

I can't draw and I am not a FUCKING pervert.

This fic and the upcoming Ranma version have a kind of weird beginning. I long time supporter who was running into some Real Life issues asked me to come up with a story concept. Since he wasn't asking for a full chapter, and even gave me some fics to look into, I did that. Several of the fics he recommended were really good, and I thought, huh, okay, this looks interesting. And then I realized what Kuroinu the original is... to put it bluntly, it is one of those horrifying wankfest games that is based on the idea that women live to be raped and abused and will like it if you've got enough big dicks regardless of anything else. Seriously, for the sanctity of your souls, don't go looking for the original.

HOWEVER. Some of the characters are really good, and most of the crossover fics are designed to help solve or defeat the assholes out there. And on that basis, I came up with not only outlines, but actually several separated scenes, mental meetings (in this fic, anyway) to start and explain the connection between Harry and the world of Eostia. For this month, I hinted at going back and filling in the blanks between those separated scenes. And perhaps because of that, the vast majority of my patrons voted for me to flesh this story out. Which I did. With more scattered scenes. LOL. I think the segues in this are kind of poor, but hey, it still works.

For those of you looking for the new stuff, go to OOO*OOO. That will be the start and end of the new segments. In the other segments, I once more mark out changes in **red**, but that doesn't carry over to the Patreon page. You will have to download and view one of the attached file versions for that.

Dream Walking Can Lead to Many Things!

Celestine dreamed. She dreamed of the forest that had been, the forest of An'vureiel. The land of the elves stretching from the mountains of the north to the center of her power here in Ken, or as she and the other elven inhabitants knew it of old, Ken'salacha, and then beyond to the depths of Lurstentum. She dreamed of the past, when life was simple, and the forest free of anything that would endanger an elf, regardless of age.

And yet, as Celestine went, the dream started to change. The trees around her were still the trees that she remembered from her youth, when she and Olga were friends. The best of friends. Back before the human nations of the time began to expand, before the plagues and the coming of the Aberrants in the time of the Great Sundering.

Yet as she looked around, Celestine knew her memory wasn't this good. Nowhere near. *These trees are so detailed, it's almost as if I am back in time, but that is impossible. No magic can... what was that?*

Through the woods Celestine had spotted movement, which was also very strange. Never before in her dreams had she seen anything moving, save perhaps birds in the trees.

Celestine wasn't a hunter, and had never studied animals all that closely, so any dreams she had of them would be simple things. This dream was surely not simple. *Oh dear, a vision then? But of what?*

A second later as she moved as stealthily as she could (which wasn't very much, Celestine might have lived in the woods most her life, but she was no woodswoman) through the woods, Celestine paused in shock. For the movement she had spotted was no animal.

Instead, it was a boy, a young human boy, perhaps eight, nine years old? Small, almost certainly malnourished, with clothes far too baggy for him, and somewhat ugly wire-frame glasses. His hair was dark brown, shaggy and wild. When she spotted it, Celestine instantly wanted to pat it or perhaps comb it, she wasn't certain.

But more importantly than any of that, the boy was crying. The kind of raking sobs that would tear at the heart of all but the most evil of souls. And on his chest, there were several long welts, showing through slashes made on his shirt. Quickly moving forward, she knelt down in front of the boy.

That movement causing him to look up, only noticing her presence at that moment. The boy gaped at her, then scrambled away even as she held her hands up.

"I'm not going to hurt young one," she said soothingly, grateful that in the land of dreams language was no barrier. "I was simply going to ask you why you were crying. And perhaps, heal your chest."

Looking more closely at the young boy's wounds, Celestine felt her inner anger, normally slow to rise, begin to boil like magma under the surface. Those looked almost like the strikes of a whip although not as deep, and wider too, being more welt than cut. Yet even so, it looked like the wounds a slave would have been given, and that was horrifying to her. *Slaves, in this day and age? I, I thought I had dealt with that foul practice. But, but perhaps only here in Ken? Or, or have they just gotten better at hiding it over the decades?*

The boy looked at her in fear then around at the woods wildly, and Celestine blinked in surprise at the amazing emerald color of the boy's eyes, almost swooning at how amazing they looked. He looked almost as if he was going to bolt. Celestine suddenly knew that if he did, he would be lost to her and that such would be disastrous. Why that was important she didn't know, but Celestine instantly acted on the idea and began to sing. It was just a wordless hum, comfort and grace merged into music, a trick she had learned upon first becoming the vessel of the Goddess Reborn and working with war orphans.

It seemed to sooth the boy, as she had hoped it would.

"You, you sing nice," he murmured, slowly untensing. "Like some of the women I see on the tele sometimes. But, but what do you mean when you say when you want to heal me?"

"I mean I will heal your wounds," Celestine kept her voices as calm and soothing as possible. "The marks on your chest."

Harry the boy looked down at them, and then shrugged with a fatalism that wrenched at Celestine's heart. No young boy his age should be so blasé about being hurt like that. "Tell me child, are you a slave? Did your master do this to you? If you can tell me where you live, I can send my knights and free you."

The boy blinked in surprise, his brows burrowing. "There aren't any knights around anymore," he said finally, definitively. "I read about them at the library. They wore armor and fought with swords and stuff. People don't fight like that anymore."

"Then how do they fight?" Celestine blinked in confusion her thoughts derailed by that strange statement. "With magic?"

"Magic doesn't exist," the boy said, causing Celestine even more confusion and then, he seemed to notice her ears for the first time. "What the... you look like an elf!"

"That is because I am," Celestine laughed.

The blonde woman's laughter sounded like tinkling bells to the young boy, who visibly calmed down further, looking almost relieved. "Then this is a dream. Er, I've never dreamed of pretty women before, but some of the older kids around the neighborhood talk about those kinds of dreams a lot."

"Perhaps," Celestine laughed again, causing a tiny smile to appear on the boy's face. "I assume it is, certainly that is how I wound up in this forest. But whose dream it is, that I do not know."

The boy's brows furrowed as he tried to work that out, and as he did, Celestine held up a hand. Holy light filled it, reaching out to touch the boy's chest. He gasped shooting to his feet and was about to run away when he noticed that his wounds were slowly disappearing. He blinked in surprise staring at them, then shook his head. "I, I've never healed that fast! Oh.." his face fell. "I hope that doesn't mean Uncle Vernon is going to beat me even more. That's what happened the last time I healed."

"Uncle Vernon?" Celestine asked knowing that anything she could do to find this boy was **important**. She knew that now, she knew that with a steel-like certainty, which Celestine could tell came from her goddess-side. "The, the man who did this to you, is your uncle?"

Celestine made her question as derisive and dismissive as she could, and it worked, as the young boy frowned for a moment, then shrugged. "That's what he says he is. Vernon Dursley, my uncle. My Aunt Petunia married him, and I live with them," The boy pouted now as he looked away, crossing his arms. Something about the extremely pretty elven woman had completely disarmed him by this point, and now he found himself saying things that he would never say in front of anyone else. "I, I heard that relatives are supposed to be family. But I, I..."

“Family is often what you make of it child. It sometimes has very little to do with who you grow up with, or even who you are related to. For my part, I do not think that anyone who would treat a young boy like you in such a manner is worth the term relative, much less the name family,” Celestine answered firmly.

“Oh.” The boy stared at her for a moment through his glasses, and then, after a silent moment, seemed to come to a decision, nodding his head once. There was a weight to that nod, like a decision reached.

Wanting to build on her success, Celestine moved back, sitting cross-legged as she sent the youth a smile. “What is your name?”

If the young boy in front of her had been of any age at all, He would’ve been blushing and stammering, perhaps unable to turn away, at the view that Celestine was accidentally giving him. But as it was, her smile was the only thing he concentrated on. That and her blonde Hair, so much longer than anything he had ever seen before were enough to make him blush and stammer. “I, I’m Harry, Harry Potter.”

Celestine frowned, cocking her head to one side as her goddess-senses told her something again. “That might be what you are called...” she said slowly. “But I do not think that is your actual name.”

What do you mean, what’s the difference?” Harry asked confused. “I, I’m mostly called Boy, or Brat. But I learned when I first went to school that that’s not my name.”

Celestine’s inner anger came closer to the surface, but she kept it at bay with ease. “No young child should be called by such... silly names,” she said, scowling and shaking her head fiercely enough to set her hair to flowing this way and that. She giggled then as Harry’s eyes seemed to watch it his blush increasing, and she smiled as she saw those eyes gleaming now. *They truly are like the color of fresh leaves, I can see his gaze being quite dangerous to any woman in the future.*

“Um, h, how did you do that?” Harry asked, looking back down at his chest somewhat embarrassed at having been staring. But he slowly moved back towards Celestine, dropping into the same seating position she was in a comfortable speaking distance away.

“That is called Healing Palm. It is a spell, an enchantment really, that priests and others who can call upon the power of Light use to heal.”

“Do you think I could learn it? I don’t, I don’t like being hurt,” Harry mumbled the last part, looking far more mature for just a moment than his apparent age.

“Given that you are here in my dream, or vice versa, I believe that yes, you could learn it,” Celestine smiled once more, causing Harry to blush and look away again. “But I thought you said that magic didn’t exist. What changed your mind?” she went on teasingly.

“You’re an elf. Elves aren’t around in my world. At least I don’t think they are,” Harry said, frowning and tugging at his chin thoughtfully, again looking much older than he had first appeared, to Celestine’s amusement this time. It was obvious that he was trying to copy what he had seen someone else do while thinking. “I think that maybe they might once have lived, only now they’re only in fantasy stories and tales.”

Celestine nodded her head thoughtfully, tugging at her long locks. “I can see that happening all too easily unfortunately. My people do not procreate as fast as you humans do. There could be a realm, some hidden valley out there where elves no longer live and are no longer known, odd as that is to me.”

“What’s procreate mean mean?” Harry questioned innocently.

“It means we do not have as many children,” Celestine answered, blushing a bit herself at having to explain that to a young child. ***PLEASE don’t ask where children come from!***

Thankfully for her, Harry just nodded thoughtfully, then shrugged. “I guess. Cats and dogs have more kids than humans do, though.”

“That’s true they do, and humans have more than elves,” Celestine laughed again.

“So that was magic...” Harry murmured, looking down at his chest again. “I wonder, could I already be using magic?”

“What makes you ask that?” Celestine asked, cocking her head to one side. It was highly unusual for anyone who could become a mage to be using it consciously at such a young age.

“When... when Petunia gave me a haircut before my first day at school,” Harry stammered over not calling her his aunt, but remembered Celestine’s earlier comments on family. “It looked horrible, it was so short and sticking out in places. But the next day, when we first went to school, it had grown back overnight. And, and whenever I’ve been hurt before, I always am back to normal within a week or so.”

Celestine laughed nodding her head. “I do not think humans grow their hair that quickly, nor is it normal for humans to heal as fast, so perhaps you are indeed capable of using healing magic. Can you think of anything else you might’ve done?”

“I think, I think I might have tried to get away from my cousin...”

“Ahhh...” Celestine held up a warning finger.

Harry smiled shyly, ducking his head and saying “Dudley,” and Celestine smiled and bade him continue. “He tried to chase me, but just as he was about to catch me, I suddenly was up on one of the roofs.”

Celestine blinked. “Truly? Can you remember what it felt like?”

“No. It was when I started school, that was months ago.”

He said that as if that was a long period of time, which, even for humans, it wasn't. *On the other hand, for a human his age, it might well be*, Celestine thought, a bubble of laughter ringing out from her again at Harry's serious expression, finding it remarkably cute. He blushed shyly again, looking down and Celestine smiled, then finally gave into the urge that she had been fighting for a while now. She reached over and moved her fingers through hair.

Harry stiffened, his eyes going wide, and he almost made to flinch away, but the gentle smile on Celestine's face stopped him in his tracks. “MMm, your hair is amazingly silky, I'm almost jealous, as I doubt that you do anything special to it, Men seldom do,” Celestine teased, and watched with delight as Harry once again blushed, but still smiled back at her, his shoulders straightening in unconscious pride at being called a man. Beyond that, it was very, very clear to her that he was not used to someone touching him without hurting him.

It was even better, in Harry's opinion, coming from someone as pretty as Celestine. Harry kept looking at her, knowing he had never seen someone as pretty, not in books or on the Tele before. Not even on the few times he had seen Vernon watching shows late at night when none of the others were supposed to be awake.

Eventually, she stopped, and looked at him thoughtfully. “You know, there are a few things that you could do to see if you truly have magic. When we are young, Elven children are given tiny balls, made of glass, we call them marbles...”

The conversation went on from there, with the young Harry lapping it up, tapping his fingers together excitedly as he listened, the idea of using magic driving out the strange delight Harry was feeling at just talking to someone else, let alone someone as pretty as Celestine.

However, he didn't listen nearly as well after Celestine change the topic to nutrition. “Of course, a mage also needs to be aware of what he eats and has to have a fit body. Or else he's just going to waste away, relying solely on magic. You need to eat more Harry.”

This caused a new flinch and Celestine once more fought back a wave of anger. If this boy was a slave and it was within her domain somewhere, Celestine vowed to free him. Although for the life of our she couldn't think of anyplace which would act as if magic didn't exist, not considering the bit about Knights or elves not being thought of as real.

She began to explain nutrition to the boy, and Harry began to ask questions in an effort to change the subject. Somehow her pleasure seemed to be conveyed to him as Harry began to ask more questions, mostly about Celestine herself and her world, wanting to know everything he could about the first person who had ever treated him with unvarnished kindness. Celestine answered his questions with delight, happy to just talk like this to someone without all the baggage that she had to deal with as the Goddess reborn getting in the way, no matter who .

A time that was, they both soon realized was much slower here in this dream world than it was in the real world. Harry noticed this after a few hours, but Celestine put his mind at ease, telling him that, "In the dream realm, time goes slow or fast as needed by the dream itself. Whatever else, this one night will seem much longer to you and I. And that is a good thing, is it not?"

Harry again smiled the shy little smile that made Celestine want to cuddle him, which she did. And after a few hugs scattered throughout who knew how long, Harry didn't even flinch this time instead delighting in the touch.

However, all good things had to end, and eventually, after what she felt had been several weeks' worth of talking, Celestine detected a wavering occurring at the edge of her vision. The forest around them slowly disappearing into a miasma of bright yellow and green. "I believe that one of us, or perhaps both, are waking up."

The look of shock and dismay on Harry's face wrenched at her, and impulsively, Celestine pulled him into a hug, his head practically disappearing into her chest. Harry melted against her, smelling the flower and honeysuckle smell of the elven woman, the soft feel of Celestine's skin against his thrilling in a way he couldn't quite put into words.. "Do not fear, Harry. Regardless of what happens out there, you have a friend in me. Whatever happens, you have that, and you have magic too. With that, you can never truly be defenseless, or alone."

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Celestine woke up, blinking away sleep, as Claudia Levantine touched her shoulder gently. "My lady, it's time to get up. You wanted to have a few moments and some breakfast before your meeting with the Bishop this morning?" Celestine nodded, then raised her hands, stretching in a way that would've sent any man blushing or hiding a... reaction. That was partly why she had insisted that Claudia act as her personal bodyguard in the mornings. Celestine knew it was when she was at her most... vulnerable... was too strong a word, but defenseless perhaps.

Claudia too flushed a bit, a but not overmuch, and she helped her mistress out of her bed and then waited by the doorway while a few maids helped Celestine get ready for the day. "Did you sleep well, milady?"

"I slept well enough. I dreamed an interesting dream I think. Claudia, could you send a message to Grave?"

"My father-in-law? I can do so certainly, but might I ask why?" Claudia asked from where she stood nearby.

"I have a project for him. And I might eventually have a question for him as well, although before that I wish to make certain that my mind isn't playing tricks on me. Last night, I had a... call it a vision I suppose. Or something of the sort, a sending perhaps from a young,

magically powerful youth in dire straits. Regardless of which it is, there might still be slavery within the Seven Shields somewhere. And if there is, I wish to have it stamped out.”

Celestine’s voice became like iron at those words, and Claudia bowed from the waist, shocked at the tone of fury in Celestine’s voice. “Do you wish my Dawn Templars to do that stomping, my lady?” Claudia had been recently elevated to lead Celestine’s own guard force, the Dawn Templars, but had yet to prove herself in that capacity.

“No. You and yours are too obvious. That is your goal, to fight on the front lines, to rally those you lead in the defense of our nation. What I need, is someone, that could perhaps not be so well known. And someone who can do that stomping as hard as possible. Grave will do that nicely. Beyond that, if you could get a map? I need to see if a certain place exists. If Surry does exist in this world, it might not once I am done with it.”

That made Claudia blink in surprise, but she merely bowed her head as Celestine scowled. “And if it doesn’t exist, that too will tell me something.”

OOOOOO

When Harry Potter awoke it was with a start because he didn’t feel any pain. He looked down at his chest, then pulled up his tattered shirt, running a hand up his scrawny stomach. There were no wounds there. *That, that means...* In the darkness of his cupboard under the stairs, Harry Potter began to smile, and then, it was all he could do to stop himself from laughing.

He looked around thoughtfully, muttering to himself, “Well, I might not have a marble, but...”

By the time the sun was up in the air and he could hear the thumping of Petunia on the stairs above, shouting at him to get ready to make breakfast, Harry had hard at work, and his concentration had paid off. Several of his textbooks were dancing around the cupboard at his command and even as they began to fall back to earth and he stood up, Harry was making plans for more experiments. *The Dursleys might not like it, but I think it’s time for me to spend more time at the library. If magic is real, then maybe all those fantasy books could help me figure out some more?*

OOO*OOO

“Hey, you mind if I sit in here? All the other carts are full.”

Harry and his new best friend Hedwig glanced up from the book in Harry’s arms, the double glance causing the redhead standing in the doorway to twitch. He was lanky, looking as if he wasn’t quite comfortable in his own skin, but several inches taller than Harry much to his annoyance. *It looks as if I’m going to be the smallest boy in our grade at this point. Crud.*

Despite that, Harry waved his hand lazily to the other side of the compartment to the redhead before looking back at the history book that he had bought from Flourish and Blots. While he'd had a lot of fun exploring the bookstore, the history books, including the one he'd finally bought, were all so dang dry! *And these are books for people my age? Really? No pictures, no lists, huge chapters, ugh. Do people my age in the Wizarding World really like this? I think I'd have more fun watching Hagrid snore. I knew I should have bought one of those fantasy books instead.*

That thought brought with it a bit of longing. Fantasy novels of all sorts had been his delight from the moment he'd found one in the local library, but owning one would have been magnificent. The Dursleys never let Harry have anything, but once, just once, Harry had gathered his courage to ask to buy a book. He had then been forbidden to leave the house for a while, even to go to school for a time until their teacher called. Then, with the danger of more people knowing that they had a 'freak' living with them, the Dursley's had relented, but the lesson had been learned. No asking for anything, and never bring up the idea of fantasy ever.

Hedwig seemed to have the same idea as Harry, and with a light headbutt flew up to perch on the ledge above, staring down at the redhead and the rat whose nose was poking out of his pocket. Harry didn't notice, but his attempt to get back into the book was interrupted, trying to lift his suitcase up onto the rack above the seats. "Isn't there some kind of magic spell for that?" he asked, confused. "I know I've seen a lot of other kids use them, to say nothing of the guy who sold me mine."

"Yeah, well, we're first years aren't we? I don't know any spells like that," the redhead grunted. "The only one I know is probably a joke from my brothers, supposed ta turn Scabbers yellow."

While Hedwig kept staring at the rat, for a moment, Harry debated using his own magic to help, glancing to the side where he had laid out his wand. Then he shook his head, put his book down, and with a sigh, got to his feet and move forward.

Between them, the two boys were able to get the redheads trunk up onto the rack.

"Thanks for that, I would've gotten one of my older brothers to help me, but they found one of their friends, and that friend had a spider and..." The redhead shivered, holding out his hand. "Ron, Ron Weasley."

"Harry," Harry answered shortly, already looking away, but too late.

"Cor! You're Harry Potter! You have it, you have the scar?" Ron asked, gazing at Harry's forehead even as Harry turned away.

"I do have a permanent reminder of the fact my parents are dead on my forehead, yes," Harry said, scowling and looking back angrily at the boy. Ron had the grace to look a little abashed, shifting awkwardly on his feet, and Harry relented. It wasn't the first time after all,

and if adults couldn't stop themselves from gawking, Harry knew the kids his own age probably couldn't either. "Just don't stare or ask questions, please?"

His ears going red, Ron mumbled something that might have been an apology, and sat down, causing Harry to sit down as well, and returned to his book. However, the redhead couldn't seem to sit still, looking from Harry to out the window, up to Hedwig, then to the door, and then finally staring at Harry's wand. "Wow, I don't think I've ever seen a wand that big."

At that Hedwig precked, sticking her head under her wing for a moment for some reason. Harry blinked, staring up at his friend, but when no explanation for her sudden chuckle was forthcoming, sighed, shook his head, and set the book aside. "I wasn't getting anywhere anyway. Honestly, it's like they don't want you to be interested in history."

"Why would anyone be interested in history anyway?" Ron asked blankly. "I've been warned about our history class for my brothers, they all say that the history teacher at Hogwarts is so boring because he's trying to bore students to death so they join him in the afterlife."

Thinking the other kid was joking, Harry laughed, and looked down at his wand. "Actually, I've been wondering, I had to get mine special made. How did Ollivander build up so many wands, and why?"

His lips working thoughtfully, Ron shrugged. "Ain't ever thought of it, although I suppose a part of it's gotta be the cost, yeah? Just like clothing." He seemed to deflate a bit. "Secondhand or one-size-fits-all always is cheaper ta buy, and to make I'd wager."

Harry nodded, knowing full well that was the case. It was why he wore secondhand clothing from Dudley, which he'd had to work on to get it to fit him at all. Dudley was so overweight that anything he wore was large enough to make two of Harry.

"How did you even get one special made?" Ron asked curiously.

The boy looked a little jealous and Harry shrugged uncomfortably. "It was either that, or I think the Wanemaker was really afraid that if he kept on trying wands on me, his store might get destroyed."

"Oh!" Ron laughed at that, nodding his head, his jealousy disappearing. "Yeah, I remember that. My family, they had me trying out all of the family's old wands, and the damage to the house was really nasty by the time we found one that worked."

Harry was confused at that, having been told by the wand maker, an old man named Ollivander that the wand chose the wizard, and that every wizard's wand was unique. But Harry just nodded, figuring that a wizard family must have a lot of wands to choose from anyway, and asked for examples of how Ron's wand choosing had gone, not bringing up any of his own mishaps. In particular, the one that had forced the wandmaker to realize that nothing in his shop would fit for Harry.

Flashback:

“Most curious, most curious.” Ollivander murmured as he stared at the wand that had just reacted positively in Harry’s hand, the light gleaming off the tip so brightly that Hagrid had been forced to look away.

“What’s most curious about it?” Harry asked, confused and a little bemused still at needing a wand at all. After all, he’d been working magic for several years now, and hadn’t need any kind of focus or whatever. Magic was hard sure, and it often took him several seconds to work up the concentration needed for large or new spells. But he could do levitation or other small scale spells easily.

He’d tried to argue the point with Hagrid, but Hagrid instantly laughed, saying that “O’course ya need a wand Harry, can’t be a wizard without it. Even a wizard as great as Dumbledore can do magic without a wand! Great man, Dumbledore. Ya read that in some of your Muggle books?”

At which point Harry had shut up, having already gotten some very strange looks from both Hagrid and the bookstore owner when he asked about elves. The comment from the bookstore owner in particular had puzzled him. What did age have to do with being interested in elves? And why did they think whatever a Veela was better than muggle nonsense, whatever that meant?

Harry’s attention turned back to the creepy old man as he brushed Harry’s hair away from his scar, causing Harry to jerk backward. He didn’t like being touched at all. While that memory with Cynthia had taught him that some touches could be good, being touched by a creepy old man was surely not one of them.

“I remember every wand I sell, Harry Potter. And it just so happens that the wand you now carry, the phoenix feather within, the phoenix gave one other feather. I find it most curious that this wand calls out to you, when the owner of its brother wand gave you that scar you bear.”

Harry froze. Much to Hagrid and the old man’s shock, his eyes began to narrow, and his teeth gritted, his hand clenching so hard on the wood of the wand it began to creak and the light went out instantly. Over the past few years, when it became clear that Harry had magic, he’d often wondered where it come from, and concluded it had to be something he got in from his parents. He had tried to ask questions, to discover what had really happened to them, but had only gotten more beatings and no answers.

Then came the letters, the mountains of letters, followed by Hagrid arriving in answer Harry finally having managed to get off a return message telling Hogwarts about his circumstances. And during the confrontation with the Dursleys, the whole story had come out. How the Dark Lord had come to kill Harry’s parents and to kill Harry in his crib.

Harry still didn't know why the dark Lord had come after him as a baby. But to hear that the wand who had killed his parents, who have done such horrible things, had owned a wand that was brother to the one in his hand...

A blast of barely controlled magic burst from Harry's hand, rocketing the wand away from him as he rejected it utterly. The wand zipped off with such force that it nearly took Hagrid's head off, zipping past the side of his head and slamming into the outer wall of the shop with enough force to embed the wand within like a thrown spear into clay.

"Oh dear!" Ollivander murmured, wringing his hands, rushing over to Hagrid to make sure that the massive groundskeeper was uninjured, before turning back to Harry, bowing from the waist. "Oh dear! I am so sorry! I should have known, I should have known that telling you such a thing would have an impact on how you felt about your wand. Children are so illogical after all."

"I, I suppose I shouldn't, I mean you wouldn't hate the brother or sister of a bully just because they're related to them, but..." Harry began, looking a little shamefaced now but equally certain he didn't want anything to do with that wand again.

"No no, you have the right of it. And it is a good learning experience for us both, I think, if you look at it in that manner. But once rejected a wand like that will never bond with you again." The Wanemaker looked around his shop, at the destruction that had been wrought up to this point by the dozens of other attempts to find a wand for Harry, before shaking his head. "It looks as if, Harry Potter, that I will be making you a personal wand. Something I have not had to do for a first year in a good long while. Most of the time when I have to make a personal wand for someone it is because they either broke their own wands..."

The look in Ollivander's face made Harry laugh despite the near disaster a moment ago and the older man smiled at him before beginning to use magic to repair the damage to his shop. "Or have gone through some kind of personal epiphany that is changed them so for profoundly that they no longer can work with their old wand."

Harry frowned at that, scratching at his scar thoughtfully. "You mean, like growing up? Or becoming an adult?" To Harry, growing up and becoming an adult were two different things. Vernon was far too angry and loud and needy to be an adult in his mind. But both felt like they should be profound moments.

Ollivander chortled, shaking his head. "No no, none of that. I cannot readily describe it in easy terms, such an epiphany is a profoundly personal moment." He gestured to Harry and Hagrid to follow, then led the way into the back of the shop, where hundreds of different types of wood floated in the air, each held in some kind of bubble. At a gesture, the bubbles lined up and began to move towards Harry.

At the old man's nod, Harry began to touch each one of them in turn. "Hmmm... No to the oak, no to the birch, a strong reaction to alder, interesting... Let us continue, the more we

experiment with wood, the better I will understand what kind of core to use as well, and I have far more wood types on hand than cores.”

Harry watched fascinated, and eagerly went along with everything, as Ollivander explained what he had meant by profound changes. Someone who had recently been forced into incredibly tough circumstances for example, coming out of them changed. Or someone who had just found his true calling in life, coming to it like a bolt out of the blue. “Those are the kind of changes that would change a person on a magical and mental level so profoundly that they will require a new wand.”

Harry took that in, then asked questions as the experiments continued, with Harry having almost as strong a reaction to hawthorn as he did to alder.

“Fascinating! Truly fascinating. You may become a fierce fighter, Harry Potter, and yet also... Well, we will see. After all, as you so recently showed, you are young, and the young have a lot to grow into. Now, let us move on to core! Really Harry Potter, if I could have a customer like you once every few months, I would be a very happy wand maker.”

Harry had grinned at the old man, all his earlier wariness towards the old man gone, seeing him as just someone who was deeply in love with his craft, and who really didn't understand people as well as he did wands.

End Flashback

The result of all that was magnificent in Harry's mind, something that his wand had conveyed the moment he had picked it up. Even now, just touching his wand with a finger as he listened to Ron talk gave Harry a thrill, and he could feel the wand responding, an eager touch to it, almost like a big dog waiting for orders to either play roughhouse style or any other way Harry wanted.

The wand was unusual to look at. Longer than the Phoenix feather wand by several inches, and thicker around the handle due to the handle portion of it being hawthorn while the rest of the wand was made out of alder. The two woods had been fused together magically, not through heat, but rather they seemed to almost grow into one another under Ollivander's careful direction as Harry watched avidly.

Inside the wand was the feather of a Hamsa, a magical bird from Asia and India, who Ollivander had explained was known to be both “Ridiculously durable, Harry Potter, and with a strange apparition power that almost resembles that of a phoenix, but which can be blocked by wards. They also are not overly strong, and so cannot be used to transport people in a similar manner.”

This particular feather had apparently been won by Ollivander from a Chinese wandmaker in a bet, and it had been dipped in some kind of molten metal at one point. Why that was, Ollivander hadn't told Harry, although the secretive look in his expression had warned

Harry not to ask. The wand maker had admitted though he didn't know what kind of metal it was. "Not silver, steel, or iron, to be certain. Nor platinum either."

But whatever metal it was had apparently change the properties of the feather, making it both tougher, and more magical in some fashion. While Hagrid and Harry watched, Ollivander had quite a bit of trouble somehow fitting the feather into the wand in some strange way. The feather eventually disappeared between two segments of the wand as if the feather had been eaten, and afterward when the two segments of the wood had finally been fused together, the color of the joined wood had changed slightly, becoming subtly blue in places around the grip and right at the tip, matching the feather of the wand. It made for a very colorful wand, blue, light red from the alder, and a light, almost tan color from the hawthorn.

Regardless of the how, and despite his earlier questions about why he needed a wand in the first place, Harry loved his wand. Not as much as he loved Hedwig, but it was up there.

Ron and Harry kept talking, mostly about the Wizarding World and food, something that Harry was very interested in. Not that he actually enjoyed cooking all that much. Not being able to eat anything he cooked at the Dursley's was definitely a downside to it in his mind. But the idea of having food that was different from the stuff the Dursley's eat was one that he really wanted to explore.

He was giving Ron a very leery look as Ron explained the Bertie Botts Every Flavor beads to him, when the door banged open. Harry flinched, almost glaring at the bushy haired girl who stood in the doorway in confusion. "Hello, have either of you seen a toad? Nobles lost one?" The girl asked.

The girl had bushy hair down to her shoulders, it's color a light honey brown, to go with brown eyes that looked kind, but set in a face that looked kind of bossy. The way she stood though reminded Harry of some of the students at the library he would see, the older kids who took taking care of books really seriously, and who occasionally had gotten in the way of Dudley and his gang when they tried to make trouble for Harry there.

Her tone was a little too bossy for someone talking to kids her own age, but Harry decided to look past that, as she was trying to help someone else apparently. "No, sorry. I've only seen my owl and a few other animals actually."

The girl nodded, her eyes flicking to the wand at Harry's side, then to the book, seeming to find far more interest in the book than in the wand, much to Harry's relief. "Is that a history book? We didn't need to get that for our classes did we? It wasn't on the list," she nearly demanded, sounding worried.

"No, the only history book we needed was on the list," Harry quickly assured her, knowing he too wanted to make a good impression on his new school. "But I wanted to figure out more about the Wizarding World, you know. I wanted to see if there are things like... Well, dwarves and elves and other things."

“There used to be dwarves, but they lost some kind of great war with the goblins for who would control the banks or something ages ago,” Ron said, also indicating that he didn’t know where a toad was either. He also looked a little put out by the girl entirely, moving further along the seat away from her and almost glaring at the girl for interrupting their conversation. “Now if you don’t mind, we’ve got a conversation going already so...”

The girl didn’t seem to notice, simply shaking her head at Harry’s hope, gesturing to the book. “I don’t think they’ve ever had anything like elves, if you’re talking about elves like in fantasy books. Although why you would think that anything in a fantasy book could be as important as a history book I don’t know.”

“Fantasy books have magic in them, and we know that’s real though,” Harry rejoined, causing the girl to frown pensively.

“Well, maybe. Although Professor Babbling, she was the one you gave you my orientation, she said that most wizards believe that most fantasy novels are written by squibs or brain addled nonmagicals who have gotten a glimpse of the magical world but haven’t understood it.” It was only then that the girl seemed to realize who Harry was. “Wait are you Harry Potter? The scar is mentioned a lot of the history books that are about you. I’ve read all about you, you know.”

“The scar seems to be the only thing those books got right. I’ve certainly never fought a dragon before, unless you count running away from bullies as fighting, and I certainly have no memory of what happened that night. I have no idea why those books are sold as history, especially the one where I apparently shot something like laser beams from my crib to kill the dark Lord. Whatever happened to him, it was all my mother and father’s work,” Harry replied firmly. “Those books are so wrong and weird it isn’t even funny.”

The girl made a pouty expression with her mouth for a moment that Harry didn’t have a word for, before nodding reluctantly, as if unwilling to agree with the idea that books could be wrong. “I can see that, I suppose. Although you’re right, if they’re so wrong they shouldn’t be sold as history, but fantasy instead.”

“Exactly.” Seeing Ron looking more and more uncomfortable, Harry reminded the girl that she was helping the silent boy behind her to find his toad. “I would look in the places that have water, or could be musty maybe? Or quiet, if there’s a place like that on this train with all the rattling. The bathrooms are the only places that fit, I think.”

The girl nodded, held out her hand to Ron. “Well then, I’ll be off. I’m Hermione Granger by the way.”

Ron awkwardly introduced himself, as Harry simply smiled and said “just Harry” when it became his turn to shake her hand.

He had the impression that the girl wasn't quite certain how to take him, and Harry had to admit that he felt the same way. He did not however agree with Ron as he spoke up the moment the doors closed, saying "Right barmy that one is! Cor, she's so bossy, she's like me mum in miniature."

Biting back a hard 'I wouldn't know', knowing that he would have to get used to things like that, Harry simply shrugged his shoulders. "I would say she needs to be more open to other people's ideas, and she seems the type to put book learning above everything else. But that's never a bad thing. After all, how do you learn about that quid thing you just mentioned if you don't read books first?"

Ron looked appalled. "You can learn tactics and strategies from books sure, but the only way to really learn how to play Quidditch is to get on a broom, Harry! Who ever heard of someone trying to learn how to fly from a book!"

The conversation about sports in general went on for a bit, with Harry occasionally patting his wand with one hand, as he listened to the strange sport while above him, Hedwig kept on glaring down at the rat, who had fallen asleep on the bench next to Ron. Harry didn't get the impression she was hungry, she'd eaten a vole the night before. It more felt like she just didn't like the rat on general principle, which Harry could understand. He was still a bit thrown off by the idea that rats could be pets, after all. He'd seen several in the cupboard under the stairs, and none of them have been the least bit friendly. *But at least none of them tried to bite me, so there's that.*

As for Quidditch, it sounded really weird. That one player could so suddenly end a game even if the other team was performing far better as a team felt way too much. But he didn't say anything since Ron was so enthusiastic about it, and had been so much help picking out good treats when the trolley lady came by. Flying though? Flying sounded amazing to Harry! He asked a lot of questions about that.

But once again, their conversation was interrupted by the door opening.

The person in the doorway looked familiar to Harry, and he remembered the young man he'd met in passing in Madame Malkin's shop. "So, I've heard that Harry Potter is on this train. It's you is it? I don't believe we ever formally introduced ourselves. I'm Draco. Draco Malfoy."

At that point, Ron scoffed, and Draco glared at him, going into a brief assault on Ron's family, causing Ron to stand up and glare at the other boy. He hadn't noticed, as Harry had, the two larger youths following Draco around out in the hallway.

"I can see you need help Potter. You need to know what sort to interact with in the Wizarding World. I can help you there," Draco said, turning back to Harry.

Harry sighed. "Thank you for the offer Draco, but I'm not here to make connections or whatever. I'm not here to take sides in whatever family feud you to have."

Both boys scoffed, glaring first one another then at Harry, as if the idea of their families being locked in a feud was completely beside the point, with one talking over the other, "As if his family has enough standing to have a feud with a centaur, let alone my family."/"Harry mate, it's not like that, his family, they're all dark, you can't..."

But Harry spoke up, overriding them a little as he got to his feet, gesturing with his wand up towards the trunk above. It floated up and then settled onto the bench, as Hedwig, his first gift and a magnificent young lady in her own right, settled onto his shoulder, glaring at all four boys. When it landed, Harry turned to it, and put his book away, bringing out another one. "I'm not here to take part in anything like that. I'm here to learn." *learn enough to get away from my so-called relatives and more.*

Immediately after the vision with Cynthia, Harry's goal would've been to find her, but as Harry had not dreamed of her since, he knew that whatever connection he had with her, or that dreamscape they met in, it wasn't one he could control. He would still look for information on elves in general, but he wasn't upbeat about his chances of finding anything at this point. *If all elves are so pretty, no way they wouldn't be known in the Wizarding World.*

"I'm sick of people trying to tell me how to think." That was after all why the Dursley's had treated in the way they had. In their own words to Hagrid, they'd been trying to beat the magic out of him. But if they hadn't been able to, Draco wasn't about to. "I want to make my own mind up about things. I'm sorry if that comes off as rude Draco, but both of you are coming off as a bit rude right now too."

Draco scowled that, but the wordless magic that Harry had just performed and the strange wand in his hand seemed to give the blonde youth pause. "Very well. I suppose I can see your point there. Just remember my offer, Potter."

With that, Draco swept away, leaving Harry and Ron alone again. "Well, you sure showed him! But you really can't hang out with people like that get Harry, like I said, his old family's Dark."

"Maybe, but maybe Draco isn't," Harry said, tapping his wand again with two fingers as he remembered his own overreaction in Ollivander's shop. He still felt a little guilty about that, although he was ecstatic with his new wand. "You can't lump people together like that, it's just wrong."

Ron scowled a bit, but Harry shook his head and sat down again after sending his trunk back to where it had been. Leaning against the outer wall he once more began to read the first year book on transfiguration. The redhead seemed to take the hint that Harry wasn't going to talk any longer, and turned his attention to his rat, trying to mumble a spell under his breath.

OOOOOO

After getting over his awe at seeing Hogwarts from the lake, Harry began to look around the other kids with him. Most of them didn't look all that interesting if he was honest. He saw the bushy haired girl still talking to the somewhat mousy boy, as well as a young, redheaded girl, who had an arm around another brown-haired girl. But neither of them caught his attention. Completing a large mass of girls stood two identical twins. They had Indian features: long slick black hair, light brown skin, their foreheads marked with small red dots that Harry had seen occasionally in movies or on magazines in the library.

At that sight, Harry remembered his conversation with Ron when Ron entered the compartment, about the food of the Wizarding World. He'd come away somewhat saddened by how similar it was to the faire at home. That was what drove him forward now. He pushed through the crowd slightly, apologizing as he went, and tapped one of the twins on the shoulder.

She turned, her brows furrowing as she looked at him.

Realizing he was about to talk to someone without the other person actually starting things, Harry gulped, but pushed forward gamely. "Hi, sorry if this comes out of nowhere. But I really want to kind of, well get away from the food at home, it's **so** bad! And I've heard really good things about Indian food. I'm not saying that you know I'm asking you to cook or anything like that, no way! But I was wondering if you knew any places in the non-magical worlds to go for Indian food."

The other twin looked at him in amusement, a smirk on her features. "Is this your attempt to try and talk us up or something?"

"What's that even mean?" Harry asked in confusion. "I mean I am talking to you right? But whatever it is, I just really want to try different foods. My so-called relatives, they hate everything that isn't typically British, and that really makes me want to try other stuff. Like a **lot**." Food that he hadn't had to cook also appealed to Harry in general, but getting food that was different from what was at home was the main thing.

The twin that Harry had tapped on the shoulder waved a hand at her sister before she could answer, giggling quietly. "I believe we can help you with your bit of rebellion. I can give you some names of Indian dishes, and there are a few chain restaurants that you might wish to try. I take it you're from the non-magical world as well. Our family has a foot in both worlds so to speak."

Harry smiled shyly, happy at the response and the fact that this girl hadn't looked at his forehead, not noticing that the girl flushed a bit at that smile. "Yeah, er, the Dursleys are fully Muggle. My so-called relatives are kind of... so normal its horrifying I guess. Like they really, really try to be supernormal, and it's disturbing."

That caused both girls to both look at him quizzically, before they laughed, thinking he was making a joke.

The bushy haired girl nearby took this moment to interject, shaking her head. "My family likes to eat Mediterranean and French when we can get away with it. My parents are dentists, and what they say about what normal British fair can do to your body if you eat too much of it? Well, it's enough to give you nightmares. My favorites are salads, because you can make so many different ones."

"I wouldn't know. Nothing green is allowed in the house unless it's been fried," Harry said shaking his head, causing all three girls to first stare at him wondering if he was again making a joke, then seeing the serious look on his face, shudder in horror.

"So I will doubly thank you for any help you can give me to let me eat stuff that isn't horribly fatty." *Or that I need to cook without actually getting to eat.* "Er, oh, I'm Harry." With that he held out his hand.

The other twin seemed to gasp, her eyes flicking up to her his forehead for the first time, but the more composed twin that Harry had tapped on the shoulder simply nodded, holding out her hand companionably first to Harry than Hermione. "I'm Padma. This is Parvati."

The conversation was interrupted then as ghosts – Harry had seen them in pictures - came through the walls. There were two of them, a fat looking monk floating beside a man in knightly armor who was shaking his head from side to side slowly.

Many of the students screamed, but Harry instantly brought up his wand, magic flowing through his hand and into his wand as he tried to think of what kind of spell to use to banish a spirit.

His response paused however as the words that the spirits were speaking reached him over the screaming of the correct crowd of kids. "Forgive and forget, I always say. Peeves is a poltergeist, it is in his nature to make messes. One can hardly argue against nature, that would be like asking a bee not to buzz."

"My dear friar, we have all bent over backwards for Peeves before this. He is not like a scorpion who could not help himself stinging, Peeves is a thinking spirit like ourselves. If all of us can learn to act with a certain amount of decorum once becoming used to being spirits, surely we must hold Peeves to the same standard? A little mischief is one thing, but disturbing the house elves as they go about their business, especially on the first night of the school year? That is entirely another. No, I'm fully on board with the Bloody Baron's words on this score. Peeves must be punished." The knightly ghost;s voice broke off and he stared down at the now stunned group of students. "And who is this, then?"

"The new students!" The fat monk floated closely, and many of the students could see how kindly and gentle he looked, not at all scary despite his ghostly appearance. "Hope to see you all in my house! Hufflepuff, you know."

“Move along there.” A firm, no-nonsense female voice announced from a nearby doorway, followed by the voice owner appearing there. “We’ve had enough disruptions tonight.

Harry stared up at the ghosts, watching as they apologized to the woman, as he wondered aloud, “I wonder what kind of spells you would need to deal with ghosts?”

“Whatever it is, it surely isn’t in the first year reading list,” Hermione said, with Padma nodding her head.

“No, I didn’t notice anything in the charms book either yet. I doubt Transfiguration would have anything, although I’m not quite done with that book yet,” Harry murmured, not noticing several of the boys and girls around them looking at all of them in confusion, while Padma simply nodded, and began a quiet conversation with Hermione about how far along she was in her reading list much to her twin’s chagrin.

All of them fell silent however as the woman spoke again, drawing their attention to her with ease. She introduced herself and then Professor McGonigal explained what would happen in a moment in the great Hall. The idea of houses sounded weird to Harry’s mind, but he put that down to the fact that he didn’t really know firsthand how a family really acted. If whatever house he was sorted into would act like a real one rather than the Dursleys, he would be happy.

His thoughts on that score faded however when the doors opened, and Harry and the others all gawked at the great Hall. But whereas most of the other students were gawking at the row of tables, the hundreds of silent students or the extremely eclectic group of individuals that were their professors at the head table, Harry was staring up at the sky. “It’s like, it’s like the nighttime sky but it’s moving. I can see the clouds...” Harry whispered in awe. *If I could put something like this on the wall or ceiling of my cabinet, it might not be so terrible being in there at night.*

But more than that, Harry had never seen the nighttime sky like this. He’d never been allowed out of his cupboard after dinner, even. To see so many stars glimmering in the night, to see the clouds shifting along, it was breathtaking.

“It’s enchanted to look like the sky! Apparently, it was the work of Professor Flitwick’s predecessor, a permanent charm of some kind. It’s mentioned in *Hogwarts the History*,” Hermione said to one side.

“Any clue how they did it? I don’t have that book I’m afraid,” Padma asked, before Harry could.

Hermione shook her head, and Harry made a promise to himself to see if he could figure out how to do that kind of spellwork before the year ended. Then all of them turned their attention to the front of the hallway again as Professor McGonigal settled an old ratty pointed

hat on a stool. The moment that the bottom of it touched the wood of the stool, a long seam opened up, and the wizard hat began to sing.

When the song ended, there was a round of applause from the surrounding students, with two redheads apparently trying to keep the clapping going for a long period of time until they were silenced by a look from McGonigal, who began the ceremony to induct new students into Hogwarts without further fanfare. Hannah Abbott became the first of many, with the others watching as the Sorting Hat sorted them into the house that it deemed them most suitable for.

Hermione took the longest when it came up to her turn, but eventually she went to the loudest table, Gryffindor. To Harry's mild surprise, the Patil twins he had just made the acquaintance of are separated, with Padma going into Ravenclaw and Parvati going to join Hermione. The two of them smiled at one another, but didn't initiate any conversation, instead Parvati began to talk excitedly to another girl, one of the first who had gone and was evidently a friend before this.

On the heels of the twins it became Harry's turn, with Minerva intoning, "Potter, Harry."

Harry moved forward out of the remaining group of students and instantly, the whispers and letters of congratulations for the two twins stopped, as everyone from all five of the tables stared at Harry, even the teachers looking at him with interest.

In another word, this would have caused Harry to flinch a bit, to shrink in on himself. But this Harry was very different. This Harry had discovered magic several years before, and had direction and drive and a sense of self, the idea he could be something, could become someone with the help of magic.

This did not mean Harry liked being the center of attention. In fact, he hated it. But instead of making all the eyes on him making him want to curl up or hide. This Harry just got angry. *Stop looking at me like him a snake in an exhibit! Stop staring at me like I'm the one who did anything that night! I was a freaking baby, damn it!* He thought angrily, shaking his head, before marching forward. If the price of learning magic, of using it as the key to get away from his relatives was to be looked at like that occasionally, he could deal with it. He'd hate it, but he could deal with it.

Moments later, Harry settled onto the stool, and the hat was placed on his head.

"Oh my, natural defenses! That's tricky, but nothing I've got not dealt with before. Indeed, I think the last one you had something similar was a little redheaded girl named Lily," a voice said inside of his head, startling Harry to the point where he gasped aloud, not having realized that that was how the sorting process was done.

"Yes, the sorting process actually is a conversation, not me just sifting wordlessly through your memories Harry Potter. I doubt I could do that much anyway if you didn't want me

to," the voice intoned again. *"But if you're going to reply, do do so inside your own head. While several students do tend to talk aloud as they talk to me, it is unnecessary, and it frankly gives me a headache as the night goes on."*

While part of his mind wondered how a hat could have a headache, Harry simply replied in the affirmative, and asked what the hat had meant about natural defenses.

"You will learn in time. It's not my place to educate you on anything that doesn't have to do with placing you in one of the houses. I will say it will serve you in good stead. As to where to sort you, my you are ambitious. Greatly so, but in a very strange direction. As to the reasoning, my word, that is a first even for me Harry Potter! An actual Elvish being. I've never seen one before."

"Wait, so that dream, it's real?" Harry asked excitedly. There had been many a day when he was toiling for the Dursleys or when he was struggling with magic when Harry wondered if he had dreamed that moment with Cynthia, or if it was some kind of mental trauma thing.

"I cannot say. I cannot even say it was just a dream. That is beyond both knowledge and purview. All I can say is that your memory of it is certainly real enough," the hat said, which was an answer in and of itself.

As Harry was pondering that, the hat continued. *"You are both ambitious and a hard worker, oh my yes. Driven one could say. I'm sorry to hear of your family life, but many young wizards and witches from the non-magical world have had similar tales in their heads over the centuries. You could go far in Hufflepuff oh yes, just like in Slytherin, but the nature of Slytherin, the need to create contacts and yet keep others at arms length, that would be a strange place to put you. Similarly Hufflepuff, with their almost enforced closeness would probably not do for you. Your eager to make friends, but are also very prickly, and you might not fit in there."*

The hat seemed to pause, as if thinking about what it was seeing. *"Your courageous as well, oh my yes. But it is hard to tell if it is because you have courage, or if you simply believe you have already faced what you consider the worst the world can throw at you. Similar to your desire to learn. You have a goal you wish to meet, but you don't care to learn for learning's sake. Tricky, very tricky. Both pros and cons for all four houses."*

Harry let the hatch to its ruminations, figuring that trying to influence it was a bad idea. What this hat said was true after all, but it wasn't all the truth either. Despite his desperate desire to get away from the Dursley's, and desire to find out if Cynthia had ever really existed in this world or was from somewhere else, he **was** still a kid. And he still wanted to have fun, which getting into a house that would just help his own ambitions probably wouldn't help. Making friends on his own terms sounded fun, while holding people at arm's length didn't.

"Not Slytherin, then. That narrows it down to three at least," the hat said dryly, having apparently felt out the way Harry's mind was going. *"And Ravenclaw, as I said, you do not wish*

to learn for learning's sake either, but learn towards specific goals. You might do well there but you would also ruffle feathers. And you did say you wanted to have fun. Well, that I think, and your willingness to stand up for yourself, regardless of who you're doing it too, that I think means you will have fun in... "Gryffindor!"

OOOOOOO

Hogwarts, Harry decided, was quite amazing, but also really... weird and silly. Not just the moving stairs or the talking pictures (why, just why?) the number of shifting suits or armor, or anything else. Not even the Headmaster's warning about the weird corridor which apparently held, according to the Twins, a Cerberus in a room far smaller than it should be kept in. The classes were also odd.

History class was even worse than Harry had anticipated. Binns really was a ghost like Ron had said, and his tone was so dry it was annoying to listen to. Harry often joined Ron in sleeping through them, despite the glares Hermione sent their way, or the way of the gossiping duo of Parvati and lavender, who routinely dragged the other girls into conversations at the back of the room. Honestly he expected he could learn more on his own, and if this continued he probably wouldn't bother showing up.

Herbology was interesting, sure. But Harry had no interest in plants at all. He'd spent too many mornings and afternoons out in the sun being forced to help Petunia around the back garden for that. Why the heck it was one of the main classes, Harry had no idea. How important was it to recognize and know how to work with all these plants?

Defense Against the Dark Arts was practically impossible. The same professor that Harry had met with Hagrid in Diagon Alley stuttered so much that Harry could barely make out a few words. Worse was the fact Harry occasionally had weird headaches and left the classroom feeling angry for some reason.

On the other hand, Professor McGonigal was utterly fantastic. Her showing how to change into a cat had given Harry a solid goal to work towards. He had stayed behind class that day, and had very nearly been chased out of her class thanks to how many questions he had for her, although the older woman had been smiling slightly as she done so.

Similarly, Professor Flitwick had cheerfully answered Harry's questions. The diminutive half-goblin had what the professor himself called a flair for the dramatic, but a willingness to answer questions. Lamenting with every one of them that Harry should've been in his house until they had eaten up so much time Harry had almost missed herbology later that day.

But even those classes relied too much on written out spells, rather than imagining and then sort of forcing those imaginations into reality as Harry had been doing with his own's magic for so long. His wand really helped, allowing Harry to figure out how much magic to put into a spell and to control what happened when he cast a specific spell, allowing him to modify them easily. But Harry barely saw the point of the words, let alone the gestures. They helped a

little bit, but knowing what was and wasn't possible was a lot more helpful. Still, it was early yet, only two weeks in. So Harry hoped that would change as they were taught more interesting spells.

The other students were similarly very mixed. Ron was fun to be around. He knew a lot of games, and he had this really old magical chess set whose chess pieces talked to him, which was hilarious to listen to. Seamus knew a lot of dirty jokes, Neville a lot about the Wizarding World and botany, and Dean was amazing with his paintbrush and knew a lot about football and nonmagical London, which was really cool to hear about as Harry had never been anywhere but his elementary school, the park, the local library and one trip to a zoo.

But all of them and most of the girls didn't really seem to want to learn, even learn magic. They acted like classes here were just as boring as reading and math classes were back in nonmagical school, which was just weird to Harry. Being tired of classes at the end of the year, sure, but right at the start, when Hogwarts and everything was so new and fun?

The only other student in Gryffindor their age that seemed to take their studies as seriously as Harry was Hermione. The two of them had an interesting talk a few nights back, and she was the only other one to stay and ask questions of the professors. But her bossy nature had not gone away. Harry would call them acquaintances at best at this point, especially with Ron always around Harry trying to push Harry away from studying so much. But Harry had so much fun with Ron that he was willing to go along with that for the most part.

But astronomy, which Harry had for the first time last night, had produced a surprise.

Flashback:

"Mr. Potter, could you stay behind for a moment?"

Turning at the dulcet tones of his teacher, Harry nodded, holding back a yawn with some difficulty. He wasn't used to staying up so late, but the stars were amazing tonight, and if he had to stay anywhere, staying out on the tower was fine by him.

He didn't understand why Seamus muttered, "lucky," under his breath as the others left though, simply stay where he was, until Professor Sinistra crooked a finger at him to come closer.

Harry did so, taking in her appearance once more. Professor Sinistra was easily the youngest of the professors, being only in her mid-thirties, and very obviously kept yourself in shape, with a slim waist, hips, and a heart-like appearance to her face and a black color to her skin that put Harry in mind of Angelina Johnson, a girl only a few years older than him, who was one of the Quidditch mad group who seemed to dominate Gryffindor.

The professor seemed almost nervous as she began to speak, almost blurting out her words so fast they ran together. "I was wondering, do you want to talk to me about your parents? I wasn't friends with either of them, but the two of them were Head Boy and Head Girl

when I became a first year here in Hogwarts. But I still have some stories to share if you want to hear them.”

Those words hit Harry like a thunderbolt. It never occurred to him before this that the professors here would probably know his parents. The only one who'd mentioned them had been Hagrid. Even in his long discussions with Professor McGonigal and Professor Flitwick after class neither had brought his parents up. *Do I, does that mean I just need to ask them to? I'm such an idiot!* Shaking his head off of that sudden thought, he nodded rapidly to Professor Sinistra's question. “Yes please! I would love to hear about them. I don't, I don't know anything about my parents. Hagrid's told me a bit, but not a lot. I haven't been told... I haven't heard...”

Harry hated the fact that he almost sounded as if he was blubbing for a moment, it made him feel weak, like he hadn't felt inside his own head since he had learned magic existed.

The professor didn't seem to notice this, or at least had the grace to act as if she didn't, patting him on the shoulder. “Excellent. I have every Monday morning free, so if you wish to stop by my office then, I can share some stories with you. It's too late tonight to get into any. I'll warn you though, I don't have as many stories about James as I do about Lily.” She smirked then shaking her head. “I doubt you'd like to hear about my crush on James, after all.”

At Harry's somewhat grossed Outlook she laughed, before adding, “but I admired your mother a lot. And if I can tell you anything about Lily, I will.”

End flashback

So all in all, while there were things that struck him as weird and some of the classes were really dull, Harry was quite happy with his time in Hogwarts. And today he was looking forward to getting to grips with the last of the core curriculum classes, potions. They sounded fascinating, even if they were waiting for two full weeks before having their first class. Apparently, the first week back was a refresher for the older classes, and the seventh years who had their full NEWTs had to choose a project of some kind.

But Harry's enthusiasm dimmed quickly. First Professor Snape took fifty points off Ron for nearly being late. Then after giving a brief speech, Professor Snape singled Harry out, growling a question at him about bezoars and other things. Luckily, Harry had red ahead in the potions book as he had for the other classes, and was able to answer quickly.

The fact that the professor seemed to take this wrongly caused Harry to frown, wondering what was going on there, before the professor quickly turned to the blackboard, and slapped it with his wand. A series of instructions appeared there, and while Harry was wondering how that was done, Professor Snape barked out, “This is your first test. If you are not like most of the dunderheads I have the horror to teach, you will be able to create this potion by the time this class ends.”

With that, he turned away from the board and began to stalk through the room, glaring at the students, who after a few seconds, quickly began to either look up at the board, or hop to their feet and move over to the various drawers cabinets and vials on display looking for the appropriate ingredients.

As they did, Henry did the same, looking over hit at his partner, a slithering boy named Blaise, who shrugged his shoulders, and held up a hand. "I cut, you grind?"

"Sure. But let's make certain that each of the ingredients are cut to the appropriate amount first. I'm good with measurements and stuff like that, but I've never worked with anything that needed all the ingredients to be chopped in different ways and then added at specific timed intervals, you know?"

Blaise nodded, and the two boys got up, heading to different at parts of the room. They began to work as Snape prowled around the room, growling out instructions, or rather comments really, to this or that student. When it came their turn, Snape glared down at the cutting board where Blaise and Harry were working together, one of them grinding, the other cutting, a scowl on his face making it apparent to Harry that he was looking for a reason to deride their efforts.

He seemed to glare at Harry particularly, but Harry ignored him, even as he felt a kind of pressure building up at the back of his head like he was getting a headache, just like in DADA. But Snape wasn't the first bully he dealt with, and Harry knew that just ignoring him like this would force the professor to go away, or to escalate. And if the professor did, well, Harry had come a long way from the scared little boy who always ran away from Dudley. He still didn't pick a fight with Dudley at home, and still ran from Vernon, but that was before he had his wand, and had learned a few real attack spells from reading ahead in the book. Harry didn't know his chances against the ground wizard, but he wasn't going to let **anyone** bully him, not again.

Luckily, Snape's attempt to drill a hole in Harry's head ended when there was a loud bang from somewhere nearby. Robe swirling, Snape twisted around, his hand swiftly holding his wand, so fast that Harry could barely follow the movement. A series of spells flicked out to drag students out from the smoky area, and to create a water bubble in the air that splashed down onto the slagged bubbling remains of the cauldron. Another spell wafted the smoke up to a vent and then away as Snape hissed. "Longbottom! You forgot to cut your boomslang on a diagonal! And I'll wager that your ground occamy wasn't ground down enough, was it, Weasley?"

Neville sniffled, his face and upper body a massive would look like slowly growing blisters as he hovered in the air to one side of the disaster. Ron had apparently been far enough to avoid that, but he was coughing and looking sickly green. Sneering still, Snape sent him towards the doorway, where he stumbled as he landed. "Patil, Moon, your potion looks the furthest along." Another spell flowed out from his wand, covering their workspace, and causing

even the smoke rising from the cauldron to pause in place somehow. “Walk the buffoon to the nurse’s office and hurry back. If you’re late, I will deduct points from your house. Weasley, you have until they return to clean up your workspace, or you will be serving time in detention with me!”

As the two girls scramble to obey, Snape turned to the rest of the class, glaring at every student equally now. “Let that be a lesson to you. Potion making is a precise art. If you dunderheads cannot understand the written word or obey simple commands, then you had best prepare for a very, very unpleasant time in this class.”

Eventually, the class ended, without any further instruction from Snape, Harry noticed. He didn’t even explain why you had to cut occamy on a diagonal, something the book didn’t explain either. But Harry and his partner did finish their potion, and when called, Blaise and Harry moved to the front of the room to present their promotions after Hermione and Lavender. Despite the disaster with Neville’s potion, Blaise and Harry had worked relatively well together, making sure that everything was cut or ground appropriately before adding it in the order they needed to into the cauldron. It was also the right color, although Harry thought that it might have needed a bit more time on the fire.

Snape scowled at Harry, then made as if to grab the ocean. In reality, he seemed to misjudge things, only knocking the potion backward off the edge of his desk towards the two boys.

But Harry was quick. He quickly grabbed it with a hovering spell, one of the first spells he had learned and the one he needed the least amount of time or concentration to do, slowing it down enough for him to grab the bottle before it could hit the ground and break. With Snape’s eyes still on him, Harry put the potion back on the desk, very deliberately pushing it forwards away from the edge.

Snape glared at him, then down at the potion, a loud harrumph coming from them. “Well, it seems as if Zabini was able to carry you, despite your fame no doubt weighing you down, Potter! That is an Acceptable.”

Harry nodded curtly then turned and left the room without another word. Blaise remained silent as Harry turned away, watching both of them thoughtfully, before hurrying after Harry, who was breathing in and out slowly, willing himself to push aside the anger he was currently feeling.

OOOOOO

Glaring at the Potter brat’s back Snape sneered, thinking of calling the lout back and demanding some respect before releasing him. But he didn’t. Instead he waited, grading the other potions to come to his desk one after another, grading the offerings based on his own understanding of the potion and his own personal slant to things too. It was one of the few good things about being a professor here, after all.

As the classroom emptied, he walked out as well, turning aside and taking another set of stairs rather than following behind the students. This let him bypass most of the school and head directly to the headmaster's tower.

After giving the stupid password to pass the gargoyle, Severus found himself standing in front of the headmaster's desk, who looked up at him in amusement from a large stack of paperwork. "Severus. I just received a report that you had a student heading to the nurse's office. Was that the only one? Or did any others fail your little test? And I do hope that you're not here to complain about Harry. We've been over this already and you know I won't allow you to be biased against him beyond a certain point needed to drive him away from slithering."

Mentally rolling his eyes at that, Snape shook his head. "While it would please me very much to report that Potter has no hand for potions, he was paired with one of my Slytherins today rather than the Weasley boy is you with thought. That walking stomach was actually late to my class, and I took points off it. But by that point, Potter and Sabini had already paired up. No, I've come to report that Potter has the same kind of mental defenses as his mother."

"Truly? Could you tell if he noticed your probe at all?" Dumbledore asked, showing no concern about the fact that a professor had just admitted that he had mentally probe to student. Severus, did after all, have permission from him to do so and not just in Harry Potter's case. "I recall she eventually became able to notice such, but it took many years to get to that point."

"He might have noticed something, but I doubt he understands that it was a mental probe on my part," Severus answered. "But it is something we will both need to be aware of in the future, especially you, headmaster, if you wish to still play the benevolent grandfatherly figure."

"Of course I do. It is so effective, after all. And just like you are grumpy, antisocial persona, it is quite close to the truth," Alice chuckled, nodding his head in thanks for the other young man's words before offering him a candy.

As Severus left without tasting one of his candies, Dumbledore popped one into his mouth, thinking deeply. He was positive that he would be able to get through whatever natural mental defenses Harry had. He'd been able to do the same thing to his mother after all, and she had similar defenses. *Well, until after her sixth year here, anyway. Hard headedness seems to run in that family, but that does not mean it cannot be overcome.*

Still, many of the other changes in Harry's demeanor compared to how Albus expected him to be surprised Albus. He thought he knew what to expect from Harry, living with an anti-magic family. He would be underfed certainly, meek, easily led, and eager to learn magic but worried about standing out still more than he already would be due to his fame as the Boy Who Lived. But it seemed as if only two of those things were right.

Harry Potter was anything but meek, and disdained his Bow Who Lived status to the point he ignored or outright scowled at anyone who tried to approach him to talk about it. He was eager to learn magic but this was coupled with a drive that few other young students who came to Hogwarts had. He also seemed to want to truly learn about magic, not just spells, which was a fascinating different.

Still, it was also obvious that he craved family, and liked to have fun just as much as others children. *And it is only two weeks in, after all. I have time yet to make my own opinion on Harry. And nothing I have seen so far means that he is not biddable, after all. The plan is still in place, should it become necessary.*

OOOOOOO

“Do you want to talk about it?” Professor Sinistra asked, gazing to the side as the small candles that she and Harry had lit began to flicker out. “I can tell that something is bothering you more than just lighting candles for your parents.

The older professor and offered to have Harry up on the astronomy tower for Halloween night, knowing that it probably wasn’t a night he wanted to celebrate like the rest of the school did. Over the years since Voldemort’s death, Halloween had become even bigger to the wizards and witches in Britain than before.

Harry had eagerly leapt at the chance to avoid the crowds and the other kids tonight. The two of them had lit a pair of candles for his parents, while the professor told him a few more stories about them. Most of these were secondhand stories now as all the first-hand stories she had about interacting or watching Lily act as the Head Girl had already been told during the past two months. Yet Harry, as starved for knowledge about his parents as he was, ate them up regardless.

“I, I might have made a mistake... or two,” Harry admitted, scowling and looking out over the horizon beyond the edge of the astronomy tower. “And I’m not certain how to make up for it. Hermione, she and I get along okay, but she’s always been so annoyed when I finish a spell before her in class, or hand in homework that she doesn’t think is long enough or whatever, and we don’t really hang out all that much like me, Ron or the others. I even hang out with the girls sometimes. I didn’t, I didn’t realize that she was kind of all alone in the House, you know?”

“I do know something of that yes. Ms. Granger really should have been in Ravenclaw, I think. But she’ll get her feet under her eventually as a Gryffindor. But something happened I take it to make it clear that Ms. Granger was not happy?”

“She tried to help Ron in class, and even though her help let him use the spell, he called Hermione names afterward. She ran away crying,” Harry admitted, shaking his head. “And I kind of blew up. I shouted at Ron, and I, I just don’t like bullies. But when I looked for Hermione, I couldn’t find her to apologize. None of the girls could tell me where she was, either.”

“You’re not supposed to apologize for Ron, you can apologize for not standing up against him when he called her names in the first place, but it’s Ron’s place to apologize for that Harry,” Professor Sinistra said firmly. “As for how to say you’re sorry, that’s all you do. Just express regret, and maybe help her make friends with the other students.”

Harry looked at her in confusion, thinking there had to be more to it than that, but Sinistra simply smiled at him, then gestured him towards the hatch leading down into the stairwell. “Now come on, it’s time for you to head to bed.” Harry looked at the dishes of the meal they’d shared, after lighting the candles, but she waved him off quickly. “Go on, the house elves will deal with that.”

Nodding at that, Harry walked off, opened the hatch and headed into the tower, frowning as he went. It really seemed as if there needed to be more to it.

Harry had made the conscious decision when school began that outside of classes and his own study time, he would like to have some fun like a normal kid. For that, Ron had seemed a perfect friend, even if he didn’t really understand that Harry wanted to study at all. Hermione on the other hand didn’t seem to find games or talking about sports or whatever girls did that are the equivalent as fun at all. Looking back on whenever Harry could remember seeing her, Hermione seemed to always be alone, as he had explained to the professor. The only time she talked to anyone was Harry when they were in class working alongside one another. Otherwise, she spent a lot of time in the library, where Harry preferred not to go, learning better by watching others or practicing magic rather than reading books.

That was what Harry was really guilty about. Not just how he didn’t stop Ron from calling her names, but from not realizing that those moments were the only time he’d seen Hermione interact with anyone else from Gryffindor.

After a few floors passed, Harry exited the stairwell out into a hallway he knew would eventually lead him to another set of stairs that would take him up to Gryffindor tower. But halfway along it’s length, Harry was broken out of his musings as something foul-smelling hit his nose. Backing away rapidly he looked around, then down at his feet, but didn’t see where the smell could be coming from. Grimacing, Harry wondered if the Weasley twins had let off some of their stink bomb things again, before resolutely moving forward trying to ignore the smell, one hand over his nose.

That was, until he rounded a door, and stared up and then further up at the reason for the smell as it came towards him from out of another stairwell, turning to head in the same direction Harry was going. A giant-like humanoid creature the thing looked almost like an orc from fantasy or maybe... *Troll! Right! I read about them, and of course the Wizarding World has those.*

They didn’t quite look like the first trolls that Harry had seen in books, this one wasn’t made out of rock or was named detritus, but the big club and the stupid look in his face was the

same, as it, pensively picking his nose for a moment, before catching a glimpse of Harry. Turning around, it growled and raised its club, bringing it down.

Harry's eyes widened, and he dodged to one side, wincing as bits of stones slapped into or cut his skin as the club struck the floor of the hallway. Then as the troll raised a leg to stomp on him, Harry desperately rolled underneath the creature's legs, muttering almost hysterically to himself as the adrenaline in his body went from zero to sixty within a second. "Don't look up, don't look up!"

He was then past the troll who roared, twisting around and bring its club down again, more of its few brain cells activating as the creature in front of it dodged and tried to get away. This meant it was prey, and prey could be squished and eaten.

Racing down the hallway away from the creature, Harry ducked into the first door he came to only to stop and stare as Hermione looked at him, the door to a bathroom cubicle closing behind her. "This, this is the girls bathroom!" The girl exclaimed, looking appalled.

"Troll coming this way!" Harry hissed, looking back behind him at the door, then leaping forward, carrying Hermione to the floor as the door exploded behind him from the blow of the troll's club. It roared as it ducked underneath the low doorway, roaring even louder as it didn't duck low enough and banged his head on the sill. Smashing it with a fist then growling and tromping forward. But by that point, Harry had rolled the pair of them underneath the walls of the cubicles, one hand over Hermione's mouth as they hid there.

The troll stared around itself, then roared at its own reflection, smashing its free hand against his chest in challenge to the creature it saw in front of it.

Peeling away Harry's hand, Hermione whispered, "W, where did that thing come from? Nothing dangerous is supposed to be able to get past the school's wards!"

"Do you want to ask?" Harry demanded practically incredulous as he began to shift to the side, crawling on his stomach underneath the side of the cubicle. "Let's see if we can crawl out of here and get behind it. Trolls don't look very quick, so if we can get out past into the hallway..."

Such was not to be. A quick forward thrust with the club that was the precursor to a real challenge shattered the image of the troll in the mirror, causing it to realize it wasn't real. The troll then whirled around, howling in annoyance and slamming its club against everything within reach, all of the faucets, all of the cubicles, including the ones directly over Harry and Hermione. They shattered, the debris falling down on top of them, burying them for a few moments. But the troll saw one hand poking out of the rubble, and prepared to bring its club down again.

Harry looked up blearily and saw this, and quickly willed his magic, thrusting up a hand, his wand pinned on his belt at the moment. *Break!*

The troll's club exploded under the will of Harry's magic, sending bits of debris into the creature's head, shoulders and arm, causing it to scream in pain and stumble back. But the damage was miniscule, and it instantly began to raise its other hand to smash Harry.

But those few seconds let Harry get his wand out. As always when using the wand, he could feel it, eager to help, and even more eager to fight. And this time, unlike a lot of times when he had to control how much power he used, Harry willed as much power as he could into the spell, aiming at a large sharp looking piece of porcelain. The image of what he wanted in his mind, Harry's magic reached out, grabbing the bit of porcelain and hurling it with all his magical might at the troll's throat. "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The piece of porcelain flew so fast there was a booming noise that hurt Harry and Hermione's ears, rattling the windows of the bathroom before the porcelain hit, slicing through a portion of the troll's neck. This caused the dumb brute to howl in agony, stumbling backwards, both hands going up to its neck, trying to hold in its own lifeblood for a few seconds. Then, perhaps realizing he was dying, or perhaps realizing that was impossible, one hand rose away from the wound, blood flicking everywhere, before coming down towards Harry, who was gasping and swaying in place.

Hermione screamed, leaping forward pushing Harry out of the way. The pair of them rolled to one side as the blow of the troll came down, pulping the debris from the cubicles and cracking the floor underneath. Hermione then twisted around, bringing up her own wand, hesitating as she wondered what kind of spell to use, before settling on the tickling charm, aimed directly at one of the creature's eyes.

While not exactly deadly, having a gushing wound in your neck and now an itching eye seemed to completely distract the troll. Its hands moved, from one to the other and back and forth, all thought of attacking the two children gone as it began to sway in place, blood loss rapidly catching up to the creature. Rapidly backed away although still tired, Harry kept his wand pointed at the creature, watching in surprise as slumped to its knees, and then fell forward onto his face, finally bleeding out from its wounds.

"Is, is it dead," Hermione stammered, staring at the creature.

"I certainly hope so," Harry said, feeling a little tired from the spell work and the adrenaline that was now beginning to leave his system.

He moved forward, but before he could reach the troll, Hermione grabbed his arm, and dragged him towards the door. "Well, well let's not wait around to find out! We should find a teacher and..."

As if summoned by her words, there came a noise of several people running towards them two from one end, another from the other end of the hallway, soon joined by someone else. Professor McGonigal was the first through, followed by Hagrid, whose face was grim, and his big hands were clenched into ham-sized fists. They were followed by Professor Sinistra,

coming from the other end of the hall, and Flitwick. Sinistra quickly fell back, shaking her head in shock, while Minerva quickly got over her own as Hagrid moved past the two kids, checking on the troll. "What happened here?!"

Hermione began to stammer something, but Harry overrode her, explaining that he had been up in the astronomy tower with Professor Sinistra holding a vigil for his parents, then ran into the troll as he came back inside coming towards this bathroom, something that horrified Hermione when she heard it. Minerva glanced over at the other professor, who nodded firmly, and finally sighed. She wasn't aware of that, but would in the future, and then looked over at Hermione. "And what of you Miss Granger, why were you not at the feast?"

Looking down, Hermione didn't look like she was going to answer, and once more Harry spoke up. "She was hiding out here from Ron and the rest of our house, professor. He called her a lot of names earlier today, and she ran off before I could apologize."

Remembering Professor Sinistra's words, Harry looked over at Hermione, squeezing her hand briefly only now noticing that they were still holding hands from when Hermione had pulled him away from the troll. "I'm sorry I didn't realize that you weren't getting along with anyone. I thought that all of the girls were, well, a group you know? I didn't realize you might not have made friends or anything beyond talking to me in classes. And I'm sorry I didn't stick up for you sooner when Ron began to call you names. I was just kind of stunned that he was doing it at all."

Minerva hid a smile as Hermione began to flush a bit, before clearing her throat, ordering the pair of them to tell what had happened to the troll. The story that came out had Flitwick smiling proudly at Harry, muttering about how he had modified a spell on the fly like that, taking a simple charm that was used every day around the house and making it dangerous. Minerva was of two minds about that, but still gave Harry sixty points for Gryffindor, and Hermione twenty for helping to stand against the troll.

She then seemingly cast a spell that created a small glowing cat. She whispered instructions into it before sending it racing off, after which she turned her attention to the bathroom and the troll. "Wait in the hall for a moment. Young Mr. Weasley will be along presently."

Harry and Hermione both frowned, wondering if that meant Ron, but instead, Percy came huffing towards them, his eyes wide at the message the glowing creature had apparently delivered.

"Mr. Weasley, please get these two back to Gryffindor Tower," Minerva said as the damage began to repair itself under her wand, and Flitwick levitated the troll into the air, his face showing the strain of lifting something that was magically resistant like the troll's body. Minerva hastily conjured a cart for it, which Hagrid began to drag towards the doors.

At that point, Minerva realized that all three of the students were still there, even Percy staring at the troll. "Be off with you, I said. I've given out points tonight, I would hate to take them back."

With that, Percy turned, gently laying a hand on both of the still somewhat stunned younger kids, pushing them gently long. "Come on, you can tell me the story of what happened tonight. I don't think either of you are in the right frame of mind to deal with the impromptu party that's going on in the tower, so I'll put you both in a few of the married couples quarters, one to each room, obviously, and then I'll tell the rest what's going on in your stead."

That didn't take very long, although their story did stun the older redhead for a few reasons and as they were ushered into a pair of rooms, Hermione grabbed Harry's hand again, squeezing it. "Thank you. For both the whole saving from a troll thing, and the words. I'll, I'll see you tomorrow for breakfast?"

There was something almost vulnerable in the way she spoke that word, but Harry recently nodded firmly, squeezing her hand back just as firmly. "Definitely. I don't know how to really make friends normally, but I think fighting a troll counts, right?"

The beaming smile he got back for that had Percy smiling even as he made certain both of them closed the doors to the two bedrooms he led them to. They were young, but there was a reason why only the Prefect's could freely access these, and only one gender at a time to boot. He looked over at an image of a Prefect on a nearby wall whose image had been placed there due to having performed some duty for the school or other. "Make certain that they don't go wandering, would you?"

"I don't think that's necessary, but I will regardless," the man in the portrait replied.

Percy nodded, then marched out the door, his teeth gritted and hands clenching and unclenching at his side. He had a little brother to... talk to.

OOOOOO

"I'm quite saddened that our students had to kill the troll as they did. I'm not saying they shouldn't have, just that it saddens me that they were put in a position they had to make that choice. Remind me tomorrow morning to speak to both of them about that. Taking a life, even the life of a troll is something that might weigh on them," Dumbledore said shaking his head sadly as he and the other teachers had a meeting an hour later on what had occurred.

"I think that Ms. Granger was bothered by it quite a bit, I could see she was barely holding it together. Mr. Potter seemed a little off as well," Minerva reflected, nodding her head at the headmasters thoughts. "Yet all in all, I have to admit to being quite proud of how quick he was on his feet."

Severus scoffed, but Dumbledore nodded sagely, and waved all of the teachers out pointedly not hearing or Aurora and Minerva place a wager on how long it would be before

Hermione and Harry were a couple. That would bear watching admittedly if worst came to worst and he would have to push Harry into making the ultimate sacrifice.

But at present, this whole incident was more important to what it told Albus about the young man in question than anything else. *Exceptionally quick, very quick to try to ignore our outright avoid public attention, but also desperate to know about his family. Ruthless at need, exceptionally powerful, but almost driven to learn as a means of proving himself* he thought, mentally ticking off points. *But what is his strongest motivator? Is it to prove himself, to prove himself strong like so many others from that kind of family so that no one can take advantage of them? Or is it something else? I will need to see how we react to the mirror to figure out which levers truly work best on the boy.*

It would take another month, but eventually Dumbledore would have his answer. As he had expected, Harry could not ignore the chance of sneaking around unseen under the Potter family's Invisibility Cloak, the second of the Deathly Hallows that Albus knew the location of. Alas, his Magical Oath to give it back to Harry meant that he couldn't hold onto it any longer once Harry was a part of the Wizarding World, and even pushing it off to the holidays like this had caused Albus some pain from his magic rebelling against an oath unfulfilled. That didn't stop him from placing several tracking charms on it, however.

This allowed Dumbledore to ambush Harry in the room with the Mirror of Erised.

OOOOOO

Harry stared into the mirror, sitting on the floor cross-legged as he gazed at his parents for the first time.

He could now understand why everyone said he had his mother's eyes. They were much the same as his own, Emerald, gleaming with good humor over a wide grin at present that made his mother's face look like she enjoyed having a good time. But his father was the one who had gifted him with his nearsightedness, as he too wore a pair of glasses. His mother was a redhead, something else that Harry is known, but the smile on her face, the smile on his father's face, those he had never been able to picture before. The sight of them and the other inhabitant of the image, it entranced him. For standing with them was Cynthia, smiling merrily as if she'd just been told a joke, even as one hand was held out towards Harry as if beckoning him to join them.

It was the same Harry had seen last night when he'd first been about with the Invisibility Cloak. It entranced Harry then to the point where he has sat here for more than an hour before hearing filched nearby had caused him to hurry back to his room. And it did so now.

Only this time, another kind of noise interrupted his staring. A quiet throat clearing.

"The danger of the Mirror of Erised, young Harry, is that it shows you precisely what you want in your deepest heart of hearts. Very few people can look into that image and turn

away. They simply sit here, staring, ignoring their bodies, ignoring their lives, lost forever in a dream.”

“Instead of trying to achieve it,” Harry said with a nod as he slowly turned away, breaking the hold the mirror had on him to look towards where the soft voice had come from. He was not surprised to see Headmaster Dumbledore, having recognized the voice from when they had talked about what Harry felt after killing the troll. He quickly got to his feet, bowing his head towards the old headmaster. “I’m sorry to disturb you headmaster, its just I wanted to see them again.”

“Your family?” Albus asked fleetingly. Then when Harry nodded, he moved over to gently take Harry by the shoulder, noticing how Harry had to fight back a little flinch at the touch, before gently pushing him towards the door and releasing him. “But even that can be a trap.”

“I know. But I’d not seen any images of them, or really anything at all from them before,” Harry said shaking his head. “I, I won’t be back. I might not be able to bring them back from the dead, but I can achieve everything else in that dream at least.”

“That is the correct way of looking at things Harry. Whatever that image shows you, it is just that, an image. Only what you can achieve will make your dream a reality. And what else did you see? Given what you just said, I think it was not just your parents.” Albus tried to use Legilimency on the youth, but it required eye contact, and his timing was poor. Harry had already turned away, leaning down to pick up the discarded cloak, pulling it around himself. But that was all right by Albus, he doubted Harry would lie to him about something like this.

In actuality, Harry had already decided to keep Cynthia a secret from everyone, even Hermione. Elves didn’t exist in this world, and Harry knew that even trying to talk about them in front of people might cause them to look at him like he was a crazy person. It also hinted at too much of his own past, the fact that he had someone’s help in learning how to manipulate magic before he even got his wand. Just like that wandless magic he wanted to keep that a secret.

“I see myself with the family professor. A girlfriend, kids, a whole house of people,” Harry said, prevaricating quite a bit.

But Albus didn’t catch it, simply nodding his head, and repeating his earlier words before Harry asked, “And what do you see professor?”

For a moment, Albus debated on whether or not to give his normal lazy, humorous answer. Then he shrugged mentally, and stated simply, “I see my family as well, from before life took us all in different directions. Family can be one of the most powerful driving forces, can it not?”

Harry nodded fervently, and Dumbledore admonished him to not seek out the mirror again, before walking with the youth, answering some very interesting questions from him

about Transfiguration, and the line between that and conjuration, advising the boy to look for a few specific books in the library, chortling at his annoyed look, before turning back when they came to the Fat Lady's portrait.

With a final farewell to the youth, Albus turned away, heading towards his own office, well pleased. While it seems as if I will need to read think some of the challenges defending the philosopher's stone after this, he certainly is no friends to young Ron any longer, Harry even hungrier to have a family and to make his own parents proud than I had hoped. Excellent. I can start to give him bits and pieces of knowledge of the Potter side of his family tree, their pasts and everything else over the next few years, emphasizing the self-sacrificing nature of that family. Will make it all the easier for him to make that final decision if need be.

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When Harry Potter fell asleep the night after his confrontation with Quirrell and the spirit of Voldemort, he was very, very afraid of what he would dream. No one had talked to him about it bar Dumbledore telling him that Quirrell had died due to the charm which had slain Voldemort. But even so, Harry had seen the man's face rotting away, turning to ash under his hands. Harry was smart enough to know that kind of thing could have an impact on a person.

When Harry opened his dream-self's eyes, he was in a forest, and looking around himself he didn't see any landmark or anything he recognized. For a moment, confusion reigned, but then he remembered a dream he once had more than two years before, well before Hagrid had introduced him to the Wizarding World. The dream which had sparked his interest in magic and started him down the road of self-discovery in magic, which had made his life so much easier, even if he couldn't quite get away from the Dursleys.

And yet, Harry thought to himself staring down at his hands, magic also killed Quirrell. My magic. My touch. It, it isn't all sweetness and light in the Wizarding world. And I, I killed... Harry gulped then, feeling the same queasy feeling he had fallen asleep with filling him, drowning out the nature of his surroundings for a moment. But after who knew all long Harry shook himself a bit, as he heard a sound through the woods. A sound that he knew all too well: the sound of someone sobbing.

He looked around, then stood up, and began to move through the woods trying to find the source of the sound.

To his surprise, it wasn't Celestine, the Elven woman whose blonde hair and smile Harry could still remember even as everything else about her had faded from his mind. Instead, it was a dark skinned elf this time. And once more, Harry stared, awestruck.

Her skin was the color of cocoa maybe? Not dark enough to be chocolate, but like coffee with a lot of cream added, like the kind of cocoa the Twins provided the Quidditch team during morning practice. Her hair was black, black as night almost, darker even than Professor Sinistra's or Angelina's.

The woman had long legs contained in a pair of high boots that came up to her knees, which looked much more practical than the small sandals that Celestine had worn. *Strange that I can remember that along with the other bits and pieces but not everything all at once?*

The rest of her clothing wasn't nearly as practical though, as she seemed to be wearing something that Harry could only think of as a modified bathing suit, showing off a lot of the cream-coffee colored skin. *But how is it staying in place?* There didn't seem to be anything holding the two sides of the swimsuit closed over her chest, which Harry found fascinating on many levels. And the size of her chest made even Professor Sinistra look like a teenager.

Where before Harry had been so young that he barely understood the difference between boys and girls and had been far more enamored of Celestine's kindness than body, he had passed puberty by this point and looking at this woman caused him to blush even as he stared, unable to turn his eyes away, the woman's beauty and curves depriving him of all his higher mental functions. Until, that was, the sound of her quiet sobbing penetrated and he shook his hormone-induced fascination off.

This motion caught the Elven woman's attention and she shot to her feet, twisting around, the staff in her hand glowing suddenly with magical power. "Who... A human? What is human doing in my dream?" She said with a scowl, looking around her, her face firming under her tears into something almost imperious. "Unless this is the response to my prayers. But what could that signify..."

The elven woman seemed to go off in her own world at that but came back to the here and now when Harry spoke. "Why were you crying?"

"What?" The woman started at that, and Harry realized for the first time that her eyes were golden colored and found himself nearly mesmerized. They were narrowed now in suspicion as she stared at him, but still beautiful in their own right, if not as naturally warm seeming as Celestine's.

Harry however simply held up his hands and knelt down on the ground in the same fashion that Celestine had done all those years ago with him. Seeing that, the woman calmed down a bit, rubbing at her face in an attempt to banish the tears that had still been falling there. "I, I was..."

Anger suddenly overtook her, and she reared up, a snarl on her purple-painted lips as she raised her hand. "None of my thoughts are any of your business human! Less than that you have no business being here at all! Only your age alone keeps me from striking you down!"

"I'm sorry," Harry said softly, looking away. Half of that was because the woman obviously was in distress and not happy about showing it and in an effort to appease her sudden fury, having no desire at all to try and fight her. The other half of it was the fact that in her anger the dusky-skinned elven woman had moved closer to him, which made her beauty more apparent, especially since sitting down he had to look up at her. From that angle, she had

barely any modesty left to speak of, the interior of her breasts practically bare to his eyes. “I, I shouldn’t have asked. Erm, from what I remember, this place is well a place to come if your troubled or just need solitude, I guess, so I should have just assumed that.”

“It is a memory of a place where I was once happy, without worries or duties on my shoulders,” the woman answered, her anger draining away at this, looking more closely at Harry now. “But nowhere in that memory was a human **ever** involved. Certainly not a quite young human.”

The woman continued to stare at him with a frown, but Harry simply kept looking away, blushing slightly. This innocent reaction, and the fact he was looking away, allowed the woman to slowly regained control of her emotions. And as she did, the woman looked around, confusion and curiosity coming to the fore. *What is a human doing here indeed? I questioned his being here before, but now I must do so even more*, she thought, examining the human from head to toe. He was a scrawny fellow. the elven woman would estimate his age at around eleven, perhaps ten, if human bodies grew as elven bodies did. Although from his reaction to her, he might be a little older. Certainly, his body looked a little malnourished, although tough and wiry for all of that.

And on his forehead was... “Where did you get that?” the woman demanded, pointed at his forehead, her curiosity arrested by what she saw there.

(segment moved to here, segments changed in red) Harry blinked, confusion making him turn back to lock eyes with the elven woman. “It, it’s what my people call a curse scar. I apparently got it on the same night my parents were murdered.”

“Rubbish.” the elven woman announced definitively, not commenting on the fact his parents were murdered. “That is a protection rune, an old style to be sure, one I haven’t seen in some three hundred years outside of books, but it would still suffice to protect you from evil in some fashion.”

The dusky-hued elven beauty was now looking at Harry even more closely, having moved close enough to touch him, leaning forward slightly to look more closely at the mark on his forehead, taking his head in her hands and turning it forcefully so she could look at his forehead from different angles. “Yes, I’m positive. That is protection rune. But it’s effect on a person that I do not know. There is also some other kind of magic within it as well, as if someone layered another enchantment or perhaps tied it into larger working in some fashion? Fascinating, at least to my Mage Sight. Hmmm...”

“C, could you please back away, er, j, just a bit, Miss?” Harry had closed his eyes the moment she had leaned forward, and now simply scrunched them closed even tighter, unwilling to embarrass himself further by looking at the sight dangling right before his eyes. The smell of her skin and the sensation of the elf’s body being so near was more than enough for him. *She smells of pine and cardamom, how, why? And why am I having trouble not looking?*

Looking at Harry's face the dark elf saw his blush and closed eyes and suddenly realized what kind of view she was giving him. She quickly leaned back, a faint color change visible on her own dark cheeks even as she laughed at Harry. "My, you are young, aren't you? I know whole nations of people who would kill to have been in your position just now."

"T, they're not my age, and... they haven't had the day I have had," Harry sighed, becoming disconsolate once more.

At that, the elven woman frowned. For a moment, she fought with herself, still-strong curiosity warring with her normal anger at humans. A glance around them seemed to tilt the balance in favor of curiosity and she knelt down in front of him, taking the same lotus position Harry could vaguely remember Celestine used.

The view this gave Harry made him blush anew, and he had to concentrate on her face. With those gleaming yellow eyes that was easier done than he had feared, thankfully. They were so striking he could barely look away.

"What is your name, human?"

"Harry Potter. And um, can I ask your name?"

"Olga Discordia, Queen of the dark elves," Olga declared, before cocking her head to one side as she looked at Harry, then looked around at the woods, her eyes narrowed in speculation once more before she sighed, gritting her teeth as she resolved to continue to be polite to this young human. "And it seems as if you too need to some solitude and time for reflection. But why would someone so young need such?"

Normally, Olga would not care about a human's problems. Humans, in her opinion, were **the** problem, and had been for the last two hundred and fifty years. But not only was this human too young to have ever harmed one of her people, the fact that Harry Potter was here at all was telling. *That is impossible to overstate, Olga!* Olga thought to herself. *I have had visions before, but this is all too real to be a simple vision. Nor is it a sending, Potter is too young and I doubt anyone that age, elven or human, could control such, now that I think of it calmly. No, this is some higher power interfering. But I thought all the gods were dead or had retreated from the realm...*

Harry frowned, and now looked away for an entirely different reason. Eventually, he simply stated it bluntly. "I killed a man yesterday."

"...One's first kill is always a trial. I understand your need for solitude." Olga answered simply, real sympathy worming it's way through her enforced politeness. Harry looked at her and surprise, and Olga barked a laugh, harsh but still understanding. "I am queen of a people who are at war, Harry Potter. I have killed more people than I care to remember personally and have ordered the death of far more. Yet I still remember my first battle."

"Why are you at war?" Harry asked, frowning at the idea of war.

“To defend my people from those who would ravish them, slay them, or enslave them,” Olga answered crisply, without any hesitation, and then leaning forward, eager to turn the conversation on the mystery of the boy in front of her. “And you? Why did you kill?” *And why did a god or gods bring us both here to meet like this? I refuse to believe it is a sign I should make peace with the humans, damn them to the depths of the earth!*

Harry flinched but seeing that this was his own question simply returned to him, knew he had to answer. “The man who killed my parents, he came back from the dead as a, a wraith. He possessed someone, willingly. They were after a, a magical item I guess, called the philosopher’s stone.”

Olga frowned, interrupting the tale in some confusion. “That name is known to me, but a stone that turns lead into gold? How is that something worth killing over? Gold is only valuable because of its rarity after all, and the moment more appear on the market without a known source, people will be looking into it.”

That comment went right over Harry’s head, and he shook his head. “Where I come from, it could do a lot more. The Philosopher’s Stone could create what is called the Elixir Of Life. It would give the user immortality. It could have brought back the shade back to life. I had to stop it from happening, and we fought.”

“And it fell on you, a young boy, to defend it?” Olga asked skeptically, keeping her derision from her face only by knowing that while one could prevaricate or embellish in the land of dreams, you couldn’t actually lie directly. Which meant that Harry’s tale was the simple truth, as far as he knew.

Harry retorted hotly, saying that he and his friends had been the ones to discover when the attempted theft was going to happen, **and that none of the adults had believed him, so it did indeed fall on Harry and his friends.** But as he spoke, Harry paused, his anger leaving him, as he thought about it some more. “I, that is I... Before you said that, I would’ve said yes. I, I tried to get the adults to look into it but, but if it wasn’t real, just a trap then...”

Olga shook her head, putting forth her own opinion. “Indeed, this magnificent item might well have been fake. Or, more likely, there were other defenses in place that you, limited as you are by your magical knowledge, did not see. Describe the defenses,” she ordered crisply. *If this boy has been sent here, I must discover all I can about him, and how he might be of use to me.*

When Harry described all the traps, Olga listened intently, then shook her head once more. “And how dangerous would those traps have been against a fully grown magic user? I can tell you that even an apprentice wizard in my army would be able to get through all of those traps on his own.”

“I, I think any two adult wizards or even a lot of wizards alone could have gotten through them. So... you saying maybe it was just meant to slow him down? Or as a... test of

some kind? A test of what?" Harry questioned, some of his good feelings towards the headmaster evaporating, just as it had the day Harry had requested to stay in Hogwarts during the summer. Not only had that been rejected, any attempt to find someplace else to live had been blocked.

According to the headmaster, the only place Harry was safe was with the Dursleys, the place he always felt least safe. Now, he did explain why: that there were followers of Voldemort out there who would love to hunt Harry down and kill him. There were wards at the Dursleys place based on shared blood that would keep Harry hidden from any magical detection or indeed anyone even thinking of looking for him at all, even through muggle means. But this explanation did not mean Harry was happy to remain there. Far from it, in fact. *There have to be other ways, right? Hermione and I need to look into that this summer, if we can.*

"That is something you will have to discover. He could simply be testing you and your friends for further training" Olga answered with a shrug, coming to the end of her patience with the human's concerns. "Although, it would be a rather odd way to do so. Especially if this prize was the real thing. Something I cannot bring myself to believe from your brief description."

Harry frowned, wishing he was as good strategy as Ron was at chess, before shaking his head. "I, I don't have enough information I don't think to figure out if I was being tested, or if something else is going on. But you're right, it **was** a little too easy."

"Knowing that you have to ask questions is half the battle," Olga nodded. Then she sighed faintly, looking away, her long elven ears drooping as mind went back to her own troubles. "It is asking the right questions which becomes difficult."

Looking at her troubled expression, Harry asked hesitantly, "What, what about you? What questions were you wrestling with? What questions were making you cry?"

Having helped Harry through his moment, Olga was almost disarmed as he turned the conversation back to her. Almost. But after a brief second, Harry's round ears reminded her that Harry wasn't a young elf, but a human, and she barked out, "It's none of your business! You are a human, you would never understand! I do not even know I am talking to you at all."

Harry let Olga's anger wash over him. He was used to adults being angry at him, and she had nothing on Snape. "Maybe I wouldn't. But I can tell it's bothering you, or else you wouldn't be here at all. So maybe talking to me can give you some new perspective? I can already tell you that your world isn't like mine. We don't have elves at all, and never have. So even if you tell me a secret or something, I can't act on it."

Again Olga snarled, but at Harry's disarmingly honest look, Olga let out that anger in a hiss, looking around them once more, reminding herself that this human boy had been sent here for a reason. *And it will be a reason that goes both ways. As capricious as some of them were, I cannot see any of the old gods bringing us together to help Potter alone. So perhaps he*

has a point. “Very well, you have a point on that, and it would behoove me to see if you can repay the aid I have given you in widening your world view.”

Harry nodded then simply waited, knowing that trying to hurry Olga along would not help matters right now. *She’s just like Hermione when I perfect a spell first. I bet I just need to give Olga a hint too, and she’ll get it right away without getting all... what was the term Wood used? Stroppey? Something like that, anyway. Although it’s obvious whatever problems she’s got are way bigger than just not being able to figure out a spell.*

“My people are stuck in the middle between two aggressively expansionist races,” Olga began, seeing no reason to say that one of those races was human, not wanting to open that particular can of worms. “I have been able to broker an agreement with one of them to ally against the other. Put the price is very high. So high, that my people will suffer horribly, and many of my people may die.”

Harry frowned at that, cocking his head to one side. It was weird Olga wasn’t going into details, but if she didn’t want to Harry wasn’t about to push. She had given him enough information anyway. “You are sacrificing something. Like, like we had to sacrifice Ron’s chess piece to get past the chess set.”

“When you lacked the power to just blast through it. Despite my disdain for that, the analogy does, much to my distress, work, as I lack the strength to blast through this problem,” Olga grumbled before standing up abruptly. *Why am I even sharing this! He’s only twelve, not exactly steeped in learning either.* “This is a waste of my time, a, a farce! I am done speaking to you human. Be grateful that I am letting you go without violence.”

She was about to walk away when Harry asked, “What exactly are you sacrificing?”

Olga licked her lips and did not turn to look back at Harry staring ahead of her, her spine rigid. All of her earlier hauteur and anger vanished, leaving Olga feeling vulnerable as she faced once more the cost of her decisions, a cost her people would pay, but not her, which, quixotically, made it even more painful, and she refused to let anyone, let alone a human, see her anguish. “A city. The largest city of my people. The group, the orcs, that I have made that deal with, they want the city.”

Harry didn’t see the problem with that, although he was concerned about the mention of orcs who he’d seen a lot of in the fantasy books he read. “So let them have it. A city isn’t worth anything in comparison to the people within, right? Move the people away.”

“The people are the point,” Olga grumbled, waving a hand dismissively at the boy’s words. But a small, angry part of her wanted to destroy this boy’s innocence further, and so she turned back, watching his face avidly as she explained, “The orcs want to ravage, to rape my womenfolk, and either enslave or kill all the men.”

While he didn't understand what rape meant, he hadn't come across that word in his reading yet, Harry knew what being enslaved meant and recoiled, looking green. For the first time since Olga saw him, he looked scared of her. "And you're willing to let that happen?"

That look touched Olga's simmering anger and she exploded with fury bellowing her words as she rounded on Harry, her golden eyes flashing. "Do you think that I would if I had any choice!? A city is small change to what the other races are doing to my people! I have lost thousands fighting this war, fighting to defend our borders, fighting the humans as they come at us, fighting to make certain my people do not live as slaves! Whole clans have been wiped out by slavers, their women taken, their men left for the crows! The orcs and the other Aberrants offer a fighting force that I can use to fight the other races. Without them, my people will lose this war and we will only continue to live as chained pets!" Olga growled, biting back the 'to your race' portion of that line with difficulty.

Harry stared at her, the mention of slavery having hit him hard as that was how he felt the Dursleys had always treated them. And seeing the grief, the knowledge that she was making a deal with the devil in Olga's face, the tears once more flowing from her eyes even as they flashed with anger, although he wasn't stupid enough to point the tears out to her since she seemed unaware of them, showed Olga wasn't happy about this either. "But you said these orcs were also fighting you? If you could remove them instead, what would that do?"

"It would give me a reprieve, and allow me to reorganize my battered forces," Olga answered instantly. "But the orcs and clans are too spread out, **and the Bitter North too inhospitable to sustain my people on a campaign into them.**" A scowl appeared on her face as she said those words, looking as if the term Bitter North pained her for some reason. "Worse, my people are not natural warriors as they are. In open conflict we fare poorly against the orcs. **We have learned that much to our cost over the past decades, just as we have against the humans.**"

Harry's eyes widened as an idea came to him. "But your deal is with the orcs as a whole, right? Could you somehow get them to fight over maybe taking the city, turn them against one another?"

"No, that is not possible. The orcs all answer to a single orc war chieftain currently, and although he's bringing their tribes together to pillage the city I'm going to be sacrificing to them, I..." Olga paused, staring at Harry, her golden eyes widening followed by the curve of her lips.

Seeing the sudden smile blossoming on the elven woman's face Harry too smiled. "You thought of something."

"Yes. It, it would still require sacrifice. But it would be the sacrifice of a baited trap, rather than on the altar," Olga announced, smiling now for the first time since Harry had seen her. "That could work! I'll give them the city, but tell them the inhabitants have turned on me,

so they will have to fight their way inside. And then when the majority of their forces are inside...”

Olga began to laugh, and though the sound wasn't the tinkling bells Harry could remember Celestine's laugh was like, it still thrilled Harry, in an entirely different way. “Yes! That works! It will pair back the Orcish numbers enough so that I might be able to push them entirely into the northwestern mountains! Give me time to prepare magical defenses that they will never be able to pass in the more fertile areas to the northeast. It will take a lot of magic and preparation, but it can be done.”

She crossed the intervening distance between them, kneeling down and enveloping Harry into a sudden, exuberant hug, putting aside her animosity to her race entirely for the moment. “Thank you, Harry Potter. Talking to you has given me a real solution to my problems. They won't last long but it is a solution that will give my people some peace on one front, at least for a time.”

This wasn't the first time Harry had found his head imbedded in the bosom of an older and very voluptuous woman and just like the first time Celestine had done it to him, Harry had to stop himself from stiffening. Although not in exactly the same manner... “Gu, um, I, I'm happy for you,” He stuttered, looking up at her from between Olga's breasts with a blush on his face that felt like someone had just hit his face with one of the tanning charms Lavender and Parvati were always talking about.

Seeing that blush, Olga was almost tempted to tease him, but decided against it, instead ended the hug before sitting next to him, twisting slightly to look at Harry thoughtfully. *Now I believe Harry Potter was brought here to help me and vice versa. There must be some way I can help him beyond making him ask questions of the world around him.*

“Now that you have helped me solve my problems, it is time to go back to yours. This shade that you had to deal with, do you know why it is after you? It cannot just be because you escaped when your parents died. Unless is it some kind of rival of your family? Are you the scion of a powerful house perhaps?” At Harry's confused look, Olga amended, “Are you the heir or only remaining member of a powerful house? The Prince of a kingdom?”

“I... I know my father came from a powerful magical house, but no, I'm not anything like that. I asked the headmaster of my school the same question, he was famous for fighting the shade when it was alive. The shade is that of a Dark Lord, who was bent on conquering my people. I guess I'm a memory of how he was defeated. He, he died when he tried to attack me after killing my parents.” **Despite his anger at the headmaster about the Dursleys and his new suspicion about how the stone was hidden, Harry didn't question that, as it was something everyone knew: Harry's mother and father had done something, and baby Harry had survived.**

Hearing that, Olga was about to scowl, wondering if this was the case of the winners writing the history, or some other kind of pro-human thing, her anger rising to the surface

again. But looking into Harry's honest eyes, Olga found some of her anger disappearing as she remembered what he had said about coming from another world. That, and his eyes reminded her of green leaves in the sunlight. "No doubt due to that oddly-used protection rune, yes, I can see that catching the unwary. Yet this shade still lives? For a given value that is."

"I, I think so, yes. That's what the headmaster told me. My, my touch, it, it killed Qu, Er, the body the shade had taken over. It, it turned him into ash. But the shade then escaped," Harry stammered his way through that explanation as he remembered that moment, *his body shivering in remembrance of that fight and the sight of Quirrell turning to ash and just... flaking away.*

Staring at the human youth, Olga found herself fighting two sets of instincts once more. On the one hand, she wanted to let this human stew in his own self-recrimination and loathing. But on the other hand, he was a young warrior, and before she was a queen, Olga had been in a somewhat similar situation, trembling over her first kill, her first battle, and needing advice from her *elder brother. And Harry's simple questions have helped me tremendously. It would be churlish in the extreme to not do the same.*

Really, her anger and hatred of humans only slowed her reaction down a bit, and Olga slowly reached out, taking one of the young boy's hands in her own, noting absently there wasn't much difference in their sizes as she did. "The ritual your mother embedded in that protection rune did that, not you, Harry. But it would not have mattered in the long run. Once a person has willingly been possessed, there is little an outside force can do to free the possessed of the creature taking him over. He was dead already. Everything after this man gave his body over willingly to the shade was just waiting for the inevitable end."

"I, I know that. It's what Dumbledore said. And it helps, some. So does knowing he was killing and drinking unicorn blood to sustain himself," Harry answered, causing Olga's eyes to widen in shock and horror. "But I, I still wish there had been another way."

"There occasionally isn't one, Harry," Olga answered shaken to her core by the mention of killing unicorns. That was an act even most Aberrants would think twice about, even if they could catch the magnificent creatures in the first place. "Not every problem can be solved as you helped me do earlier. Sometimes it boils down to either you or them. Best to make sure it's them, whatever you have to do. And... I would say if this shade still lives, it might not be the first time you are forced to kill."

Harry flinched at that, but Olga went on, squeezing his hand again to make certain her words got through. This, she knew somehow, was why Harry was here, he had to face this shade, and the gods themselves wanted him to win, just as they wanted her to listen to his unbiased new perspective. "If it lives and comes after you again, Harry Potter, it won't be playing a child's game. You must be prepared to meet this shade's challenge. Because it seems that your adults might not be up to the task. Always be prepared to look after yourself and your own."

She waited, watching as Harry first stiffened, looking as if he was about to argue, but then looked away. As she watched his shoulders shifted back and he sat a little taller, then nodded. He didn't like it, but it was evident he couldn't argue with her words.

Seeing that, Olga went on, building on her earlier thoughts. "I suggest that you look into self-defense in some form. If you were forced to rely on the charm that was placed on you by your mother, it is obvious that you need more training."

Then she poked Harry in the arm, before taking his arm, and pulling it out, looking at it critically. "And more muscle. Being wiry and quick is all well and good, but you look as built as a goblin."

Harry winced, shaking his head. "I do not! I've seen goblins, they're taller than me, and their faces are all pointy!"

"Where I come from, they are short, green and wiry," Olga shot back, before adding. "Although, yes, they also have pointed heads and ears."

Given how he and Blaize had begun to snark back and forth, Harry could perhaps be excused for what he said next. Trading semi-friendly barbs with the sharp-tongued Italian had trained him very well. "So elves and goblins have the same ears then? Are you related?"

Growling, Olga shook her head, glaring at him until Harry quailed sufficiently, pulling her hand away from his. There was a frosty moment then, and Harry coughed realizing he had crossed a line, before asking about Olga about her people, their magic and society. Olga was willing to answer these questions although if Harry could remember more from his meeting with Celestine, he might have realized Olga was answering his questions in far broader terms, still not entirely trusting a human, even a human from another world.

Soon though, Olga turned the conversation back to the Wizarding World as Harry had seen it. Here, Harry spoke first about the goblins in his world hoping to both get it over with and to apologize for his earlier remark. The nature of the odd creatures shocked Olga as beyond their height they had nothing in common with the goblins she knew all too well.

The tale of Harry's time in the bank interested her though. Olga had always been a bit of a thriller-seeker before taking up the mantle of Queen among her people, and the ride interested her immensely. That led to Quidditch, and the knowledge Harry was a Seeker and could fly on broomsticks. That ability wasn't known in her world, and the idea of it finished the destruction of her distrust in Harry. To Olga, he was now not really human any longer, he was simply a being from another realm which had nothing to do with her own.

The fact Harry promised to bring Olga flying if he ever figured out how to bring his broomstick along on these strange, shared dreams was merely icing on the cake. Really.

However, when it came to Harry's time at Hogwarts, there were still several issues, and unlike Harry, Olga wasn't willing to let the fact he'd been ostracized and blamed by his own

house for losing points slide. She pointed out that simply forgiving such was stupid and foolish, **and that trying to simply ignore** the opinion of the public would eventually drive Harry crazy. “You cannot be responsible for the thoughts and opinions of others, Harry Potter so don’t even try. Especially when the adults in your world seem at best to be part of the problem. **Again, you must look after yourself and those close to you. Who you must choose most carefully.**”

As they talked, time passed slowly, which once more Harry noticed, as did Olga. But neither commented on it, just enjoying talking. Sharing his impressions and concerns with Olga seemed to lift a weight from Harry’s shoulder. For Olga, it was nice speaking with someone, even a young boy, who didn’t have any preconceived notions of her, demands, or thoughts about her as a Queen. **It brought her back to a kinder time, before the Sundering of the elves, when there was only one elven nation made up of all three types of elves. Before the plagues, before the cracking of the world. Before Celestine discovered she held the soul of a goddess within, before the humans, before she became queen all-too soon.**

But eventually, like Celestine before her, Olga saw the edges of the forest becoming like mist, and realized that the dream was about to end. “We are waking up Harry Potter, and we both will to go back to our own worlds. I have a certain trap to plan, while you must do some planning of your own so that this Dark Lord of yours cannot take advantage of your weakness **if he still has resources to do so. I would be...somewhat** displeased if this is the last time you walk in these forests, Harry Potter. Especially given your promise of a broomstick ride.”

If for no other reason than I believe there is still more to be learned here, Olga admitted. The boy had grown on her somewhat during their talk, but it was still only one meeting, and that didn’t matter nearly as much as the two of them seemingly meeting here as they had, with either of them being in control of it. **Or the odd magics he had described. Quite a lot of that was fascinating to her, and Olga hoped to learn more.**

Harry nodded, looking up at Olga as she stood up once more, blushing again but this time not looking away. Instead, he was trying to memorize every inch of her, wishing he had been able to do the same thing when he’d first met Celestine. He didn’t want to forget **any** of this dream, not again.

Seeing the look on his face, Olga smiled, *fighting back an inappropriate urge to blush,* and took a single step back, nodding her head once to him. “Until we meet again, remember what I said, Harry Potter. Sometimes, it all comes down to you or them, and it’s always best it be you who survives, however you can contrive it.”

OOOOOOO

Olga woke up her bed in the Black Fortress, frowning as she felt the wet pillow under her head, drenched with her tears. For a moment, the details of her dream alluded her. Then, she spotted a dragon on a green field hanging to one side of her bed. The sight of the green

field reminded her of Harry Potter's eyes, and with that, the rest of their conversation came flooding back to her. Including the plan she had devised.

Shifting out of bed, Olga threw the covers off, moving swiftly towards the doorway. There, she wrenched it open just as her aid, Chloe was about to knock. Chloe was a younger dark elf who Olga had saved from a life of slavery to humans eight years ago. Since then, Chloe had been one of her most devoted followers, her personal bodyguard and assassin.

"My lady, are you..."

Olga passed her by, tapping her on the shoulder. "Come with me, Chloe. I have a plan that will need your help. I will also need messengers sent to the city of Ragaan, and a discussion with my magical corps. The orcs want a city, I intend to give it to them. So hard they choke!"

Chloe stared at her, seeing the thrust back shoulders, the gleam in her queen's eyes, and smiled for the first time in months ever since their army had lost the Battle of the Atton Fields against the humans. That had decimated their army so bad, that it had forced Olga to look for alliances among the hated orcs. But now, it seemed as if her queen had decided on another course.

And Chloe couldn't be happier to see that determined, dangerous look back in Olga's eyes. "Yes Mistress," Olga almost squealed the words as she hurried after her queen.

OOOOOOO

For a few days after waking up, Harry couldn't follow Olga's advice. He was stuck in the infirmary, and despite his friend's best efforts, nurse Pomphrey didn't even let him read anything beyond the textbooks for another year. The moment they were out though, Harry became even worse than before in terms of how much time he spent in the library, although his reading material had changed. Olga was right, after all, he lacked enough knowledge of the Wizarding World, as well as specific spells against spirits, something Olga admitted she couldn't help him with.

The first he couldn't do anything about. There weren't any booklets or textbooks to prepare nonmagical children for the Wizarding World, no books on laws or anything that he could access. There might be more in the future, but the various age lines in the library stymied his efforts on that score.

Harry confided some of his thoughts to Hermione as he poured over a defense book he'd had to pay a seventh year to gain access to, trying to find spells that could be used against spirits. So far, the only good spell he'd found was a spell that could show someone was being possessed. "I don't know why the shade of Voldemort is after me, but I know it is. Which means I need to start planning for it, maybe getting ready for the next time it shoes up."

On the one hand Hermione was happy that Harry was taking magic so seriously. Before this, while he always practiced every spell he saw in action and seemed determined to always

master every spell to a point that was mildly crazy, he hadn't really liked or enjoyed book learning so much. That made it somewhat frustrating to Hermione, who learned so much better by reading that he was so much better at casting magic than her. Although when it came to finer detail work, such as making a transfigured item have a design or something on it, Hermione did it much better. Harry could transfigure something faster and larger, but not with as much detail.

And yet, the reasoning Harry gave... "Harry, surely Hogwarts is the safest place on earth! Especially with Headmaster Dumbledore here."

Harry looked at her, one eyebrow rising. "Maybe, but that didn't stop Voldemort, did it?"

To that, Hermione had no reply, and sighing, she began to help her friend research more spells, although she did object occasionally to buying access to books from the older students. That they then practiced the spells afterward actually made it quite fun, even for Hermione. It also meant that by the end of his first year in Hogwarts, Harry and Hermione **were both performing an eclectic bunch of Defense Against the Dark Arts spells taken from every grade.** **They also** ended the year with a certain jaundiced view of what was on offer for students. But eventually the year ended and the kids had to go home, no matter how reluctantly.

Once back with the Dursleys in his personal hell, Harry took Olga's other words, when she spoke about his needing to exercise, to heart over the summer. After all, flying a broom only worked so many muscles. He even had the room to do so now, since the Dursley's had apparently decided to give him Dudley's second bedroom. Not out of the goodness of their hearts though. They bluntly stated they didn't want Hagrid to come back and find that they had kept Harry in the cupboard under the stairs like he was when the half-giant had arrived to make sure that Harry got his school supplies.

The Dursleys had also confiscated everything magical,. Harry's trunk, his clothing, and even his wand was in the cupboard under the stairs. But that was all right. While Harry loved his wand, he wasn't dependent on it. And when they had tried to 'confiscate' or do something to Hedwig, Harry had opened her cage and let his beautiful bird out to defend herself, which she had done ably before flying out the still open door. She returned that night, and Harry had practiced wandless transfiguration by making her perch.

After he had given himself a nice blanket, anyway. Transfiguration still took a lot of concentration and power without his wand to help focus, but he was getting better. Harry often wondered why transfiguration was so much harder than charms or simple magical manipulation, but put it down to something he would learn in time.

Only allowed out to cook or garden, Harry took to exercising, push-ups, sit-ups and running in place while practiced wandless magic at the same time.

Now, a week before the end of summer, Harry finished one sit up staring at the number of floating balls all around him, as the issue with his wandless transfiguration came back to him. "I wonder if I should look into levitating larger things? Or trying to transfigure them at the same time?"

Deciding to try that experiment, Harry laid back so his shoulders were touching the ground again, and then, concentrating on three of the balls in particular, sat up once more. Two of them changed shape slightly, shifting into pudgy squares, simple shapes to start with. The third didn't do anything, and all the other balls that he had been keeping in the air thumped to the ground one after another.

Harry winced, waiting for a shout from below, but no shout came, and he breathed a sigh of relief. "Petunia must still be outside. Dudley is off doing whatever, and Vernon isn't home. Good... and now I realize I should probably have figured out a way to tell time better than just watching the sunlight coming through the windows. Bugger."

From her perch, Hedwig precked at him, and Harry shrugged. "Yeah, hindsight and all that. But there should be some kind of spell to tell the time, right? A charm maybe, or something from Snape's class. Though I'll let my bum be rogered by a broomstick before I go to that bully for help."

With a sigh, Harry pushed himself to his feet, then moved around to grab up the small marbles and bouncy balls that he had been using, putting them into a jar that he hid under his bed, including the two lumpy square ones. He then used magic to fuse the against the outer wall, so that even if Dudley went searching for things he could break of Harry's, which he did a lot, he wouldn't be able to get the jar out from under the bed. The bed in turn was too heavy for him to move.

As he stood up once again, Harry chuckled a bit, remembering how Hermione had reacted when they had been told about how they wouldn't be able to use magic at home and wondering what she would think of all his wandless magic.

Flashback

"But, but that's so **wrong!**" Hermione said, staring down at the paper in front of her incredulously. "I was so looking forward to showing my parents what I had learned. And now you're saying I can't?"

"It's the Statute of Secrecy, you see. While your parents might know about magic, we can't really trust them to keep it. Worse, it would take just one nosy neighbor to look inside, and the secret could be out," Percy explained, as he kept on handing out single sheet parchments to the first year students. "As a witch or wizard, you agree to keep the Statute of Secrecy, and as such, you can't use magic outside of the Wizarding World. There are those strange camera things, video recorders, everywhere. And it is every witch and wizard's

responsibility to keep magic a secret. Accidents or life or death situations are one thing, we do have Obliviators, but using magic in your homes, no.”

“But, but that means that wizard angle families have an advantage! They can keep learning over the summer,” Hermione stammered, sounding even more appalled than before as that thought occurred to her.

“No, it doesn’t. Underage wizards can’t use magic either. That is the Underage Misuse of Magic Law. The moment you enter the Hogwarts Express, a ward places a tracking charm on your wand. Unless you are in a highly magical area like Hogwarts, Hogsmeade your specific magic signature will be detected, and you will get a warning from the Department of Magical Regulation. Three strikes, and you are brought before a judge for hearing, and might even face having your wand snapped and your magical education put on hold for a few years,” Percy warned.

Hermione’s eyes widened at that, taking Percy’s words at face value, calming down a bit knowing that the other students wouldn’t be able to get ahead of her. She might have mellowed quite a bit since she and Harry had become friends, and Neville and Harry had worked on her quite a bit in terms of having fun, but Hermione was still extremely competitive.

Harry was a little more cynical about things, though, and shook his head as Percy moved onto handing the papers out to the other first years, glaring at Ron, who flinched a bit. Apparently, Ron would be taking remedial classes over the summer because he had been doing so badly in some of the classes. He was decent enough when it came to actual spellwork, but his writing assignments were apparently abysmal.

“How much do you want to bet that Percy is only stating the party line, and a lot of people get around it?” Harry mused in a whisper. “After all, what can the difference between a magical household with lots of magical items or people around, and a shop like Madame Malkin’s or someplace else be?”

“I know, drat it! I suppose I can convince my parents to maybe allow me to head to Diagon Alley occasionally over the summer so I can find a small corner and practice small spells and maybe...” Hermione muttered, looking a little worried at the very idea, knowing that Harry might be wrong, and she might indeed be caught doing something illegal. That was something else that hadn’t changed over the last year. Even though she had joined Harry on a few out of bounds adventures over the year, which included but was not limited to Dragon Transportation, Forbidden Forest Exploration, and Dark Lord Dueling, Hermione still believed rules were meant to be obeyed more often than not.

Seeing his friend was lost in her musings, Harry gently took her by the shoulder, leading her off.

End flashback

That memory segued into the memory of the hug that Hermione had given Harry when they parted company at the train station. The smell of Hermione's hair came to Harry's mind for a moment almost as if she was standing in front of them, and Harry paused in mid-pushup as his traitorous mind compared Hermione's hugs to those that the Flying Foxes had given him when they had won the Quidditch championship. "Nope! Stop thinking about your best friend like that Harry! Stop thinking about girls in general! What the heck is up with that, ugh!? I'm even having dreams of Olga every night nowadays."

At that, an image of Olga dressed up like a student popped into Harry's traitorous brain, followed by one of Hermione dressed up like Olga. Harry found himself blushing, his eyes going far away not realizing he had stopped halfway through his push-ups until his arms gave out and his chin hit the wooden floor so hard it bruised. "Ow! Right, need to figure out why I'm thinking about those kind of things. I need to head to the library sometime before going back to Hogwarts."

He rolled onto his back, then slowly pushed himself to his feet, only to jolt to the side towards his bed as there was a pop in the open air of the room between the bed and the door. Defensively he thrust out a hand nearly unformed magic lashing out, and the little creature that had just appeared there froze in place. "What in the heck!?"

Calming his beating heart, Harry realized he'd just frozen a magical creature that had just popped into his room, and moved over to the little guy, looking at him quizzically. "Well, I can't say I've ever been able to do that spell before, but I guess seeing Hermione use it so often facing those trials before finding Quirrell and the stone gave me the idea. And she still thinks I'm better at magic when she can pick up things like that so quickly from just reading about them? And without pictures?"

Shaking his head, Harry examined his little captive only to realize he was a house elf. Harry had seen them in the kitchen Hogwarts occasionally. Although this one looked dirty and a little unkempt in comparison.

Knowing that house elves were not dangerous, Harry dispelled the magic on the little creature, watching the house elf stumble forward, its eyes wide as it stared at Harry. "Sorry about that, but I don't like it when things pop into being around me."

"Mr. Harry Potter sir says sorry for using magic on Dobby! Dobby is not worthy," the little creature mumbled, still looking a little surprised at how he had been frozen.

Having learned in his first meeting with the house elves at Hogwarts that getting them to call him Harry or just Mr. Potter was impossible, Harry ignored the mode of address, sitting down on his bed and reaching for a towel to wipe his face off from where he had been sweating. "Are you here to deliver a message or something? And I take it Dobby is your name?"

"Mr. Harry Potter Sir asks for Dobby's name!" Dobby wailed, looking like he was a second away from a breakdown at Harry's kindness.

It took Harry a while to get out the full story from Dobby, with much fits and starts, but at the end, he became quite angry. Nor was Harry the only one. Hedwig also looked angry, staring at Dobby as if he was a mouse, one that had done something particularly rude and annoying in Hedwig's presence, her talons clenching and unclenching, her wings slowly unfurling as she leaned forwards.

While Harry had been able to keep in contact with Hermione occasionally thanks to both of them living in the non-magical world and having phone numbers although even there sometimes his calls hadn't gone through. Thankfully whatever Dobby had done there hadn't stuck most of the time, probably, Harry realized, because other people used the house phone all the time. *And come to think of it, didn't Petunia mention there always being someone around working on the phone lines? I guess whatever Dobby is doing can be overcome by the power of science.*

Beyond Hermione, though, he'd had no contact with Padma, Neville and Blaise this summer, and had been wondering why none of the three had contacted him. It had surprised him when Padma hadn't had a phone number to call, but he also knew that the Patils had been planning to head to India for the summer. But the others should have at least sent him some messages as he'd sent them mail. Now he knew why he hadn't received any replies, and he narrowed his eyes angrily at Dobby, who quailed.

"Let me get this straight. You want me to not go back to Hogwarts, and to stop me from wanting to go you decided to stop all mail coming my way? So I would think that my friends had abandoned me!? Well, good thing you don't know about phones then! And you are doing this because there will be danger at Hogwarts this year?"

"Master Harry Potter must not go to Hogwarts! It is dangerous. The master, he has plans."

"But you can't tell me those plans, or who your master is?"

"No. Dobby is forbidden to give out master's name without permission. Dobby is forbidden to talk about the plan, and will have to hurt himself in punishment later. Dobby is not looking forward to baking his hands in the fryer again," the little house elf shivered, staring at his hands, but then his pointed face firmed. "But Dobby needed to warn Mr. Harry Potter Sir! Mr. Harry Potter Sir is too important!"

Wincing a bit at the idea of Dobby hurting himself, Harry slowly shook his head, and then began to try to explain why he had to go to Hogwarts. Not just his friends, but his overall goal of getting away from the Dursleys. And now, more than ever before, finding more information about elves. Once was coincidence, twice though? And two different elves to boot? They had to be out there somewhere. And Harry was determined to find out why he was dreaming about them in the first place. That was right up there with making his parents proud of him as a lifetime goal.

But Dobby shook his head, remaining obstinate that Harry should not go to Hogwarts, even though he did seem to understand that Harry hated his relatives and vice versa. "If Mr. Harry Potter will not listen, Dobby will do what Dobby must!"

With that, Dobby popped out of existence before Harry could cast another spell on him, and it was only then that Harry realized that the two of them had been talking for so long that Vernon had returned home. There was a clattering from below, several voices, and then stumping, bumping, and then the door was pulled open, and Vernon charged through, his belt already in one hand shouting, "I don't know how you did it boy, but trying to magic our food like that, that's the last straw!"

Harry held up his hands trying to placate the furious walrus-like man, but Vernon smacked Harry hard in the face, sending him crashing to the side of the bed. He grunted at the impact of the wood to his ribs, and then, Vernon began whipping Harry with his belt shouting about how magic was unnatural. "Filthy unnatural abnormal... ought to have been put down as a child! I should have drowned you, that way you'd be with your filthy unnatural parents!"

Harry tried hard to pull on his magic, to concentrate enough to cast a spell, but that first hit had rattled him, and he couldn't concentrate hard enough through the pain to cast anything. But he wasn't without allies any longer, and seeing her boy in danger, Hedwig launched herself into the hair, scratching and pecking.

"Freaky bird! I'll have you now!" Vernon shouted, flinging his belt around wildly.

Seeing his friend in danger, Harry pushed through the pain and used his tried and tested favorite spell.

Vernon whooped as he suddenly found himself in the air, his arms flailing, his belt falling from his hands as he panicked. "Boy! Put me..."

A second later, Vernon was flung out of the door to crash hard into the opposite wall, and Harry pushed himself to his feet, bloodied, battered, but glaring defiance, as Hedwig flew over his head again, looking as if she wanted nothing more than to take Vernon's eyeballs out. He glared at Vernon, who pushed himself to his knees, glaring right back, looking as if he was going to charge again, but Harry's hand began to glow, and Vernon quailed even as Petunia and Dudley joined him, also glaring at Harry. Dudley had even gotten a cricket bat from somewhere.

The standoff was interrupted by a tapping on the window, but Harry didn't look over at it. Instead, Hedwig twisted her head in that direction, a low dangerous preck going from her. "Preecckkk..."

"You shouldn't have done m, magic, boy! You're in trouble now with your own people!" Petunia sneered, as Vernon put himself to his feet, grabbed the door, and closed it in Harry's face.

Unlike all the other bedroom doors, Harry's opened outward. Vernon had done that deliberately for moments like this.

"You'll stay in there until you learn!" Vernon shouted and Harry sighed, before turning away and moving towards the window. Where an unknown owl was hovering nervously under Hedwig's gaze with a scroll in one claw.

OOOOOO

"Well, I have to say that at least you were allowed to exercise Harry," Hermione said, looking over her friend. The two of them were now sitting in a compartment on the Hogwarts Express, and not for the first time since picking him up, Hermione had to admit she liked the changes Harry had gone through over the past few months. He still looked far too skinny, but instead of just being skinny he was now looking very fit, with muscles visible under his shirt and on his forearms. His face had also started to thin, almost maturing a bit.

Something in Hermione's eyes had Harry blushing a bit, scratching at his scar and looking away, happy yet embarrassed at her complement. "Thanks. And thanks for coming to get me too."

"Honestly! If I could, I'd ask Professor Dumbledore if you could move in with me over the summer," Hermione huffed. "And you're positive that he said that was impossible?"

"Apparently there are a few wards on the property at my own place that hides me from magical detection. I tried to get a straight answer out of him, but he said I wouldn't understand any of them until I started to take rooms in third year, but that there were still a lot of unrepentant Death Eaters out there. I'm not certain I believe him, but..." Harry sighed with a shrug. "Frankly, I'm getting used to the fact that adults really can't or won't help me when it comes to the Dursleys. Or even normally. Look at what happened with our head of house when we tried to tell her about someone going after the stone. We were wrong about who, but still, McGonigal didn't even give us the time of day."

Hermione looked angry at that, or it could be she was angry at Harry for not believing Dumbledore. Hermione still tended to trust authority figures a little too much in Harry's opinion. But knowing any further discussion on that score would lead to an argument, Harry decided to change topics. "And thanks for getting all my schoolbooks for me too. I wish I'd been able to read them over the summer, but..." He winked at her, kicking Hermione's shin lightly, a mannerism that she had begun to use with him. "I suppose for at least the first few weeks I'll have to lean on my best friend's super brain."

Hermione huffed again, but the smile on her face gave her real feelings away, and she lightly kicked Harry's knee as well, before deciding they should get started on that right away. Ignoring the fact that for Hermione, being caught up meant being ahead of the reading by at least four months or more.

She quickly had her trunk down, and the Transfiguration book out between them, but their reading was interrupted by the door opening. Harry turned expecting to see either Ron trying to renew their friendship, or Draco coming to sneer and gloat about something. Despite Harry's best efforts to steer clear of Draco, he tended to come in search of Harry whenever he thought he had a reason to gloat or get Harry in trouble.

Instead, two girls younger than they were stood in the doorway. One was a redhead that had to be Ginny from Ron's description back when he and Harry were friends, and her face instantly flushed almost as red as her hair when she saw Harry. The other was a blonde girl, her hair slightly longer than Ginny's, her face thinner, and her eyes just a little larger. Her hair was almost the same color as Cynthia's, and Harry started as he stared at it before shaking his head quickly. "Yes?"

"Do you mind if we sit with you? The twins are having an incredibly loud Exploding Snaps game, and we did not wish to be caught in any of the explosions," the blonde asked.

Harry and Hermione both nodded, scooting over towards the windows to allow the two girls to sit. Ginny stared at Harry for a few moments, until Harry got uncomfortable and waved at her, trying to introduce himself and saying that Ron had told her him about Ginny. But Ginny began to blush so badly at Harry talking to her that he stopped.

In contrast, Luna pulled out a newspaper of some kind, and began to read.

Hermione instantly saw this, and frowned a bit at the title of the newspaper. "The Quibbler? I don't think I've heard of that one. I thought the Daily Prophet was the only newspaper in magical Britain."

"They like to think they are, and certainly the Ministry would like them to be. Otherwise, who would try to break open such conspiracies as the Minister's goblin pies? Or the insidious plots to use heliopaths to control people's minds through our teeth?"

Hermione's eyes crossed, and her brow furrowed.

The look on the older girl's face finally broke Ginny out of her paralysis. "Don't mind Luna, her father runs that newspaper, and she seems to think that everything written in it is real. The paper is more about finding magical creatures, creatures that are supposed to be extinct or are just really hard to find more than real news. A lot of the beasts are real, but the news isn't"

Harry noticed how Luna's face seemed to slacken at that, but still had to ask. "I don't suppose there's anything in there about other magical societies is there?"

"If by that you mean other nations, there are a few things Harry Potter," Luna answered, looking at him thoughtfully. "But as far as I know, or this newspaper knows, there are no other magical societies out there that are not already connected to the International Confederacy of Wizards."

Harry frowned a bit, then shrugged his shoulders as Ginny continued to explain how most of the things in the Quibbler couldn't be confirmed by anyone. "Then doesn't that mean they don't exist?" Hermione asked, frowning at the newspaper now. "Just like those things in the tabloids."

"I wouldn't know about tabloids, I've never read one. But we know that magic can block the senses. Is it really such a leap to think that even magical senses can be blocked or directed away somehow? Or that certain things can only be seen by those with the ability to do so?"

Hermione hummed at that, but nodded, and Harry noticed Luna's shoulders shift a bit, as if she had been stiff a moment before, but now was relaxing a little. "Well, I suppose there is that." With a shrug, Hermione turned back to the Transfiguration book and began to direct Harry's attention to it. The quicker they got on 'catching up' the better.

OOOOOO

This year, Harry and Professor Sinistra were not alone on the astronomy tower. Hermione had joined him, along with Luna. While Hermione simply held his hand as Harry laid out two candles in memory of his parents, Luna laid out one of her own her simple explanation of "for my mother" causing both Harry and Hermione to give the younger girl sideways hugs, before all three of them fell into contemplative silence for a few moments as they looked into the candlelight, watching the candles slowly burn down.

When the candles were nearly gone, Harry leaned back from the candle, blinking his eyes to clear it of little flashing lights as he looked up at the sky above, then over at Hermione, gently poking her shoulder with a finger. With his time to reflect out of the way, Harry knew his parents would want him to move on to other things. "So, it's been two months now. Are you officially over your crush on Gilderdogle? Or do I have to organize an intervention?"

Hermione blushed rosily, pushing him with what his her hand so hard he fell onto his side where he laughed. "Harry! You, you're such a lad sometimes! And for your information, I, I never had a crush on..."

"So you were just blinded by his smile, then? You've certainly kept on trying to figure out his teaching style," Harry teased, holding up both hands to make quotation marks at the words 'teaching style', causing Hermione to glare at him. "Come on, Hermione! You have to admit by this point at least that Lockhart's absolute pants as a teacher! Even Draco's realized it for goodness sake."

"He doesn't even teach us very well as first years. I've taken to going over his books and looking for inconsistencies, things that don't make sense, or spells that aren't real," Luna opined. "It's a wonderful brain game, almost as good as the crossword puzzle in the Quibbler."

"Far be it from me to tell you should be less than respectful to a fellow teacher, but I have to admit that a lot of us were surprised that Gilderoy was given the job. He was an all right

student when the two of us were in Hogwarts together, and I know he has had all of those adventures. But he's never been very good about being professional or has ever had any lessons in teaching as far as we know." Aurora began, before smirking, shaking her head, both motion and expression visible in the light of the candles and a lamp set by the hatch. "That, and he keeps going out of his way to flirt with me."

Harry and Luna looked at one another, then back at the attractive astronomy professor before drawling out, "You don't say," causing the professor to laugh. It was no secret to her that a lot of the older students had fantasies about her, after all.

"Besides Harry, you're one to talk, or are you going to say that you just thought Angelina had a splinter up her bum, and that's why you were staring at it so hard when all of you are trooping back into the tower?" Hermione interjected, having finally worked out a proper reply to Harry's teasing and not willing to let it go.

She also sounded quite jealous for some reason. But Harry shook his head. "Hermione, I could barely tell where I was walking, let alone looking. Wood is practically working us to death trying to make certain we're ready for this year. Malfoy and those new brooms his father donated to the Slytherin team have him in a tizzy."

That brought Hermione up short, and she nodded, and Harry pushed his shoulder lightly against hers. "But seriously. If we're ever going to learn anything from Defense Against the Dark Arts, I think we need to do it on our own. Just like I was doing last year."

For a moment, Harry's face clouded over, and Hermione instantly pulled him into a sideways hug, causing Harry to stiffen only slightly, and not because he was unused to her hugs any longer. No, he was stiffening for entirely different reason, as his traitorous mind decided to note how nice Hermione smelled, and how soft her hair was. *Damn, she doesn't smell as... interesting as Olga did, but she feels almost as soft as Celestine.*

"Drat it, I think you're right, Harry. I really, really don't want to say anything bad about a professor. But there is only so much we can learn just from listening and helping Professor Lockhart go over his books."

Deciding that was as far as he was going to get, Harry nodded, and pulled back slightly from the hug, looking over at Luna. "What about you? And have the Ravenclaws stopped bullying you?"

"Don't worry, Padma threatened to conjure rats into all of their bedclothes if they didn't. She can be quite ferocious you know," Luna murmured, nodding her head. "It sounds like fun."

"It actually might be a good idea for all of you to try and create a club. One that goes across house lines. It wouldn't be the first time, although I will say that since You Know Who's death, the Defense Against the Dark Arts classes haven't been as important to anyone who

didn't want to go into the Aurors. Then there's the curse of course. But if you're determined to do good on your NEWTS it's best to start early."

"Wait, what curse?" Hermione asked, frowning.

"Huh... come to think of it, I suppose it isn't actually talked about much lately," Aurora mused. "The position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher is cursed. It's why it's so hard these days to find someone to fill it, and those that do don't stick around for more than a year. No one knows how it was done, or how the curse has been able to stick around for so long, but even Dumbledore is stumped."

"That's impossible! There are curses obviously, but to curse a position, how would you even do that? Surely there have been professors before hours that were able to keep the position for more than a year?"

Aurora shook her head, and began to list off professors she knew about after having become a teacher herself. It made for a distressing list, since most of them had either been injured in some fashion, or simply died. By the time she was finished talking about seventh person to hold the position since she had become a professor, Hermione's incredulity had faded, and she was now looking a little green as was Luna and Harry considering how that individual had died. "Okay, so maybe it is cursed..."

Luna tried to make a joke of it, hoping to dispel some of their queasiness. "Indeed, it looks to be as cursed as some words are." Hermione and Harry both looked at her quizzically, and the fairy-like girl smiled at them blandly. "Like calling yourself invincible, or a ship unsinkable."

"I always thought that movie was so stupid," Hermione mumbled, causing Harry to look at her in confusion.

"Regardless, I think Professor Sinistra is right. We need to start a club of some kind. I found a lot of books in the library about the offensive spells and stuff like that that we weren't taught last year, and they certainly helped me then. As second years, we should be able to access more." Segments of the library were warded by age lines, which Harry had learned the hard way last year. "We just will have to keep it a secret from Flopheart. I swear, if he tries one more time to use me for his own fame, or even touches me again I'm going to break his wrist!"

While a little thrown off by Harry's violent words, Hermione agreed eagerly as did Luna, who said that she could probably talk to Padma and get her to join them along with a few others from Raven club. That was a good thing, as Padma was about the only one in that crowd that Harry would call himself friends with. She hadn't taken it well when Harry had explained what was going on with Dobby, but when Hermione told her about having seen the bars on his windows and a flap on his door when she and her parents have come to pick him up, Padma's ire had eased.

“We might even be able to get Blaise to bring along some of the Slytherin kids. I doubt Draco will want to join, and his two bodyguards would probably be too dim. But maybe a few of the first years? Maybe Seamus, maybe a few of the Hufflepuffs as well. The more people we have, the more who might have things to teach us,” Hermione mused.

“I wish I could help. But the only thing I could do is to tell you to ask Professor Flitwick to help sponsor the club officially, so you can be given a classroom to use as a meeting place. You won’t want to use the library. And he might be able to provide some pointers. But I’m afraid I’m absolutely pants at combat magic. Blood bothers the heck out of me, and I’ve never liked thrills or excitement either,” Professor Sinistra said, before glancing at the sky, quickly calculating the time with the position of the moon, and then standing up. “That’s enough planning for now. It’s time for you all to head back to your dorms.”

Hermione, Luna and Harry were almost to the point where Luna would have to break off to head to the Raven Clocktower when Harry frowned, hearing a voice in the distance, almost unheard of but still close enough for him to make out their words. “...Tear, rip, eat...”

He frowned, wondering where the strange voice was coming from. But he didn’t hear it again, and the three of them moved forward once more saying goodbye to Luna before Hermione and Harry went on, walking in companionable silence until they heard a loud commotion ahead of them.

Moments later the two of them were at the back of a large crowd staring at a petrified cat on the floor, and a bloodied message on the wall. From where they were the message couldn’t be read, but the sight of ‘Mrs. Filch’, Filch’s cat frozen in place was fully visible.

“What in the world has been going on?” Hermione demanded.

“Where the heck have you two been?” Ron blurted, gesturing over to the wall. “This is what we all found when we came out of the feast.”

Hermione and Harry looked, and then as they were reading the message on the wall, Filch spotted them. “You! Neither of you were at the feast! It must’ve been you!”

The professors tried to stop them, but he grabbed for Harry pushing through the crowd to reach him.

But just as he did whenever someone touched him like this, Harry reacted violently. Grabbing Filch’s arm, he wrenched it away from his body, his wand coming up and pressing into the man’s throat. “Don’t touch me!”

Headmaster Dumbledore spoke up before anyone else could, although Snape looked as if he was just itching to take points off, or maybe use magic himself to force Harry and Filch away from one another. “Harry, I take it that you were once more with Professor Sinistra on the astronomy tower having a silent vigil for your parents again?”

Harry nodded, then gestured to Hermione explaining that she and Luna had both joined him. Hermione instantly vouched for him, and moments later, when they were summoned, Professor Sinistra and Hermione did the same. Dumbledore thanked them, then looked around at the rest of the students, casting a spell that silenced all noise but his own voice. "In that case, I believe that we cannot say anything about what has occurred here. Let the professors examine the scene, and let no one start rumors one way or the other."

This didn't stop the rumors of course, nor did it stop Draco crowing as if he had been involved in it. But Harry and Hermione walked off, ignoring all this, but more determined than ever to push forward with their own education Defense Against the Dark Arts. He didn't even both looking back as Draco shouted, "You'll all need to watch out, Mudbloods!"

OOOOOOO

The rocks kept cascading down behind him and Harry desperately leaped forward. Thanks to his quick thinking, Harry was able to avoid most of the rock beyond a blow to his collarbone and another that hit the back of his thigh. Wincing, he slid to his knees, his hand going to the back of his thigh, making certain nothing had punctured skin or broken bone. "Well, cock. Everyone okay over there?"

"We're fine over here Harry," Fred's voice said.

His voice followed by George and Ron affirming the same thing, before Ron added, "And the moron Lockhart is unconscious. So much for thinking he'd be any help. First he tries to backstab us, then he tries to Obliviate us, and now we can't even use him to find traps any longer."

Harry snorted as he pushed himself to his feet. "That was your idea remember. I wanted to come down here my own."

"Yeah, well, he's the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. He should have been up to helping us somehow," Ron grumbled.

Harry shook his head. When the three of them had come to Harry frantic about their sister missing, Harry had known instantly that she would be with the Slytherin heir, whoever had reopened the basilisk's lair. Thanks to Hermione, he had already worked out how the basilisk was getting around, but it was Fred and George who between them figured out where the entrance was once he told them about it.

But the idea of bringing Lockhart around with them had been Ron's and it hadn't worked from the beginning. Still, Harry was where he wanted to be, and he stiffened his shoulders, gripping his wand in one hand. "Well, fine. You all stay where you are, or see if you can get back to the surface and find an actual professor. I'm going to keep going."

The only professor that Harry really trusted at this point was Professor Sinistra, and not in a fight., hence why he hadn't gone to any of them when Hermione had been petrified. If the

school couldn't be trusted to even bother trying to use its own funds to buy in-season mandrakes from someplace else in the world, and they did nothing to stop the rumors about Harry being Slytherin's heir? Then how was Harry supposed to trust any of them at his back in a fight? *It's just like first year all over again. None of them believed Hermione and I then, none of them would have believed me now. Not with most of the school spending a majority of the school year turned against me.*

Not even Sinistra's attempts to back him up had done much when the other professors didn't bother combating the rumors. Not even Padma and Parvati explaining how revered a Parseltongue would be in India had done anything. Although why the two of them and Hermione all blushed occasionally when mentioning it was a little weird, something Harry still didn't understand.

"Hey, you can't be/ it's a basilisk Harry!" The two twins spoke over one another in their haste to explain that going on was a very bad idea. "Even if it's for Ginny, we can't ask you to go against something like that on your own!"

"You're not asking. I'm doing it myself. We don't know if Ginny's dead or not, and if there's a chance to save her, we need to take it. Besides..." Harry said, his tone turning dark, as his free hand flexed and magic began to coalesce around his hand and the tip of his wand. "This thing hurt Hermione. I'm going to gut it and use skin to make a coat!"

On the other side of the rock wall, Fred and George exchanged a glance whistling a bit, then shaking their heads. They tried to keep on talking to Harry, tried to convince him to wait until they could force their way through the rock and rubble. But Harry was already gone, moving down the long hallway.

Not twenty minutes later however, he was regretting this decision. The basilisk was huge, several hundred feet long, and Harry's glasses, charmed to act like mirrors, were already beginning to crack under the impact of its gaze as the snake itself lunged towards Harry, his attempt to talk it down having failed.

A hasty Protego, the only shield spell Harry could do, shattered as the body of the basilisk crashed into it. But it slowed the monster down a bit and Harry flung himself sideways. A cutting spell that Harry had learned from a fourth-year book hit the basilisk in the side but did nothing, the magic dissipating on its scales.

Let's see if he likes this! With wave of his wand, Harry created a stick of TNT and tossed it upwards. Harry had practiced this for weeks, and finally been able to conjure the gunpowder and everything else to make it this past week.

This makeshift explosive worked a little better. It smacked against the basilisk's head, exploding on impact sending it sideways to crashing to the side of the large cavern in which the statue of Slytherin had been carved.

“Oh, using Transfiguration to create a muggle weapon? Impressive. It won’t work though. A basilisk is practically immune to magic, and to impact type violence as well. Even a muggle tank round would bounce off.” the watching Tom Riddle said, almost lazily leaning against the statue as if he was fully corporeal, tapping Ginny’s purloined wand in his hand. “I’m impressed that you are able to come up with a charm strong enough to ward off its gaze even for a bit but the basilisk has so many other ways to kill you.”

The snake reared back again and darted forward once more, its jaws gaping. Harry ducked to the side, falling into one of the small pools that dotted the cavern, which actually saved his life, letting some of the snake’s bulk miss him by inches. A second’s thought and a spell flicked into the water, whipping it up into the snake’s face, before Harry hit the water with a fire spell from his other hand.

The steam blinded the snake causing it to hiss a bit in pain, as Harry darted away, thinking hard. He glanced up at the ceiling of the cavern, and instantly began to cast spells upwards. “Bombarda!”

The snake recovered from the heat of the steam only to have to dodge wildly as several stalactites came raining down towards it from above. Several of them were further directed by Harry’s magic, Harry able to cast a spell with one hand and another with his wand. This he did now, Trying hard to find a spell that would work on the snake. But nothing direct seemed to bother it at all, not even Harry’s most powerful Rifele, the magic just dissipating on its scales.

Only a few that he aimed at it’s face caused the snake to flinch, but even then, its eyes were too small targets for Harry to hit, and he could feel his glasses cracking.

“Chain casting! Fantastic, and at your age. How amusing that history repeats itself there, as it was in second year when I learned how to do that,” Riddle mused, not understanding that Harry was actually casting from both hands instead of just one spell after another thanks to the angle between them.

“Oh shut up!” Harry said, darting towards Riddle his wand raised as if he was going to attack the spirit. Riddle lazily raised an eyebrow, and then, grimaced as Harry dodged to one side and the snake passed through where he had been a moment ago, racing towards Ginny as if it was going to crush her body before slamming into the side of the statue. A hasty spell from Riddle pulled Ginny out of the way, sending her flopping against the wall near the entrance and the spirit seemed to dissipate for a second as the snake slammed into the bottom of the statue.

“Foolish serpent! Do not harm the redheaded one. I still have need of her,” Riddle intoned as his spirit reformed to one side, looking as if it was undamaged from the recent disincorporation.

Harry took advantage of the momentary confusion, transfiguring several bits of debris from the attack from the roof into different animals. The first group he sent forward, large lions trying to attack the basilisk. Nowhere near as large as regular lions, there were still several of

them, and Harry grimaced at the amount of concentration and magic that it taken. It was clear that he was well away from using such magic in battle, but he hoped it would hold the snake's attention, while the others, small monkeys with cymbals, began to bang them together, covering the sounds of his feet.

While that was going on, Harry ran away, thinking hard about what he had seen the snake survive up to this point. Before he could reach Ginny though, he was forced to duck behind a pillar near the entrance as the snake burst through the conjured creatures, lunging forwards once more.

It pulled up before it would slam into the bottom of the door, then slithered around into the hiding place Harry had just vacated, as a blaze of light appeared in the air above.

Harry didn't glance away from the snake, but his eyes widened as he saw Headmaster Dumbledore's Phoenix fly down and begin to attack the snake as had once seen Hedwig do to Vernon. At the same time, something fluttered down from above from where the Phoenix must have flashed into the cavern.

Darting that way, Harry was astonished to see the floating thing was the Sorting Hat and was about to race away, already thinking that was a waste, before the Sorting Hat spoke. "Now this is a fine pickle you've found yourself in Harry Potter. A knight errant on a quest faced with a vile beast. But no knight is complete without a weapon. And while I still stand by what I said to you that night, that you would do well in any house, that did include Gryffindor."

Something metallic began to fall out of the Sorting Hat, to clang against the floor, and Harry stared at it, before looking back over his shoulder as the basilisk screamed, hissing in pain and agony in the tongue of snakes. The Phoenix had blinded it, and Harry's eyes widened in shock. "Ꞥ Speaker! It hurts! My eyes, I cannot see! Ꞥ"

"Ꞥ Leave the bar of you silly creature! Leave it! It cannot hurt you any longer, you still have your nose, you can still smell him, you can still bite with your fangs! Obey me! Ꞥ"

For just a second, Harry felt sorry for the snake. But then wit as coming after him, it's tongue flickering out, or was its nostrils flaring? For the life of him Harry couldn't remember at the moment what whether or not the basilisk was a type of snake which smelled through its nose or through its tongue.

But it obviously knew where he was, and he quickly used his wand again to raise a wall in front of him, darting to the side and behind a pillar as his free hand grabbed at the Sorting Hat. The snake slammed into and through the wall, but Harry tossed out a few of the noisemakers that Fred and George had made, causing rooster noises to crow. Unfortunately, while again the snake flinched away, the noise had none of the properties of a real rooster would. *Damn it!*

Grimacing, Harry stared down at the hat and the hilt that was jutting out from the bottom of it. But despite the fact he had grabbed the hat by its tip, the sword was not falling all the way out, as if someone or something was holding it within the hat. Wordlessly, Harry set the hat on the ground, and pulled it back up, revealing the sword, which clanged to the ground, causing the snake to twist in their direction, able to hear the noise over the few remaining noise makers.

"Sorry about this," Harry said, tossing the hat to one side, and grabbing up the sword, even as he began a spell with his wand hand. This was another modified spell, one that he had learned, astonishingly, from Lavender. Several of the magazines they read had perfume charms, and Harry had learned one of them from Lavender when he complained about how badly the men's bathroom in the tower smelled occasionally.

This spell was modified, however. Instead of conjuring a simple wafting scent of roses or cinnamon, Harry willed the spell to create a scent that was as foul and toxic as he could imagine. The stream of gas shot out from the tip of his wand like a spray at the incoming snake.

It worked, the gas hitting the snake and instantly causing it to scream aloud again in pain, as it reared back, thrashing, bringing around its tail. "☞ My nose! My nose, that stench! What even is that! ☞"

Harry had no mind to spend on the snake's pain however, having had to dodge wildly as the snake's tail came around, but he wasn't fast enough to get completely out of its way. Even a slight swipe from the tip of that tail was enough to toss Harry through the air like he weighed nothing at all, and he crashed into the opposite wall, where he fell to the ground, gasping, but still retaining his wand and the sword.

"☞ Yes! That's the way, ☞" Riddle hissed, then used the spell to counteract the smell attack that Harry had landed on the snake. "☞ He's on the ground opposite you! Hear his heartbeat, and finish him off! ☞"

Harry slowly rose to his feet, as the snake moved in his direction, bunching up once more in preparation to dart down and bite him in half. Or perhaps swallow him whole. Harry wasn't certain at the size of the snake, and didn't really want to think about it. Although staring up at that snake's mouth opening, Harry found it hard to think of anything else. And he was so tired, the amount of magic he'd been throwing around had begun to take its toll.

But the weight of the sword in his hand reminded him he had another weapon. *And if the basilisk's scales stop spells, how about the inside of his mouth?*

Before Harry could even think of a spell to try and use, the snake struck, its mouth coming down towards him, fangs bared. But just as it bit Harry, Harry thrust upwards, pushing with all his might at the sword in his hand. All his strength, and his magic. He nearly blacked out from the pain of something hitting his shoulder and opposite side, puncturing through. The snake had hit him, but at an angle instead of coming straight down and biting him in half.

Blood spurted up onto his face from the wound to his shoulder as he screamed, but he still thrust forward with his other hand even as his wand fell from his nerveless grip, his magic pouring into the sword as he thrust it into the top of the snake's open mouth.

The snake's bones were somewhat magically resistant, but not nearly as much as its scales, and Harry's spell on the sword pushed it out of his hand and up deep, deep into the creature's mouth through that bone even as Harry found himself flung free to crash back into the wall he had already hit again.

The creature thrashed, slamming into Harry again and again, breaking bones and pushing him against the wall several times so hard Harry began to feel his vision fade and he felt something give on the back of his head, blood beginning to seep down onto his neck to join the blood from his shoulder even as something inside also popped, sending a spasm of even worse pain through him.

Eventually though, the snake's spasms did the work for Harry, driving the sword deeper into its own body and the brain. The instant its brain was pierced, the snake collapsed, all thrashing stopping almost instantly, his entire body going limp as its jaw slumped open.

Blearily, Harry ground his teeth, and pushed himself to his feet, stumbling a few steps, reaching up to the fang embedded in his shoulder. "**RRAAAgg!**" Tearing the fang free, Harry tossed it to the side, ignoring the fact that even more blood began to now gush down his side and arm as he slumps to his knees, staring not at the dead snake.

Instead he locked eyes with the spirit of Tom Riddle, who was slowly making his way over to Harry. At that sight, Harry reached deep inside, and with a grimace, tried to heave himself to his feet, but his body had just given too much, and he slumped back onto his side as his eyesight began to dim once more.

"You're dead, Harry Potter. I must admit, I did not expect you to overcome my basilisk. But its bite will still prove lethal. The poison within at the very least, if not the rest of your wounds. You are brave, no doubt just as brave as your parents were when my older self came for them. But you **failed!** You will die, Ginny will die, and I will rise once m--!" Tom said, only to cut off as the Phoenix began to sing. "What is that stupid bird doing now?! Get away, bird!"

The Phoenix continued to sing, coming click down, and Tom growled, reaching for his wand, only to remember that he had been forced to drop it when the snake could come through his body a few moments before. "Dammit! Phoenix tears, I should have remembered."

Harry wondered what that was about, not having read about anything like Phoenix tears. But then, the pain in his body began to reseed, and he looked and saw the Phoenix was crying onto his body, specifically his wrecked and ruined shoulder. The wound there was closing, and Harry could feel many of his other injuries starting to fade as the basilisk poison within him also started to ebb away.

And as it did, Harry's mind became clear once more. The danger wasn't over yet, he couldn't rest, not yet. *Riddle! The book!*

He started to push himself to his feet, just as Riddle realized the same thing. Riddle raced away, heading towards the statue where Ginny's wand had to lay while Harry looked around desperately, feeling his body still exhausted from all the magic he been using, but unwilling to give in just yet to sweet darkness.

But his wand lay somewhere buried underneath its carcass, lost when the basilisk and bitten into his body. But the sword gleamed in the snake's mouth and racing over, Harry grabbed the hilt, pulling it free surprisingly easily before he raced after Riddle as fast as his utterly exhausted body could take him. Then he remembered that Riddle's body wasn't quite yet solid enough to be hurt. *And there's no way I'm up to casting even a small spell, let alone something that can hurt a ghost. But... the diary! He's still in the diary, not just in Ginny!*

With that, Harry changed direction, heading towards the center of the cavern. Where Ginny had originally lain, the open diary still remained where it had been at the start of the battle, the weight of the basilisk passing over it not having done anything to it.

Riddle reached his wand first, turning, expecting Harry to be right behind him, his first spell going wide before he saw where Harry was going, a green dart cracking into the basilisk carcass. "No!" Another greenish spell began to build at the tip of Ginny's wand, but before Riddle could test it, Harry slid to his knees next to Ginny's body, sword raised and then stabbing down.

Instantly black oozing blood spurted out from the book as if Harry had just thrust the fang into a living creature and Riddle's shade began to scream. The book began to twitch underneath the fang, and Riddle popped out of existence. The flow of... ink? Blood? Harry didn't know, continued for a few seconds along with the book's spasm, before also drying out at last and laying still. Whatever spirit had inhabited the magical diary was now very much gone.

At that, Harry smiled, slumping to his knees as he finally allowed unconsciousness to claim him, falling forward.

OOOOOOO

Dreaming once more, Celestine found herself in the gardens of her youth and looked around, confusion reining in her mind for a moment. But then, she remembered how several years ago she had meant that interesting young slave boy, Harry Potter here. *We never did find him, darn it. But I wonder...*

With that in mind, Celestine began to move through the woods looking for young Harry, even calling his name occasionally, laughing as she did so, remembering the time when she was

young and playing through these woods with her friends. "Harry, Harry Potter? Are you heereee~~?"

Instead of her strange young acquaintance, what Celestine found was danger. Summoned by her cries, orcs came out from behind the woods, snarling and slobbering, licking their chops as they stared at her their loin clothes stirring. "Orcs, here!?" Celestine was shocked, but quickly backed away, magic forming around her hands.

Retreating quickly, Celestine put her back against a tree, gesturing to either side. Glowing shields of gray energy appeared, creating a barricade to her flanks several feet removed, blocking the orcs from circling her as she then cupped her hands and thrust them out towards the charging orcs. Dozens died, but still more came, with goblins and other Aberrants appearing. Yet it struck her that there were no dark elves among them.

Yet as time went on, Celestine felt her shield spells weakening under the repeated blows of the orcs, and Celestine began to look around for some way to escape.

Then came a howl through the woods, and giant dogs, mongrels she thought, appeared out of the woods, charging towards the orcs. A ferocious battle occurred in front of her, and Celestine shifted her magical to support, using her healing energies on various dogs, keeping them in the fight even as she wondered where they came from.

Eventually, the dogs retreated, glaring and growling angrily at the orcs, who also paused, letting Celestine gather her magic for another large scale attack. But then, the worst thing happened. Both the Aberrants and the dogs turned toward Celestine. Gone was the looks of defensive protectiveness in the dog's eyes. Instead, they gleamed with the same the lust and desire to dominate and corrupt as the orcs had when they looked at Celestine.

They all started to charge forwards, and Celestine screamed as her shields shattered under the weight of all the bodies attempting to attack her. Now thoroughly terrified, Celestine willed herself to try to wake up, willed for this nightmare to end as the orcs and Abberants raced toward her. And on each and every doggy face was the same kind of uncontrolled, violent lust and desire to dominate.

Then, a shout came from one side. "Get away from her!"

The youth she remembered from years back was there suddenly. He was much changed since then, having grown in the intervening years as humans were wont to do, but more importantly at the moment he was holding a sword in one hand which he used to cut and slash at the dogs several of whom died. One orc fell, screaming, another took a slice across arm, which seemed to poison him to the point where he fell with foam dribbling from his mouth and then Harry Potter was holding out his hand, lashing out with spells.

One of them targeted the land beneath her, and Celestine rose up into the air on a pillar of stone which carried her away from the orcs and dogs. Given that reprieve, Celestine too

began to use her magic once again, no longer frightened and determined that Harry too would survive whatever was going on here. Under her will, shield spells appeared around Harry occasionally, and any wound he took was healed instantly while energy filled his body and holy light and lightning struck their enemies.

How long they fought, Celestine had no idea, but eventually, the last of the dogs, a massive shaggy beast that looked part wolf and part pit bull was chased away with his tail between his legs, and the last orc died to one of her spells. For a moment, all they could do was gasp, then Harry leaned against his sword and stared up at Celestine. "This, I don't I didn't expect that! I thought this wood was peaceful!"

With a gesture, Celestine began to float down towards him, a beaming smile on her face, sweat stuck her loose white robe to her body, making it even more see-through than normal, although she didn't notice. "Nor did I my young friend. And this wood should indeed be free of such strife. Thank you most immensely for your help!" With that Celestine threw her arms around Harry, drawing him into an exuberant hug. "And it is just as good to see you alive and well."

Harry didn't stiffen as she remembered he had the last time. Instead, he slowly, very hesitantly returned it with one arm., breathing in deeply, shuddering as the adrenaline of battle slowly began to leave him.

For his part, Harry was somewhat bemused. He had collapsed into sleep after killing the basilisk under Hogwarts and had fully expected to never wake up thanks to the beast's poison. But here he was, once more in the forest of his dreams, and here, he was, holding Celestine. *HOLY flipping, by Merlin's hairy arse, she is so gorgeous! And soft, and ooh, wait, no, not the time for this, down boy!*

Harry's other hand still held his sword until Celestine's hand lowered down his arm to gently touched his. At that touch, Harry released it to fall to the ground where it promptly disappeared. Even as his other arm when around her, both of them stared at the place where the sword had been.

"I hope that doesn't mean it disintegrated in the real world, I would get into a lot of trouble," Harry murmured, slowly nuzzling his head against Celestine's breasts, shivering at the sensation of silk and skin that made the silk seem almost rough in comparison, fighting the disturbing desire to kiss it. Celestine still smelled like flowers and elderberries like Harry remembered, but everything else was, well, waaay more important than it had been. The feel of the breasts against his face, and the hint of something small and pink he could see through the sweat-soaked white shift was more than a little distracting, and the rest of Celestine was, well she had a body worthy of a dream. *Ooh, now isn't that ironic, heh.*

Celestine slowly pulled away from the hug, realizing with a start that she had needed that just as much as Harry had, or perhaps more. "I doubt that will be a problem. This is a kind of

dream-walking realm. I wish I could tell you more about it, but I'm not exactly in control of whatever is going on here between us either, Harry."

The way she said that made Harry blush, shaking his head, as he stood back, once more taking in Celestine's body. And this time, he stared hard, willing himself to remember her as he could Olga. Not just her hair, not just her voice, or the smell of her, but everything.

Celestine stood about two feet taller than Harry was currently, putting her at around the same height as Angelina, making her, he thought anyway, a half foot shorter than Olga? They both seemed to half the same slim build in terms of waistline. Celestine was also a bit curvier in terms of her hip and rear, and her breasts were... well they were just amazing! They were bigger than Olga's by a few inches, softer and fuller looking drooping ever so slightly on her frame, covered like the rest of her by a white silk shift of some kind tied loosely at her waist with a large gold ring, flowing from there, letting her legs free to be seen in all their glory.

"Merlin, you are so gorgeous!" He whispered, then blushed, both hands pulling away from Celestine to cover his mouth.

Celestine laughed, a faint blush appearing on her face, knowing that was the honest truth as far as Harry cared, and that he wasn't saying that to get anything from her, to curry favor or because he was simply lusting after her body as a few noblemen had in the past. *Or perhaps, not just because of that, anyway,* Celestine thought, her blush deepening before she ruffled his hair noting that it was still as smooth and silky as ever. "Aren't you a little charmer?" she teased.

She then cocked her head to one side, frowning a little as she took in Harry in turn. He had grown perhaps a foot or more since she had first seen him. Gone was his previous underfed, nearly emaciated appearance. On top of becoming taller, Harry had begun to bulk up a bit, his shoulders were much broader than they had been, far broader than an elven youth would have had. His hands, she recalled, were calloused, though not like those of a warrior like Claudia, not in a way that Celestine recognized at all. His glasses were smaller, better fitting, and his eyes somehow seemed deeper too.

Harry is no longer a boy, regardless of his age, Celestine thought with some sadness as she saw that look. "Has it really been that long? You look almost like what humans call a teenager now," Celestine added, unwilling to just blurt out and ask what had caused his previous maturity to solidify into something else entirely.

"Barely," Harry nodded. "I'm thirteen."

Celestine nodded, and gently took his hand in hers, tugging him away from the battlefield, putting distance between them and the bodies and the wreckage of the forest, although she noted that none of the bodies had remained after the last dog had retreated. Even the blood splatters were disappearing. "And how are you doing Harry?" She inquired, setting aside the mystery of what the rest of this vision/dream/whatever might mean in order

to talk to her young companion, interested in learning how he had come to change so quickly in what to her was a short period of time.

“I, I’m doing all right,” Harry answered slowly trying to figure out a way to summarize his life since he had seen Celestine that first time. “It turns out that magic does exist in my world. Thanks to you, I spent a long while training myself in magic. It, um, I used magic to make my life with the Dursleys bearable. But then, I learned two years ago that there’s an entire magical society hiding away, and they have a school. It’s been interesting, although most of the classes are kind of slow or just boring. And I could do without a Dark Lord after me. I mean come on, I’m just a kid, what’s he doing wasting his time on me for?”

Despite how lightly he spoke, Celestine could tell that it was but a shield against real shock, and a growing sense of perhaps fatalism or something like resigned anger? *I think that once more pain or exhaustion, perhaps both, have brought Harry to me here once more.* “This Dark Lord, you do not know why he is after you? Actually, why is he a Dark Lord?”

Harry sighed and related what he knew Lord Voldemort and how he had been after Harry’s parents for defying him in the past, and then Harry for somehow defeating him personally. Harry put that down to his mother’s protection in the form of the rune on his forehead, and, like Olga before her, although Harry hadn’t yet mentioned her, Celestine could now tell that the rune on his forehead was indeed a ancient rune of some kind.

YES!! Inside Celestine’s mind a chibi version of her hopped up and down thrusting a fist into the air. *Hah, I was right! His family, his mother for certain, has some connection to our world. The question is, how? And where did they find information on this rune? I can only vaguely remember seeing the like before!*

But that wasn’t all she could see. Celestine could also see there was some kind of darkness there. Not part of the rune, but, but caged within it. *Drat it, why did it have to be runes? I never studied them before. Those were always more Olga’s interest.* That way lay pain though, and instead of looking back on those memories, Celestine concentrated on what she could see. “Hmm...”

“U, um, Celestine?” Harry squeaked, staring, unable to pull his eyes away from her cleavage which was right in front of his face right now. *Pink, they’re bright pink*, he thought dazedly, staring at the tips of the pale white orbs, longing to do...something. He wasn’t certain what, but the view called to him on a primordial level. “Wh, what’s wrong?”

“My old friend was right Harry, that is a rune, but I never studied them. Instead, what I can see there is a bit of darkness. So while Olga was right, so too were the people in your world who called it a curse scar. But unlike them, I have no intention of leaving it there.” With that, Celestine began to mutter under her breath, the secret name of her god along with a few words in the tongue of the Gods, which was called Caliath, as she prepared to perform a cleansing.

The next second Celestine leaned forward kissing Harry on the forehead. There was a splash of white magic that nearly blinded Harry as her lips touched the rune on Harry's head, and he winced for a second as pain lanced through his head. He could almost hear a scream of some kind, but as the magic faded was like a hidden pressure he had never noticed had disappeared. He blinked, then as Celestine pulled back to give him a bright smile, returned it.

Without further ado, Celestine turned away, putting an arm around Harry's shoulders, and pulling him along as they continued through the woods. After a moment, Harry put aside the oddity of what had happened as Celestine seemed to and leaned against her, his arm around her waist, hand moving to Celestine's hip before going back up like he had been electrocuted.

Celestine didn't notice this, instead simply smiling as she continued to move through the woods beside her young friend. "I am sorry your life is so dangerous Harry. But I hope that you treasure the times that it is not."

Harry shrugged that. "I've got friends, and I've got Quidditch, um, that's a magical sport played on flying broomsticks." Unlike Olga, Celestine didn't seem interested in that, and he went on. "Magic is...the way they teach it anyway, is a little more constricting than I thought it would be. But if the Dark Lord just would stop coming after me in one form or another, I think I'd be a much happier person."

He then paused, before blurting out, "Although, maybe not. Maybe then I wouldn't be able to meet with you like this." Harry gestured around them and then to Celestine, willing her to understand how important meeting her had been to him without having the words to do it.

Even as she smiled at that and even blushed a bit at the look in the young boy's eyes, there was some kind of tension in Harry that Celestine could feel, and she gently squeezed his shoulders, leaning her head against his. "You know you can tell me everything. What would I do? We aren't even in the same world with one another."

That fact brought Harry out of his happiness at simply being hugged like this by Celestine, the original woman of his dreams, shaking his head sadly. It would be nice if that wasn't the case, but Harry knew that was impossible. There was no evidence he could find that elves like Celestine and Olga had ever existed in his world.

At Celestine's repeated urging, Harry told her about his year. He explained how he had been ostracized for a specific magical talent, although it took some coaxing for him to explain what that was. When he told her about his ability to speak to snakes, Celestine, like his friend Padma, didn't seem at all bothered by his ability, instead finding it fascinating, even going so far as to look around and see if they could find a snake so she could see him do it. Alas, the serpent summoning spell didn't seem to do anything in this dream state.

From there, the tales of his first year also came out in a roundabout fashion when he mentioned that this wasn't the first time he'd dealt with the Dark Lord's shades. The fact he

had to kill a possessed human the year before startled and saddened Celestine, but also explained the hardness in Harry's face. Beyond that, the fact that Harry was so ostracized, even by people who apparently lauded him as the slayer of the Dark Lord, when his ability to speak to snakes came out, saddened her greatly. Her advice on that score was to ignore them at best, to forgive, but to always be aware public opinion was fickle, somewhat lining up with Olga's the year before.

"One of my ministers would call that an example of a mob mentality," she said sadly. "A mob is only as bright as it's loudest person, and they always follow the latest shouter for a time. I will not say to forgive them all, Harry, but do not let your heart harden totally against them. Instead, if your people are so quick to turn on you, perhaps some more distance is warranted."

Seeing Harry no longer wanted to talk about himself, Celestine turned the discussion to herself and her lands, telling Harry about the great war, and about the Shield Maidens. In turn, she also asked Harry about his adventures, and if he had looked into his real family, and if so what he knew about them.

While his latest adventure made for interesting listening, the knowledge Harry had discovered about his past proved to be scant little. The Potter side was well known, but the Evans side wasn't known at all beyond the Petunia connection, which Harry declared as "Probably being adopted, given how different Petunia and my Mum are supposed to be judging by the stories I've been able to wrench out of my teachers. I will try to look more in the nonmagical world when I get the chance. But why are you so interested?"

"I am wondering where your mother came by her knowledge of runes, Harry. That rune on your forehead is from **our** school of magic, and that is very strange. The odds of having two different worlds use the same runic language is beyond impossible. So in searching for your mother's side of the family you might discover that connection."

"Hmm, that is what Olga said too. About the rune I mean. She said it was linked to some kind of larger ritual," Harry mused, a soft smile coming to his face that, for once in this dream realm, had nothing to do with Celestine or Olga. No, this smile had everything for the one memory he had of his mother: her smiling, crying face as she stooped over him, whispering words he couldn't remember, before a green light flashed, and the light in her eyes faded. Then as she fell out of Harry's sight, there was another green flash, and then pain, and the memory ended.

"I think that makes a lot of sense, really. Way more than a baby somehow surviving getting the killing curse to the face. I actually really like the idea that it was my Mum who took Voldemort down. Heh. Take that, ya pureblood wankers. It had nothing to do with my being a Potter, or both of us being halfbloods or anything like that, it was all my Mum knowing magic the rest of you had never learned."

Hearing the name of her old friend turned enemy, Celestine had nearly stumbled, and turned to look at Harry fully. The two of them had continued walking through the wood side by side as they talked. But she waited until Harry came back from his minor reverie, and had promised to look into the Evans side of his family before questioning, "You met Olga? Here, in this realm?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, I did. She, um, she was dealing with a problem of her own and I had... well it was right after I killed Professor Quirrell, who was possessed by Voldemort. We helped walk each other through our problems, and she gave me some advice. That was about a year ago, now."

Hearing that shocked Celestine on many levels, but the content of the meeting also made her smile. *Perhaps, perhaps there is yet hope for us to reconcile. Perhaps in some fashion Harry represents a chance at peace between her people and mine? Certainly the recent changes to the war front and the fact she did not in fact continue her people's alliance with the Aberrants is a good sign.*

Shaking her head at that, Celestine smiled a trifle grimly as she moved a few paces away from Harry, indicating with a wave he should wait where he was. "Well, that is interesting, but let us turn back to your Dark Lord problem. I think what you need to combat such is some Holy magic. Let us see if you can learn my brand of magic, Harry."

With that, she began to teach Harry some light magic spells. Celestine found Harry to be an apt pupil, quick, with an intrinsic connection to his magical core that Celestine had rarely seen, for which she was very grateful. In turn, Harry began to teach Celestine some spells of his own world, although he cautioned her that it was difficult to use attack spells and more finicky spells without a wand to focus the spell. "I seem to be able to do it, but it takes me days for most spells, and longer for trickier ones. My friend Luna has a theory on that, but she wanted to wait to tell me what it was, drat it."

Celestine smiled at that, and then asked him to show her a spell before using the low-powered cutting spell he'd shown her to slice apart a log into six pieces, rather than the one Harry had done. Harry stared at that, then pouted a little. "Show off."

"Hehehehe!" Celestine's laughter rang out again, and Harry found himself staring at her, utterly smitten once more.

Catching the look in Harry's eyes, Celestine shook her head, *amused by the puppy-dog crush she expected Harry was feeling. It will fade in time, as it has for many humans before him. She thought, smiling as she tapped him on the nose. Its still cute though.* "But tell me more about your school. Your friends. I've told you about mine, it is only fair you return the favor."

Once more, Harry lost himself in simply walking and talking with Celestine, who was remarkably touchy-feely, something he wasn't used to with anyone but Hermione, but which he lapped up like a drowning man, much as he did with his best friend. The conversation went

back and forth, with more time taken on magic and Celestine's life than Harry had learned when talking about Olga, and Celestine touched on the war again, mentioning the Aberrants in particular. She didn't mention Olga or the Dark elves, just mentioning that the Aberrants were not the only enemy of the dwarf/halfling/human/elven alliance. Harry also got to hear about Claudia and the other Shield Maidens through Celestine's words.

When the dawn came, both of them were sad to see it, and Celestine would not let Harry go with the final hug. "Be well, Harry Potter. Remember to always enjoy the good times of life, no matter how dark it might seem."

Harry nodded, hugging her back, trying to come up with some words of wisdom in turn, and no doubt making an arse of it while also trying not to put his hands on Celestine's rear given their disparate heights despite his hands desires to gravitate in that direction. "The same to you. Don't, don't let your concerns about the war make you forget what you're fighting for."

They stayed like that until Celestine found herself back in her bed once more.

Her maid was opening the blinds to let in the light of day, and Celestine sighed and set up, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Could you please send a message to Grave and someone to find Claudia? I would like them to take breakfast with me this morning."

Claudia was no longer the recently promoted leader of her Dawn Templar and thus free in the morning to personally guard Celestine. Three years had come and gone, and in the same time it had taken Harry to go from a boy to a young teen, so too had Claudia changed from an experienced and well-trained but not very well known commander to one of the most lauded Knights in the world, and reputedly the strongest female Knight living. So it was that Celestine had to wait for her breakfast before talking to her or Grave.

"You called for us your holiness," Claudia and Grave said as one, although even from where she sat at her breakfast table, she could see that there was a distance between them that hadn't been there a few years back when Grave had retired and promoted Claudia in his place. They were as always polite to one another, but there was a certain anger in the air. A certain resigned anger and despair coming from Grave, and anger and sadness on Claudia's side.

And Celestine knew the cause of it. Klaus Levantine was Grave's son, but unlike the rest of his family going back as far as anyone could remember, Klaus had no talent whatsoever for combat. Instead, he was a bit of a bookworm, with a weak disposition and body, one that made him look far older than his years. Indeed, looking at him, Klaus looked almost as old as his father, and certainly older than his wife, who was still only in her early thirties.

Yet Klaus was a perfectly good clerk and researcher. Indeed, Celestine employed him in that fashion. Klaus had become her agent in the world of numbers and bookkeeping. Several times when Celestine had pointed Klaus at this or that Lord, he had found corruption, and more

than once it had been Klaus, not Grave or Celestine's agents who had discovered evidence that allowed them to find slavers.

Three years since I began that investigation and slavery is still a problem, still hidden underneath the surface, Celestine thought, shaking her head internally. Indeed, most months it seems only to have driven the practice deeper underground!

But all that was beside the point to Grave. All he saw was that Klaus was no Knight and could not take up the mantle that his family had done for four generations. Indeed, to see his only son like this was a horrible stain on his personal honor. That was why he had adopted Claudia and had then instigated a marriage between Klaus and Claudia several years ago: so that hopefully their offspring would be strong enough to carry on the family name.

Yet in another bitter blow to Grave's pride, no offspring had come from their union, and never would. The problem wasn't with Claudia, and Celestine often wondered if perhaps it would've been better if it had been, some wound she had taken, or some family ailment on Claudia's side. But no, along with his weak body, Klaus was unable to father offspring. He could perform the deed, but his seed was impotent.

Smiling at them both, Celestine gestured them to sit, then politely asked if either of them would like something to eat. When both had shaken their heads, she moved on to the business of why they were here, knowing both preferred to spend as little time as possible on niceties, preferring to get down to business.

"First, I want to talk to you about the possibility of enlarging the Dawn Templars, Claudia. Perhaps as much as twice over, while adding a magical company to it."

"You mean an integrated arm of the Order, my lady?" Claudia asked, somewhat surprised. "We already have access to mages."

"Yes, but those mages answer to their own schools and occasionally their Lords or are free mercenaries. Not you personally. Thus they are not held to the high standards that Grave and yourself have instilled in the Dawn Templars."

Both of them nodded in acknowledgment of her words, while Grave looked intrigued at the idea, and Claudia did the same. But she was also frowning at Celestine. "May I ask what brought this on, milady?"

"That ties into why I want you here for, Lord Levantine. You see, I have had a vision. Two of them in point of fact. Both of them surrounding a young man. He called himself Harry Potter, and yet, looking at him, I could tell that was **not** his real name. Not the name of his soul."

Both her listeners cocked her head, then nodded, as they recalled that elves had two names. One was a soul name, the name they used when they performed magic or when they were with family, a name that was tied to their very souls. Then they had a second name they used in public. There was a lot of history behind the two names being different that they, as

humans didn't know. Humans normally had only one name, obviously, but if Celestine saw Harry had a second name, then it was possible he had been given a different name at birth, only being given the Harry moniker later.

Or at least, that was what they assumed. Really, not even Celestine was certain as to what Harry having a soul name meant. She was certain he wasn't Elvish though, which made it even more unusual.

Waving one hand, Celestine set that topic to one side. "But let me describe this latest vision before we get to Harry Potter and his mystery. Then you'll understand my worries."

Harry just Celestine described the latest vision from beginning to end, when the orcs attacked her, when the mongrels who had been fighting them turned on her. "It was as if their very nature had changed, becoming something horrible."

Claudia and Grave both frowned, looking at one another. "Do you think these dogs represent the lords of a specific realm, or some kind of mercenary band? Or one of the Seven Kingdoms turning against you? All could be termed a proper interpretation of your vision, milady."

"Perhaps, one, perhaps more. I, I think we should perhaps try to cut back on our reliance on mercenaries and also push to have our Knightly Orders become stronger over time. Hence my hopes concerning the Dawn Templars. I want to bring in mages and put them under military authority, and perhaps add other military arms as well over time."

While Grave scowled at that now, the mention of mages reminding him about his son and his issues, Claudia frowned pensively, tapping her finger on the table in front of her. "I will see it done your Majesty. It won't happen overnight, and I won't promise miracles. But I think it can be done."

"I am not asking for a miracle Claudia, simply progress," Celestine answered with a smile and then turned to Lord Grave. "I would like you to be involved in the vetting process for new members, and to take up a position as the chief instructor at the training facility here in Ken. I realize now that I was not using your abilities to their fullest when I tried to make you my slave chaser. And yet, my reasoning for that comes back to Harry Potter, and the connection I feel he might have to you."

Grave frowned confused. "While I quite enjoyed your tale of him saving your life in your vision, lady Celestine, I have to admit to some confusion. Why do you think he is connected to me?"

"You had a brother I recall, seven years your senior he was," Celestine said softly. "A fine young knight named Evans..."

"Evansworth," Grave said, suddenly becoming even sterner and more masklike than normal. "Yes. I remember him well, all these decades since. He was the family's original heir,

but we were both trained equally, and were close despite that, as is all too rarely the case. But why..."

"Harry Potter is the son of James Potter, and Lily **Evans**," Celestine interrupted gently. "And also, I recall that your brother had emerald eyes, did he not? And that he disappeared due to a magical mishap? A teleportation spell gone wrong, transporting both himself and his magician friend elsewhere. Hence your disdain for the art."

Grave slowly nodded and Celestine smiled seeing a small light entering his eyes, a light of hope perhaps. "You think that this Harry Potter is, is related to me by way of my brother?"

"I can sense something of the Levantine line's willpower within him and his eyes, they are the same gorgeous emerald I remember your brother having, a gift of your mother, I believe," Celestine said with a nod. Celestine had met both Levantine brothers decades past, as both had been brought to her court by their father, who was the commander of the Dawn Templars at the time, a position the Levantine line had held for more than five generations before Grave had been forced to adopt Claudia in order to keep the tradition going.

However, Grave shook his head, some of his delight at the idea visibly leaving his face. "And yet you say he is a magic user."

"He used a sword as well," Celestine chuckled. "And, I have yet to tell you how he last used that sword. That tale makes his and my adventure in our joint dream seem quite bland in comparison."

Sharing the story about Harry's battle with the basilisk, which she had forced Harry to tell to her in as much detail as he could, took the rest of Celestine's meal, by the end of which Grave and Claudia were both in shock. A boy of thirteen, besting a basilisk? Such creatures took whole companies of knights and mages to deal with, and he killed it himself? Oh, he had help which removed the creature's eyes, removing one of its deadliest weapons, and he fought it in an enclosed space, but still. Given any age to the beast, a basilisk's scales was proof against nearly all spells, and so tough even a ballista bolt would bounce.

But to dare the snake, to take its bite in order to deliver your own? That was courage that any Knight would envy.

"There is potential there," Grave answered, trying hard not to feel hope, knowing that if it was dashed, he would probably break. Then he scowled, shaking his head as the main issue occurred to him. "But what does all this matter? He is in that world, we are here. While I might be related to the boy, that doesn't matter unless he is here to continue the line as my own son cannot!"

Claudia shifted angrily in her chair, but even she could not deny that Klaus couldn't continue the Levantine Family's legacy. She didn't care, she loved Klaus despite that lack. After all, there was no end of desire in their marriage, even if she had to be kind of careful

occasionally in her passions. But Grave was still right. The Levantine line, a family whose lineage stretched back to the first human nations, would die out with him if this boy... Her eyes widened. "You're thinking of trying to bring him here, aren't you?"

Celestine smiled and let loose a laugh. "I think that is part of this last vision of mine. I think, that come what may, Harry Potter is important to our world, and somehow, needs to be brought here, if not for his own safety, than because we, for whatever reason, need him here, above and beyond continuing the Levantine Family. As such, I'm going to start researching that, and I will put both Lulu and Kagura on it. Between the three of us, I am certain that something can be contrived. It won't happen overnight," she teased Claudia using the same term she had done a moment ago, "but I think we can do it."

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Albus hummed thoughtfully, staring after a recently recovered Harry Potter as he left his office and allowed himself a faint snort before he began to use a spell. This spell, like many in his repertoire, was keyed to things around Hogwarts, allowing him to look through the eyes of a few paintings as Harry raced along the core doors towards where Lucius Malfoy had trooped. *Foolish little man As if anyone could force me out of Hogwarts! And to actually threaten the other members of the Board of Directors? Did he never think they would compare notes? You never did believe in Slytherin Subtlety, for all your dogma, did you Lucius?*

He watched the compensation between Harry and Lucius with amusement, and began to laugh as Dobby proved that house elves could be very dangerous. "What is that game with where the Muggles bounce bowls on a wooden court? Based the ball? Or is it basket the ball? Regardless, I believe Dobby could be a fine player."

He leaned back in his chair thoughtfully then, as he ended that spell, staring up at the ceiling, for there was far more to think about than Malfoy and his machinations. Not even the moves he was making with the minister was enough to keep Albus's attention.

Instead, he turned his mind to the diary, and to Harry Potter as well. Because his glasses, and two of the knickknacks in his office in particular had told him things during that discussion with Harry when he and young Ginny had burst into the office thanks to Fawkes. Albus's glasses were able to see magic. Two of the devices were attuned to the curse scar magic, the dark magic that existed within the scar on Harry's forehead. The existence of a portion of another's soul within. And yet, those instruments were silent now. And Albus had not seen any kind of dark magic within the scar itself.

Could we have gotten so lucky? Could the basilisk's poison have 'killed' Harry for just long enough for the portion of Riddle's soul he houses to lose its connection to the living world and then brought Harry back? Dumbledore believed himself quite learned, and in no way any kind of gambler. But he reckoned that even the most addicted, wild gambler would never have bet on the odds of anything approaching the chances of that.

I cannot be certain. Riddle's soul could simply have been weakened to the point where it is no longer detectable by exterior magic. Or it could have merged with Harry. That is the worst possibility. That his wounds had somehow broken down the barrier between one soul and another. I will need to be on the lookout for unusual magic, or changes to Harry's personality. But, if it is in fact the soul within passing on, does that mean that the prophecy is complete? No, I cannot assume that. I must continue to observe.

"Yes," Albus and murmured to himself. "I have quite a bit to ponder, and alas I cannot watch Harry all the time over the summer. But this diary will at least give me something to look into, something solid that I can use to try and find others of a similar nature. That, and my own understanding of Tom Riddle, anyway. I wonder, Tom, could you have been so arrogant as to hide one of these poor cruxes within the grounds of my school? And where else would you have hidden them? Or... who else would you have trusted?"

With that thought, Albus got to his feet, setting aside thoughts of the young Potter boy once more. There were far, far more important things than one boy's life to consider, after all.

OOOOOO

"Another summer passed, and this one without any life and death struggle, at least on my end," Harry mused, as he sat down across from Hermione in the last card on the train. "And what have you been up to? You look a little tanner than before..." Harry trailed off, taking in Hermione's looks. *Yep, Hermione is um, is um definitely growing up. She's never going to match Olga or Celestine, but even so, there's no doubt Hermione's really attractive. Now if I only knew what to do about it...*

"Look a lot happier. Your clothing fits too! You look... Good Harry," Hermione mumbled, her eyes going up and down Harry's body before she could stop them. *EEP. He's, he's shot up like a weed. No wonder I heard Wood crying about him almost being too big to be Seeker. And are those muscles, and those shoulders. Good grief.*

Shaking that thought off, Hermione continued, "I take it that living with Luna for the last week agreed with you?"

Harry smiled back. "Indeed. Thankfully, I managed to... 'convince' the Dursleys that I shouldn't be it at their house when Aunt Marge came by. Living with Luna for a was a lot of fun, they have so many small magical knickknacks around the place." In actuality, it had been Dobby who had convinced his relatives that they could let him go, but Harry wasn't about to say that, even to Hermione. She would undoubtedly object to all the ways Harry had been having Dobby help him make his life with the Dursleys easier...

To say nothing about some of his research fueled by Olga's words after his first year.

"What about you?" Harry asked, changing the subject.

“My family and I went to France for a dental conference. The beaches were nice, but...”
Hermione paused.

“...Are your parents still not really happy with magic?” Harry guessed, hesitantly reaching out to squeeze her hand, still having trouble occasionally initiating such contact.

Hermione’s issues with her parents had come out last year right before Hermione had been petrified. While Hermione’s parents were not nearly as violent about it as the Dursley’s, they weren’t exactly pleased with magic really existing. They didn’t punish Hermione for it, but neither did they embrace magic as part of their daughter’s lives. In Hermione’s words her parents acted like magic was a phase, like going to high school, that Hermione would eventually leave behind. Hermione was happy enough to go along with things to a certain point, taking classes over the summer to keep up her education on the non-magical side of things, but she was very clear that she wasn’t going to be leaving magic behind anytime soon.

“They don’t exactly like a lot of what they’ve heard from the Wizarding World, and they found some kind of booklet at Flourish and Blots last year that they read through over the summer. They’re very, **very** unhappy about how little rights nonmagicals have when it comes to magic, even those like my parents who know about it,” Hermione said, slightly diplomatically. They’d not been happy about magic in general, but understood the purpose of Hermione going to school, controlling the strange events that had occasionally happened around her.

“Well, I can’t exactly blame them for that. I don’t like a lot of what I’ve seen in the Wizarding World are there.” *I didn’t like a lot of what I had seen before talking with Olga opened my eyes to the fact Dumbledore might have been setting me up against Quirrell as a test. Which we might talk about in the future, Hermione. I haven’t found any proof, but I still don’t trust the headmaster much, there’s too much coincidences, to say nothing about how my attempts to find out more about my parents and the Wizarding World has been stymied. And don’t get me started on how little help most of the professors are.*

Aloud, Harry went on with a little joke. “It’s like most wizards and witches are a strange mix between thinking magic is something they have to have, and then taking it for granted. I’ve seen so many silly stuff being done by magic, but nothing new or inventive. Like, magic should be always constantly moving forward, like science is, right? Only it isn’t.”

Hermione nodded agreement, raising a hand to push some of her fluffy hair back over one year, a move that caused Harry’s eyes to take in her appearance again, twitching a bit as he realized, not for the first time in this conversation, that Hermione was a girl. *Is that lipstick she’s wearing?*

“I agree. Most wizards, certainly most adult wizards we’ve seen, are this strange mix between insular, crazy, and lazy. I definitely agree with the idea they take magic for granted.” Hermione said, before blinking. “Harry, where did your mind just go?”

He shook himself, looking away from her, specifically Hermione's glossy lips. "Sorry, it's just, you've got some lipstick on, it, it looks good. I just didn't think you were the type to wear it that's all."

"Oh~~? And what's that supposed to mean?" Hermione asked, pushing his shoulder gently, while inwardly pumping a fist in victory.

However, Harry was saved from answering as the door opened, and Padma and some of their other friends came in. Padma took one look at Harry, and blushed faintly, smiling him at him as she sat down on Hermione's other side. "Hey Harry, you look good."

"Yes, I think he does, thus proving the point that if you want to style, you must come to an Italian," Blaise drawled, as he sat across from them. "It is good to see that you took my advice."

"Yes, yes, thank you for telling me what colors go with which, and that there are other stores out there beyond Madame Malkin's that specialize in boys clothing. Don't let it go to your head Blaise, or else it will be too big for your broom to lift off the ground." Harry didn't mention that Blaise had helped him discover clothing stores and so forth because he had abandoned Harry during the year on pressure from Malfoy.

That had hurt the pair's odd friendship. Indeed, it had strained a lot of Harry's connections to many of his fellow students bar Hermione, Padma and Neville. Most of his other friends, even the Quidditch team, had distanced themselves from Harry slightly after the third petrification was found to be a Hufflepuff Harry had argued with after Lockhart had tried to take over the club Harry, Luna and Hermione had begun earlier in the year. And even now, none of the Hufflepuff friends Harry had thought he had made had apologized. Nor had Blaise, but he had at least offered his help in terms of clothing.

But neither boy was willing to show that strain for very different reasons, hence why Blaise shot back, "Right back at you, O slayer of basilisks and rescuer of young maidens. Has anyone come by get to ask you for a book deal? I'd wager you would be able to easily beat out Flophart. Or perhaps worse, has the Weasley clan come by to try and sell their daughter off to you in thanks for saving her in the first place."

"Beating out Lockheart's sails wouldn't be difficult. After all, his books stopped selling after last year," Luna interjected, before the two boys could continue their taunting of one another.

As their other friends joined them, Harry tried hard not to notice any of the girls. All of them were beginning to show signs of womanhood, not just Hermione, but Padma and even Lavender, who barely took one look inside the cart before waving at them and heading off with Parvati. *Dammit, the books I found in the library told me what was going on, but they didn't give me any idea about how to control it or more importantly where my eyes or mind goes. Am I just supposed to figure that out on my own!?* Considering the fact that every night since my last

meeting with Celestine I've been dreaming of her, Hermione, and the two of them sharing clothing, Harry didn't know if he had enough willpower to do that. I suppose I could ask, but who?

Luckily for Harry, Blaize wasn't his only male friend, Neville had also grown to be a friend as well. He wasn't about to ask Blaize for self-control help. But Neville left the compartment when Padma and Hermione began to bring out books before Harry could ask him to step outside with Harry for a second. The girls began excitedly talking to one another as they began to go over to the defense of the dark arts book, which looked to be about creatures this year, and which might actually be a good class for once considering the book assigned.

Harry was looking forward to their newer classes more than anything else. "I mean, honestly, only two of the classes we've been taking so far are worth it in my mind. I'm not going to be an herbologist like Neville. Astronomy, even the professor knows that the magical world's knowledge of stars is well beyond the point where the non-magical world's knowledge is. And then there's Binns and Snaps. Do I have to say more?" *At least I know Dumbledore isn't exactly serious about making certain we all have the best education we can get.*

While Hermione looked as if she wanted to object, the others still in the cart nodded. Most of them had left, leaving only Harry, Luna, Padma and Hermione. "I'm looking forward to runes in particular," Hermione gushed. "There's ever so much you can learn from them after all."

"Actually I'm more interested in arithmancy, we can all just force our magic to obey like Harry here," Padma teased.

Harry scoffed at that, shaking his head, was about to reply that that was only because they were all trapped up with the idea spells and wand waving being important, when the door opened once more. Malfoy strutted in, sneering around at Harry's companions. "Well Potter, have you heard the news about Sirius Black? I'm surprised you're coming back to school with him out there. I expected you to rush off after him."

"I heard about Sirius Black getting free, but what does that have to do with me? Surely you should be the one worried. I mean isn't your mother a Black?" Harry asked him, confused. He had heard about the breakout by the Death Eater Sirius Black from Luna's father. But Xenophilius hadn't told him many details, seemingly very reticent about talking about it all.

Draco seemed to blink, then sneered at Luna and Padma, who glared back at him. "You mean Loony and the Wog didn't tell you?"

Harry was instantly on his feet, his wand in his hand, pointed directly between Draco's eyes. "I don't like bullies. I've said this many times. And I don't like name-calling either. I don't why you're here Draco, or why you keep on coming after me like this. I have told you before, I am not interested in you nor making connections or whatever. I am only interested in magic, and learning about it. Now leave, and please, don't come back."

Draco sneered, but with Harry's wand already in his hand and pointing directly between his eyes, knew that there was no way he'd get the drop on them. Even his two bodyguards had both frozen, knowing how quickly Harry could move and how easy it would be to shift from one target to another in the narrow corridor.

"I should have expected that I suppose. Still, if I were you, I'd have learned all I could of a man who did what Sirius Black did," Draco intoned with a sneer. "Still, no skin off my nose if you don't have a Gryffindor's courage to go with the normal lack of brains of you lot." With that, he turned, and left the compartment, slamming the door behind him.

Harry instantly turned to Padma and Luna, crossing his arms. "Is there something about Sirius Black I should know?"

Both of the kids who had grown up in the magical world (mainly for Padma, anyway) looked at one another, then sighed, and Padma spoke up, explaining how when Lily and James had hidden away, Sirius Black, James's best friend for many years, had been made to the Secret Keeper. "They would never be found unless he gave up that secret. A whole army could search for them, and would just not see them at all unless they were read into the Secret by the Secret Keeper. And he would have to do so willingly."

For a moment there was silence, and then the cart began to shake, rattling so hard it felt like everything was about to fall apart. A flashing coruscating aura of magic appeared around Harry as his face shot down and his eyes began to glow with barely contained magic.

Hermione hesitantly reached over, taking Harry's hand in both of hers, squeezing gently. "Harry, calm down, please."

That touch brought him back from the brink, and breathing deeply, Harry allowed some of his anger to leave. Hermione had a point, and Harry remembered his conversation with Olga then, remembered how he had helped her work through a problem, making him realize that he needed to think about this like it was some kind of military or combat problem. *Charging ahead would do nothing, looking for Sirius Black, I don't even know where to start.*

"If he comes after me, he'll have to, to come at me at Hogwarts, or down in Hogsmeade." Of course, Harry hadn't gotten permission from his relatives to go visit Hogsmeade. But he was semi-friendly with the twins, who were known to be able to head into town whenever they wished, and they owed him. "That means all I have to be is ready for him if he shows up. Traps and preparation beat out rushing away all hollow." *And if he doesn't, I will have a year more to grow and prepare to go after Black in turn.*

By mutual consent, the conversation turned to other matters, while Hermione didn't let go of Harry's hand, squeezing it in both of her own occasionally for more than an hour. And if Padma did the same once or twice as the conversation continued, Harry didn't mind one bit.

About thirty minutes after the trolley lady came by the train began to slow.

Frowning, Harry looked over out the window, shaking his head. “We haven’t gone nearly long enough to reach the station, have we? The cart lady usually comes by at the halfway point.”

“True. And we haven’t past through the last few tunnels,” Hermione murmured.

“And is it just me, or is it getting chilly?” Padma said hesitantly, looking around her. “I really, really hope this isn’t one of your adventures Harry. I’m not the adventurous sort.”

Luna nodded, but her wand was in her hand, even as the chill grew throughout the train.

Harry moved to the door, opening it with one hand, while his other pulled out his wand from the holster he’d bought that summer, kneeling down to present a smaller target as he looked down the center of the train. Coming along it, was a large, dark cloaked figure, which seemed to hover in the air several feet above the ground with no legs visible. It wasn’t entering any of the compartments, simply moving along the train, while others behind it, seemingly turning this way and that as if searching for something.

“Dementors!” Luna whispered in horror, backing away from the door. “They must be looking for Sirius Black!”

“Okay, now, what are they, why are we feeling so bad, and where are the Aurors that surely should be accompanying them,” Hermione hissed, backing away from the door as well as Padma as all of them began to feel dread, and not just dread or fear, but as if all their positive emotions were draining out of them.

Luna didn’t reply, backing away rapidly, her eyes seeing nothing, her breath coming in gasps, as Harry began to hear a voice in the distance, a woman’s voice, calling out not Harry, not Harry.

The voice, the screams, the feeling of dread and the lack of happiness threatened to overcome Harry, and he began to see spots of Blackness in his vision. Whatever was going on, was just, just **wrong** at a fundamental level. Eating away the happiness they are all feeling.

And Harry wasn’t going to let it. “No, no!” He growled out, grinding his teeth together as he gripped his wand hard, trying to push away at the feeling even as the Dementor in the lead finally reached the back of the train where they were. It reached for Harry, and he growled out, “**No!**”

He wrenched away, bringing up his wand, his mind filling not with a spell he made up on the fly, or even one he’d learned at Hogwarts. No, this one was one of the ones that Cynthia had taught him during their dreamscape the last time they’d met, one meant to banish dark things away like spirits. “Furious LIGHT!”

From his tip came a spell as bright and searing as if a dwarf star had suddenly, blazing with energy as it flash forwards. The mere sight of it caused the Dementors to scream, shifting away as a group, but they were too slow and the hallway too packed with them for the nearest ones to get away. They were struck by the spell, and simply ceased to exist, even their robes disappearing, turning into smoke and vanishing as if they had never been.

The Dementors all keened as one, and then fled, the keening grating on the ears of everyone on the train. The feeling of the dementors didn't fade, but they could not stand Harry's magical assault.

And as they fled Harry kept it up, kept pushing out his power, kept furiously driving the dark creatures all the way down the train and then outside. He kept it up until the train began moving again, until the Dementors were floating away. And then unconsciousness claimed him, and he collapsed forward, only being caught by his friends, even more magically exhausted than he had been after his fight with the Basilisk, all his magic expended in one violent go.

OOO*OOO

Before he could even open his mind his eyes, Harry knew what he would say. The Forest. Or rather, he would see the forest if he wasn't lying face down in the loam. Yet Harry could feel it all around him, a kind of welcoming silence. Even now Harry didn't quite have the words for it, but he knew this forest welcomed him, like it was home. More home than even Hogwarts, let alone the Dursleys place. Even during the fight with the orcs and dogs it had felt like that, although in that case it felt like he was being forced to remove someone out of his home.

Although being there definitely did not help with the pain in his head. "OWWWWwww...." He groaned.

How long Holding groaned to himself, holding a head that was practically erupting with pain, Harry didn't know. But soon, a voice broke into his agony and a dainty foot flipped Harry's unresponsive body over. "If you have come here to die human, could you at least do it quietly?"

Harry looked up, already knowing what he would see, but still feeling some shock at the view. *I don't know where Eostia is, but Merlin do they make them beautiful there!*

From Harry's current position, he could stare straight up at Olga's long cocoa-colored legs, which today were not wearing long boots as previously. Instead, she wore slippers. The rest of her outfit too had changed, a kind of thick silk thing covering her chest and above more, but at the bottom, only a very thin pair of panties covered her modesty, allowing a strange mark on her stomach to be seen, a mark which hadn't been there before.

Taking all of that in, Harry then looked past her legs, the odd mark, and her bust, which, despite being more constrained at the moment, was still quite large, to the face above. Then

with as deadpan an expression as he could do in the present circumstances, Harry intoned "Oww," again.

Olga scowled and she raised a hand to create an attack a spell, but then her golden eyes widened in recognition. "Harry Potter, correct? We met here once before two years ago. So it was not some strange fluke or trick of my mind. I had wondered."

With that she knelt down, some of her animosity gone as she laid a hand on his forehead.

Oh, that feels nice. Her hand's so soft, as soft as Celestine's, Harry thought, humming in delight as her touch took the pain away, although his body was still too exhausted to move.

"You have what is called magical exhaustion. To a far greater degree than I've ever seen in even my own race." Olga frowned thoughtfully, the mystery of the boy's presence once more disarming much of her normal anger towards his race. "Did you run into your Dark Lord again? And how long has it been in your world since we last saw one another?"

"Around two years I think," Harry said, then smiled. "It's nice to see you again."

Olga's lips twitched involuntarily at that. There was something very endearing about this young human boy, especially given how much his simple suggestions and just talking to him had helped Olga two years past from making what she now recognized as a tremendous mistake. *He may be a human, but Harry Potter has certainly never hurt me or mine. I can set aside my hatred for his race in this realm, at least when it comes to him. And it isn't as if I have discovered why the gods brought us together like this. Once was enough to help me, and through me my people two years ago. A second meeting like this, the reasons for it elude me at present, but there must be one.*

Having rationalized her urge to be kind to Harry away enough for now, Olga looked down at Harry's body, tapping his chest, as and nodded in something approaching approval before pulling Harry's head into her lap, leaning her back against a tree. "I see you have taken my advice and gotten some training. You have some muscle on you now, Harry Potter."

"I found a martial arts trainer who was willing to take me on," Harry nodded. "I can't go as often as I would like, but he gave me exercises to do every day, so I think I'm getting into pretty good shape."

"Martial arts? An interesting turn of phrase, that." She gently smacked his stomach, noting the muscles there with some approval, as Hermione had a moment ago. Young Harry looked to become quite the comely looking specimen for his race, not as soft and childish as a child his age would be of her own people. "Well, at least you don't look entirely like a human-shaped goblin any longer. But tell me how you became so exhausted."

Harry frowned, reaching up with one hand to gently touch the rune on his forehead. A rune that Olga decided she wanted to study in more depth before this dream/sending ended. *If I can copy that and then somehow recreate the rest of the ritual it is a part of...*

"I don't know. It was really strange. I was on the Hogwarts Express, that's a um, call it a mechanical construct that carries a lot of people from a gathering place to the magical school I'm a student at, when it was stopped. These weird shadow things invaded, and I used to spell I learned from Celestine...."

Olga reared back at that, nearly smacking her head against the tree behind her. "Celestine! You learned a spell from her!?"

"Actually, I met her before I met you," Harry answered, surprised at her reaction, and wondering where it had come from. Still, neither woman had told him that their races were at war, and so he saw no reason not to tell Olga about his previous meetings with Celestine now that it had come up in conversation.

The odd event with the orcs and dogs attacking her confused Olga. *First the dogs were protecting her, then they turned on Celestine? Strange. Very strange indeed, as was the fact none of my own people were involved in the assault.*

"But you defended her then, just like a gallant knight," Olga teased, having come to the same conclusion that Celestine had now: that even beyond helping her personally, Harry Potter might be important for their world as a whole. How, and why he seemed important to both her and Celestine equally, was still beyond her, but she was willing to see where this led, for now.

Yet even setting that aside, Olga was grateful that he had helped her old friend. A few centuries might have passed since their childhood together, but Olga still called Celestine, as silly and airheaded as she was, as much an enemy as she was, a friend. *As for Harry, he might represent a chance at something, perhaps, perhaps peace between our peoples?*

Olga would have scoffed at the very notion if not for the help Harry had given her by helping her figure out a solution to her Aberrant conundrum and the sheer amount of time in the dream realm having made them something she could almost call friends the last time they had met. Being able to set aside her duties and concerns for what felt like a month the last time she had met Harry had been a delight, and one that Olga, fight it though she might, was looking forward to feeling again.

But despite her inner woman looking forward to a bit of downtime, the help he had given her in working out a new solution to the orcish problem mattered more. While Olga's people didn't inhabit as large a territory as they had and had lost a city, their defensive position was actually much stronger. Now for every raid that occurred into her lands, hundreds of orcs or humans died. Her own offensive operations were smaller, but Olga could live with that.

Harry blushed, looking up at her with a small, somewhat wry smile. "I don't know about a Knight, but I certainly tried my best."

A teasing smile still on her face, Olga ruffled Harry's hair gently. "And would you do the same for me, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry said instantly.

Seeing the faint blush on his face Olga smiled, winding her fingers through his hair but set aside any teasing for now. There would be time enough for that later. "That's nice to hear. Although, your use of light magic annoys me. Surely fire or explosion magic would've worked just as well."

"Well, where I come from, books always say that you have to combat shadow creatures with holy or light magic." Harry tried to shrug but gave it up as a lost cause. His body just wasn't moving. However long he stayed here, it was clear his body wasn't going to get anything out of it. *I wonder why, though. I mean, when I met Celestine, I had collapsed from physical exhaustion and the whole basilisk poison and phoenix tears fighting it out in my body thing. But my body here was unaffected. Now that my body's fine I'm just magically... oh, of course. This whole thing is a magical sending. Should have realized that I guess. As er, real as things are, there's still not going to be a full carryover I guess..*

"Besides, it was the largest spell I knew that I could use without harming the area around me," Harry said aloud, setting aside that realization for later.

"If they had a physical form, they were not simple shades and thus you could destroy that body," Olga announced coldly, although Harry wasn't certain if it was real or no, given the twitching he could see on her lips. "If you are going to do Celestine the pleasure of using her magic, then I demand similar treatment. You can tell me more about the magic of your world in turn."

She smirked then, putting a coquettish pout on her face that had Harry stammering and blushing even as he couldn't turn away. "And maybe I will even forgive you for forgetting to try and bring a broomstick here so that we can go flying."

The night passed slowly in this manner, with Harry and Olga talking shop for what once more felt like weeks, uninterrupted by body issues of any kind. Olga learned several dozen new spells, both commonplace and combat based. Most of the commonplace ones Olga could already do. Levitation and summoning spells were just specialized Telekinetic-based spells after all.

But some of the others Harry had learned from the Hogwarts library were interesting, and not all of them were direct combat based. Indeed, a few of the ones that she was most interested in, such as the Bubblehead charm, didn't seem to have any direct combat application. Olga had plans for them, which she detailed as she and Harry talked.

Eventually, the night ended, and as she saw the edge of their vision slowly coming apart and becoming like so much cloud, Olga sighed, staring down at where Harry's head still lay in her lap. "It has been an interesting night Harry Potter, yet it is coming to an end. But I think I wish to give you something to remember me by..."

With that, as Harry's eyes widened in shock, Olga leaned down and gave him a kiss on the lips. It was lingering, that kiss, firm, almost demanding, even if both of their mouths stayed close, and after a second Harry's began to kiss back, making Olga smile. *You might have met him first, Celestine, but I will have my own influence on this boy!*

The kiss kept on, until with a start, Harry woke up, the dream ending in an instant as he found himself in a bed in the hospital wing of Hogwarts.

OOOOOOO

"Mistress, your breakfast is here, and you told me to remind you today that you have an early meeting with the strategic council," Chloe's voice intruded on Olga's sleep, and she scowled, shaking herself free from the remnants of that shared sending with some reluctance. As had happened the first time, the queen of the dark elves found herself once more back in her bed in the dark fortress, and with a sigh, Olga pushed herself to her feet, quickly moving to dress as the door opened and Chloe entered, pushing a tray.

I wonder, I wonder what I should take away from that dream? Several new spells to be certain, some of them quite interesting. But the fact that Harry met once more with Cynthia, and a second time with me now, there is a connection between worlds there. And I have to ponder about the strangeness of his meeting with Cynthia for the second time. Dogs turning on her? Orcs in that secret place? Does that mean I win? Was that dream a warning Cynthia that she should shift sides, or else the high elves would be dragged down with the humans? Or did it warn of an Aberrant victory? That would surely be hell on earth.

There was certainly something else going on there. *Just as there is something else driving this connection between my Cynthia, and this young human boy. He was older than the first time certainly, but not that much older, she reflected. Although, given how well he was kissing me by the end, there is reason to be hopeful for his future.*

She giggled at that waving Chloe off when the younger dark elf looked at her quizzically. "You will eat with me, I trust?"

Chloe made to object, but Olga overrode her, gesturing her peremptorily into the chair across from Olga. "I rarely eat large meals to start the day, and you know it, Chloe. And you are still a growing young woman."

At that, Chloe snorted, knowing that she actually wasn't growing all that much, but willing to have a meal with her mistress. She also knew that her Mistress preferred spicy meals, but there was little spice to be had at breakfast beyond sausages and occasionally omelets with

peppers. *Maybe I should look for a new cook for us?* She mused, even as she began to scarf down the waffles.

About an hour later, the two of them entered a conference room, sparse of most paraphernalia except a few battle banners and the chairs, all of which looked extremely comfortable and opulent. After all, are going to be here for a while she thought, sliding into her own chair.

Most of what she heard was normal fair. Olga's surprising move a few years ago of fooling a massive portion of the Aberrants into attacking a single city, and then not only allowing them to invest the city, but exploding it under their feet had allowed her to overwhelm what few forces of the Aberrants remained afterward to threaten her realm. The humans of course had still been an issue, but they were much easier to fool with illusion magic and spells, had been badly hurt in the war prior to that moment.

This and surprise had allowed her to consolidate her forces, shifting her people entirely to the northeast. Now, while the Aberrant had access to several of the dark elves old mines, her people would be able to feed themselves. They had a smaller territory to defend, and more people to do it with.

It also allowed the Aberrant direct access to human lands to the south. Their attacks on the country of Ur allowed Olga to organize and consolidate her defenses even more. And when the humans came raiding her people again, Olga was ready for them.

In turn, the humans were not ready for when the Aberrants rebuilt their numbers within a few months, and came raiding south en masse. Now, more than a year after that great undertaking, the war had shifted into a three-way war between the Aberrant, human and dark elf forces.

Her own forces are still far smaller than either of her opponents of course. While the Aberrant could rebuild their numbers in a year, neither she nor the humans could. But concentration of force mattered more than total numbers, as humans had proven.

And with the Black Keep and its connection to the ley lines, Olga had enough magical power to completely ward several segments of the border on both sides. This funneled them into more easily defensible zones, and may both sides pay dramatically. Raiding parties still got through occasionally, especially human ones, they are clever bastards. Yet her people were in a far stronger position now than they were barely three years ago.

The map on the table reflected this new reality. Where before, the kingdom of Garan would have crossed the continent from east to west, now it was much smaller, a diagonal shaped segment set to one side continent only really touching Aberrant territory to the northwest, and the nations of Rad and Feoh to the south, with access to the neutral lands of the forest elves of Tululu. This left Ur backed up by Geofu to face the Aberrants, where before all Rad, Feoh and Ur had all abutted Garan territory.

But even as she listened to reports and gave out orders, Olga was still thinking about that meeting with Harry. But not just meeting Harry Potter and what Olga had learned from him directly, but what he had told her about the meeting with Cynthia. Something about that was nagging at her, but she couldn't quite bring it to mind. Still it had brought one concept to her mind very strongly. Secrets and surprises, like the one she had sprung on the Aberrants were the most dangerous thing in this war, and Olga needed to shield herself from them.

Olga held that in for a while, until the end of the meeting, where new business was supposed to be brought before the command group. Olga stood up then, overriding several others who had been making to speak. All of them stared at her in surprise, but remained respectfully silent. "It has come to my attention recently that we need more information. Not just about military movements, but about our enemies in general. Where do the Aberrants come from? Where are their cities, their blacksmiths, and so forth. They would be much less dangerous without weapons. We need information on the humans, is there any way we could turn them against one another?"

At that Chloe grinned, along with several other dark elves around the table. Many of them or their families had felt the sting of the human's depredations, and the idea of getting them to kill one another was even better than the idea of Aberrants and humans killing one another.

"Could we perhaps strike at specific targets within human territory to free out people and not anger the other humans? We all know that Celestine has been trying to stop the slave raids. How is that seen by her nobles, those humans who rule through bloodline rather than ability? We need to know more about both groups. And one thing we know about humans already is that they are very enamored with gold."

Everyone there nodded again, and Olga went on. "I propose that we set up two... Institutions, call them. Two groups that will investigate both of our enemies. One of them will be like Cynthia's group, the Eyes of Larentia. They would be tasked with examining the human nations, infiltrating them, and most of all finding our people, those who have been enslaved and taken away. All other priorities pale in comparison to that one."

Considering that even in the last year alone, nearly two thousand dark elves had been captured and been captured and sold into slavery, all of her listeners nodded firmly. That was but a pittance in comparison to what it had been before Olga rallied their people together, but it was still a grievous total, eclipsing the number of dark elves that had died in direct confrontations with the Aberrants, although even there, dark elves had been captured, mostly unfortunately women. Nearly three hundred in the same timeframe.

"The other group will be made up of male scouts, I will not risk a single woman on a task like this. But we need to know where the Aberrants come from, how to **really** hurt them, and maybe even how to stop their invasions at all," Olga finished before inviting questions and suggestions with a wave of her hand. Whatever that meeting between Cynthia and Harry

meant, Olga needed more information about the world in general to figure it out. But she would eventually have that information. *And then, I will figure out a way to turn it to my own advantage.*

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The first thing that caught his bleary eyes was a plaque on the wall above his head with his name on it. "She really did it," he muttered, shaking his head. "Really?"

"I told you I would put your name up there if you keep coming to see me, Mr. Potter. I like to be prepared like that," a tart voice said from one side, and Madam Pomphrey moved into his line of vision. "Now take this and go back to sleep. You need your rest."

That time, Harry had no dreams. He had no dreams over the next few weeks, as he got to know his new classes, Runes and Arithmancy. Arithmancy quickly proved pointless in his mind. He didn't use it to or indeed anything else to create most of his own personal spells and didn't really see the point to doing so. His new friend Luna explained this as Harry being a mage as well as wizard, which she and Hermione had a long discussion about. It wasn't an argument, but it could've been called the debate, one Luna eventually won, with Hermione actually conceding the point.

Whereas other wizards needed wands or other foci and spells to control and shape their magic, Harry was unique in how he could connect to his magical core. It was a far more primal connection for him, which allowed Harry to use magic far more easily than most wizards. Dumbledore, Professor Flitwick, Grindlewald and a few others throughout history had the same connection.

The downside however was that whereas a normal wizard would become magically exhausted and then be fine in a few hours rest Harry could literally kill himself if he pushed himself too hard. And he would never have the fine control that wizards could develop. As an example, Harry could use Wingardium Leviosa to lift a ton of rock or send a feather hard enough into the ceiling to have it stick in the wood there. Hermione could send the feather through a room of moving objects and small tunnels and never have it touch them or the ground.

Despite that point, it was good news for Harry. It meant that he could use the spells that Olga had taught him just like he had the ones from Celestine. During those few weeks Harry could see that Hermione was coming to a boil, questions popping up at the back of her eyes, questions about what he'd done on the Express when the Dementors appeared.

Apparently, Harry had done something that most thought was impossible: He had killed Dementors. Harry's confusion on that point was the only reason why Hermione had not questioned him about where he came up with the spell he'd used the moment he woke up. His lame excuse of "I saw it in a role-playing game."

The fact that he didn't know what it did, had convinced her that perhaps he had been telling the truth.

It certainly sounded better than I learned it from an Elven woman I met in my dreams, and she's the most gorgeous thing I could almost ever dream of, Harry reflected, staring out towards the rain-soaked Forbidden Forest.

"Hey, Potter, don't space out on me."

A light slap to his back brought Harry back to the here and now, and he twisted around to glare at Oliver. "What? Come on Oliver, you know there's no point to this, Surely they're calling the match even now."

"Surely they are not!" The older student shot back, sounding horrified at the very idea. "Quidditch matches have happened in all kinds of weather weather, this is nothing in comparison to some of the historical matches!"

Harry stared at him, then slowly shook his head. "You know, Hermione keeps on coming up with examples about how wizards are crazy. That statement makes me think she's right."

"It's Quidditch!" Oliver what shot back as if that was enough of an answer, and Harry rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Let's get a move on."

Five minutes later, and Harry was really, really wishing that he was back inside, or that he knew a spell that would keep off the rain which wouldn't continually drain his magic to do it. It was rainy, it was cold, visibility was practically. In other words, it was a typical Scottish autumn day, with the added benefit of it pushing evening and the horror of being in the air on a broomstick. *Thank god for Warming charms!*

He barely noticed when one of the Hufflepuff players went down injured, or when time was called and the two captains called in their teams. Leaning on his broom in front of the rest of the team in a tight circle around him, Oliver began, "All right, I know that this weathers bad, but we're doing what we can and..."

"Oliver, I can still feel my hands but I really don't want to right now, and my arse feels like its turning into ice on this bloody broom. So don't think me and the girls are going to be able to perform anything major out there," Angelina barked back.

She was quietly furious with her captain, who took a very slight step back at the angry lioness. It was a general rule of thumb in the house of Gryffindor that the twins and Angelina were the three people that you did not want to cross. The fact that all three were thick as thieves and had the backing of the rest of the Quidditch team, including Oliver if he knew what was good for them, was merely icing on the cake.

"Find the snitch Potter," Oliver said instead of replying going for a soft target in the still-tired looking younger wizard. "That's the fastest way to end this."

“Tell me something I don’t know Oliver, maybe, like oh I don’t know, how to see more than twelve paces away from where I’m flying!?” Harry barked back.

“I think I can help with that,” Hermione announced. How she got there, none of the others could tell, but suddenly, she was within the circle of players and tapping her wand against Harry’s glasses, her brows furrowed as she added yet another layer of magic to a few spells the two of them had already placed on the glasses. “We might have to replace these Harry, I’m afraid the physical structure isn’t going to be able to contain all that magic for long.”

Harry blinked, then blinked again as he saw Hermione and the rest of the team almost as if it was a clear day out, then sent his friend a beaming grin. “If they can last me for the rest of the game Hermione, I’ll buy another pair. And those books on enchanting you looked at when we were in Diagon Alley. You’re amazing, you know?”

She smiled at that, then wished him good luck with a quick, bone-breaking hug, before disappearing between two of the girls. Harry realized then she had used his cloak to get close, and then the bodies of his fellow Quidditch players to remain invisible to the opposing team. *Clever girl.*

Soon, all of them were up in the air again, and not thirty minutes later, Harry saw the snitch. He bolted for it, but suddenly screams erupted from the crowd. Dark figures were moving across the school grounds in the distance, coming towards the Quidditch pitch. Creatures of darkness, with hoods who didn’t walk instead flying forward.

The Dementors from the train! Several of them were even below Harry now, reaching up with clawed hands. *If the beings could be called to have any emotion, these seemed eager, angry, wanting to take their vengeance upon Harry for the death of their fellows on the train.* Already, Harry could feel his worst memories rising, draining his happiness and willpower away.

But with the sight of the creatures came a fierce determination and anger, *anger at them once more forcing him to face his most hated memories, anger at their endangering his friends again, and, somewhat childishly, anger at their interrupting the Quidditch game.* Perhaps that was why when Harry began gathering his magic again, what came to his mind was one of the spells that Olga had taught him, *rather than the same spell he had used last time.* Then he’d been determined to protect himself and his friends, this time he also wanted to hurr *these joy-destroying bastards.*

“Chain fire!” He howled, and from his hand a thin beam of fire almost as bright as the sun shot out. It crashed into one of the Dementors below, and then jumped to another, even as its first victim began to scream *and sizzle, fleeing in agony, but not killed this time.* The spell connected to another Dementor, then another, then another, until the survivors were fleeing, and Harry was roaring, grabbing at the snitch, even as the magic continued to leave him until he ended the spell, crashing to the ground, awake, but drained.

After the party Hermione again cornered him. "It was another RPG spell Hermione," Harry said, even as he began to draw letters on his chest, the words 'not here' forming there. Seeing that Hermione's eyes narrowed and she looked around, then nodded slowly, as she saw the inquisitive faces of the rest of the crowd.

"Fine, I guess you've done it before," Hermione muttered, shaking her head. "Ugh, you and your mage powers."

"What's an RPG?" Fred/George asked.

As Hermione began to explain, Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He knew he would have to tell Hermione everything eventually, but not right now. Right now, Harry wanted to bask in victory for a bit. And if he did so long enough, maybe he could figure out how to explain to his best friend how he had been learning spells from a dangerously sexy older woman, who also happened to be a dark elf. A species that didn't exist in this world. *Yeah, I don't see this going well for me. Still, at least I can put it off until I can be certain our conversation won't be overheard... Now... where exactly would that be?*

Setting that problem aside, Harry shifted the conversation back to the party, still internally trying to figure out how to tell his best friend about his greatest remaining secret. *And I also have to wonder what else is going to go wrong this year. It's almost Halloween, and that's never a good time for me...*

End chapter

I'm not actually happy with the name of this fic. It would after all only cover the first four chapters or so. Still, it will do for now.

So there we have it. The first few years of Harry in Hogwarts is done, and the seeds have been deeply planted. From now on, those seeds will only grow, but to show that, I will need to show more about the rest of this school year. And as you can see, my original thought to have the Wizarding World bits be small 2,000 words per scenes failed. So here I will end this for now. I don't see myself coming back to it unless one of you has some secret spell/jutsu/scientific wonder to clone me, but it was kind of fun to write. I hope you all enjoyed this, and have a Merry Christmas!