Blindness

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Summary: Harry Potter is not standing up in his crib when the Killing Curse strikes him, and the cursed scar has far more terrible consequences. But some souls will not be broken by horrible circumstance. Some people won't let the world drag them down. Strong men rise from such beginnings, and powerful gifts can be gained in terrible curses. (HP/HG, Scientist!Harry)
*Chapter 1*: Colors

Author's Note: This story came about in the two week time period after my initial LASIK surgery went poorly and I could not focus enough to see details either near or far away, but mostly blurry colors and shapes. The first portion which will be posted (the first six chapters) were written using talk-to-text on my cellphone, a method I do not recommend if you have a choice, as the errors are many and often humorous. There will be multiple parts to this story, which will be posted as they are completed and edited.

*Many thanks to GJMEGA for his wonderful help prereading and beta'ing this story!*

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1981

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Fate.

Prophecy cannot be avoided. To try is to make it happen in unique and unexpected ways. It is knowing the end of the story before you have begun to read, and all that is left to know is how one gets to that set point. Fate and prophecy, spiderweb thin strands of future, mapped out and in patterns or tangled in knots.

That night, a wizard sought to change his future, and made it instead. That night, a rat ran and hid.

That night, two Potters died, and one lived.

But the boy who lived was changed, and his eyes that so resembled the color of the killing curse that should have shredded his soul were wide with the sight of new things.

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Petunia was having a bad week, one filled with anger and resentment.

Her sister, dead. Her *brat*, in *her* house. Just like Lily, to go off and die,
and leave her spawn behind. Little word for years, few letters, nothing but spurned invitations and devilish moving pictures of a wedding and an infant.

But at night, in the dark, she allowed herself to grieve, to unleash painful bursts of tears for lost time and opportunities, anger at herself and the world for tearing two sisters apart like a tree split down the middle.

She wanted to hate the boy. She wanted to turn her anger to the child who bore her sister's eyes.

But something was wrong.

It didn't take too long to notice. The boy was silent; compared to her tantrum-throwing son, he was like a statue, staying still in the middle of the room, not exploring, not getting into trouble.

And quiet, hardly a tear to give notice to a soiled nappy, hardly a whimper to betray hunger.

But all of that could be ignored. All of that could be brushed aside in favor of lavishing attention upon her own son, who so desired it with every scream and fat waving fist.

What could not be ignored was the innocent way his eyes looked upon her. Never focused in quite the right place, but peering at her with firm determination, as if seeking to understand a puzzle. His head would move; listening to sounds. But always those eyes, bright green with intelligence, never quite looking at her face, but following her form with the questing sway of his black haired head.

In a month's time, she knew, knew with a mother's intuition. Knew after a few easy tests of snapping her fingers to see his head turn; and yet seeing little reaction when waving her hands in front of his very face.

Lily's son was blind, or very near to it.

And every facet of coldness in her body melted away. The wizards would never want a blind boy; how could he possibly learn magic? They wanted perfection, like pretty little perfect Lily, not Petunia.
Harry was hers, now. Fate had given her back her sister, and in a way had given her a second chance.

She would not squander it.

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1982

Lily's son was different, though.

In his first year with them, Petunia let herself admit as much. To her husband, in private, she shared her fears and speculations.

Magic still ran in the boy, ran in the way things came to him without his touch, in the way objects moved from his path before he could stumble upon them.

It was alarming, to say the least, to watch her table and chairs moved aside as the toddler slowly walked across the kitchen floor with unsteady legs.

The boy could not possibly go to daycare. A simple outing to a park was fraught with danger. She had to keep the boy inside, until he could learn to be more normal.

The Dursley's became used to making excuses. Yes, the boy is blind. Yes, he's my sister's orphaned son. Yes, he is feeling a little unwell. Yes, he's a bit... behind his peers. No, he can't play, he's under the weather. Yes, he's staying inside today.

Why? Well, he's different. He's blind.

Petunia focused her attention on Lily's son. While her own Dudley was sent to reception, she stayed at home and taught Harry to speak.

She taught him shapes by the feel of his hands. She taught him objects by touch, animals to sounds, colors to objects. She told him the sky was blue; and also that water was blue, and ran his hands through a bowl of tap water.
It was hard. It made her heart hurt, to see his trusting eyes, his unquestioning acceptance of what she told him.

She read books on blind children; she spoke to experts over the phone. Petunia Dursley became a different sort of woman, the kind who spent hours with a child not her own for no other reason than to help him.

And Harry Potter learned.

1985

Dudley did not always understand.

The other kids at school had brothers and sisters, and they were no different.

But his mother said that Harry wasn't just blind; Harry was *magic*. The other kids' siblings didn't move things without touching them.

And because Harry was magic and blind, Dudley had to look out for him. It was up to Dudley to protect him, because Harry was special.

Dudley's five year old chest had puffed out with pride when his mother told him that. Dudley was being given an important task. He had to grow strong and be watchful, so he could watch over Harry.

Dudley took his task very seriously. Any inkling of jealousy was quickly squashed with a simple look into his cousin's unseeing green eyes. How could he be jealous? He never had to share his toys, because Harry never wanted them. Harry couldn't see them.

Dudley felt bad for Harry, even though the boy was special and magic, because the boy never *could* play with his toys. He felt bad enough that he wished he *could* share them, wished his cousin could see if only for an hour, and they could play together.

When he told his mother as much, she cried.
Vernon was confused.

His wife had told him of her odd sister; but Vernon rather had thought Petunia was a bit touched herself, to believe magic was real.

The moving pictures in the mail hadn't been so odd, a trick really, easy to brush away.

But when the orphan in his house began to move things, well, Vernon Dursley was a practical man. A business man. He knew now there was something out there he couldn't ever understand.

His wife no longer spoke harshly of her sister and 'her kind'. She was gentle with the boy; and Vernon saw their own son profit from helping take care of little Harry.

He was satisfied with the arrangement. Petunia stayed at home, keeping the house and the children, and he went to work and made money. That there was now two kids instead of one, and one odd one at that, made little difference.

And this magic business wasn't so hard to live with after all.

1988

Dudley was a large child; his baby fat seemed determined to stay, but his bones were big and muscle hid underneath the fat.

No one messed with Dudley Dursley.

And no one picked on his cousin where Dudley could hear, or they regretted it.

But even with Petunia's vigilant eyes, even with Dudley's clenched fists, the world was not always kind.

Harry's ears heard things far better than they should. He heard the teasing whispers, the taunts. Walking with his cousin, he heard them call him
names because he was different, because he didn't go to school, because he was blind.

He was an idiot, a wimp, a waste of space.

Others felt pity for him. He heard them soothe each other that at least their children were not as bad as him; at least their children were whole. He heard other kids whisper how sorry they felt for him, not being able to see and play and have fun, always cooped up inside. How they felt for him; poor, pitiful Potter.

Harry was not sure which was worse; the cruelty, or the pity. To an eight year old, neither was preferable.

That summer, in an effort to confront both feelings and join his peers at their level, Harry convinced his aunt to allow him to enter school. He had long since learned to read with braille; at a rate that would have startled Petunia, had she had more experience with blind children. But she did not, and could only assume it was normal.

But nothing about Harry was normal, as she would learn when she agreed to her charge's pleas.

Because when Harry started school, the teachers who knew what normal was were more than happy to tell her such.

Harry was aware he was different. His last sight of things that he supposed were truly normal, things that had edges and forms, had been of a man in dark robes killing his mother. Of green light that had risen to destroy him, while red eyes glowed in the darkness.

Green, like fresh grass. Red, like apple skins and roses.

But only like. Harry had no words to describe the true colors, no objects his young mind could grasp upon.

Because he saw differently, now. He could not see what other people saw. He saw something new that they could not understand.
When he learned words, he tried to tell his aunt. Tried to speak of the colors he could see, though he did not know their names. Light that swirled and spiraled and moved, always. Light that seemed to flow through things, sometimes with the quickness of life, other times with the slow oozing path of death.

As he grew older, he learned more words, and knew with certainty how odd the things he saw were. He learned to use what he saw to his own benefit.

A chair, wooden. It had light, but it moved so slowly it hardly seemed to move at all. And only in the grains of the wood. The nails that held it together did not move at all, but gleamed like a spark, like the point of a sharp pencil. He could move the chair, and the nails, if he let his own light touch it.

But some things had no light, and were like empty spaces in his vision, only seen because they sat like dark shadows.

Plastic. The swings in the playground, dull and void, and he avoided their touch with stubborn insistence. Clothing made with synthetic fibers, like cloaks of darkness swept around his figure. Harry screamed when his aunt put a shirt of such fibers on him, and though she did not understand, she refrained from doing so again.

Harry had been afraid he would disappear if he wore it. Afraid his light would go dark and slow and dim. Afraid he would die, like his mother died.

Harry did not bother with the concepts of things like 'night' and 'day'. Always the world looked the same, the moving light, the shadows.

When Harry began to learn science, he began to develop his own hypotheses.

Things that grew had life, even when dead. Things that had never lived, things made with science and human hands, did not. Things that came from the earth, natural stone and rock, also bore odd pinpricks of light; synthetic gemstones and mixed concrete were only shadows.
Harry learned the light of wood from the piercing light of metal. He learned the throbbing look of human flesh from the dark shadow of a wall painted with chemicals. He learned his colors all over again, and he learned his objects by look now instead of feel and sound.

It was all different, it was all new. It was all _magic_.

Magic that his aunt said he had but could not learn because he was blind.

But Harry didn't think of himself as blind anymore.

He rather thought magic had taken his eyes and given him magic back instead.

The teachers assumed a blind homeschooled child would be behind. They started off the young Potter with the outdated materials left over from the last visually impaired child.

In a day, he answered the simple math and science questions correctly.

The next day they moved up a year, telling themselves the boy had had good tutoring from his aunt. It would be good to put him with his age group, after all.

They were wrong, and in a week, it was confirmed.

Harry Potter was a _genius_.

The Dursleys, at the news, only exchanged glances.

It was not so odd, after all, for a special child with magic to be special in one more way.

And with the long practice of reacting to the unexpected, the Dursleys began to look for a new school.

Harry was taken to more doctors. They looked at his eyes and ran tests with cold metal and stinging light. They noticed his pupils did not dilate as
they should, that his eyes were oddly focused but certainly unseeing.

A new kind of blindness, some doctors whispered. Never seen anything quite like it, others said of the boy who walked and talked like a normal child, whose eyes were so vibrantly green and intelligent.

He could not read numbers on paper. He could not describe pictures, or depict objects. He could not draw or write himself. He could not tell you a color of anything he saw, unless it was a guess or an assumption.

Harry Potter was medically blind. But physically, something odd was at work, on that all could agree. No blind child could avoid objects so well, could know a silent, unmoving person was present, could recognize an object's physical type if not their color or shape.

Only the Dursleys knew what it was, and they did not allow the curious doctors to run more tests, though they were avid to the point of offering money for the chance to study the phenomenon of the blind child who could see.

Magic.

1990

For two years Harry Potter attended a special school in London, dropped off by his uncle on the man's way to work.

He excelled with fresh material and new ideas. He made his own experiments, testing the light he saw and cataloging it in his mind.

He could make no notes at first, so he learned to compartmentalize his thoughts. His memory was unparalleled, he found, and Harry knew that the magic that ran inside his own skin was at work.

He learned higher math and found a great skill with languages. He learned to use and type in braille and thus solve equations and eventually write notes that could be printed off with a printer to be read later. He met other blind children and adults, and knew for a certainty that they did not see the
lights he saw.

He learned, because learning was all he knew to do. The only thing he did for the simple joy of doing it was music.

He would sit for long hours and listen to it, magic to his ears, a violin play or a piano sing. A woman's voice raised in triumph or agony, a man's in harmony.

Music was the only art he knew, and he loved it.

But every other moment was part of his quest to know what he was.

And at every turn, he knew the answers lay somewhere he would not be allowed to go.

Magic. What made him different, what made him special. What let him, away from curious gazes, move objects and change them.

He could make the light of wood into the light of metal. He could make the slow oozing wood of a dead twig quicken to life again and bloom, taking root. He could make the crystalline tones of water change to harsh red sparking fire.

Nothing was so full of light as fire, he found. And the light of fire burned his skin painfully.

And that was how he learned to use his light to heal, to soothe pain and mend a tear that let his light leave his body in rivulets of liquid.

Blood. He now knew that some of the light he saw in people was blood, though he had guessed it before.

And so on and on it went, the discoveries, the guesses, the learning. A child stepping into a dark world, one questing foot at a time, unknowing what lay beyond.

But that world would soon come looking for him.
Petunia watched it happen, time slowly gliding by.

Her sister's son growing up. Lean, a black-haired boy who spent most of his time at school or in his room, reading with his fingers or working magic in displays too marvelous to comprehend. No friends nor a desire to have them, only focused on study and the projects that caught his fancy.

She watched from the doorway one afternoon that summer as he made a stack of wood shavings into beautiful flowers, one by one, each a different color, purple and blue and red.

Then he gave them to her with a sweet smile, and Petunia smiled back though she knew he couldn't see it.

"Did you mean to make them these colors?" She asked after a moment, and Harry shook his head, his voice soft and cultured to the precise words his teachers had instilled in him the last two years.

"No. I can change their physical form, but Dudley tells me the colors are always random. In the case of flowers, the stem is always green, but the petals deviate. Though, from what we've seen, they stay within their natural color scheme."

Petunia blinked, and chose to ignore the large words that sounded so odd coming from a young boy, and instead focus on the much stranger portion of that statement.

"Dudley's been helping you?"

Harry grinned, and the mischievous spark that showed brought her hope that her young nephew might one day turn his focus from his studies to things normal boys his age did.

Getting into trouble, mostly.

"Some. I use his eyes, and he gets the rewards for his girlfriends. They quite enjoy the flowers, I am told."
Petunia sighed, and with a last word of awe for the creations he had given her, left him alone.

In three days, the flowers in their elegant vase began to wilt.

And by then, her world, as special and beautiful as it had begun to be, would be tainted with fear.

Harry Potter had cost them very little in the last nine years. The nice private school he attended on scholarship, and before that Petunia had only spent time with him and little money. He was an easy child, never asking for things, only certain oddities setting him apart. Finding shoes made only of leather had been one of the difficulties, but that had paled compared to some of the trouble Dudley had gotten into over the years.

Perhaps one could squabble over the cost of food and clothing, of the materials Petunia had gotten for him when he was young, or the doctor visits when they hoped glasses or surgery might solve his eyesight.

But Petunia did not count those things, for Harry had brought light into their household with his presence, his bright outlook, his happy innocent delight in the things she had always taken for granted.

So when the letter came, her heart broke. For a day, she carried it in her pocket, and that night she cried, to her husband's confusion.

When another letter arrived the next day, she could no longer hide from the truth.

Nor could she deny the boy she had learned to love the chance to be part of a world that might be able to help him, though she feared the opposite.

And, perhaps there was the hope that the wizards did not know that Harry Potter was as he is, and when learning, would let him come back to her.

With that last thought in mind, Petunia wrote her letter, and sent it by the owl who waited patiently upon her car.
"Albus."

Minerva's voice was soft at his office door.

Albus looked up, saw her eyes, and sat up straight.

Together, they looked over the letter from Harry Potter's muggle aunt.

And again, he read it as he sat at his desk, the impossibilities it presented, the difficulties, the horrible twist of fate.

The prophecy, which still waited unfulfilled, waiting for a boy to grow up and a dark lord to return.

A boy that might be blind. How could he possibly be their savior?

But he had seen the scar with his own eyes, a jagged lightning bolt that had cut sideways across his face, cutting the skin around his eyes like a macabre blindfold.

Magic could not heal blindness. It could not fix eyesight. There were spells and items aplenty to help the life of such disabled, but there was no cure. The few magical prosthetics available to replace eyes were flawed, and limited only to adults who had reached their magical and physical maturity.

If Harry Potter was blind, he would stay blind for a very long time.

And Albus Dumbledore could not teach a blind child magic.

*Was it possible he misinterpreted the prophecy?*
McGonagall watched him for three days, not wanting to believe it, unable to face the facts.

She watched Lily and James' precious son walk carefully down a street, cane stretched out in front of him, always escorted by his uncle or cousin to and from the muggle vehicles.

She watched him wait for doors to open for him, watched him coached on what food to be eaten at public restaurants, watched as muggles catered to his disability with the comfort of long familiarity.

He was smart, attending a school with peers twice his age, but his mind could never make up for his lack of sight.

Harry Potter could not wield a wand at a target he could not see. Harry Potter could not read spell tomes or take notes from a professor.

There were no wizarding books in braille. There were no blind wizarding children taught at Hogwarts. What few practicing magicals who were blind were not so from youth, but only lost their sight in their old age or in accidents later in life.

Maybe, with careful tutoring, he could be taught a few limited spells. Maybe he could prepare a pre-cut potion, or work with his hands in herbology. But the magical world was too dangerous for him to ever be alone.

He was Harry Potter. He was famous. The wizarding world would not know what to do with a blind savior.

What minions of the Dark Lord remained would find him easy pickings.

"It's for his own good." Albus Dumbledore said softly, when she relayed her findings. "He can not come to Hogwarts. Perhaps it is best that he simply disappear into the muggle world."
"There will be questions." Minerva said softly, and the venerable Headmaster sighed.

"Let it be known he is receiving private tutoring."

And in his mind, the Headmaster considered that the young Longbottom boy also fit the parameters of the prophecy.

He could have been mistaken all along.

And as easily as that, the problem of Harry Potter was pushed aside.

Petunia felt her heart break when she read the letter.

As much as she would have wished to keep her nephew with her, she had also known how much being denied would crush him.

But she told Harry anyway, that his world would not take him as she had always warned, and he only smiled.

He knew something they did not; magic had him in its grasp whether he was blind or not, and he would learn to use it one way or another.

Time passed; days, weeks, months. Harry Potter became a name known in muggle scholarly circles in Britain, a rising star, a genius child, the pride of the Her Majesty's Gifted Children Program.

And in the magical world, fate worked its delicate plans.

"How could you let this happen to my daughter?!"

The muggle man roared in distraught pain, standing over his child's hospital bed.

"Mr. Granger, this accident..." Professor McGonagall began.

"You told me the school was safe!" The man interrupted her, waving a fist.
"Calm down, sir, you might wake her." Madam Pomfrey gently broke in, and with a grimace the man lowered his voice and continued to rant in harsh whispers to his daughter's Head of House.

"We were told this was the best institute for magic. I had my doubts, but you, you professor, convinced us. Now, we get a letter saying our daughter is in your kind's hospital? This, St. Mungos? Because a troll bashed in her head, broke her bones? And she might never recover fully? My daughter?! Where were you, when this troll was roaming your school!"

"Ms. Granger left the Halloween Feast of her own accord…"

"To go to the bathroom!" Mr. Granger burst in, shaking his head. "Can one of your students not visit the facilities without danger?"

"I'm sorry…"

"No." He said firmly, and looked down at his pale little girl, her mother's curly brown hair limp around her face. "No more of your apologies. If… when, my daughter wakes up, she won't be returning to your school. She had scholarship opportunities to the best schools in Britain. She can learn magic if she still wants to by tutor, safe at home with her mother and me."

Professor McGonagall stuttered and pleaded, but all of her words fell on deaf ears.

Mr. Granger would not let his child out of his sight again for a very long time.

1992

In January, while her peers at Hogwarts returned for a term that would be fraught with drama, Hermione Granger entered muggle school once more.

It had taken a month for her to wake from the magical coma meant to heal her mind.

Magic could easily mend broken bones and skin; the spirit was another
matter, and the mind a mystery never solved.

She could not speak well; and when she did it was slow and slurred, as well as in broken syllables.

For another month her parents doted on her at home as she was visited by a speech therapist, coaching her how to speak again, though written words came as easily to her gifted mind as ever.

And when Hermione grew tired of the constant pandering, tired of her parents worried eyes and pitying gestures, she insisted she was ready to return to school.

And in London, on her first day of school, she heard a name mentioned with longing, a name very familiar to her from her magical studies.

What were the chances that the blind darling of her new London school was also the wizarding celebrity?

It wasn't possible, of course. Not at all. The-Boy-Who-Lived wasn't *blind*, he was being trained in secret by aurors and the Ministry.

But Hermione watched him in fascination anyway, too shy to speak in her new halting way to a boy who seemed to know more than even she did, too nervous to offer help to him when he navigated the hallways with careful steps.

And when she sat close to him in the cafeteria, watching his focused face on some paper or another, fingers caressing a page of braille, she found herself becoming fascinated with the boy.

From a *distance*, of course, because the Hermione Granger she was now was not the same girl of four months ago. She did not offer help to her peers, though they would be more receptive to it than the students at Hogwarts ever were; she couldn't speak well enough to give answers in class when a teacher asked. Crowds made her nervous; bathrooms, even of the muggle variety, were nightmarish rooms of pain and darkness.

Harry saw something different in January.
Blue-violet light, like spiraling electric lightning across a stormy sky. A form, shorter than himself, darting in and out of the corners of his vision.

*Watching him.* Burning brighter than any other person in the London school. Burning with something no one other than himself had.

*Magic.* The bearer of the blue-violet light was magic, somehow.

She or he, Harry could not tell, shadowed his movements. In his mind, he fondly began to call the vision *Violaceus* for the unique vibrant hue of its magic and life. He found the Latin for the blue shade of purple described it aptly, and imagined it was a girl who was much like himself, damaged in some way, kicked out of the magical world for some fault that made her less than perfect.

Viola shared no classes with him. She passed him in the halls with quick steps, the tread of a nervous personality. She sat within sight of him during the lunch meal, her light questing from her with timid jerks, like a cat testing a puddle of water to see that it was, in fact, wet.

He was not fast enough to catch her. The blind, even those who saw light, found it hard to run.

So he began to think of ways to draw her to him, when he could ask no one her name, could not point her out from a crowd. A blind boy searching through endless color for one single, fascinating hue.

At Hogwarts, Neville Longbottom and Ron Weasley became friends of an awkward sort. Seeing the aftermath of what happened to Hermione Granger changed them; changed all the Gryffindors, but none more than the two boys who reluctantly went searching too late for the girl who had been so hurt by their callous words.

Neville had wanted to go earlier; Ron had not. One felt guilty for not being stronger; the other, for being so weak.

The two knew why the know-it-all had been in the bathroom. Their shame bound them tighter than friendship.
After winter break, they began to find reasons to study together, reasons to help their peers. Following signals nearly too vague to understand, they began to search for some way to find forgiveness in themselves.

Some way to make up for what they had done.

And from the clues they were given they found out about the Philosopher's Stone and where it was hidden. They saved a dragon together. They followed Snape under an invisibility cloak Neville had been given from a mysterious benefactor.

Seamus and Dean were brought into the fold, tagging along with their suspicions, the four Gryffindor boys thinking of themselves as the Saviors of Hogwarts.

And when Dumbledore left, when Professor Snape disappeared, when their Head of House wouldn't listen, they did what they had to do.

They followed the clues left so carefully for them, and went to save the Stone themselves.

Neville defeated the Devil's Snare. Ron caught a key and solved a chess board. Dean and Seamus both worked through the riddle with laborious effort.

And Neville, the only one uninjured from the chess match, marched through the fire with the first explosion of courage he had ever felt in his life.

Dumbledore was pleased.

His ploy had worked. Mr. Longbottom showed true promise, and had made friends with his peers, good boys all of them, Gryffindor lions through and through.

The Stone was destroyed, and Neville Longbottom thought that he and his friends had saved it from falling into darkness, and that maybe Neville himself was somehow important enough to defeat a dark lord.

Seeds, carefully planted, needing only time to grow strong.
Albus Dumbledore would make the savior his world needed.

Hermione had three focuses in her life as the months passed and summer approached.

Her muggle studies at school, advanced material that finally challenged her the way she had always wanted.

Her magical studies, assignments by owl, practical evaluation once a week by Mrs. Hiddlesticks, a retired Mistress of Charms and Transfiguration.

And Harry Potter, the smartest boy in the school. Sometimes, she almost thought he was looking for her, his amazing green eyes locking upon her face for a second as she passed, his head turning at odd moments when she approached.

Always, she nervously looked away and fled, unsure why she even bothered.

He couldn't see her, not really. He was blind, everyone said so, and it was easy enough to see for herself in the way he walked, the way he read, the way he needed help picking out his food in the cafeteria.

But Hermione couldn't take the chance.

She much preferred watching from afar and trying to solve the mystery he presented.

When term broke for the summer, Harry left school with a feeling of frustration, silent on the entire drive home.

He hadn't even spoken a word to Viola, the light avoiding him at every turn.

Once, he tried to call for her; but what to say?

*Hey, you there, with the pretty lights, girl? Boy? Young, old?*

*Hey, you, stop.*
Let me talk to you.

But it hadn't happened, and Harry found himself strangely reluctant to enlist the help of any of his acquaintances at school. What would they think? How could he possibly explain?

He could only hope the light would still be at school when term resumed. He hated a puzzle left unsolved.
*Chapter 3*: Scarlet Fire

Harry did not stop practicing his magic, though its limits frustrated him.

He could manipulate his own light only in specific ways, all related to touch or a range of around ten feet.

Farther than that, and he felt like he was stretching out an arm, unable to reach.

His aunt spoke of wands; she also spoke of an alley for his kind, Diagonal or something, reached from a pub she could not see from a certain muggle street.

His aunt had waited in the car with her mother, afraid to enter, when she was young. Later, an older teen and puffed up with bravery, she had let her sister lead her inside and show her the magical world.

Harry saw his aunt's light pulse with emotion when speaking of it; and its agitation only increased when Harry insisted he must go there.

He had to get a wand, for experimental purposes of course. And why shouldn't he? Surely just because the school had rebuffed him did not mean he was not allowed a wand.

And with more convincing, his aunt finally agreed, to make him happy.

He rarely asked for much, after all.

His aunt warned him.

She told him that he was something special in the wizarding world, though they did not know of his condition. He did not understand all of it. That the man, the wizard, who killed his mother had been a criminal of the worst sort, feared by wizarding kind. That Harry had somehow been instrumental in the man's death, and that all of the wizarding world seemed to know his name.
That the scars he had heard whispered about across his face were the sign of a curse, scars that would identify him to every wizard and witch who knew the story.

The letter that had come with him when he was brought to the Dursleys said as much.

His temporary solution was easy. He had no desire to be recognized when making his first foray into the wizarding shopping alley with his aunt. He only wanted a wand, and perhaps a few books his aunt or Dudley could translate aloud for him.

He tied a soft cloth around his eyes, his aunt assuring him that the black material covered all of the pale, jagged marks, and did not look horrid.

Then, with a determined smile, he prepared to enter a place neither he nor his aunt could see.

She knew the street; when they arrived, Harry could see the magic, the bright light streaming forth in a wide circle.

He led them both into the light, and when they were inside, his aunt sighed in relief.

At the entrance to the alley, his aunt described a brick wall blocking the way.

Harry, instead, saw a spider web, delicate and precise, with a few key knots that held the design.

He tapped those knots with his light, and the thing transformed into open air. His aunt gasped with amazement, her trembling hand tight in his own.

He smiled.

That day, Harry confirmed something new, something that changed everything.
Magic was indeed part of the light he saw, bright and strong.

He had made some guesses, from seeing the way he manipulated objects with his own light, from the glimpses of Viola in London. But on his first glance around the Leaky Cauldron, and his first gaze into Diagon Alley, both sights not altered in the least by the synthetic cloth across his eyes, his guess was confirmed.

Magic flowed in thicker streams inside witches and wizards than it did his aunt. Magic lit the streets in details, the stones alive with it, the building so thick with its light that he felt both blinded and able to see for the first time in his life.

It was too much. And he could not close his eyes, could not look down or away to filter the sight. His mind was awake and taking it in, despite what his physical eyes might wish.

For long minutes, Harry stood, holding his aunt's hand in a tight grip, his walking stick in the other, trying to put some sort of filter on what he saw.

It was like standing in the center of the sun, everything was so alive with color and frantic movement.

And the sky! The air above him streamed with light, swirling as if in some foreign wind, moving to music he did not know.

Magic was everywhere, in everything.

And Harry Potter could see it all.

He let go of his aunt's hand, and began to walk.

His aunt told him he had money in the wizarding bank, that his father was rich and that his own kind counted money differently.

The goblin bank, with its orange creatures and sharp metal, fascinated him. Wizarding money, gleaming with golden magic, was heavy in his hands.
The Potter’s *did* have money, though his key had been misplaced. It was simple to get a replacement; a drop of blood, and thus life, as proof of who he was.

His aunt did not like the goblins; Harry thought that he probably would not either, if he could see them with her eyes. But their magic knew no ugliness, and gleamed in an echo of the precious riches they guarded.

And with a wizard’s money, Harry prepared to find himself a wand.

Diagon Alley was loud; so many confusing noises, some sounds so foreign he could only assume they were from creatures the muggle world did not know. He was constantly surrounded now by not only the new lights, but the smells and sounds of a culture he had never experienced before.

It was chaos, and it was everything he hoped it would be.

Along their path, his aunt reading to him the signs of stores they passed, Harry made two stops.

The first was to a clothing store, where all the materials were natural, cotton gleaming with brown light and the many hues of animals, some he did not recognize.

But the boots in the window glowed with orange fire.

*Dragons.*

It made his heart stir with excitement, and though his aunt baulked at the extravagant price, he would not be swayed.

He walked out of that store with firelight around his feet, a orange and yellow glow only he could see, and a cloak around his shoulders that streamed with silver light like the moon.

The second was to the bookstore, where Harry learned that magical kind did not use braille or any writing like it. With his Aunt’s help he bought a spare three books, their bindings in leather, their pages alight with magic but not words that he could read.
It was frustrating, and disappointing, and expected. If his kind had taught blind students they would not have turned him away, after all.

The wand shop of Ollivanders glowed like the sun in an alley of smaller stars, so full of light that he faltered upon entering.

But it smelled of wood and musty boxes, of water and fire and an electric charge he could only think of as magic, and that scent spurred him to walk forward into the silent store and what opportunities it held.

The wizard who waited for them at the counter gleamed in a rainbow of colors, like what he imagined a kaleidoscope would look like to normal eyes. And each of those colors seemed connected to the bright lights that filled the store, the gleam of woods too numerous to count, the fibers of pulp and the now familiar twang of dragon mixed with new signatures he could only guess at.

The wizard's magic came upon him in a wave, evaluating him more than the tape measure that whirled through the air.

"Mr. Dursley, you say? A bit old for a Hogwarts student... you have a familiar look about you. I dare say you are trying to pull the wool over my eyes. Heh heh..."

The old man chuckled with dry humor, one hand gesturing towards the cloth over Harry's face.

Harry smiled, but remained silent. He heard his aunt shuffle nervously behind him.

"Not many blind wizards, you know. Justin the Brave, in the stories, was a blind wizard, a knight who slew a particularly troublesome griffin... In modern times, only two of my acquaintance. It doesn't happen much, in magical folk. Not naturally..."

Again, the old wizard drifted off, and again Harry only nodded.

The man huffed.

"Usually, I can't get customers to shut up about themselves. You're an odd
one, and I don't mean those eyes. *Now.*"

The man stepped away.

"You have options, Mr. Dursley."

Harry waited, watching with avid eyes as the man's magic seemed to split and swirl in multiple directions at once.

"Normally, children of your age bond and learn with a singular wand, purposefully suited to themselves. But I see you already carry something that may be much more in tune to yourself."

Harry's hand tightened around the walking stick he carried. It was fine grained wood; oak, to be exact. He had liked the way its steady green light held still in his vision, wood from a tree that had lived a hundred years in peace, then died and been reshaped into solid support.

There were many things that did not contain a spark of life, black holes in his sight, in the normal world. Concrete in particular was like walking upon darkness, and curbs had caused him to stumble more than once.

The more processed the object, the less life it continued. And when others had tried to press plastic and carbon fiber, lighter weight sticks for his use he had turned the dark shadows of them away with a grimace. He preferred to see the thing that guided him, and hold the echo of its life in his hand.

Harry shrugged. "It's just a wooden walking stick."

"Ah, that it is..." Ollivander drawled. "But every wand I own was also once just a slice of wood. I give it shape, I give it its core, and I make it something new and unique. Length is important, and type, and even the day in which it was made. And every creature who gives a piece of themselves to make a wand magical also gives it personality all its own. A dragon's heartstring for fierceness and pride; a unicorn hair for confidence and purity, a phoenix feather for courage and loyalty. My specialties, each and every one, and yet possessing infinite possibilities."

The wizard paused, and his magic was bringing something to him,
something long and streaming with the oozing green life of wood newly hewn.

"A wand bonds with its master, and will work better for its bonded than anyone else. The bond grows stronger with every use, with every day spent on your person. But tell me, what do you carry with you always already? That walking stick. For you, I recommend something different."

Harry frowned. "My mother used a wand at Hogwarts. I assumed they would be best."

Ollivander sighed. "Unimaginative. I find structured schools to lack something important. Experimentation, the celebration of being different. Only certain ingredients, only certain pets, only certain clothing. Rigid, confining, bah!"

The man coughed and grumbled, then thrust something towards him, and by reflex Harry reached out to grasp it.

"That, my boy, is a wizard's staff. Out of date, yes, most youngsters prefer modern wands, and for good reason. More mobile, more flexibility for the newer flashy spells. Quick and light. A staff, now, that takes courage to wield in these days. I carved that from a yew branch only weeks ago."

Harry set his walking stick aside and ran his hands over the wood, feeling the grain, watching the slow swirl of green light.

But there was only green, none of the flavors of magical creatures he had seen in the wands around him.

"Where is its core?" Harry asked, and the man grunted in surprise.

"Ah, yes, I'm surprised you guessed. Most wizards now who use staffs prefer to slide their wands inside. A cheat, a way to have both the usefulness of a wand and the occasional look of a staff to make them seem more important or powerful. But it doesn't work properly as a staff that way. Few these days desire or could even actually wield a true staff, so I seldom make them. This here has not yet been converted."
"Then how would I use it?" Harry asked, and Ollivander sighed.

"You don't. We find you a wand that likes you, and I find a branch of its wood and carve you a staff and take the wand's core to place inside it. Perhaps add a stone or two for focus."

"Just like that?" Harry questioned, and Ollivander sniffed.

"Of course not! I am a master of the craft. Do you think I will tell just anyone my secrets?"

Harry shook his head, and the old wizard sighed.

"Or, I can simply give you the wand. Which do you prefer?"

The man seemed resigned. Harry rather thought the wizard wanted a challenge more than he wanted to sell a wand.

And a staff seemed infinitely more useful than a wand, when it could double as his walking stick. He could take it with him to school, to the park. Always have the ability to magnify his magic through a focus if needed in an emergency.

And he wasn't going to a magical school, where the staff would be commented upon. He would be in the muggle world, with a new more elaborate cane, but still just a blind boy's cane.

"The staff." He said, and saw the man's spectrum of light thrum with excitement.

It took a long hour to find a wand that accepted him. Its wood was holly, a pattern Harry recognized from the tree that graced the park near his house. Inside, scarlet light streamed in a feathered design that hinted at fire even as it also gave off a slight melody that warmed his heart.

"Phoenix feather." Ollivander said simply, and his voice was odd, his light dim with some conclusion the man did not like.

But he said no more, and Harry did not ask. He found himself reluctant to give up the thin length of wood, feeling as if something precious had been
taken from him.

"A week, perhaps more." Ollivander said simply. "I will owl you the finished product, if you prefer."

His aunt stepped closer.

"Harry, I think that would be best."

He knew she would rather not return to the alley. Her normal hue was dark with uneasiness, out of her element among so many of the people she did not understand.

Harry turned towards her and carefully reached out, fumbling slightly before holding her hand and squeezing softly.

It was harder to see a normal person, he realized. Their light was dimmer now to him, compared to the bright halos of the witches and wizards they had passed. Ollivander's hands had been cylinders of streaming light, easy to see in his path.

His aunt's were dull by comparison, hardly recognizable from the rest of her solid shape.

"Alright." Harry looked at the wandmaker. "Though best deliver it at night. We live in a muggle area."

His aunt sighed in relief, and Ollivander clapped his hands together with agreement.

When the staff came, it was held in the talons of two owls, their forms pale blue and white at his window. Harry accepted the package, wrapped in textured paper that he carefully pulled away.

It glowed with scarlet light, red as the eyes of the monster that slew his mother, phoenix fire, singing under his hands.

He felt it warm at his touch, saw his light flow inside of it and bond, two separate creatures becoming one, recognizing in each other a brother.
He wished he could meet the owner of the feather he now carried. He rather thought they would get along well.

With the staff, new wonders became possible.

In the privacy of his room, his cousin occasionally sitting in, Harry manipulated his world. He made himself impervious to fire; he made himself levitate. He made Dudley fly; he made his bed disappear.

He healed his cousins broken finger from boxing. He played pranks upon the kids at the park who once whispered behind his back. He made a dead tree live again, and took a branch and made it into coal that burned with red fire. He turned a bird into glass and gave it to his aunt. He fixed the dining room table when a leg broke, and changed the black shadowy vinyl of the kitchen floor to green wood streaming with life.

In a months time, the Dursley home no longer looked the same as he made it his playground, and the spells he cast did not fade.

They stayed strong and bright.

And Harry's desire to learn more only grew stronger along with them.

When term resumed, Harry searched for Viola with new determination.

A witch or wizard was in his school, another outcast, and their presence now meant more than ever.

Because together with another magical person, one with eyes that could see, the magical world would no longer be out of his grasp, limited to the readings of his aunt from magical tomes she did not understand.

And when he finally saw the blue-violet light, he made his move.

Hermione knew right away what was different, and the only possible conclusion made her mind spin.
The previous term she had made it her mission to learn everything about Harry Potter, both the boy at her own school, and what was written about the wizarding celebrity. The more she learned, the more certain she was that her Harry Potter was not the Boy-Who-Lived.

The Boy-Who-Lived had defeated hags, and studied with aurors, and had a lightning bolt scar on his forehead. The papers showed a drawing of a tall boy, the scar shooting downward in stylized grandeur, holding a wand aloft in confident hands, dark hair slicked back in perfect lines. He was out of the country somewhere, traveling with tutors, too busy to attend Hogwarts, avoiding the fury of the eager wizarding press, with good reason.

The muggle Harry Potter had a scar, yes; but it was an ugly thing across his eyes, perhaps vaguely lightning shaped, but nothing pretty or grand about it. It branched and cut the skin, pale spidery lines that split his eyebrows and made bad work of his noble face. His hair was black, yes, but it was wild, falling across his face in long strands that he never seemed to notice.

There was nothing that truly linked him to the wizarding world but his name.

Until the first day of the new term, when Hermione saw him walking the halls in what had to be dragonhide boots.

That she noticed them first might have been odd; but her eyes tended towards the floor on most days, avoiding the gazes of her peers, and she had seen some boots just like it in the window of Madam Malkin's her first trip to Diagon Alley and been awed by them, knowing they were from the skin of a dragon, a beast she had thought only myth days prior. Their existence had gotten her attention; and their price tag her horror.

Anyone who had seen dragonhide before would never mistake its shape or quality for anything else.

But then she saw the cane in his hand, a different one from the simple pale wood of the year before. It was made of deep brown wood, polished with a golden sheen. On the top curve gleamed two small red stones like the eyes of a serpent.
And most telling of all were the runes carved with painstaking patience along its surface in a gentle spiral. Wizarding runes, like in her books.

Did he even know they were there? Was his blindness all an act?

She was so caught in her startled confusion that she did not have time to sidestep him as he approached.

His startling green eyes looked at her face, not quite meeting her eyes, but seeming to stare straight at her nonetheless.

He saw her.

"Viola." He murmured, and reached out his left hand toward her. "I need to talk to you."

Hermione shifted, uncertain, glancing from his hand to his face.

"I... I'm not w-who you th-th-think I am."

Her stutter embarrassed her to no end, red rushing over her cheeks in a flood.

Harry Potter smiled.

"You're a witch, aren't you?"

And Hermione Granger felt the last of her doubts disappear.

"H-h-how did you k-k-know?" She whispered, and he took another step forward, his hand questing until it brushed her shoulder gently and squeezed.

"That's what I want to talk to you about. Please?"

And there was no way she could possibly say no to that.
*Chapter 4*: Emerald Eyes

It was hard for her to believe the story he told, and yet its sheer unbelievability made it plausible.

Had she even read of any blind wizards? She had seen a few with glasses, proof that there was no simple magical cure for less than perfect eyesight. But no one truly blind.

And Harry Potter was blind in the normal sense of the word.

She wondered if the wizards had even talked to him long enough to realize that he was not normal anything, really.

"Light? C-c-colors only, or, or… s-s-s-shapes, too?"

Harry shrugged where he sat in the nearly abandoned library, most of the other students in class.

Like they both should be. He might be able to get away with it, but she was certain she would have a note to bring home to her parents.

*But it was so totally worth it.*

"I see colors, in patterns and moving at different rates. No two things look quite the same, and I've learned to recognize a lot of the patterns and colors well enough to get by. All people have the same general pattern, though witches and wizards glow brighter. But all have different hues, all over the color spectrum. I saw a woman once, and knew she was pregnant, because she bore another color different than her own inside of her."

"Really." Hermione breathed, finding the thought beyond fascinating.

Harry grinned. "It has its perks, its tricks. But I can't find its true potential. The wizards won't take me into their school, and they have no books I can read. I need help, Hermione. I need another of my kind."
Her heart raced, then fell. "B-b-but, I'm not... I'm m-m-muggleborn, and I was only at H-h-hogwarts for two m-m-m-m-months. I hardly know a-an-anything about their w-world."

Harry leaned forward, all humor gone. "I don't care for labels, and I don't need a Hogwarts student. I need someone smart and willing to work with me, to help me find a way to learn what you can just read in books. Someone to guide me on trips to Diagon Alley, and help me with experimental magic."

Hermione bit her lip. "We're not s-supposed to use m-magic outside of school, you k-know. My p-p-parents had to sign special papers at the M-m-ministry to get them to allow m-me leeway as long as I was e-e-enrolled with a tutor. I'm surprised you haven't been c-c-caught by the Trace."

"The Trace?" He asked, and Hermione nodded, then realized he couldn't see the small gesture.

"It's like a b-beacon of some sort, lets them know when we're u-u-using magic without an a-a-adult."

He sighed, absently rolling his long staff between his palms where it was propped against his shoulder.

"I don't know. Maybe it doesn't track the accidental magic of children, and seeing as I was never enrolled in a magical school... maybe it wasn't activated." He smiled suddenly. "You see, you are useful already. I had no idea that the wizards might be tracking me."

Hermione flushed, looking down, words jumbling together in her mind and making it difficult to speak coherently.

It had been a long time since someone other than her parents had spoken to her in that tone of voice. Someone whose good opinion she couldn't help but crave.

*That troll knocked more than a few screws loose,* she mused, and ground her teeth together.

"What's the matter?" Harry asked, and Hermione blew out a breath.
"N-n-nothing. I'll do it. I'll h-help."

He beamed, and though he couldn't see it, Hermione smiled back at him.

From that day forward, things changed.

She had a friend; and a friend that made the girls who used to snub her begin to crowd around seeking her friendship.

She spurned them all. Harry's friendship was more than enough, more than she could ever hope for, and what he wanted took up all her spare time.

With his funds she bought more books and read, combing through tome after tome for some solution, some spell to meet her need.

And when she found it, her excitement could not wait for the next school day.

And so Hermione Granger met Harry Potter's muggle relatives, who were more surprised at her being their typically antisocial nephew's friend than the fact that she was also, inconceivably, a witch.

It was a simple spell, though at a fourth year level. It simply read aloud any text that one pointed a wand at, meant to help train young wizards how to properly enunciate their Latin.

But for Harry, it opened a new world.

He simply opened up a page, placed his hand upon it, and spoke the word.  
"Enuntiare."

And a voice read the entire page.

When it worked the first time, Harry stood, trembling, and reached towards his Viola's light, pulling her close into a hug, his head dropping to her shoulder as he whispered his fervent thanks.
She was stiff as a board; and Harry let her go as swiftly as he had drawn her in.

But he would give her everything he had if she asked for it after that day.

1993

For Hermione, that year passed like a blur of wondrous research and magic of all kinds.

She shared all her tutor’s notes and books with Harry, the boy devouring them at a pace that astounded her. Together they practiced magic in her room, her with a wand and precise elegant movements, him with only a rough gesture and a word, one hand on the carved wood of the staff Ollivander had made him.

Harry helped her with her muggle subjects, explaining things in ways she had never thought of; with textures and sounds, mathematical patterns and geometric shapes. They would reserve the labs at school to practice chemistry, Hermione doing the delicate physical work Harry was incapable of, him coaching her in words and gestures.

For her parents, there was never a moment of doubt. The boy who their daughter brought home was the first friend she had ever had; and he was courteous to a fault.

And they didn’t need to fear that as a wizard he might draw their girl back into a dangerous world. He was blind, after all, and Hermione had told them that he was not wanted in their world. They didn’t understand the wizards thinking, when it was obvious to them the boy could perform magic well enough. But wizards thought in odd ways, and it was none of their business. They were only glad to see their Hermione so very happy again.

But at a school of magic in the mountains of Scotland, there was little peace or happiness to be had.

The school was terrorized by a monster. Ghosts and muggleborns
petrified, blood writing on the walls, halls flooded and fear dripped like poison in the hearts of the students.

Ron Weasley's sister disappeared; and later that day, the Headmaster of Hogwarts and his phoenix fought off a basilisk in the Great Hall before the terrorized eyes of a hundred fleeing students.

Neville Longbottom, bearing Gryffindor's Sword, helped distract and slay Slytherin's monster before it could wreak more havoc, three friends at his side, dodging and weaving, the Heroes of Hogwarts.

Then the Headmaster struck it down with enveloping fire and a well timed severing curse to its neck.

But five students died from looking into the Basilisk's naked eyes before the phoenix could claw them out.

And one boy was killed in the aftermath, when the great beast fell dead upon him, and later students would say they did not recognize the boy, and in fact, no more mention was made of him.

Only the Headmaster and the Heroes knew the real truth, of the boy Tom Riddle who had boasted so strongly of killing Ginny Weasley to make himself whole again.

Lord Voldemort had returned, for a brief time, and once more left spilt blood in his wake.

Ginny Weasley's body and the mythical Chamber of Secrets were never found.

Harry grew to like Hermione's mind more than even the color of her life. She had ideas, brilliant ones, making leaps of logic that he enjoyed. She read as much as he, getting references to ancient authors and theories that his family could not appreciate.

She wasn't awed by his own knowledge anymore, nor did she treat his blindness like an inconvenience. She was patient, and she was kind.
When she was excited and enthralled in study, her stutter disappeared like the shadows of plastic in his vision, becoming nothing.

And when she finally told him the story of what happened to her, of Halloween and the troll, of the cruelties of young boys, he knew he would never forget the name of Ronald Weasley, who took away the magic and gave only tears instead.

Hermione was brilliant, a shining light that drew him like a moth to open flame, and Harry did not care in the least if he got burned.
*Chapter 5*: Black Deeds

It was counted as good luck for the grieving Weasleys, to have such well-timed fortune.

They used their prize to travel to Egypt, one of the top magical tourist destinations what with so much of the wonder hidden from muggle eyes and thus away from muggle crowds. A perfect way to find a distraction for a family lost and reeling.

But it wasn't good fortune at all; for in a dark gloomy cell, one man howled in fury.

1994

Hermione sat and watched Harry work.

He leaned back in his chair, the staff held gently in both hands, the rubies glowing faintly with eerie light.

And on the floor, fire bloomed in random shapes and patterns, twisting across the thin wood laid out for the purpose, carving out symbols faster than any metal in human hands could hope to match.

When he was done, a perfect ritualistic pentagram lay carved there, the proper symbols in place as the book had instructed them.

Hermione had taught Harry the symbols on raised disks, running his hand gently over each arch and angle until he knew every single one.

"Now, the beads." Harry reminded her gently, and she sprang to her feet, flushing, to retrieve the small glass marbles she had obtained from a toy store down the street. She put each in a triangle and stepped back, watching as once more Harry began to work his magic, not a finger moving, not a word from his mouth.
The glass became stones of different colors and shapes, ruby, emerald, diamond, opal, citrine, quartz, and jasper. Hermione stepped forward to check each one, making sure they had the right hardness against her scientific scale to be proper gems.

"They're correct." She said softly, feeling a flare of pride at the lack of a stutter.

She was getting better.

"Now, to see if it works." Harry stood, his staff hitting the ground with a solid thunk, the rubies atop it flaring in response; and Hermione saw the object in the center of the pentagram begin to form from empty air.

The stones began to burn; the symbols illuminating to gleaming light. The object began to solidify into a shape.

A moving, lithe shape, a feline whose form flickered with shadows as it paced.

Harry sighed, and the cat became solid, the gems disappeared, and the symbols on the wood collapsed back into nothingness.

The pentagram and any sign of it was gone, all that was left was the overly large cat, its fur bushy, its eyes alight with agitation, its tail whipping to and fro.

Hermione bit her lip. "What do we d-do with it now?"

Harry laughed. "You see him too? How does he look? Normal?"

She eyed the creature. "Normal enough. Black fur, white markings on his paws, kind of like a manicure... um, when girls paint their nails? His tail has three rings of white on it, a bit odd but not abnormal." The cat hissed at her as she stepped towards him. "H-his eyes are green, normal scale, his teeth... ah, look normal. H-h-he's not happy to be here."

Harry grinned towards where she stood. "He appears just like a normal cat to me too, brownish red light, slight alteration on his pattern with an extra spiral over his chest, but that could be typical. We will see if the pentagram
conjuration helps him remain solid past the customary twenty-four hours."

"And... if he does?" Hermione asked warily, suddenly unsure of the outcome if their experiment on prolonging semi-sentient life forms past the typical expiration period of a day and night worked.

Harry turned toward her, eyes looking somewhere in the vicinity of her nose.

"Then one of us has a new pet. I say we try increasing sentience on him next, with the reverse double triangle model and Lipscomb's principle of mental stimulation. Need more marbles, glass works best, I think, for the transfiguration into gemstones. Or crystal, if that wasn't so expensive. The purer the glass the better, if you can find more that are not colored with chemicals."

Hermione nodded, absently gathering her notepad to jot down her observations of the cat and the process, as well as Harry's notes.

She never would have thought of using a seven sided septagram on the transfiguration circle instead of the typical five, nor adding citrine and jasper for their properties of stabilizing magic's desire to revert matter back to its natural form.

If this worked, Harry should write a paper on it. They could get published. Maybe create a false name and submit their research to the Transfiguration Board.

But Harry didn't care about any of that. He wanted to create life, for some reason, probably because the magical world said it was not possible.

Anything their books claimed was not possible had become their next problem to solve.

"A challenge, not an impossibility," He would declare, and Hermione would know to purchase yet another notebook for yet another project.

Already they had defeated several key principles of Charm theory, discovered wand movements were basically unnecessary if visualization was done properly, and created several new theories regarding
transfiguration, two of which had been tested that very afternoon.

Hermione knelt and called softly to the black and white cat.

"Here, kitty kitty kitty, I'm not going to hurt you, come h-her--"

It spat and backed up, spine arched, fur raised. Harry followed its movements with roving eyes, following some pattern she could not see.

"You could just leave it here until it's settled."

"In my r-room?" Hermione asked, folding her arms as she stood. "What if it needs to use the litter box? I d-don't have one."

"Vanish it." Harry shrugged. "Though, I doubt it will. It's never eaten. In fact, that's another curiosity. Will a transfigured cat know how to be a cat? Know what eating is? Or, do my own preconceived ideas of what makes a cat a cat make it know? And, if I was wrong about what a cat should be, would it be wrong as well?" Harry's eyes grew slightly unfocused, head tilting in thought. "Or, perhaps the pattern I see is preset with the biological information a cat needs to be a cat. A cat's pattern is like its genetic code, a preset base for cause and effect regarding its environment. With preconceived ideas of danger, hunger, procreation. We trigger danger, because we are larger than itself."

Harry blinked, then turned to her with a smile. "Let's test the theory. Get food, and see if we trigger hunger instead, and make ourselves allies."

Hermione stared at him a moment, then smiled and shook her head. "Alright. Look's like I'm buying some kibble then."

The cat, newly dubbed Hiss and Spit, or Hiss for short, did not disappear. Nor did it become particularly friendly with anyone other than Mr. Granger, whose lap he would frequent every night as the man relaxed from a long day of dentistry in his easy chair.

Harry eventually became bored with Hiss, whose sentience they were not able to increase despite multiple attempts and recalculation of their reverse triangle diagram theory. It was a cat, and just a cat.
But it acted like a cat, which was what it was meant to be, and Harry wrote the experiment off as a success, while Hermione made laborious notes and submitted them to the Research Committee at the Ministry of Magic under the name Ms. Viola James.

Harry hadn't minded, nor seemed to care at all, his mind turned always to his next experiment, his eyes focused on things she couldn't fathom. But when she received a letter of acknowledgment, with scheduled trials to test her notes, she beamed with pride.

And when a month later she received congratulations on prolonging a transfiguration and a request for an interview in Transfiguration Monthly, Britain's primary journal on cutting edge transfiguration theory, she was so excited she jumped on a startled Harry with a hug that sent them both sprawling to the floor.

And laughing, she didn't notice how she talked at all, but only made plans to answer questions by owl.

Viola was a shy, very private witch, after all, and didn't desire to visit the busy Ministry quite yet.

At Hogwarts, Sirius Black vandalized the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, where the Heroes lay sleeping; later, Ronald Weasley was personally attacked and nearly killed when Sirius Black and the betrayer Remus Lupin infiltrated the school after Christmas break.

Neville Longbottom and Dean Thomas saved their friend, but not before the boy was infected with lycanthropy.

They gave odd interviews to the press; talking of rat animagi, the false vilification of Sirius Black, and the innocence of Remus Lupin. But despite their best efforts, Black received the Kiss before interference could arrive, and Lupin followed soon after for being accused of purposely infecting an innocent.

When Longbottom and Weasley went to the press to try to clear Lupin's name, too little and too late, Rita Skeeter published a scathing article in the
Daily Prophet against Minister Fudge and the Ministry's high-handed tactics at the precious wizarding school. Dementors on the ground near students, the execution of a Hippogriff in front of young students, and a detailed theory of the Marauders Tragedy, which displayed the events at Godric's Hollow years ago in an entirely new light.

At the press conference, Weasley and Longbottom finally told their story directly to the public, of secret keepers and betrayals, murder and jealousy, Headmaster Dumbledore standing proudly and supportively behind them.

And the wizarding world reacted with fervor, Skeeter egging them on with vitriol and instances both real and imaginary of the Ministry acting out of its bounds and against its own rules.

By the summer, Cornelius Fudge resigned from his office in deep disgrace.

A private funeral was held for Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, both of the wizard's wasted remains laid to rest with phoenix fire.

An invitation was never sent to Black's godson, Harry Potter. The Boy-Who-Lived had not been seen or heard of in years, only rumor and speculation in his place. Some now even questioned his existence; had anyone ever even seen the boy? Knew of anyone who had? And with the Heroes of Hogwarts, another savior was not needed anymore.

An old man's work was nearly done.

Harry and Hermione continued their experiments, giving more research to the Committee, making Viola James a very renowned witch in her fields, branching out from Transfiguration to Charms, then to wards with defensive and offensive spells that could be preset to specific items or locations, an avenue not yet explored in traditional ward schemes.

Speculation began about this mysterious witch, an acknowledged genius in her work. Where did she go to school? Where was she from? Who was funding her work?

*When can we finally meet her?*
Hermione found the articles in the Prophet about her existence amusing; the fact that they were in the back of the paper was no matter, their existence alone was amazing. Harry only rolled his eyes with his usual grin when she read them aloud to him, in her kitchen or his, the friends meeting more often now on their own home ground where their talk of magical theory would not draw notice.

And it was Hermione who saw the articles that graced the front page. She read him those, too, because she recognized the name of Ronald Weasley, and despite her ill favor to the boy, the news of his lycanthropy was horrible for anyone.

And the scandal with Sirius Black, and the current Minister's resignation, was big news.

Hermione read the story to Harry, who fell into a grim silence as it unfolded, the name of his father mentioned more than once. The knowledge that his family had been betrayed was like a punch to his gut, as was the news that an innocent man had died, a friend of his father, after being incarcerated for over a decade for a crime he did not commit.

Peter Pettigrew was still at large, a new massive manhunt in progress under the guidance of the new interim Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour.

Hermione watched Harry's face darken, anger an expression she had never seen before on the usual humorous or determined boy. His fist clenched together, his eyes closed tight.

When she finished reading the latest article, she drew close to him, reaching out to gently touch his hand.

"Harry?" She asked, and his eyes opened, startlingly green, running over her worried face, looking at her pattern.

She had asked him long ago why he called her Viola, and he told her of the hue of her own light, its startling contrasts, its fascinating pattern. How he had searched for her, unable to find her with his disability, frustrated to know another witch was nearby, so close and yet so far. How he had
called her Blue-Violet, *Violaceus* in Latin, shortening it to a nickname said with fondness.

Sometimes, she caught him staring at her, unaware he too was being watched; saw his eyes following what she knew was her magic with simple pleasure, like a critic observing a brilliant painting.

It flustered her, to know he looked at her like that. It awed her, to know it did not matter what she wore, how she looked, that her magic would always be the same to him. That it was only herself, Hermione Granger, that gave off the specific light he found so absorbing.

"It's alright." He said softly, then shook his head with a jerk, looking down. "I don't think about my parents much, and to know all this has happened, and I didn't even know about it… I don't have the right word for it."

"Disorienting?" She questioned softly, falling into a word game they played often during their research. "Disconcerting?"

"Perplexing, maybe?" He rejoined, a small smile curving his lips.

Hermione slumped a little in relief, squeezing his hand again as she spoke. "*Befuddling*, really describes it. A complex, *confounding* complication."

Harry laughed, then leaned forward into a brief hug before standing, his chin raising in challenge.

"Yes, that's it exactly. A confounding complication I don't need. Unless this Pettigrew comes looking for another Potter to stab in the back, I think it doesn't matter in the least. Come on, let's turn our focus back to more cheerful things. Tesla's theories on electricity and how it applies to magic's electromagnetic effect on muggle electronics? I really think we are on to something with AC versus DC power…"

Hermione dutifully stood, pulling out one of her many notepads, the blue one freshly labeled *Tesla*.

With Harry Potter, the show must always go on.
A prophecy is not a simple manifestation of magic itself; it is, instead, something very different indeed. It is a knot in the web of fate, a fact, a point in time that can not be avoided no matter how events conspire.

So why, then, do mortal men try so very hard to make them come about? Why try so hard to repudiate their fate?

Prophecies would have no power if they could be avoided.

But still, humanity fights against them, and in the end changes very little.

Harry Potter no longer felt alone, as he had many times when he was younger, lost in a world of illumination and yet darkness. Unable to be part of conversations about simple things like the raggedy look of a neighbor's dog, the new paint on a mailbox, the black eye another teen sported from some fight. He could not say whether a girl others fancied was pretty; he could not give an opinion on a peer's new car or fashionable clothes.

But with Hermione, magic became their little secret, their studies a game played only between the two of them, one with words and movements only they could understand and no one else.

"You sure picked a cute one." Dudley commented from somewhere near the doorway, and Harry only raised a brow from where he sat facing his desk.

Dudley coughed. "I mean, well, she is pretty, if you're wondering. Her hair's a bit wild, but well, so's yours." He shifted. "I mean, not that wild is bad, it's not. It's kind of… cool. Yeah, cool. All the girls think so."

"Thanks." Harry replied dryly, and Dudley's weight shifted again before he leaned closer with a whisper.

"You want me to describe her, man? I mean, I guess you know the logistics, but there's some things only us guys can understand, you know?"
She's growing up, if you get my meaning. In her, ah, well, chest area…"

"Okay, alright." Harry broke into the awkward commentary, shaking his head. "I don't want you looking at her chest, thank you very much. Please."

Dudley cleared his throat. "Oh, yeah, well, right. Wouldn't want you checking out my girl either. Don't worry though, I got your back. I'll let you know if I catch any guys eyeing her."

His cousin trundled away from his doorway with an off key whistle, his heavy tread emphasizing that his cousin was still very much large for his age.

Indeed, the Dursley boy's deep brown hue spoke of a physical strength that would surely keep growing. Probably why the boy was now the star of the Smeltings Academy's boxing team.

Harry sighed, leaning back in his chair.

He had completely lost his train of thought.

_____________________________________________________________________________________

Harry was fourteen, and as a fourteen year old boy, thinking about girls was not only normal, but expected.

The only problem was Harry couldn't really remember how people were supposed to look. To him, a person was a pattern and a color, some brighter and some duller, some beautiful hues and others frankly nauseous. There was a professor of science whose yellowish brown tint made his stomach roll; and another biology teacher whose nearly pearlescent pale blue pattern he could stare at for hours in devotion.

And it was hard for him to remember that others could see him staring, and that looking at people's patterns often made his eyes roam to places not proper to look at in public.

He took to wearing sunglasses, and spent more time than he ever had before comparing the female lights around him to one another.

But none did he study as often or know as well as Hermione Granger's.
Hermione thought it a tad odd that Harry began to wear sunglasses, and worried some that he was trying to hide the scars across his face.

Had someone said something to him? Made fun of him perhaps?

The thought boiled her blood.

She tried to delicately bring it up; but Harry only frowned at her mention of his scars.

"I forget they are there, honestly. Why? Has someone mentioned them?"

Oops. Her conclusion was false.

"Oh, no. No, I, ah... was just thinking, maybe with all the news about that Pettigrew person, you thought m-m-maybe, ah... someone might recognize you."

She finished lamely with a physical wince.

Harry's frown grew.

"You know as well as I that the papers published my scar having an entirely different orientation, no doubt a rumor started to protect my identity. Do my scars bother you?"

"No!" Hermione burst out, horrified. "N-n-not at all. I was just curious, that's all."

Harry shrugged, a mite uncomfortably to her eyes.

"Alright."

Hermione sighed, looking down at her precise notes. Her speech impediment was nearly entirely gone; only in rare moments did it show itself, and each and every time it made her self-conscious. Had Harry caught the stutter?

Oh, god, she hoped not.
Hermione tucked a stubborn strand of hair behind her ear and glared down at her writing.

"Mr. Potter, there really is little more we can teach you here. Have you considered the scholarships available to you? Many fine colleges would be glad to have you."

Harry looked away from the grey spiraling color of his adviser, the office filled with the familiar smell of subtle cigar smoke and vanilla.

"I've looked at them."

He had studied each and every college. Physics, sciences, languages, mathematics. Programs by the dozens, all paid for, all smooth voices over the phone speaking of the glorious campuses he would never see and the many amenities he could not use.

None of them had what he really wanted, and that was seeing Hermione everyday, learning magic and discovering new wonders. And she wouldn't qualify for a transfer for another two years at least.

"Well, Imperial College London has many online classes, if you want to stay at home where you are comfortable."

Harry shrugged, frowning down towards his feet, his own deep emerald light a unique signature apart from the lighter shades of the verdant wooden floor.

"I suppose. I rather thought I might continue my progress in the biology of the human form. It's a difficult subject for me."

It was difficult because he couldn't see muscle and bone apart from flesh. What he could see was blood, the many strands and streams of it, the life of a person, pumping from their heart out of their chest and through their skin, a rough sketch of a man.

And in a cadaver, he saw a dim, still reflection, like an echo left in an empty room. It made him question life after death, how ghosts formed, and the difference between poltergeists and ghosts and if it dwelt in the human
pattern he saw. It was fascinating.

But also uncomfortable for those who did not understand his sight. Why would a blind boy wish to observe medical students he could not see, and personally learn the human body the only way he knew how, by smell and sound and touch?

His advisor shifted in his chair, grey light flickering with a disjointed rhythm.

The man had a slight heart defect, a skip. Harry wondered if he knew; and wondered if he should tell him, and how.

"I… see. Harry, let me be frank. You are a brilliant boy, by far the best we have seen in many years in most subjects. But you are at a point where you must begin to think what you want to do with your life, where you want to place your focus. A few months ago I thought you might be settling on computer hardware and electrical work, but you moved on from it abruptly. Now, this interest in anatomy… well, it doesn't seem practical long-term."

He had lost interest because he could not figure out the link between magic and electrical energy without more books from Diagon Alley, and he did not have access to muggle transformers big enough to test his latest theory. He had put that project aside for the moment until Hermione could find more information on limiting the effect of magic using wardstones and ritual circles. She hadn't gotten far with the endeavor, partly because of his sudden interest in spirits and what made them.

He really needed to find a ghost or two to interview.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry's head jerked; he had nearly forgotten the man's presence.

"Yes, sir."

"Son, I've known you for nearly six years now. I know you're dilly-dallying, and I suspect it has something to do with your young lady friend."

To his surprise, Harry felt heat gathering up his neck. His advisor chuckled, and the grey light moved closer as Harry felt the man pat his knee.
The light flickered again, an off-beat.

"I know how it feels, we've all been there. Young love, first crushes. But you can't let it hold you back. If Ms. Granger is a true friend, she wouldn't want it to either. You can still be friends and not attend the same school."

Harry felt his cheeks heat, and clenched his fists in reaction, one leg jumping in anxiety.

"I know. I'm... thinking about it, really. Maybe after this term."

The man sighed; the grey light reclined in the green outline of a chair, the blank space of a plastic composite desk beside them.

He knew it was there because his staff inevitably hit it each time he entered for a visit.

"Let me know if you need help."

The man sounded defeated. His light flickered again.

When Harry stood at the door, about to exit, he turned back with a jerk.

"Mr. Adams, you might want to have an electrocardiogram. Your heart displays symptoms of arrhythmia."

And before the speechless man could form a reply, he quickly strode from the room with sharp raps of his staff upon the stone hallway.

"You can't be serious, Dumbledore."

Scrimgeour's voice was low and scoffing.

Albus smiled with gentle determination.

"This may be just the thing to enhance our reputation, Minister..."

Minister Scrimgeour broke in with a snide twist of his lips. "I thought you would be quite tired of students dying under your watch..."
The Headmaster could not contain the flash of anger, or the wince, that marred his face. But he covered it with a long suffering sigh.

"The Triwizard Tournament has a noble history. With a few tweaks, an age limit and monitored challenges, it should be quite safe."

Scrimgeour laughed with dark humor. "This is just the kind of scheme my predecessor allowed himself to get talked into. Our country has enough problems without adding in international scandal if your Tournament fails."

The Headmaster straightened in the office chair. "What goes on at Hogwarts should not be linked to the Ministry in any way..."

"Ha! And yet, Cornelius was run out of office for actions that took place there. I am not such a fool." The former Auror straightened papers on his desk with brisk movements. "I have yet to see a good reason for the Ministry to back such an effort."

So it's to be politics, then. Albus's voice was cold when he spoke.

"I've heard you are trying to bolster the auror force, increase training. The Wizengamot is resistant to such things during times of peace."

Scrimgeour's mouth twitched with a frown. "The sky grows dark, Dumbledore. I see the signs, the increased activity in those elements that hold great resentment for these peaceful times. Give them range to move, and they will always push for more. I have no desire to see war again in my life."

Dumbledore clasped his hands together in his lap.

"Perhaps I can lend a helping hand, if of course I was not so busy trying to raise support for my own cause."

"...perhaps." Minister Scrimgeour slowly agreed, yellow eyes sharp.

They understood one another quite clearly.

"Where is he, Wormtail?"
The specter hissed, somewhere between the sound of a squalling infant and a low groan.

The man upon the floor, flea bitten and ragged, mumbled in return.

"Master, I can't say! No one has seen him since your… uh, difficulties. He's not been at Hogwarts! Rumors I heard said he was traveling, or training."

"Dumbledore." The voice hissed. "He's planning something with him. He knows! He knows the boy is my downfall, he's hiding him. We must draw him out, I want him for my return more than any other. You will get him for me, Wormtail. Promise me this."

"I p-p-promise, Master." The terrified words came.

"Do not fail me."

At the World Cup, under the increased security of more than two dozen aurors fresh from the Academy, only one incident was reported, though it made all the major papers in Britain.

Bartemius Crouch Sr. was found dead with the body of his house-elf, both murdered with the Killing Curse, within the very grounds of the Cup's wards.

No suspect had yet been apprehended, and with the murder, Minister Scrimgeour had his support from every angle to increase security in the name of maintaining law and order and the safety of the people. Wards were updated; hit wizard and auror enrollment increasing by leaps and bounds as incentives were created to enter the programs.

Britain had never felt so safe under the reigns of a competent Minister.

And when the Triwizard Tournament was announced, there was only excitement.

Dumbledore had a plan; a detailed, ornate plan, one that was nearly at its
fruition.

The world had to have its savior; had to have the figurehead to battle Tom Riddle, to save the day, to fulfill the prophecy.

The Heroes of Hogwarts were nearly there, the only shadow that remained was the distant memory of a boy who survived a Killing Curse.

But that would change. Dumbledore would put someone before their eyes who rose to every challenge and won, who competed against witches and wizards older than he, the best and brightest from all of Europe's magical schools. Someone brave, someone real.

Only a little slip up need be made.

When the Goblet spit out two names for Durmstrang, there was uproar in the Great Hall. Threatening words and snide looks were passed between schools, professors standing up at the Head Table, Viktor Krum and Anette Falla looking lost amid the uproar.

But then, there were two names chosen for Beauxbatons, and there was more confusion and anger, especially as one chosen was not within the age limit. The elder Delacour held her younger sibling close in a protective hold, her eyes afire with anger as Madame Maxime screeched in outraged French.

The Great Hall began to settle into whispers and plans, all the student's eyes fixed on whether two would be picked to represent Hogwarts.

Cedric Diggory was met with cheers; Neville Longbottom with rapturous applause, the stylized Hero of Hogwarts standing proudly to take his place beside the Hufflepuff.

The Headmaster looked grim, but also oddly calm as he read the name aloud, his blue eyes twinkling as he took in the way the young Longbottom Heir stood, shoulders straight, chin lifted in courage.

He began to step away from the dais.
And then the Goblet flared again, a slip of paper spiraling forth like a single spark thrown from a fire.

Dumbledore caught the paper on reflex; the hall went silent.

The Goblet of Fire's blue flame faded away into dormancy.

All eyes saw the Headmaster read; all eyes saw him turn deathly pale, true shock present for the first time, his purple pointy hat trembling in reaction.

The paper crumpled in one wrinkled fist.

Then, he spoke aloud a name all knew and none expected to hear.

"Harry Potter."

Harry had been relaxed; reclining against a table, focused on his current project, watching Hermione flicker from one place to another, setting up the parameters, laboriously checking last minute details with low murmurs of description.

She had gotten used to describing what she did; knowing the minute details of her fingers and hands would be missed, knowing that Harry craved to know everything that took place.

Then, he saw the light.

It was coming fast; a piercing deep blue fire, spiraling and alive, bursting through the glittering white plaster walls to consume him.

He jumped to full alert, his staff thunking upon the floor with a crash, both fists wrapped tight around it as he faced the threat.

"Harry?!" Hermione spoke behind him, but he had no time to speak. The blue fire overcame him, before he could think to cast a defensive curse, unknowing what he faced, unable to see if the fire was real or magic, physical form or spiritual, its pattern a style familiar and foreign alike, like fire but in a very, very wrong hue.
Harry cried out, shaking, knowing he should be feeling something, heat at least, the blue light racing through him, binding him.

"Harry, what's wrong? H-harry!"

Hermione was close, her calming hue a comfort he reached out for, his trembling hand grasping her shoulder. She stepped closer, until all he could see in his vision was blue-violet light.

"Something, something's inside me. I... did you see anything? Just then?"

Hermione gathered him to her, arms squeezing tight, and Harry leaned into the comfort without any qualm.

"N-no, I didn't, I swear. What did you see?"

Her question, so familiar from their research, made him suck in a calming breath.

He had to be analytical. He had to be calm, rational. He wasn't hurting; it was as if nothing had happened. There was no smell of smoke, and he had heard nothing accompanying the light. Was it all illusion?

"Light, through the left rear wall, which shows no sign of tearing. As you didn't see it, the force was either spiritual or magical. Blue light, a deep hue, cobalt or sapphire on the scale. Its pattern was very similar to fire's standard flickering spirals with bursts of a lower blue shade."

As he spoke, he relaxed, stepping away from where Hermione stood. At a gesture, he saw her reach for the brown stability of a paper notebook.

With a deep breath, Harry continued, looking down at himself. "My own pattern seems unchanged, and I'm displaying no physical symptoms of attack. No heat or cold, only slight constriction in my airways that might be related to the onset of a panic attack." At Hermione's questioning sound, Harry forced a smile. "I'm fine now." He looked down at his hands, leaned over to look at his feet, then glanced over each shoulder. Finally, at a loss, he shook his head. "I don't see anything different. I can't see my face, though, and if whatever it was is related to the mind, the signs would be there. Times like this I wish I could use a mirror."
Though mirrors reflected light, to Harry's vision they only gleamed with the steady argent tone of silver alloy or the more common deep shadows of manmade reflective compounds.

"You don't look different, Harry. I've made notes, but what you've described is nearly impossible to catalogue with what we know. Spellfire from wands displays the caster's magical signature. The pattern you've described is not human. Though, we really should research magical creatures sometime soon. If this could be the work of something you've never seen before…"

There was a lot he hadn't seen before.

Harry wanted to groan; instead, he made himself sit in the green and brown outline of a chair, the wood feeling firm under his weight. "Yes, we need to remedy that. Look into menageries near London. I can recognize goblins and werewolves from visits to Diagon Alley, but the other more sentient beings will be harder to locate and study. Veela and centaurs and the like."

"Well, if it resembles fire, I suppose Veela… but no, they only possess enthrallment properties directly related to sight. This was a spell of some sort, and by your account passed unaltered through a wall. I don't know of a spell that can do that."

Harry slowly shook his head. Hermione drew closer, then knelt on the floor in front of him.

Her face, a rough spherical structure of light, nearly the brightest part of her form, was close to his own.

"It's alright. We'll figure this out."

Harry smiled and let his forehead rest against her own, his eyes falling closed though it did nothing to damper the luminescences he saw.

"Yes, we will."
~End of Part One~
*Chapter 7*: Purple Eminence

**Angela's Note:** Here is the beginning of Part Two of Blindness. There will be 4 chapters in this part, which due to the complications while posting the first part will be brought online one at a time every twelve hours until they are all up, (two a day for those who hate math) on the recommendation of technical support (apparently, some issues have occurred with posting too many chapters at one time if they exceed 5k). Many, many thanks to **GJMEGA**, who not only beta'd this part of the story, but has also coauthored it with me, helping shape the direction and overall plot. It is very much improved and expanded upon! There will be four parts to this story now instead of only two, so I hope everyone enjoys the expanded content!

**GJMEGA's Note:** Hi there everyone! First off I'd like to say how grateful I am to Angela for giving me the opportunity to work with her on her various stories. It's been a joy and a privilege. As Angela stated above I am now venturing forth from the role of a mere beta to that of a full coauthor. This is my first foray into the creative process of a story so I hope you all enjoy it. Also, anything from here on out that you don't like is probably my idea, I hope I haven't screwed up the story too much. :)

"He can't possibly compete. He wasn't even listed under a school!" Igor Karkaroff complained from where the three Heads sat in Dumbledore's office.

Madame Maxime nodded her head solemnly. "I agree. Is zere no way to let 'im go free?"

Albus ran a hand over his face, feeling ten times his age.

Everything had been so perfect. His goal was within his grasp. Only to learn someone else had been tampering with the Goblet as well, and the one boy he most did not want to see had been placed right under his very nose. The one boy who could unravel all of his plans to place Neville Longbottom as the new savior.
Or, perhaps, the situation could be salvaged. Surely no one would possibly expect, once they saw the boy, for Harry Potter to ever be capable of saving anyone?

Albus spoke up, his voice solemn.

"The Goblet is binding. Harry Potter must compete, or risk breaking the contract and paying the price."

"Then who does he compete for? Just because he is a British citizen doesn't mean he should be competing for Hogwarts as well." Igor said haughtily, and Albus carefully arranged his face into serious lines.

"I propose he competes for himself, perhaps with a partner chosen by us. There is a reason Mr. Potter has not been enrolled at my school, a very serious one I'm afraid the public has not been made aware of yet. He would not be an asset to your school's team."

The witch and wizard exchanged puzzled glances.

Then, Albus Dumbledore explained the ramifications of the Killing Curse, and their confusion turned to dismay.

Then, pity.

The sound of the doorbell ringing woke Harry from a deep sleep.

Immediately, light dawned around him like an explosion of the sun, his consciousness filtering through the information with long practice. His grey walls, his green wooden floors, the bed he lay upon, the brown cotton linens. Streams of light, of life both present and faded.

He rolled over with a sigh, burrowing into his blankets and the smell of clean linens. It was Saturday; Hermione wasn't to come over until after lunch, and his aunt hadn't even called up for breakfast yet.

Had Dudley gotten caught with illegals again? The last time the police had come to their very door with the allegations and Dudley had been grounded for the rest of the year.
Harry rather thought the boy had given up such things in favor of his newest girlfriend, a posh girl from rich parents who wouldn't take kindly to even a whiff of illegal activity around their daughter. Not to mention his place as star of the Smeltings Boxing team.

"Harry?" His aunt’s voice at the door jolted him awake again from where he had begun to drift asleep. "You have… visitors."

Her voice trembled; Harry was instantly alert.

The incident from the night before still bothered him. Had it been magic after all? Had the Ministry noticed?

But why, then, come to his house and not Hermione’s where the blue fire had caught him?

*Had they been there already?*

Frowning, Harry quickly dressed, brown natural fibers combined with the fiery orange dragonhide boots. With his staff in hand, he descended the steps more by memory than sight.

He saw them from the hallway, through the flickering shadows of the living room's plaster.

Two magical people, one a virtual sunburst of pale blue magic with flickers of scarlet fire within its pattern, an odd mix he hadn't yet seen. It didn't resemble pregnancy, but definitely signaled a foreign influence of some sort.

The other's magic was a light brown, a human pattern with odd markings across it that looked feline.

*An animagus?* The thought was intriguing enough that Harry rounded the corner, coming face to face with the visitors.

His aunt called to him with a nervous lilt.

"Harry, this is Headmaster Dumbledore, from Hogwarts. And his, ah, assistant, Professor McGonagall."
"Deputy." A woman's voice corrected calmly, the owner of the mixed pattern.

"Hogwarts?" Harry questioned softly, stepped closer and then sitting in his own chair, a leather construction that he had learned years ago was the most visible to his sight. He smelled the faint hint of old books, parchment and animal hide, mixed with the distinct scent of the outdoors; old grass and evergreens. These people had been outside very recently, and not anywhere near Surrey.

"Yes, Mr. Potter." The pale blue light said. "I am Albus Dumbledore. I, and professor McGonagall, taught your parents in school."

Harry nodded, uncertain why they were there. They were years too late for Harry to enroll.

The Headmaster cleared his throat.

"My boy, there has been a… misunderstanding, at the school. We are having a Tournament, you see, between the magical schools of Europe... your aunt has told you of your heritage, surely?"

Harry heard restless movement from the doorway; his aunt was uncomfortable.

"Yes, of course."

The older man sighed in relief.

"Yes, we rather hoped she had. We were greatly pained when we learned of your... difficulties, by owl. And what that meant for your education."

Why were they apologizing now? It was years too late, and the sting of rejection had long since faded in his easy ability to learn on his own terms. He didn't need a school to learn magic, and based on the level of Hermione's tutored material, he was already quite proficient in many subjects.

"I understand." Harry said simply, and he did. It was hard for people to face others with disabilities, and the wizards in particular were lacking.
Still, it might have felt better if they had at least tried, or even spoke to him about the problems he might face. Instead they had written him off without even a personal visit.

*Perhaps he did still bear some bad feelings after all.*

McGonagall spoke, her voice gentle.

"This is very hard for us to admit, but there has been a mistake. The Goblet of Fire, the artifact meant to choose the Champions of the Tournament, failed spectacularly. Not only did it pick two Champions per school, but it also... picked a Champion not of any school. We suspect deliberate tampering…"

Harry lost the sound of her voice in sudden revelation. The Goblet of Fire. *Fire!* A magical artifact. An artifact that makes choices…

"Blue fire?" Harry questioned, cutting off the witch in her rehearsed spiel. He heard her startled breath.

"Excuse me?"

"This Goblet, was its fire blue?" Harry asked simply.

"I... yes, it was. As I was saying, the Goblet..."

"Picked me." Harry finished, leaning his staff against his legs as his grip tightened upon it.

It explained everything he had seen, at least. If only he did not have a million more questions with that answer.

"That’s right." Headmaster Dumbledore said. "And the Goblet's contract is binding. This means you will need to be present at each task, though we have determined it will not be necessary for you to actually compete. If you forfeit each challenge, that should still fulfill the requirements. We are more than happy to provide rooms for you to stay in during each challenge, and open invitations to the planned festivities."

Harry felt excitement begin to thrum in his blood. The complication of the
tournament seemed nil if he could merely forfeit; what made his heart race was the chance to enter the magical school Hermione had described in detail, perhaps to peruse the grand library itself.

And ghosts! Hermione said there were ghosts. Perhaps he could finally make a correlation in his theory of spiritual life forces and the method of death.

But he couldn't possibly go alone.

Harry sat up straighter in his chair. "I will go, but I will need certain concessions."

He had learned long ago that even if one did not possess bargaining power, to act like one did often still got the desired results.

There was a moment of awkward silence.

"And... these are?" The Headmaster finally questioned.

Harry tapped his fingers in thought, making a mental list. Then he smiled brightly.

"I would like to stay for a few months, at the least, and use of the library, including its restricted section. Also, I would like my friend to come with me. We can continue our own studies by owl as easily there as here."

The witch sucked in a startled breath; the Headmaster sighed after another long pause.

"Mr. Potter, I'm afraid muggles can not easily enter the premises without great difficulty. Of course, if you wish to experience Hogwarts for a prolonged period of time you are more than welcome. But as for the library, wizards do not use braille..."

Harry cut the wizard off before he could continue with more nonsense. Honestly, did they think he was an idiot?

"No, no no." Harry waved his hand. "My friend is a witch, of course, Hermione Granger. She formerly attended your school; and I have a spell
to read aloud the books I want."

Harry smiled.

"Do we have a deal?"

Nearly in sync, Harry saw their lights pulse in extreme agitation, almost a mimic of the effects of the heart defect his advisors ECG had found.

Where they really that surprised?

She hadn't seen Mr. Potter since he was ten, and then at a distance.

Minerva had been picturing a timid, quiet boy. She thought perhaps he might wear dark shades now; blind muggles always did that she had seen.

She had hoped his aunt informed him of magic at least, if not details a muggle could not be expected to know. She had expected him to react with confusion, then maybe even fear or anger.

She did not know what to do with what they got instead.

The boy's green eyes were locked on them in such a way that his blindness seemed a farce. He was tall and lean like his father had been, his black hair a wild mess. He carried a cane with symbols that were suspiciously familiar upon it, and his boots were eerily similar to dragonhide.

The clues were stacking up, higher and higher. But it was impossible. It had to be.

And then the boy spoke Ms. Granger's name with fond familiarity, and mentioned using a spell with the ease of a person who had done so many times before.

She felt her breath catch in her throat; saw Albus stiffen in pure shock.

She wet her lips and spoke the only answer they could possibly give.
"Yes, of course, Mr. Potter. You are both more than welcome at Hogwarts."

The Headmaster and his Deputy were not simply content to agree; they asked questions.

Practically an armada of them.

Harry wasn't much inclined to simply give away information that took him years to collect, but he did give them enough facts to satisfy and hopefully send them on their way.

He met Ms. Granger at muggle school. Yes, he and Ms. Granger both received tutoring by owl. Yes, he had learned spells. Yes, he used a staff, from Diagon Alley, and further questions about it could be directed to Ollivander.

Yes, he was blind.

Yes, he could still see.

"Or at least, see some things." Harry clarified, and watched their patterns fidget in startled surprise.

"What kind of things?" The Headmaster asked tentatively, and Harry sighed.

"Colors and patterns. I've learned to get by with what I have, and it has its advantages and disadvantages. It appears to be some form of mage sight that a few of my books hint at, only without having normal sight along with it. I see some mixture of life or magic as distinct patterns, with definable characteristics like color, movement, even brightness."

The two across from him were silent for a long moment. Finally, the Headmaster cleared his throat.

"Could you give us an example? So we can better understand."

Harry slowly nodded, glancing around the muggle room. There was nothing
truly spectacular in it; furniture, all natural fabrics and components to suit his vision. The floor wood, the walls painted.

Really, the only proof that would work well here was in the people in front of him.

Harry smiled and fixed his gaze on the witch.

"Professor McGonagall. You have a much brighter pattern, which I have hypothesized based on my own and Hermione's auras to be a sign of magical ability. Your pattern is human, though it bears a feline underlay to it that suggest either an animagus ability or some magical heritage I am not familiar with."

He saw the witch's color pulse in agitation; but the Headmaster was as silent and still as stone.

"Your color is a lighter shade of brown, but I have not yet come to any solid conclusions of what hues might mean in sentient people. It could suggest abilities, which in your case would be some sort of affinity with plants or animals. Or it could suggest your nature, which would be hard to categorize with brown hues as they tend to be associated with beings that are both calm and energetic at turns."

Harry finished with a last glance over her form, focusing mostly on the fascinating markings of what looked similar to a tabby cat.

McGonagall cleared her throat.

"That is… most amazing, Mr. Potter. If we had known… well. This bears more discussion at a later time."

They both stood. Harry slowly came to his feet as well, staff at his side.

The Headmaster spoke. "We look forward to seeing you at Hogwarts very soon."

Harry smiled brightly.

"I can't wait."
Hermione was not happy. In fact, she was furious on his behalf.

She paced, she ranted, she waved her hands about like a banshee. She talked of litigation, of suing the school or even the Ministry who condoned the use of the Goblet. She grumbled about the ethics of binding him into a contract against his will and knowledge; then deviated into angry speculation about how such a thing was possible.

In the kitchen, Harry stood near Mr. Granger, whose life force thrummed like a coming thunderstorm, agitated with brewing fury.

But they weren't mad at him. And Hermione hadn't even given her parents a chance to forbid her going with her friend.

"As if I would let Harry go there alone! Who knows when the next t-t-t-troll might come along, or a blasted dragon even! This is ridiculous! How can they possibly f-force you to compete?"

At that, Harry gently stepped into the conversation.

"They said I can forfeit each challenge, I only have to be present."

Hermione's teeth clicked together and Harry could swear she growled.

"And embarrass yourself in front of the entire world? What kind of nonsense is that? Just because you're blind!? You're twice the wizard any of those dunderheads at Hogwarts are! I'll help you. We'll find a way to knock their s-s-socks off!"

Harry sucked in a breath, reluctance spiraling through him.

"Hermione…"

"Don't Hermione me, Harry Potter! I know you, you have grand ideas of research and spell casting and the like, not even thinking of the d-d-dangers. Well I know. And if you let them all think you're weak, they will take advantage of you left and right. I won't s-s-stand f-f-for it."

And with a last harumph, the girl stomped from the room.
Harry let out the breath he had been holding, looking down at the dull, nearly lifeless green floor under his feet, its still wooden pattern a hint of its advanced age.

"Harry."

Hermione's dad's voice was soft. Harry jerked his head up; he had quite forgotten the man was there.

"Yes, sir?"

Hermione's father sighed, the smell of sterile metal increasing as the dentist moved closer. "I know I can't stop her from going with you, but… she's my daughter. What happened at that school nearly killed her, and it did change her. I don't want that to happen again."

Harry straightened.

"She's my best friend. I don't have any plans of being in danger, and definitely not bringing her into it."

The man laughed sourly.

"I don't think you will. It's her I'm worried about. She can't keep her nose out of things that aren't any of her business."

Harry grinned. "Curious as a cat."

Mr. Granger sighed. "Just like you. Two peas in a pod. Get on with you now, she'll be over tomorrow with her things."

Later, when the young boy left and their daughter was safely tucked in bed, John Granger held his wife as she trembled.

"I don't think I'm ready. I'm not ready! For her to go back there again… oh, honey, are we doing the right thing?"

He only held her tighter, as his wife answered her own question.
"But of course, we have to let her 's so much stronger, now, than knows fancy spells and is prepared. And she'll have Harry. She'd never forgive us if we made her stay when her only friend was forced to go. I'm not even sure we could force her if we tried."

He tucked his face into her shoulder, and sighed.

"I'm worried, too."

He said the words softly, and felt her tears fall on his skin.

The news that Harry Potter was coming to Hogwarts ran like fire through the school. The Champions were nearly forgotten in the fervor of finally seeing the mysterious Boy-who-Lived.

"I bet he's tall." "I bet he's loads better at spells than us." "I bet he's ugly, that's why he's been hiding so long." "I heard he's been training with aurors." "I heard he's got red hair like his mudblood mum." "I can't wait to see his scar!"

The comments went on and on, not only by the Hogwarts students but among the foreign guests as well.

Headmaster Dumbledore had been prepared to make a statement to end the speculation. Announce Potter's blindness and request caution around him.

But now, after seeing the boy, everything had changed. He had planned to set Neville up as a strong wizard, one to draw out the Dark Lord and be marked as the prophecy stated. But Harry Potter was marked already, the scar he had borne as a child still slashed across his face in spidery white lines like jagged horizontal lighting bolts.

And the power that the prophecy spoke of could so easily be the unique sight that Harry possessed.

The way his eyes had looked at them, as if he could see them. And yet not making eye contact even once. Seeing something underneath their skin,
like he was peering into the very soul of who they were.

He had hoped for a boy who would be obviously less; disabled and weak. Not a threat to either Longbottoms rising stardom or the Dark Lord who might be actively trying to kill him.

Instead, he was beginning to think he had been wrong all along. Harry Potter was the one; and he had left him alone in the muggle world, untried, unsupervised, untaught.

He had to learn what Harry Potter knew; had to prepare him for what was to come, if the boy would allow it.

And if the worst was true, Neville would still be there, waiting to take his place as savior and do what had to be done.

As reluctant as Hermione was, Harry was excited for his first sight of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

They arrived via portkey, the wizarding teleportation device that seemed designed to cause as much discomfort as possible.

For Harry, who saw the spinning, revolting magic involved, the effect was greatly magnified. When they landed, only the sight of the school kept him on his feet.

Overhead, a wide dome of light spread across the sky, massive wards like those at Diagon Alley, only older, ancient even, so deeply entrenched that they seemed carved into the very air.

And the castle was a living, breathing thing. Its still stone light gleaming in dark shades of purple, a color Hermione called eminence when Harry described it to her in a soft whisper unheard by their escort.

Around them, green and brown trees and plants sprouted, the darker shades of black and violet denoting bare earth and rocks. The same smell of wild hills and forest he had recognized on the Headmaster was a blanket to his senses, filled out now with the sounds that accompanied such a place. Wild birds, a lone dog's bark, the far-off din of hundreds of
students. As Harry drew closer to the castle, he felt like he was watching some giant creature, sleeping a deep slumber, afraid if he stepped too loudly he might wake it.

Hogwarts' pattern moved, sluggish perhaps, but it was alive. Every eminent light that made up its stones spoke of life, of magic. Harry had not known wizards were capable of such feats; making a building of rocks live. Perhaps it had not been intended at all; perhaps it was simply an aftereffect of centuries of magic, of young life growing old in its walls, so many thoughts and feelings and patterns sheltered in its belly that it began to think and feel for itself.

But like a giant, it moved slowly, and its thoughts were things that Harry doubted he could ever understand.

Suddenly, Harry wasn't interested in ghosts anymore. He only wanted to sit and stare at the walls of Hogwarts and try to understand her.

Hermione took his hand, a gesture meant to comfort her as much as him, where he had stopped outside the walls; looking up at the rising towers in awe.

Professor McGonagall flickered and fidgeted, but said nothing.

Harry squeezed Hermione's hand, and smiled, bathing in the light of Hogwarts Castle, feeling like a small, insignificant child next to her size and power.

Professor McGonagall took the two children to their rooms, unsettled.

Ms. Granger had not guided Mr. Potter through the winding pathways. The boy had not even appeared to use his walking stick, his staff, as a means of sight.

He had strode behind her, face turning about, eyes eager as they locked upon things he should not be able to see, whispering to Ms. Granger of things she could not fathom. He had stepped around suits of armour before she could warn him, navigated the stairways, and at the portrait to their
rooms had reached out a hand and ran it reverently along the canvas.

The woman inside, oddly enough, had not seemed to mind the touch. Portraits normally took offense at such treatment.

And when McGonagall left the two, in rooms she had baulked at, placing two children of the opposite sex in the same quarters, even if the rooms were separated, was just asking for trouble, she had went straight to the Headmaster.

"It's true. After we left the other day, I had my doubts, thinking maybe he had heard of me somehow. That it was all an elaborate prank like the kind his father would get up to. But, Albus..."

Minerva paused, and looked to the side, lost in thought.

"He can see. Maybe not as well as us, but the way he walks... he's not helpless. And that staff of his, the way he carries it is just like in my great grandfather's portrait. Like a wizard trained to its use. He's not telling us everything. I can guarantee he knows far more than simple, basic spells."

The Headmaster steepled his hands together, blue eyes tired.

"Then we must earn his trust if we ever want to know what he is capable of."

Harry met his first house-elves that very night, creatures of fluorescent yellows that bowed and flickered and never seemed to stand still. Meals were to be delivered directly to their rooms, a courtesy that Hermione took as an insult.

"They don't even think you can eat with them?" She demanded hotly, flinging herself into dark brown leather and its lighter cloth pillows. "You don't have a d-disease!"

"They think they are helping." Harry said gently, and began his walk about the living room of their quarters, carefully inspecting each inch for obstacles he might not be able to see.
But to his delight, there was little point. Everything seemed brimming with magic, no dark shadows to be seen, all natural materials and spells that nearly made him feel normal, able to move without the hesitation of encountering some moved table or cluttered floor.

"Well, I say we should eat breakfast in the Great Hall." Hermione sniffed, and Harry continued his walk, eyes roving.

"As long as we tour the school after. I've already began to think of a world of possibilities. *Hogwarts!* You never told me how *alive* she is. Like some great beast whose heart is thumping around us. The stones pulse, perhaps a quarter the speed of a normal heartbeat, and to a rhythm I haven't figured out yet. The house-elves are tied to it, the statues, the portraits... they all bear her mark. I hope you brought extra notebooks."

Hermione didn't grumble or sigh; she was a researcher at heart, and at the prospect of some new knowledge did exactly what he hoped.

She sat up, all insult forgotten.

"*Alive? Connected?*"

And Harry settled down into a chair to explain what he had seen.

No one was expecting to see Harry Potter in the Great Hall. There was no big announcement; indeed, many did not even know the boy was yet in the castle at all.

And, of course, breakfast at Hogwarts was a casual affair that not all preferred to attend, instead settling for the extra hour of sleep. And those that did had bleary eyes and saw only what they expected to see.

Hermione did not take them to her former House's table. She wasn't there as a student; and she had absolutely no desire to encounter her former housemates. Instead, she thought it much more prudent to settle for the Hufflepuff table at the far side of the hall, where less notice would come to them.

Harry followed her, black muggle sunglasses over his eyes, head swinging
side to side as he took in the magic that flowed through the very air. He did not need Hermione to tell him where the tables were; the stamp of yellow house elf was upon them like paint. The green chairs glowed with repairing and cleaning spells too numerous to count.

When they sat, the students next to them only spared curious looks for the boy and girl dressed in plain black robes, the quality few would recognize at a glance. They did not recognize them; but it was not unheard of for students of another house to visit each others tables at breakfast. Those younger thought perhaps they were older students; those older assumed they were from a younger year in some other House they had not met before.

Subsequently, it was not until Harry had finished eating that their presence was noted.

Professor McGonagall, glancing across the Hall, caught her gaze on the very familiar forms rising to their feet at the Hufflepuff table. The Headmaster caught her stare and followed it; Professor Flitwick, who had been talking to the Headmaster, frowned and turned.

And all the professors at the head table suddenly were looking in one single direction, most with curiosity at seeing the famous boy who they had only just learned was, in some sort of odd way, visually impaired.

And as fate would have it, it was then that the pranksters at the Gryffindor table worked their mischief.

With one Champion in Gryffindor and the other in Hufflepuff, a spirit of camaraderie had bloomed between the two Houses. But also a friendly rivalry, with mostly well meant jinxes cast back and forth. Ones to change hair color; others to switch House badges on robes, or scramble ones spoken words. Things that looked dramatic and faded fast, the best kind of prank.

The Weasley twins had planned their event for the end of the meal time; the two boys, though more quiet after the death of their sister, had not lost their desire to cause trouble, though it now held a darker edge. That morning, their victims were Hufflepuff table; a charm to turn black robes
golden. They had recruited several other Gryffindors for the task, the spell easy to cast, a child's trick. It was supposed to cause laughter; a goal the boys sought far more fervently than any other.

The first volley would target the right side of the table; the second, the left, and the third all who remained. It was expected that the professors would only punish them with a simple detention, and it would be worth it to cause some havoc and see a fourth of the school walk about with golden robes for the rest of the day. In fact, the Gryffindors were planning to change their own robes immediately after to join in.

To Harry, who had been studying the ceiling as Hermione gathered her bag, the spells rose like a rosy haze to fall upon the other side of the table.

He did not understand; he only saw the magic cast and find its target, then the brown fibers of the students clothing suffused with magical hues, the pattern remaining unchanged.

Hermione gasped; surprised, her wand rising to her palm. Harry's hand tightened around his staff. He heard startled shouts; but no fear or pain.

A second volley of spells, and Harry stepped in front of Hermione's frozen form, his staff held loosely now, the basic defensive spell coming automatically to his lips, the first time he needed to cast it for anything other than research purposes.

"Protego."

His word was lost among the shouts of the Hufflepuffs; the charm that should have hit them fell aside, its magic confused and lost. Harry watched it splatter upon the wall, soaking into the stone in fascination. Hermione grumbled behind him.

"Just some ridiculous p-prank, Harry. It's over now. I think we're the only ones they missed, maybe cause we're standing. Let's hurry up and go."

Harry let his spell fall, smiling with a shake of his head. He began to turn, prepared to follow her from the Hall.

He saw magic gather and rise, and heard the Headmaster speak.
"Cease this right now!"

But the words came too late. The spells came again, and this time it was not the split colors that targeted the table at large, spiraling to take multiple targets.

They were focused solely on Harry and Hermione, and even with her previous claim that it was a prank Harry would not tolerate letting the foreign light touch his color and pattern in any way, even if only on his clothing.

In the second before it hit, his mind flared through rapid calculations. The spells came from multiple directions, too varied to be prevented with a simple protection spell meant to be used as a shield from only one direction from one spell.

The rosy magic was not strong, but it had been cast from multiple wands. It would overcome *Protego*. He needed more, and he knew how to get it.

Harry thumped his staff upon the ground, knowing he had no time to speak the words, and let his emerald magic wash from his hands into the scarlet staff he held, flaring about them in the golden dome of *Protego Maxima*.

Rose met gold and flared around it, passing harmlessly to sink into the stone behind him. Hermione sucked in a breath and then groaned aloud. Harry felt eyes upon him like a physical tingling in his skin, the sounds of cheerful surprise shocked to silence.

He dropped the spell, locking his gaze upon the yellow table all the spells had originated from.

"Mr. and Mr. Weasley!" Professor McGonagall screeched, her brown magic stomping towards the table, and Harry saw the myriad patterns of the Gryffindor students flicker and squirm in their seats.

"Who is he?" "Is that..." "Did you see that spell?" "I didn't hear him say a word!" "Could it be him?"

The students began to all speak at once, McGonagall's shout breaking the
silence. Hermione groaned again, and Harry felt her hand on his elbow.

"Come on, let's go before she starts yelling. This is so *embarrassing*…"

She began to drag him away, and Harry turned with her.

"*That's that girl, the one who nearly got squashed by the troll!*" A single sentence amid all the others caught his attention, and his head turned, seeing a lavender pattern wilt as his face turned towards her.

Then they left the hall behind.

The Headmaster gave a stern lecture to the entire hall once Mr. Potter left it; and that included a very disappointed word about the kind of introduction they had given to their new guests.

At the news that Mr. Potter was indeed in the castle, and not only that but had cast a powerful spell in front of their very eyes, the student's excitement could not be contained, even with the detentions given to half the male Gryffindor students.

And immediately upon their release, students left in droves to seek out Harry Potter with new, informed eyes, while the Headmaster and his professors reconsidered again just how helpless Harry Potter was.

Albus, Severus, and Minerva met in the Headmaster's office.

The professors had all been told to keep quiet about Mr. Potter's potential blindness. It wouldn't do at this stage to let the weakness be known; if indeed it was a weakness at all.

They planned to speak to Ollivander about the man giving an unregistered child a staff of all things, something much more powerful than the standard wand, if unwieldy with its size. They planned ways to talk with Mr. Potter and learn just how much he knew of the wizarding world and magical spells.
They planned to find out just how much and how well Mr. Potter could see; and if it was well enough to compete in the Tournament in truth. And if he did, who might be willing to partner with him.

Professor Snape preferred someone from his own house; Professor McGonagall thought Ravenclaw should be given a chance.

Albus told them either decision would have to be agreed upon with the other Headmaster and Headmistress, as well as Mr. Potter himself.

And when Severus and Minerva finally left on their errands and to teach their classes Albus Dumbledore sat in his chair and contemplated past mistakes and how to fix them.

Harry and Hermione managed to avoid the students that first day mostly because they were in places they were not expected to be; but also with a great deal of luck.

Once they saw the students responses to Harry's presence, the questions both rude or simply awestruck, any future meals in the Great Hall were discontinued, and visits to the library were undertaken only late at night or early in the morning.

Harry hardly noticed the students. He saw their colors and patterns; but both were easily ignored with the grandeur that was Hogwarts surrounding them. He heard their questions; but he ignored them as ignorant and uninformed.

Hermione found it much harder to do both. She saw the eyes and heard every piece of speculation. She interpreted the looks given to them, some fervent with hero-worship, others dark, and very many just curious. They wanted to know everything about Harry; from if he remembered the night his parents died, to what his favorite color was.

And as for her, they cared little other than to wonder how someone like her became friends with the Boy-Who-Lived.

One by one, the professors came to Harry Potter and tested his sight and
abilities, some casually, others with more purpose.

He didn't mind; he understood professional curiosity. At their prompting, he described some of what he saw; the portraits, the stones, the people, their pets.

For Flitwick, he performed charms both basic and advanced, sending the miniature man whose pattern betrayed a goblin relationship into excited jumps.

For McGonagall, he described what he saw when the woman confirmed her animagus form and transformed in front of him.

He was delighted to know that while in feline form her pattern did not change, remaining mostly human with the stamp of a cat. At length he discussed with the professor what it might mean to change the soul of an object, its pattern, instead of merely its skin or color, and how that might affect the length of the transfiguration.

When Hermione took notes on his new hypothesis, Professor Mcgonagall was surprised. Hermione didn't explain, other than to say she might make a reference to it in one of her homework assignments that was due by owl. They had agreed before coming to Hogwarts that the works of Viola would remain secret.

When Professor Snape approached hours later, Harry saw the man's deep purple shade contained odd flecks of the deepest red. When he said as much, the potions professor went oddly silent; then, without explanation, left, the acrid smell of potion ingredients lingering in the hallway.

When the defense professor came upon him after a long day of exploring the castle, Harry saw the same stamp of red.

This time, Moody gave him an explanation.

"That's dark magic, most likely. I have no small amount of it on me from the war."

Hermione whispered to him later that Alastor Moody was a retired auror, and pretty scarred up himself, missing an eye and a good chunk of nose.
Harry was uncertain.

Alastor Moody had nearly the exact same fragment of red, precisely located on what should be his right arm. It looked less like magic and more like another person's pattern and hue. Combined with the defense professor's odd hue of grey tones dappled with black, as if pieces of him were strangely missing, and Harry grew concerned.

Was it some magical malady? A disease he had never seen before?

*Would it be rude to ask?*

Hermione thought as much, when he finally asked her, and he put it aside.

At least until he grew bored.

It was Albus who gently told Neville Longbottom to make friends with Harry Potter, hoping to bring together the two boys who might save the world; and it was his kind words that informed the young Gryffindor of the Killing Curse Scar's blinding consequences, with the best of intentions.

Neville told his closest friends when prompted of his sudden desire to track down Harry Potter; Dean told the rest of Gryffindor, who told their friends in other Houses.

None had seen the scar behind the Boy-Who-Lived's ever present sunglasses; some did not believe the rumors.

Others did, and confusion reigned. Was Harry Potter supposed to be weak, now? *Useless?* He was a *Champion!* He had cast a *spell* in the *Great Hall!*

*He had defeated the Dark Lord and lost his sight.* The girls sighed in pity and planned to soothe a broken heart. The boys spoke aloud of helping him, while others silently lost the respect they had based on stories in the *Daily Prophet* that all knew now were false.

Potter hadn't killed hags and flown brooms. He was blind, he used a staff as a cane, he wore glasses to cover what must be white eyes. Granger
wasn't his friend; she was just his guide; he never went anywhere without her.

For three days, the school sought to talk to Harry Potter out of respect and awe; and in the space of a day, their questions turned to whispers, and their glances still curious contained a morbid hint of wonder.

The Boy-Who-Is-Blind, an oddity, something strange.

Hermione knew immediately that the school had been informed; she didn't need to hear the questions about it, though none came. She saw the looks, and squeezed Harry's hand.

He didn't notice. He only continued his thoughts on the ghosts bound to Hogwarts and how their white spectral patterns seemed to feed on the magic inherent in the school he claimed was sentient.

He lived in a world all his own, and Hermione only wasted a second considering if she should tell him how the school was acting.

Then, seeing his furrowed brow as he speculated on the afterlife and its interaction with magic, Hermione placed a smile upon her face and forced the thought from her mind. Why worry him, and why should he care at all? They would complete the tournament and return to their studies, away from the wizarding world and its prejudice. Harry was a genius, and they were already famous under the name of Viola James. They didn't need the students of Hogwarts.

They would get along just fine on their own.

Harry was explaining to an avid Professor Babbling how the ward structure of Hogwarts seemed to be formed when the Headmaster approached, the wizards pale blue light a beacon of power.

The elderly man politely excused the Ancient Runes professor and pulled Harry aside, though he did not seem to mind Hermione's continued presence at his side.

"My boy, I'm most sorry your condition has become common knowledge. I
had hoped to keep your blindness from the general public, but alas, somebody on my staff must have spoken out."

Harry frowned at his words.

"I never planned on hiding anything, Headmaster. I'm not ashamed of my disability, and if anything, it is dangerous to keep it secret. It's in my best interest for others to know I am visually impaired."

Hermione, at his side, fidgeted, her light wavering. The Headmaster sighed.

"But surely, you will at least want to keep your rather, unique, form of vision more closely guarded? My professors are quite frankly amazed by your abilities, but we can't trust them to remain silent on the things you have told them. I recommend you be very careful with whom you tell the things you see."

Harry raised a brow.

"You don't trust your staff?"

"That's not it at all." The Headmaster assured. "I just do not always trust their judgement. You have enemies, Mr. Potter, simply because of what you did when you were a child. They will seek to harm you in any way they can."

Harry shook his head.

"First you wanted me to appear normal to avoid being thought weak, and now you want me to appear weak to avoid letting my enemies know I am not? What is the point?"

The Headmaster made a frustrated sound in his throat.

"Please, try to understand. Your sight could be extremely useful if you come under attack. If they underestimate you, you have a better chance of escaping..."

Hermione broke in, her voice high with anxiety.
"What are you trying to say? That he's in danger? You sound like he could be h-h-harmed at any m-m-moment."

Hermione's voice stopped abruptly, and Harry knew it was both the renewed stutter and the reminder that Hogwarts was not, in fact, safe. He felt anger swirling inside that the Headmaster had brought both about again in her mind.

Dumbledore sighed.

"Harry, my boy, you are the Boy-Who-Lived. You may have been safe in the relative anonymity of the muggle world, but every eye is on you now. You must be prepared. I can help you. Some of my professors are more than willing to privately tutor you both, you only have to ask. We only want what is best for you."

Harry resisted the desire to snort; it was a gesture very unlike him, but seemed appropriate for the situation.

Instead, he stiffened his spine and faced the pale light with a direct gaze.

"I, and I'm relatively certain Hermione, would be more than happy to have any advice or training you would like to offer. I have many theories I would like to discuss further, and there is a lot I do not know about my own vision and why it is the way it is. One of the reasons I was so happy to come here was the chance to learn. But," Harry lifted his chin. "I'm not going to purposefully hide what I am. I won't advertise it, but I won't hide it either. Not the fact that I can not see normally, or the fact that what I do see is unheard of. I must live with what I am, and the rest of the wizarding world can as well."

And with that, Harry reached out for Hermione, took her offered hand, and strode back in the direction Professor Babbling had taken.

At the end of their first week at Hogwarts, Harry and Hermione stood on the Astronomy Tower in the dead of night, Hermione writing quickly in her notebook as Harry paced the circular floor, unheeding of the drop on every side, his hands gesturing as he spoke.
"This castle, it's changed over time, the original construction is obvious in the pattern, more saturated with magic, its pattern more cohesive. But this tower, it's integral. The ward domes center is directly above us..." Hermione glanced up at the stars with a curious look. "...and directly below us is the heart of the school, something like a computer mainframe. All the magical pulses seem to flow in or from it, leftover magical residue gathering in the center to be redistributed throughout the school, even powering the wards to some extent. There must be something below ground as well, underneath the sewers that are present in the walls, given the angle of the patterns design. Perhaps a loadstone or ward algorithm that acts like a brain, storing memories. Hogwarts will recognize damage to itself, I think, if on a grand enough scale. It might even be able to act independently of whatever control the Headmaster has to counter a threat. Marvelous!"

Harry stomped a foot and spread his arms out wide like an embrace, the glasses forgotten in his pocket with the curfew long past, wide green eyes smiling at something she could not see.

"We have walked the entire perimeter and most of the hallways. This place is brilliant. We stand in solid proof that objects can be made sentient. This place is alive, Hermione, I'm only more certain of it. How is this possible? Artificial intelligence, with magic serving as its life force, its blood. Magic collected over a millennium, maybe, or the Founders of this school knew something that has been lost or hidden since then."

Hermione smiled, stepping close to him.

"I don't think you are going to find out in a week, Harry. I've been reading too, and nothing in the history books even hint of what you are talking about. Rooms move, yes, but it's just understood that magic does odd things sometimes. It's expected. You're trying to claim it's on purpose."

Harry snorted.

"Of course it is. The staircases rotate based on student traffic and on how much the castle likes a person..."

Hermione laughed incredulously.
"Harry, they're charmed to move randomly! Hogwarts, A History states…"

Harry rolled his eyes, running a hand through his wild black hair, cut short around his ears.

"I know what it says. On Rowena Ravenclaw's suggestion, the stairways were charmed to move to save space when the upper floors were constructed. But nothing is said about when they move, and why. I've been watching, and I see the school's pattern interacting with the students. It has favorites."

Hermione sighed, plopping down to sit while she wrote a few more notes.

"Alright. But I'm not sure where you are going with this. We don't have time to prove Hogwarts is alive, or any reason to do so. I thought you wanted to question the ghosts more, maybe explore the forest…"

Harry sighed.

"Time. Never enough time. I think I could spend my life in this school and Hogwarts would still be a mystery. I can truly see why it's so special to the wizarding world." Hermione's heart squeezed. Harry continued, stepping to the edge of the tower and looking down, eyes roaming the castle below. "I suppose I should be more economical with my time. It's hard to turn away from such a wonderful puzzle, though."

A gasp brought Hermione's head up and caused Harry to freeze, head tilted as he listened.

From the doorway below, a red head slowly rose, brown eyes locked on where Harry stood.

"He shouldn't stand so close! Does he even know the edge is there?" Ron Weasley demanded. While Hermione gawked at seeing him, another boy rose behind him, the large bulk of Neville Longbottom stepping forward.

Hermione opened and closed her mouth, then shook her head.

"Why are you here?"
Ron didn't answer. He was looking at Harry.

"Step back, slowly. This is the Astronomy Tower, you have to be careful."

Harry's lips tilted in a smile as he turned to face the two Gryffindors. "Don't worry about me. Even if I stepped over the side, there are spells present to prevent students, or any living thing for that matter, accidentally or purposefully falling from the sides. It would be a harrowing few seconds, but then Hogwarts would return you to the tower."

Ron frowned; Neville, with an awkward cough, cast a small lighting spell to illuminate their faces more clearly. Hermione watched both boys stare with open curiosity at Harry's uncovered face, the lights casting the scars across his eyes in vivid detail.

Neville cleared his throat. "I, ah, saw that you two were up here. It's past curfew, but... ah, well, we're able to travel about pretty good without getting caught. Wasn't sure if you have to follow curfew, but if you did, thought maybe you would like help getting back."

Harry shrugged. "Not necessary. As we are guests within the grounds of the castle the Headmaster has not placed us under curfew."

Hermione folded her arms across her chest.

"What do you really want?"

While Harry frowned at her tone, Ron flushed.

"Hermione, ah, I meant to talk to you the first day you were here, but... well, it was hard to find you at all, and... I'm sorry. I wanted to say I'm sorry. I was the one who said all those things, the others were just there listening to me. I was stupid, I didn't mean it."

Hermione began to speak; but Harry beat her to it.

"Ron Weasley?" His voice seemed stilted; an odd tone Hermione had never heard. "The Hero of Hogwarts?"

Ron flushed further, and Neville stepped forward.
"And I'm Neville. I guess you know the story." The brown haired boy looked at Hermione earnestly. "I might not have said anything, but I laughed. I wanted to fit in, but it was still wrong. We went looking for you, Hermione. We just... we were too late."

His voice broke at the end. Hermione simply stood there, having no idea what to say.

It had happened three years ago, but the memory of the troll had overwritten everything before it. She remembered the laughter, remembered crying; but more than anything it was the troll, its smell, its roar, the pain.

She looked down, silent.

Harry spoke again from beside her. "Everything has consequences. You hurt her, which led her to a position that nearly killed her. I'm not sure an apology years later is enough."

Ron flinched. "I'm sorry, but this is none of your business, Potter. You weren't there."

Just why Harry hadn't been there was made clear in the boy's tone; Hermione's head whipped up and she glared.

"He's my best friend, so it is his business. You never even sent a letter when I was in the hospital. Why are you so sorry now all of a sudden?"

Ron paled. "It's not like that. We just wanted..."

Harry stepped closer to her, his hand seeking for hers, clasping it tight. His green eyes were focused on where Ron and Neville stood, glancing between the two with eyes she knew were memorizing patterns and colors.

Hermione stiffened her spine.

"I know what you w-w-wanted. You thought you could use me to get closer to Harry, even though you already treat him like he's an invalid. You don't even know him. Is this about the Tournament? Or do you just want to try
to make him part of your posse of *H-h-heros*?"

Harry's hand tightened on hers. He looked down at her, eyes running over her forehead then down her neck before he sighed and shook his head. He turned to face the Gryffindors.

"You don't know me, and I doubt you ever will, but I think you are sincere in apologizing to Hermione. I don't like you very much, and I don't have to. If Hermione wants to forgive you, she'll come to you. Until then, leave her alone."

Neville nodded; Ron scowled. But both left without another word.

And Hermione stood and let Harry draw her into a tentative embrace.

~*~Review Please!~*~
Chapter 8: Orange Scales and Ridges

The days before the first task passed quickly for Harry; there was always more books to listen to, more parts of the castle to explore, more things to learn.

A few professors in particular quickly became close to friends in their shared love of learning and exploring new ideas. Filius Flitwick, whose expertise in both Charms and Dueling made him a valuable teacher in converting wand-based spells to use in a staff, was visited on nearly a daily basis. With him Harry began to experiment with moving his staff in ways other than simply down or out from himself. Flitwick, in turn, was interested to learn Harry's experiments on using the light and patterns he saw to cast spells instead of wand-movements and in some cases, words.

Septima Vector, a stern woman who taught Arithmancy, was hardly interested in his sight at all besides the potential benefits in seeing the mathematical correlation between the patterns he saw and the basic algorithms she taught. Instead, she was more than willing to spend hours with Harry and Hermione talking of numbers, geometry and calculus, some of the few muggle subjects that had a common language in magical society, even if few studied them.

Harry was fascinated by the idea of using magical numerical equations to predict the future, and compared it at length to muggle Game Theory, which muggle economists had been perfecting for years.

"Though, they call it decision science, or interactive decision theory, not predicting the future." Harry finished, while Hermione quickly continued to explain further upon seeing Professor Vector's stunned gaze.

"It's relatively basic and short-term, of course. They set it up as a zero-sum game, with each person having a set positive or negative number for each possible decision..."

The third was, surprisingly, the professor of Ancient Runes, Bathsheda Babbling. Though Harry, without the ability to read or write runes, could hardly learn the subject she taught, she was also interested in the use of
ancient runes in warding schemes, in particular the ancient wards of Hogwarts that mostly still remained a mystery.

As soon as she confirmed that Harry could, in fact, see magic as light and patterns, she practically overtook the task of escorting them around various portions of Hogwarts herself, as avid as Hermione on his hypothesis of an underground warding chamber, and his descriptions of the wards and how they were shaped led to her confirming several of her own theories on the scripts used to ward the ancient castle.

He also made friends with the gamekeeper and entered the Forbidden Forest, spoke to centaurs about the stars he had never been able to see and the connection with the forest's magic and their own, watched thestrals graze and fly, observed the multitude of magical flora and fauna, always entering new colors and patterns into his internal directory and Hermione's written notes.

And on the day before the first task, Neville Longbottom passed Hermione a note with an apologetic glance, and within the paper was written a single word.

Dragons.

And Hermione abruptly decided that the Headmaster's plan for Harry to simply forfeit was indeed a good one.

But Harry, in a abrupt change of heart at the thought of encountering live dragons, fervently disagreed. So that night was spent reading about dragons and how to survive encountering them.

The task was to obtain a golden egg from a clutch guarded over by an angry mother. Durmstrang conquered the challenge with expert use of transfiguration to distract the angry dragon. Beauxbatons' work was choppy, the elder Delacour spending more time guarding her younger sister than searching out the egg. Hogwarts' Champions obtained their egg with flawless teamwork, the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor working together to duplicate the eggs and draw the dragon away from its original nest.
Harry, alone, walked out to see the Hebridean Black dragon. He could have chosen a partner; but the only person he truly trusted was Hermione, and he wouldn't willingly put her in danger.

When he had chosen the Hebridean, he had immediately thought of all he knew on the species native to the British Isles. It was a smaller breed as dragons went, but also the most aggressive dragon in Britain, a creature that could carry off an entire cow or deer in a feeding. It was supposed to be a dark ebony, and have eyes so vividly purple they glowed with inner light.

But to Harry, the female dragon that towered above him by at least thirty feet, its wings stretching even higher into the sky as it postured and hissed, was a living breathing sun in streams of bright orange and deep yellow, its reptile pattern a thing of terrifying beauty.

He gasped; nothing could possibly describe the vision. The eggs underneath her gleamed with pinpricks of glowing light, little stars under their mother sun.

Except one, which seemed dull in comparison with only its surface wizarding magic.

He couldn't summon it; the charms to prevent it were ingrained deep. He could copy the other champions, using tricks of transfiguration and illusion.

Or, he could show the dragon that something did not belong. He didn't know what a dragon saw; he didn't even really remember what wizards saw, all his memories of true sight were vague and indistinct. He knew it was golden colored, or else the other Champions could not pick it out; but to his sight, that color did not register. Did dragon's see in color? Were they more like mundane reptiles, registering scent and temperature?

Harry stepped closer; the thing stiffened and snorted, its heat reaching to him, its fire burning in its gullet, a steaming cauldron.

Harry placed his staff in front of him and reached for his own pattern, bringing it up and out of his skin, his magic a gleaming green light around him. He saw the dragon watching him, its large orange head lowered over
the eggs, waiting, judging.

Harry filtered his magic through the staff, the green growing red with a phoenixes essence, the gentle song ringing in his ears, calming his heart.

He could have used a million spells; Hermione had droned on and on about them. But Harry didn't see the use. Spells were fickle things that did not always follow common sense. And he had no spell for what he wanted to do.

He only had his own will and the light he could see, the simple truth of it.

"Something does not belong." Harry whispered, softly enough that those in the stands could not hear. He heard them speculating, the announcer questioning his sense, wondering if he would forfeit and what he could possibly do against a dragon.

There were dragon-handlers nearby, waiting for him to fail, waiting to save him. Many of the students were watching to see a disaster, the stands full of people catching their first glimpses of the Blind-Boy-Who-Lived.

The Headmaster, as the old wizard had intended to do, had suppressed as much as he could any talk that Harry could actually see. Harry hadn't tried to prove him right or wrong; he ignored the speculations entirely. They weren't worth his time.

The orange beast leaned closer; the spectators around him gasped. He felt its breath heat his face.

"Something does not belong." Harry whispered to it, and let the scarlet phoenix amplified magic spill from him and ripple across the ground to touch the dull colored egg.

It rang like a bell; empty and hollow, and the dragon reared back in distress. Again, Harry made it ring, and the orange dragon pattern, scales across spines and ridges, leaned down to take a deep sniff.

It hissed, and lunged, and the golden egg was pushed from its nest with disdain and a wild flutter of wings.
It didn't belong with the stars it had nestled within. The Hebridean Black crouched over its eggs, wary, wings impossibly wide furled around them, an orange-yellow sun. Harry smiled at it, and walked toward the fallen egg, seeing the still pinpricks of metal as he walked closer underneath the magical spells.

And as his hands picked up the smooth egg, the crowd roared its approval.

Hermione didn't give Harry a choice.

"I'm going with you to the Ball." She declared, after hearing the announcement as they sat in the Great Hall at the thinly veiled command of the Headmaster. She saw the hawk like gazes of the girls in the Hall on the boy beside her and found herself smirking back at them.

Harry waved a hand in dismissal.

"If you'd like. I'm not required to dance though."

Hermione laughed at that. "For the good of everyone else. You would bowl us all over and stomp on our feet."

Harry joined in on the laughter; he knew dancing would be something he could never do well.

Though, he found himself grateful that Hermione had wanted to attend the Ball with him. He rather liked the thought of it.

"They want to know if you're really blind." The soft voice came from the side where Harry and Hermione walked from Vector's classroom, ignoring the stares and whispers that had only increased since the first task.

They turned, and Harry looked at the oddly fractured pattern, its soft pink light in a warm tone.

"Who are you? And why are you barefoot?" Hermione asked curiously.
The girl sighed. "Luna. I'm afraid my shoes went missing again. They tend
to do that this time of day."

Harry knew Hermione would be frowning though he couldn't see it. She
always pulled a face when confronted with something puzzling. Harry had
felt it a time or two, the skin on her face moving, the blue tinted purple light
flickering with disturbance.

"What do you think?" Harry asked suddenly, curious about this girl with the
odd broken pattern.

One pink arm waved through the air, glittering.

"Oh, of course you are. It's very obvious to anyone who can see. My
father thinks you've been possessed by You-Know-Who's ghost and that's
why it seems like you can see..."

"That's p-p-preposterous!" Hermione broke in, but the girl continued
unheeding of the interruption.

"...but I rather think a fairy is sitting on your shoulder, leading your way. Or
maybe a ghost only you can see, someone kind and wise, and it taught
you magic too."

Hermione huffed. Harry smiled, and looped an arm around the aggravated
girl.

"Well, you're more right than anyone else's theories I've heard so far in the
hallways."

Luna's magic expanded and glowed with emotion, though he wasn't sure
which. When she spoke, her voice remained calm and serene.

"I'm very glad."

And then her light began to move away, without a word of goodbye. Harry
listened to Hermione's grumbling commentary of the Ravenclaw, and only
shook his head.

"Something's different with her pattern. Its design is skewed, like it's
broken once and healed badly."

At that, Hermione went silent.

Later, she told him what she learned from another student, that Luna Lovegood had lost her mother at a young age, and commonly was called Loony Lovegood for the strange things she said and did. It made Harry wonder how much trauma it would take to break a pattern.

And only then did he realize what he had been seeing in the ghosts at Hogwarts, distracted as he had been by their white coloring and the purple sparks of Hogwarts' magical signature that made them quicken and live.

They were all, each and every one, broken.

He hadn't expected the Ball itself to be very spectacular; but the night of the event he found himself just as dazzled by the myriad spell constructions made by professional hands as Hermione was by the ice and crystal.

They spent most of the Ball at a table, watching colors and patterns whirl by, content to simply speak to one another, their own bubble in a sea of people. Halfway through, Harry reached for her hand and held it.

Hermione did not pull away.

At the end of the night, hand in hand, they walked back to their shared room, and Harry then wrapped an arm about her shoulders and pulled her close, taking in the blue-violet light that was so very beautiful against the purple walls of Hogwarts, the perfect velvet backdrop to Hermione's pattern.

He told her as much, speaking for the first time of how beautiful her light was to him, how it fascinated his gaze more than once, of the true reason he had begun to wear the black shades.

And when he was finished, Hermione pressed a quick brush of her lips to his cheek, and retreated to her room.

And Harry felt like he was on fire.
~*~Review Please!~*~
The clue to the second task lay within the egg. When it opened Harry heard the screeching and immediately slammed it shut in wincing response.

But he had had time to glimpse the pattern easily recognizable from his careful perusal of the magical creatures around the Scottish castle. Scales and fins, fish and human patterns alike, the color the gray-blue hue of the merpeople.

Hermione held the egg under water and opened it again, and together they ducked their heads and listened to the song.

They could not have made more of a challenge for him if they had purposefully tried. Harry didn't know how to swim; the very thought shot dread through him.

One team member was to retrieve an object from the merpeoples village at the bottom of the lake; then, they were to bring it to a floating platform in front of the school and hand it to the second team member, who would be responsible for placing the object upon a higher platform, charmed to hover high above the water.

There would be creatures to challenge them both above and below the surface.

Hermione tried to teach him the bubble-head charm; he learned it easily, but found the magic of the charm prohibited his sight to such an extent that it was useless. They tried to locate gillyweed, both in person and by owl, and found the supply sold out for weeks and nearly impossible to import with Ministry regulations.

Finally, Hermione put her foot down, and insisted on completing the first
part of the challenge herself. She wouldn't have him forfeit, not after the success with the dragon, and the Headmaster's nearly insulting condescension afterwards because Harry had not followed his suggestion to lay low.

And she also claimed that retrieving a stone from merpeople would be a walk in the park.

So Harry found himself waiting as first Hogwarts, then Durmstrang, exited the water with their stones.

Then, he waited, and waited, seeing Neville triumphantly use a rapidly growing green vine of some sort to reach the higher platform, Cedric below helping cast spells to make the diving hippogriffs and pixies stay away. Durmstrang's team sent Krum aloft on a summoned broom, the man's light whirling with such speed Harry could barely follow it if he tried.

But he didn't try. His vision was focused on the water. He could hear it lapping the sides of the deck, could smell it on the air, seeming to surround all his senses, and hiding from him the one thing he wanted.

Fleur paced and paced, her voice sobbing, claiming attack by grindylows or the giant squid must be preventing her sister from surfacing. Harry's heart seized in nearly catatonic fear at the thought. Together, he stood next to the witch whose fiery pattern betrayed relation to a veela, looking down into the dark depths of the lake.

He saw her light flare first; blue-violet, electric, and he shouted aloud.

Hermione carried with her Gabrielle Delacour, who was scooped up by her sister even as Harry drew Hermione into a hard hug, burying his face in her wet hair.

She pushed him away, speaking quickly.

"Go! To the platform! Here!" She thrust the stone in his hand; he could hardly care. She pushed him again, and he reluctantly turned, looking upward at the wood platform, the swooping colors of airborne creatures waiting for him to attempt to ascend.
He couldn't apparate even if he knew how. He couldn't fly a broom, never having learned the skill and knowing its dangers for one who couldn't always see correctly. He could only levitate himself, and he would have to do so quickly.

So he did. With a wild push of green magic he threw himself into the air, his staff cradled in one tight hand. When the creatures curved towards him, he jerked aside, flowing around their colors with grace.

When he alighted upon the platform and placed his stone among the others, he heard his score placing him firmly in second place, tied with Durmstrang.

And then, as quickly as possible, he returned to Hermione, who had just reluctantly made friends with the French girls from Beauxbatons.

Hermione wanted to tell Harry to relax. Since the second task he had always been hovering over her, watching her and the air around her, his gaze fierce and dark.

Haunted.

She remembered his face when she breached the water, his knuckles white in a fist. The fear she had read there.

He wanted to forfeit the third task. He wanted to just leave and return to the relative safety of muggle London. He seemed disinterested in their studies, even with the recent breakthrough in the creation of spirits and what it might mean about the afterlife.

She could barely twitch without him coming alert, that blasted tall staff of his at hand.

"Stop it." She finally burst out, turning on Harry as he paced the room. "We're not leaving yet. I'm fine! I only took so long because little Gabrielle was too afraid to even move for fear of running into more merpeople. Apparently they don't care for veelas very much. I finally took her up myself, and that was that. I used all the proper spells to get rid of
the lake creatures. I'm not *helpless* Harry."

He grimaced and sat. "I'm sorry. I just... it worried me. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Hermione scooted close to him, leaning her head onto his shoulder. "That's silly. *You've* already happened to me, so I don't expect life to get dull. Plus, we need more material for Viola's next paper. Stop worrying about me and get back to work."

She poked him hard in the side, and he grunted.

Then, he laughed, and she saw the tension in his face begin to relax.

"Alright, Ms. James. Let's get to work then."

At every turn, fate seemed determined to thwart him.

Albus had designed the Tournament to showcase Neville Longbottom as the new savior; a hero worthy to be followed, able to destroy a Dark Lord. He had thought Harry Potter *unable* to be that hero.

Then, Harry was summoned, by an unknown person within his very school, a follower of Tom Riddle most certainly. And Harry was shown to not only be able enough to learn magic, but possessing what could possibly be the power spoken of in the prophecy.

And the prophecy clearly stated that the Dark Lord would not know of that power, though the boy himself seemed determined not to hide it.

Now, he no longer knew the right thing to do. *Teach the boy?* His professors all claimed Harry Potter to be an amazingly bright student, unparalleled within the school. *Warn him of the prophecy?* He risked the child fleeing from his destiny, or worse, seeking to make it come about before he was ready.

*Wait?*

He risked his enemies making their own moves.
And yet, he had very little other choice.

Harry practised magic when he was not listening to books, studying with professors, or tracking down spirits and creatures to add to his list of patterns.

He experimented with his power, using it with and without the phoenix staff, both intoned spells and wordless ones.

The staff made up for its lack of finesse with raw magical power, the stones atop it nearly bursting with amplified light. He manipulated raw elements the best, turning them from one to the next, weaving fire and water together as shields or weapons, raising earth in jagged spikes or flinging it like arrows, riling air to a ferocious wind.

Uncomplicated, simple patterns and light, with so much more potential in offensive and defensive maneuvers than complicated spells that required complex wand movements and precise wording. Magic at its most pure, strong and bright.

He preferred fire most of all, the sparking patterns of bright red and deep orange, the lighter the color the hotter the flame.

Once, in the dead of night, he left Hermione alone to slip from the castle onto bare ground, and there finally cast the spell he had most longed to cast.

*Fiendfyre.*

It bloomed so pale it was white like a ghost, hot death, assuming the forms of animals of all kinds, magical and muggle alike, nearly sentient as it craved to consume life. Uncontrollable in its urges until he was forced to let it go, cutting off his magic from feeding it further.

And in the wake of its destruction, he felt humbled.

There would always be something he could not master in mere moments, if he ever could at all.
But he would greatly enjoy the challenge.

The students at Hogwarts seemed of a mixed mind toward the Blind-Boy-Who-Lived. Some, after seeing his ability in the Tournament and his easy way of walking through the halls, thought that the papers might have gotten the news of his vision wrong. Others thought that perhaps it merely was not as serious as proclaimed.

Several rather thought that Harry Potter was the next Merlin, and therefore being blind simply couldn't make him any less spectacular. That these found themselves in a self-styled Harry Potter Fan Club, whose members tended to stalk the halls looking for the elusive teen, wasn't a surprise.

But a few watched every movement they could of Harry Potter very closely, who he was close to, what professors he learned from, what unique abilities he might possess, and this information was reported most diligently to those relatives who wanted to know.

The third task was set near the end of term, months past the second. There was no need to involve Hermione; it was to be some sort of obstacle course, observed by all as they sat high above them.

To Harry, who had to wait to enter the maze second with the Durmstrang Champions, it all seemed superfluous.

It was supposed to be some great challenge, showing off the strength of various school's prime students. It had done that to some extent; no one could doubt the prowess of Neville Longbottom and Cedric Diggory in Hogwarts.

But why had Harry been involved at all? The question had haunted him and Hermione both the entire time, wondering who would wish to bring them into public light. Was it simple curiosity? Was it in hope of tarnishing his reputation, or highlighting his disabilities? It had done neither, for now many assumed he was not blind at all despite his glasses and the obvious use of his staff as a cane. He moved too easily; seemed to see things coming his way, following movement with his eyes and avoiding obstacles.
Of course, they didn't know that was only because of the magic that saturated everything around the school and its grounds. They couldn't know that anything of plastic or concrete would send him sprawling on his face, that he couldn't tell simple colors of portraits or decorations, couldn't read or write ink on parchment. They only knew what they saw; and that was powerful in a tournament of magic.

In the maze, Harry split off from Durmstrang and began a leisurely stroll. He was in no hurry; he didn't want the Cup or the prize. He had learned enough in his months at Hogwarts that it was worth the hassle. He only wanted to complete the test and return to Hermione and his studies.

He heard the screams from the crowd; heard the cheers and jeers.

He heard the announcer's description of events as they passed. And as he completed a simple riddle from a fascinating large feline pattern he was excited to learn was a Sphinx, he heard the confusion.

Durmstrang had turned against the competing Champions. It was an unexpected strategy; the challenge was supposed to be from within the maze, not from the other competitors.

Hogwarts' Cedric Diggory was down; Beauxbatons had fled in retreat, Neville Longbottom valiantly covering their escape. Then, Krum was defeated; the second Durmstrang champion also falling to the Gryffindor's wand as she simply stood there in apparent forfeit.

And in front of Harry, unnoticed by the eyes riveted on the combat, the maze moved out of his way, tearing itself apart and restructuring at the hand of some other's wand.

Harry saw the pale magic tearing apart the green plant life; he knew that someone was leading his way. He could have turned aside; but what was the point? The answer to the mystery lay ahead, waiting to be solved.

Someone wanted him to walk on, so he walked, staff swinging from side to side, eyes wide open for tricks of magic.

The announcer cried out his name; Longbottom was rushing for the center of the maze.
But Harry was already there. He looked at the Cup, a crystalline pattern of deep purple light.

And like a spiderweb on its surface another spell lay, the stamp of a portkey. The trap set to spring.

He saw Neville's unique brownish-green hue, rushing towards the Cup, the red wand in his hand sparkling with light against the deep green backdrop of the hedge maze.

"No!" Harry called, walking as quickly as he dared towards the large boy, feeling slow and useless, not used to moving fast.

Neville, on edge from Durmstrang's vicious tactics, attacked first, spells flung wide in his haste. Harry dodged some and dispelled others, slowing to raise his staff in protection.

The boy was close; close to that magic that would send him away to someplace else, either the start of the maze or somewhere far, far worse.

Harry, the suspicious thoughts at the forefront of his mind, was betting on worse.

So when he knew he would not beat the boy to the Cup, he did what he had to do for the one who laughed at Hermione's expense years ago but had apologized for it since and was sincere; who had given them the hint about the dragons though it gave them an edge in the first task.

"Accio Cup!" Harry called with a lash of emerald magic, and let the trap spring upon him.

In a graveyard of violet stones and shadows, the sickly red and brown hues of a rat animagus was waiting for him. He was bound before he could fight; his staff fallen at his feet.

It was the disorientation that made him pause; the portkey's spinning colors still making his mind reel. Then he saw a different pattern being brought closer by the brown shade of rat, a giant coiled serpent at the feet
of what had to be Peter Pettigrew and one other person.

Its pattern was red, like heart’s thick blood, the deepest shade he had ever seen, and it was the pattern he had seen stamped upon the colors of Professor Severus Snape and Alastor Moody. If Dark Magic was what caused such a taint, then the being in front of him had nothing of the Light left in him.

And it was broken, a mere fragment, that spoke in a high nasal voice and called itself Wormtail’s Master.

The confusion left him; the final pieces of the puzzle found, the picture now laid out complete before him.

Lord Voldemort had been scheming all along behind the Tournament, not dead at all as he had been led to believe. Lord Voldemort had been waiting, this broken remnant pattern of a wizard, waiting to trap him. Wanting him at his mercy.

It appeared he might owe the Headmaster a small apology; he was about to profit greatly from being underestimated by his enemy.

Harry did not wait when he saw the still gleam of metal in Pettigrew's hand. He called to the light in the staff at his feet; sang the phoenix song in his heart. He felt the bindings on him rip and tear and fall away, and he slumped down to fall upon the scarlet fire and green wood that made him so much more powerful.

The rat pattern of Pettigrew scrambled away, calling to his master in high pitched tones. Harry spared him no attention, unsure if Lord Voldemort was weak even when broken.

He flung out the green ropes of an Incarcerous spell at the Dark Lord, feeling both rewarded and relieved when the bloody pattern was bound in emerald light.

"Harry Potter!"

Voldemort roared, a wand of familiar phoenix tones in his hold, like a brother to the staff he held. But the wizard did not cast a spell; his magic
apparently as broken as his pattern.

Harry saw the rat begin to change; shrinking in size, the brown deeper in hue, fur tones stronger than human.

Perhaps he thought he was hidden in the grass, able to escape; but Harry saw Pettigrew clearly as a spot of brown among the sea of green plants and purple stones around him.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Harry enchanted, and was pleased to see the pattern freeze.

"Kill him!" Voldemort raged and struggled and hissed, and from the grass the large serpent came, lightning fast, brown and red scales with the yellow shade of poison upon it. *Perhaps a magical breed of constrictor,* Harry thought absently, and raised his staff in a silent shield.

The brown and red light jerked and slid away, words hissing from its form.

"It sees me, Master!"

For a second, Harry paused in shock; *was there a breed of magical snake that spoke?* But then the familiar tried to strike again, slamming against his shield with an audible thunk, angry hisses spilling from its mouth that he heard as spoken curses.

"Petrificus Totalus." Harry muttered, and was surprised when the snake's light shed the green binding spell with hardly a shiver. He quickly raised his shield again with wordless intent, eyeing the large serpent as it hissed curses, circling him rabidly.

"Incarcerous!" He tried again, and again the snake shed the light. Natural resistance, maybe, or else the thing had multiple layers of protection charms.

Time for some creativity.

Harry dropped his shield, and with a wave of power and intent transfigured the pale air into bright pinpricks of metal, quickly threading them together around the thrashing snake as it curled and struck the new bars.
And as the cage closed around it, holding it still for the moment, Harry realized he must be mistaken; for the brown snake pattern was distinctly different from the red pattern that seemed etched over it; a very familiar, human, red pattern.

Unlike the smaller taint upon what he now knew to be the arms of Death Eaters, the snake's entire being was overlaid like a murky film, collapsing in on each other in places, human and snake, red and brown, two souls in one body, unlike anything he had ever seen before.

Something he had not known was even possible.

And the human soul that crouched upon the brown light was as fractured and broken as the bloody monster that howled in anger under his spell.

For a long moment he stood still, appalled, in a graveyard surrounded by enemies he had overcome perhaps through sheer luck, or perhaps just their own incompetence, and considered yet another puzzle that had arisen.

Two broken fragments of one soul, each controlling a separate body. Perhaps he had indeed killed Voldemort after all when he was a child and gained his scar. Perhaps what he saw before him was only the remnants of a wizard who had not properly died or become a spirit as normally broken patterns tended to do. Perhaps Voldemort's pattern was tethered to the world in the slivers before him.

*What a fascinating thought.* An entire realm of new questions and possibilities opened before him; and he *really* did not have any more time to think on them.

The snake thrashed again, and to his surprise he saw the metal pattern caging it crack and begin to break under the serpent's strength. He frowned sternly at it as the thing fell free, brown and red light fixing on him with vicious intent.

Well, he *had* tried to take the specimen alive.
"Kill!" The snake hissed, coiling to spring, and Harry banged the butt of his staff hard against the ground, his green magic bonded with the scarlet phoenix song of the staff as he struck in a much more powerful, and deadly, spell.

"Confringo!"

Unlike the inferior binding spells, this one did its intended job. The brown light of the snake shattered into pieces, its pulsing life beginning to slow with death even as the remains fell to the ground.

And the red sliver of broken soul that had covered the snake wrenched free and began to perish with an unholy howl, fading to nothing as all human souls did when the body they inhabited no longer had life.

Harry spared a moment watching the still pieces of the brown snake, Voldemort quiet now behind him.

He wondered if one part of a soul knew when the other part died; if they felt the loss. Then, with a grimace, he reached out for the portkey at his side, its web still alive and functioning, levitating the Dark Lord and Pettigrew close enough to touch, though his skin crawled at having their lights so close to his own.

"I will have your heart for this, Potter. I will destroy you and everything you hold dear."

Voldemort hissed in a sudden high, whiny voice, the small, almost child sized scarlet light gleaming with furious rage.

Harry didn't answer. He didn't quite know what to say.

He only wrapped a hand around the Cup and let it take them all away.

There were no words for the shock that came over the stadium when Harry Potter appeared with a wanted criminal and something other in tow.

The world dissolved into pandemonium. Reporters clicked wild pictures; aurors swarmed like bees around a hive. The Minister yelled for order; the
Headmaster of Hogwarts rushed to cage a squealing bundled monstrosity from attempting to escape into another host.

The horrible name of Lord Voldemort was said aloud; and in the quiet that followed, the Headmaster of Hogwarts confronted the bundle and it responded in a hiss that too many wizards and witches heard.

"You can not kill me, Albus Dumbledore! I will never die!"

No one was watching Harry Potter except a single witch with tears of relief in her eyes at seeing him unharmed; and only she saw Professor Moody reach to lead him back away from the possible danger in front of him.

And she was the only one who understood when Harry let the black glasses upon his face fall away and turned his gaze up to find where she sat among the crowd. His piercing green eyes met hers, and she saw the anxious warning there.

She jumped to her feet.

"Get Down!"

Her scream rang out over the crowd, the only words of warning she could think to say in that instant; words she had heard more than once in muggle movies.

The crowd, already on edge, startled and scrambled at her words; but it was the loud explosion from behind that sent them to the ground when Alastor Moody turned his wand upon Harry Potter and tried his best to kill him.

Harry had been watching Voldemort when the steadying hand at his elbow tightened; He looked down to see the damning stamp of bloody red on Moody's forearm.

"Come with me, boy. It's not safe here." The gruff man murmured.

Harry knew better; one never went with the enemy where they wished to take you, no matter how one was threatened or coerced. The only
advantage you had was to strike when it was unexpected, on your own terms.

And Alastor Moody was a trained and deadly wizard. If the man meant him harm, Harry would need every advantage he had.

"I'm fine here, thanks." Harry replied softly, but the man's grip did not waver. Harry felt him lean closer, his light burning bright with gray swirling into black.

"I must insist."

Harry closed his eyes; then he nodded and took a step back, reaching up to pull the glasses from his eyes and let them fall to the ground by his feet. He raised his head to face the stands, finding the gleam of blue-violet, the beloved pattern, assuring himself that she was far away from any damage that might occur.

He heard her shout something even as he whirled, bringing his staff up between himself and the professor, breaking the older man's grip.

He heard Moody curse in dark tones, saw the bright green-orange gleam of a wand that bore a dragon's heartstring.

Then Harry raised the golden light of the shield *Protego* as the professor's gray magic swarmed towards him with the deep crimson stain of dark magic.

He heard the explosions; but worse, he saw the patterns flicker then fade around him as the curse was turned aside to strike the nearby stands, wooden sparks flung into the air, people screaming, patterns muddling together in a confusion he could not interpret.

He could only defend himself, backing up one step after another, pouring more and more of himself into the shield, the dark magic eating away the golden light like nitric acid onto flesh.

He heard orders, commands, attempts to rally behind him. He knew, somewhere in the back of his mind, that battle was raging in more than one part of the stands. He had no time to worry about his friend.
His shield shattered, and Moody laughed.

Then Harry knew there was no use trying to only defend himself, when the people around him were dying.

So he called to the light inside the earth, the deep purple tones of rock and stone, some of it bearing the pattern of the castle itself.

And with a desperate twist of his own emerald light, he flung his staff out from him and made the purple light into a new familiar pattern, one deadly, one large and powerful.

And he sent it to attack.

Later, when the rubble was settled and all of the statement’s taken, everyone could agree on one solid thing.

The dragon surprised them all.

The Death Eaters in the crowd, waiting to hear their Master's call, or better yet, see his triumphant return, had taken the attack upon the Boy-Who-Lived as the final signal to bring them to arms. Seeing their Master, the frail thing caged by Dumbledore, had frozen them; but the explosion of a portion of the stands and the death of several of the Ministry's guarding aurors had given them courage again.

Albus Dumbledore, faced with attack from unknowns within the crowd, securing the Dark Lord and his servant, and the attack on Harry Potter, had to make a horrible choice; to save those around him, or continue to bind the darkest wizard that had risen to power since Grindelwald.

He chose to hold He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, the scales in his mind falling to where the greatest good might be gained.

It was left to the remaining aurors to battle the rogue Death Eaters, the Dark Mark rising above their heads, but telling friend from foe was difficult, and the casualties of both the fleeing innocent and those battling were steep.
None were left to help the Boy-Who-Lived; but soon, he didn't need it.

Hermione, forcing herself between the stampeding students and press, had only managed to reach the outskirts of the battle between her best friend and the Defense Professor when a hand snagged her, pulling her back.

Before she could cast a spell, the black-haired Potions Professor spoke harshly in her ear, a shield rising from his wand to turn aside a particularly nasty curse.

"Foolish girl! You'll only be in the way! He needs no distractions now!"

She turned to argue with him; Harry would be nearly blind with the amount of spell light being flung through the air!

*He wouldn't be able to cope!*

He wasn't a god, he was just *Harry*. He couldn't take on a Death Eater alone.

And when she turned, her fears were realized as she saw Harry's shield fall, and heard Moody laugh.

Severus Snape cursed under his breath, pushing her aside to step forward.

Then, the ground shook under their feet and Hermione fell to her knees with a harsh gasp, the shouts renewed around them in horror.

Because between the dueling wizards claws were pulling themselves from the ground, sharp pinpricks of rock, spines, ridges, stony scales and a large arching neck.

It happened fast; a blink of the eye, really, was all it ever took for Harry to change the pattern of one thing to another. Hermione had seen it before, on a much smaller scale.

She would have thought, later, that something large would take more time to transform. But as it turned out, it only took more space, and that space
made the world shake and tremble.

The ground was an empty, collapsing hole; the stands were beginning to fall, witches and wizards fleeing in a riot in any direction they could.

All, away from the stone dragon that launched itself at Moody with wicked intent, its long tail lashing behind it with the crunch of rock upon rock.

Hermione squeaked; then Professor Snape picked her up from the ground and pushed her away.

"Run!"

To Harry, the thing he had created gleamed with the still purple light of stone, only infused into the pattern of a Hebridean Black.

The professor hardly put up a fight; later, Harry would learn that there were few spells that could blast apart the amount of solid stone he had sent at the wizard. The man only spent enough time to block the first few efforts of the lumbering beast to snatch him in its jaws before sprinting away.

And without apparition, Moody was left only one means of escape; the edge of the wards.

The dragon couldn't fly; neither was it very fast. If anything, it was an extremely awkward creation. But it had a few things going for it; surprise, and the terrible appearance it gave.

He saw Moody's gray light disappear; and he simply stood, weak and trembling from the effort it had taken to transform the stone, leaning heavily upon his staff, weary. The cloying smell of smoke and burning flesh assailed him, the air heavy with spellfire and destruction. How many had died? How many lights had faded from the world during the mere moments the duel had lasted?

"Merlin, boy." He heard a whisper, and turned to see Professor Snape's pattern.
He stiffened; the man also bore the bloody mark.

"Peace, Harry. He is one of mine." The pale blue light of Headmaster Dumbledore said; but he couldn't relax.

"So was Moody." Harry snapped back, and saw the blue pulse with emotion.

"That was not my dear friend Alastor. If I am not mistaken, that was Bartemius Crouch Jr, who has been thought dead for some time."

The world was spinning; His eyes burning, burning, burning. Harry groaned at the sensation, and heard a growl from the distance, hissing words reaching his ears.

"This isn't over, old man!"

Dumbledore only sighed in response.

"I very much fear it is not."

With the appearance of the dragon and the flight of Crouch, the opposition ended. Those that did not escape were rounded up by the Ministry.

But in the end, three students would never return to the castle, and nearly three dozen were wounded. Of the spectators, two were killed, with five times as many injured.

And the Ministry lost eleven aurors, half of them new to the force.

It was a blow the wizarding world had not seen since the war against the Dark Lord; and the only thing that pushed that news to the second page of the special edition of the Daily Prophet was the picture of a mutated terror under a single headline.

**Boy-Who-Lived Captures He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!**

Standing tall in the background, elegant staff in one hand, was Harry Potter, his face uncovered for the first time in pictures, scars twisted
across his face in thin white lines, eyes open and focused on the monster at his feet in fierce concentration.

And when his blindness was finally mentioned, it was done with a reverent tone, as if describing a gruesome wound that had been overcome with spectacular skill.

~*~Review Please!~*~
*Chapter 10*: Black Stone in a Golden Ring

Harry had never thought he was the kind of person who would hide from the world until the days after what was dubbed by the press 'The Tournament Tragedy'. The pressure of an entire society's expectations were stressful enough; having the awestruck gazes of the students on him was simply too much to handle.

He spent the first day in his rooms at Hogwarts, comforted by Hermione's soothing light and words, recovering from both the magical strain of transfiguring so much stone, and the headache that had plagued him since he heard the last words of Lord Voldemort before the monster was taken into Ministry custody at the hands of Headmaster Dumbledore.

What he saw in the graveyard with the snake and its portion of broken soul he shared only with Hermione; and his new thoughts on soul patterns and the ramifications they might have she wrote carefully in with his previous notes.

On the second day, news came in the form of a visit from the Headmaster, and the story the older man told was only overshadowed by the plans the Ministry had made.

Alastor Moody had been held captive by Crouch, who had stolen the ex-Aurors hair for Polyjuice Potion, a magical concoction that copied one genetic pattern onto another person for a short time. It had worn off during the duel with Harry; and Alastor had been found locked in an expanded trunk.

Harry made a mental note to look into space-expanding charms and the concept of something being bigger on the inside. Interior dimensions? Worlds inside of worlds? Wormholes?

Meanwhile, interrogating Voldemort had proved useless; the man only spat out answers in angry, sibilant hisses, a language none knew but the serpents the wizard liked to surround himself with. But Pettigrew had revealed under Veritaserum that Crouch had been part of a plot to restore the Dark Lord's normal human body, as the wizard's soul had somehow
managed to survive while his original body had not the night Harry's parents died.

A broken soul, Harry thought, identical to the one inside the snake as well. Everything he had learned so far had led him to the conclusion that broken patterns would become spirits, if they died in a place with sufficient magic to act as fuel for the incorporeality. And while some spirits were capable of possession, none fit the description of what the two slivers of Voldemort were.

But he wouldn't get a chance to study the phenomenon closer; the Ministry had made its pronouncement in the morning paper.

There would be no waiting; the Wizengamot had met in an emergency session, the trials had already taken place for both Pettigrew and Voldemort, though Dumbledore implied there was no one willing to represent either of them in court.

Those that might have had already been exposed in a Ministry-wide sweep for those bearing the renewed Dark Mark, as new regulations for mandatory showing of the right forearm had also been implemented the very day after the Tournament. No arrests had been made yet; but several dozen workers were missing, never showing up for work. The aurors were working day and night to track them down for questioning.

The Minister would no longer tolerate terrorists in his country. And to show his, and his Ministry's, willingness to do whatever must be done to find and punish those who sought to overthrow the government, Peter Pettigrew and Voldemort, also known as Tom Riddle, were both to be Kissed and executed in succession inside the very Atrium of the Ministry, to be viewed by all who wished to see the infamous Dark Lord put down like the dog he was.

Hermione told him that Dumbledore had looked grave when telling them the news; Harry couldn't understand why. It seemed a triumph to him, to finally kill what was left of Voldemort once and for all. And with Pettigrew's statements, Sirius Black was now fully exonerated, if posthumously. Every loose end had been wound up, except for Crouch and the Death Eaters who had fled. But without Voldemort as a figurehead, Harry was uncertain
how they could raise another force to truly challenge the irate Ministry.

But then again, students Harry hadn't known had died. The victory had come at a cost.

_Hermione could have been one of those students._

Harry wouldn't forget that fact, either.

Dementors made his stomach roll nauseously. Their tall forms seemed to be brown from far away; but closer, he could see the hundreds of shades and patterns that mixed together to form that dirty brown color, yellow and orange and blue and green and purple, an ugly kaleidoscope of souls.

He had read about them specifically once he learned they would be used to execute Voldemort and Pettigrew.

Hermione gripped his hand tightly; she had not wanted to be here. The Ministry Atrium was crowded with people; aurors, reporters, the Wizengamot, the angry, the curious.

For his murder of twelve muggles and his part in the plot to resurrect Tom Riddle, Peter Pettigrew had been sentenced to the Kiss in a public trial.

Voldemort's trial had not been public; but none were surprised that the verdict was the same. The Dark Lord's crimes were too many to number, and the trial itself was mostly just for show, so the Ministry could look effective after the past debacle with Black.

And Harry had not been given much choice in attending the spectacle that was to follow. He was now touted as the Blind Sorcerer in the papers, the tales of his spectacular wordless magic at the Tournament spreading far and wide and only growing in the telling.

_The dragon had been a bit much_, he had acknowledged to Hermione afterwards. But it had been the very first thing to occur to him, and if nothing else it had been effective in ending the battle.

The dementors hovered closer, the crumpled pattern of Pettigrew on the
The wizard was on a raised dais, along with the Minister, Dumbledore, and select aurors. Harry himself stood with Hermione and even more aurors who acted as guards near the stairs.

Too close for comfort to those creatures.

The Minister finished intoning his list of the crimes of Peter Pettigrew, though Harry was hardly listening. He was watching the dementor instead, as it leaned over the wizard and began to draw the color out of him.

Hermione gasped and trembled; later, he would need to ask what it was she saw that was so frightening.

Because what he saw was horrifying enough.

When it was over, Harry saw an empty human pattern, the white light sluggishly alive. It's heart still beat, blood still ran through it's veins.

But what remained was not a person any longer.

If there was an afterlife, Pettigrew's soul would never make it there; Harry saw it filtering and digesting inside the magic of the dementor, and fought not to be sick.

No matter how broken a pattern was, it seemed a dementor could still destroy it.

When they left, after what remained of Voldemort had also been Kissed, the press swarmed over them, asking questions, taking pictures. The aurors cleared the way for them, a small bubble of privacy, until the apparition point was reached.

The Headmaster himself was waiting for them, a regal phoenix upon his shoulders whose pattern was distinctly familiar.

Fawkes, whose feather resided in his staff, and also in the wand that the Ministry had just snapped into two distinct pieces in front of the world
before flinging them into a waiting pyre.

The phoenix sang a short song; despite himself, Harry was cheered up a little, his slumped shoulders straightening.

The Headmaster took both their hands, and the phoenix took them all back to Hogwarts.

With no more Tournament and the aftermath of it settled, there was no longer any reason to remain at Hogwarts.

The students exams had been canceled and they were sent home the day before. The castle, empty, was still as full of light and magic as ever.

Harry was sad to leave it.

Hermione, however, was eager. Her parent’s owls had only been getting more worried as time passed. The Dursleys had included their own notes to Harry, all of which hinted that they would be more comfortable if he returned home sooner rather than later.

Both families had been informed of the disastrous outcome of the Tournament, and both were equally unhappy about it.

So when Hermione finished gathering their things, countless notebooks stored carefully inside an expanded and weightless trunk, they made their way downstairs to their scheduled portkey.

Albus Dumbledore had a problem on his hands, and one not easily solved.

What had been destroyed of Tom Riddle the day before was unfortunately not the end of the dark wizard.

He had suspected the wizard had attained some form of immortality; and that had been confirmed four years ago when a soul fragment had possessed one of his professors, and doubly confirmed when another portion had tried to take over the school using a basilisk.
Two confirmed pieces, both dead, and he greatly feared it was not over yet.

But there was only one man who might know for certain how many times Voldemort had split his soul using one of the darkest forms of magic.

And Dumbledore had to convince the coward to tell him.

If not for the dead students already weighing on his conscious, he might have been more gentle.

If not for the two dead pieces of a soul already dispatched, he might have been more diplomatic.

"I know you know, Horace. Even if you've hidden it from yourself."

And when the former potions professor stammered and blubbered and begged, Albus Dumbledore did what had to be done to help preserve lives and perhaps wizarding Britain itself.

And when he pushed through to view the true memory of what happened one night so many decades ago, he had the answer to the question he had been turning over in his mind for so long.

Seven. Seven times, the magical number. The goal of Voldemort, if he had been able to attain it.

Seven.

Which meant there were five more pieces to find and destroy.

Crouch had the last orders of his Master, ones given in the dark of night when he first reunited with the Dark Lord.

If everything was lost, if they were thwarted, if the impossible happened and their enemies struck them down once again.

There were two more ways to continue the righteous struggle.
The first was supposed to lay in Malfoy Manor, in the care of Lucius Malfoy.

But Lord Malfoy and his precious Manor both were under the guard of aurors, the first of suspected Death Eater activity, and the second for housing multiple dark artifacts that had been found on an abrupt search after the Tournament.

That left Gaunt House and the many wards that bound the item he was to search for.

It took Crouch a week and a great deal of experimentation to finally get to the ring; a golden band with a simple triangular black stone inset in it.

But once he had it, he heard his Master's voice again, inside his head instead of out of it, and it whispered to him what else he must do.

Harry's toes were bruised from colliding with the concrete stairs that lead to the London school. His elbow smarted from hitting a door; his shins were in pain from walking directly into a desk made of what must have been plastic composite or some form of particle board.

It was enough to make him resort to mild cushioning charms on his clothing in self-defense.

He had forgotten how dark the muggle world was, surrounded by the purple stones of Hogwarts.

And most of all, he had forgotten how magic moved outside of all the laws of nature and science he had learned in his youth.

At Hogwarts, the world consisted of wondrous light and mystery, new discoveries around every corner, so many books to listen to and professors to experiment with.

But in the stark reality of the muggle world, Harry could see more clearly than ever that things truly did not make sense between the worlds.

Magic followed magical laws; or, at least, most of the time. Science
followed scientific laws, at least until they were disproven. Both sets of laws discovered by men and women, magical and mundane alike, over centuries of experimentation and thought.

But taken together, at the same time, both violated one another spectacularly.

Even something as simple as basic transfiguration principles did not seem to correlate with physical laws. Before going to Hogwarts, Harry had spent a great deal of time with Hermione focusing on Transfiguration, how it was done and why, where the excess energy and force might go when transforming something larger into something smaller; and where the extra might come from when changing a mouse into a cup.

His urge to find out why magic worked had, ironically, faded at Hogwarts. But now, confronted with his own limitations, his drive had returned.

But in order to focus on such things, he had to officially graduate from the London secondary school and free up his days.

His advisor was thrilled that Harry was moving on; even as he was extremely curious about Harry's time at Hogwarts and what had come out of it.

"A lot of study." Harry summed up the experience in a brief sentence. He hadn't been able to say more when he left other than the standard Ministry line that he had been accepted into an 'exclusive boarding school in Scotland.'

"They have a wondrous library."

He would miss that the most, after his expanded sight.

And after a few more minutes of polite conversation, it was done, and Harry walked out of the muggle school for the last time as a student.

Hermione jumped back into mundane school with a fervor, eager to put all that had happened at Hogwarts behind her.
It was odd, not having Harry with her in the halls, not meeting him for lunch in the cafeteria. Odder still to not meet him in the library to study in the afternoon period, or listen to him rant on one subject or another that was taking place.

But after school, Harry was usually waiting for her.

The black-haired teenager was focused on figuring out a way to bring science and magic together. Hermione wasn't sure why he bothered; neither world could ever really understand the other unless both had all the facts.

The day wizards learned muggle science would be the day muggles learned of the wizarding world's existence.

In other words, never.

"Never say never." Harry said gently, when she said as much. "I think magic is the property science is missing; the chaotic element that changes the base facts, rewrites the equation time and again. From my research, I would say in the last fifty years muggles have come close to discovering magic all on their own. What would wizards do then, I wonder?"

"Obliviate the scientists who discovered it?" Hermione muttered, thinking of past 'accidents' and the Ministry response, and then just how much technology had changed. Would obliviation even work at all on such a large scale?

Harry laughed at her words, and returned to his experiments.

At the end of the summer, Viola James released her research in controversial papers on the basic rules of transfiguration, challenging the ability to transfigure things permanently in any way. She stated that a rat was always a rat, which is why turning it into a cup could only be temporary. She stated that air was always air; which was why adding it to a rat when transfiguring it into a chair would last at most seven to ten hours, depending on the amount of magic spent on the transformation.

She claimed that magic was the fuel source in such transfigurations, and
that magic, when burned, gave the ability to change the basic pattern of one thing into a likeness of another, but still left traces of the original pattern even when the physical aspects completely agreed that the act was perfect. That magically, the rat was still a rat even when it was a cup, with thoughts and urges that it could not act upon while stuck in the cup pattern. That a cup, transfigured into a rat, only followed the instincts of a rat’s pattern but had no more intelligence than a cup.

She claimed this was why the animagus transformation was possible; a human still had a human pattern, even when physically they copied a feline pattern down to the minutest detail. She claimed that these pattern would leak over time, leaving an animal stamp upon a human pattern even when in human form. Viola concluded that, if any human spent a great deal of time in a different pattern, whether that of an animal or an inanimate object, the pattern might also leak onto their original human pattern, giving the human characteristics of the foreign pattern.

This was why an experienced witch could transform herself into a table, and still be aware of the world around her, and even transform herself back on command, something a true table would never be capable of as it possesses no brain. This was why an animagus or human transfigured into an animal could overcome animal instincts and be capable of complex thoughts outside of the animal brain, even when using animal neurology.

She added in the existence of intelligent spirits and poltergeists; how they were all remnants of human or magical patterns that survived the death of the original body, fueled by the magic of the places they haunt.

Souls, Viola James claimed, were only patterns unique to every living thing, human and animal and plant. Patterns that existed outside of a physical body, which was why changing the physical did not alter the base patterns thoughts and feelings. It was why changing the physical was temporary. It was why sustenance of any kind did not transfigure well or at all but could be duplicated with ease.

This explained why Gamp’s Law of Elemental Transfiguration worked, and yet had exceptions.

Finally, Viola James concluded that none of her hypotheses could be truly
proven unless one had the ability to see or otherwise detect such patterns.

And in response to the paper, both the Board of Transfiguration and the Board of Transmigration Studies insisted on meeting Viola James in person to congratulate her on her superior research and flawless experimentation.

And like every time before, they were denied.

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Harry sat back in Hermione's chair, looking over Hiss as the feline reclined on his girlfriend's bed.

*Girlfriend.* Though Hermione held his hand, hugged him, kissed him, labeling her a girlfriend simply did not compute well. It seemed too juvenile; too temporary, too easy.

*Simply not good enough.*

She was, of course, a *girl* and his *friend*. Technically it was correct. He supposed an outsider would even say they *dated*, as they went many places together both during their research and their free time. They were best friends who really liked each other. Who were more than friends.

He tried to think of it from a scientific perspective, as he would approach a problem. His heart pounded sometimes when she was near, or his palms sweated, or his mouth would go dry; all signs of adrenaline and increased blood levels. He enjoyed her presence more than any other person or thing; it literally brought him joy to be near her. Would that be dopamine or serotonin? Oxytocin or vasopressin?

Was love literally just a combination of chemicals in the body?

"It doesn't make sense, Harry."

Hermione's voice brought him from his thoughts; he turned to look toward her light as it paced across the shadowy carpet floor.

He smiled, raising a brow, and heard her growl under her breath.

"Viola's latest paper. Or at least, it doesn't because we have Hiss. If you're
right, then Hiss is really just a combination of air and stone patterns, forced into a cat pattern. He's not really a cat. Then why, after so long, is he still a cat? It would mean in reality we did not make a cat at all, but a… a, magical construct."

Harry looked back at the brown pattern as it stretched lazily across the lighter brown cotton bedspread, speaking softly.

"When I made a dragon out of stone, it was a magical construct. It was stone, and a shoddy job at that as the stone was so obvious. When we made Hiss, we completely overwrote the previous patterns into a feline pattern. Its color and shape alike are perfection."

Hermione stomped one foot.

"Then why doesn't every transfiguration work that way? It makes no sense."

Harry's smile faded into a frown.

"The conclusion I have come to is that the witches and wizards cannot see patterns. They see the physical, and so they manipulate the physical elements, not the soul, of an item. With the help of advanced runic structures and the cooperation of several participants, they can make the physical transfiguration deeper, influencing its soul, so that the magic lasts longer. But it never quite changes it. This is why the Ministry tests of our previous papers on transfiguration did prolong the transformation past the standard day, but didn't last more than a month. Hiss here has passed his year mark."

Hermione hovered closer to him, her hands seeming to flicker as they made a gesture he could not follow.

"Because only you can see patterns that we know of."

"Yes." Harry agreed, and Hermione continued.

"Then that means you are an exception to the conclusions you just presented in this paper."
"Yes." Harry nodded, and looked back at the cat.

Hermione sat beside him, one hand warm as it touched his own, their light flickering together as they touched.

"What does that mean?" She asked, and Harry's frown deepened.

He looked away from her as he spoke.

"Science itself isn't rules men have declared absolute; true science is a search for truth. It's a way of organizing what we know and making it all make sense collectively. I fit in there somewhere, Hermione, I just haven't figured out how yet. I'm like one rogue element in a formula, making the results of every equation I try change. My vision makes every charm and curse and spell have the potential to turn out differently than the norm. It's throwing off my own experiments; but at the same time, it gives me the opportunity to more accurately understand what is happening, if I can only figure it out. I'm not describing this right."

Harry paused, shook his head. "I'm not breaking any rules. Magic isn't, either. It's taken me all summer to figure that out. There is reason and rationality and rules to all magic can do, just like there is with everything the muggles have figured out so far in nature. What we call magic is simply another force to consider mathematically, one whose limiting factors have not all been discovered. More complicated than most, of course, because I am almost positive that if there is some sort of math to it, it is capable of changing based on the user and how it is used, or, better put, its environmental factors."

Harry turned to face her, holding both her hands in his.

"But that's speculation. For me, it means that I am capable of changing one type of soul into another. I can change a rat into a cup and make it a cup in every way that matters. I can make a dog into a cat, a tree into a stone, water into fire." He took a deep breath. "I can make a dead tree live again. Quickening, I've decided to call it. Putting natural movement back into a still pattern. I've done it once before already, a long time ago, and did not even know what I was doing at the time."
Hermione's lights flickered; shock, maybe. Her heart's rhythm jumping and speeding up. Harry looked over her beautiful light and held her tightly as he prepared to admit what had only just begun to occur to him as he followed his research to its full conclusion.

"And though I haven't experimented yet, I believe I can make a pattern die, stealing the movement from it, the magic that fuels its life. Using my own magic to change its live pattern to a dead one. The excess force, or fuel, distributed into the air, would be able to be gathered if one could see it. In theory."

Hermione's hands felt cold and clammy now; her breath fast. She tugged her arms, and Harry let her go.

She stood, and he knew she was looking down at him, could feel her eyes even if he couldn't see them.

She was silent a long moment, and then she cleared her throat.

"In t-theory, then. Would this work with h-human patterns?"

Harry was already stiff with anxiety; at the question he had expected, he didn't flinch, though the unconscious renewal of her stutter betrayed how deeply the thought disturbed her.

"Depending on environmental factors, yes. The human pattern goes... elsewhere, sometimes in a matter of seconds, other times in hours or days. While a tree's dead pattern only slows to a stop and can be easily restarted, humans have both the base white light of their human body, and the unique pattern of their souls. The soul disappears, except when it changes into a spirit. If the pattern is only in the process of fading, then yes, I believe I could make it live again. If it is gone, then no, it would have to be completely reconstructed, which seems impossible at this point without a great deal of familiarity with the pattern in question. What would be easier would be transmigrating a ghost's pattern into a empty human cadaver and then quickening it."

Hermione made a strangled sound.
"You mean, b-b-bring a ghost b-b-back to l-l-life?!"

"Essentially, yes."

Hermione seemed to jump, she paced across the room and back so quickly. She mumbled under her breath; she snarled to herself.

Then, she snarled at him.

"No one can know about this. It would ruin your l-l-life! What people would w-want from you… I can't… I c-c-can't even imagine!" She threw up blue-violet arms and shouted. "No! I c-c-can imagine! You would be a circus f-freak, or, or some sort of g-god, bringing the dead back to life! You w-w-would be summoned to hospitals, or, or b-brought to dying d-dignitaries bedsides, or traveling around the world putting ghosts into d-dead b-bodies. They would probably be asking you to summon souls back from the afterlife next! R-r-resurrecting M-m-merlin!"

Disgruntled, Hiss jumped from the bed and scrambled from the room as Hermione's voice escalated. Harry stood and tentatively walked closer, holding out his arms in front of him until they collided with her heaving chest.

Flushing, he moved them to the side to draw her into a hug that she reluctantly accepted.

Against her hair, he murmured. "I've thought of some of that. Even the resurrecting part. My experiments have led me to believe in some sort of afterlife that human patterns retreat to." When she stiffened further in his arms, he quickly continued. "Which is why I agree with you. There is no need at present to tell anyone what I might be capable of. I have no desire to be put in that position. I have quite enough fame as it is."

Hermione laughed weakly, leaning into his embrace.

There was a creak at the door, and Harry glanced up to see Mrs. Granger's light standing nearby. Hermione backed away from him with a quick stride.
"Mom! I, ah, we were just..."

Mrs. Granger cut her off. "I heard shouting and was worried something was wrong. Good to see you two have worked it out."

And her steps retreated down the hallway with the flickering movement of a wave.

Hermione sighed.

"Now we've done it. I had her convinced we were just friends."

Harry shifted uneasily.

"Is that a problem...?"

The Dursleys were under no such illusions. Harry hadn't even thought to hide his changing relationship with Hermione from them. Dudley in particular had given him an odd combination of fist bump and high five that Harry hadn't had a clue how to physically respond to.

Hermione's voice was amused.

"Only if you mind. My mother already considers you part of the family; I think she has been dying to get the two of us together for a while now. Expect to be invited to all the family get-togethers now. You'll get to deal with my crazy uncles."

Harry relaxed, and Hermione stepped closer to him. He felt her hand touch his, and by reflex he turned his palm over, clasping their fingers together. She leaned into him again with a sigh.

"I'm sorry, for shouting. I'm just worried."

Harry drew her closer, wrapping his arms around her warm light with a small smile.

He supposed it might be odd, to be glad that she was worried. But it meant she cared, just as he did, enough to value another's well being more than one's own peace of mind.
"It's alright. I've got several experiments planned to explore the phenomenon. When we know more, we can more accurately prepare for what we are dealing with."

Hermione let out a soft laugh and pulled away. Harry felt her hair brush his cheek and neck, and his heart skipped a beat in response.

_Hormones_, he thought dryly, and sighed.

Ludovic Bagman was drunk; good money made in bad ways was always spent easily for him.

And the drink helped him celebrate his success at the art of gambling fortunes on wizarding games of skill.

He never saw the spell that struck him outside the Hog's Head Inn; and when he awoke, he rather wished he was still happy and gloating about goblins, not staring at a potion in a cauldron, bound hand and foot, while a hand held his throat with cold fingers.

But he was not afraid for very long.

Crouch found the graveyard; he gathered the ingredient and retreated with stealth.

He captured an old irritant of his father's, and bound him at the altar.

He stirred the potion counterclockwise with precise, calm movements.

Then, he slit the throat of Ludo Bagman, and let the blood flood into the cast iron cauldron.

His Master hissed his approval; Crouch himself thought it a stroke of brilliance to take the washed out Head of Magical Sports and Games when the wizard thought he was safe in Hogsmeade, right under the nose of the great Albus Dumbledore and the Ministry's aurors.

And now the annoying, boastful bastard was dead, his life going to
resurrect a far superior wizard.

Crouch threw the old bone of Tom Riddle Sr. inside with a plop, the murky red liquid sloshing wildly. He tasted the thick foggy air and sighed in pleasure at the smell of fresh death.

It was now his own turn to give once again to the cause.

"Flesh of the servant." Crouch murmured to himself, and lifted the silver knife to his forearm, laying it over the black mark of his Master.

With a jagged, painful motion, he sawed off the skin of the tattoo, the flesh that most represented what he was and would always be. A snake inside a skull. Cunning unto death.

*Death Eater.*

With a pained and satisfied gasp, he tossed the scrap of marked skin into the cauldron.

Then he lifted the ring high into the air.

"For you, *my Lord!*

And he let it fall.

Later, when Tom Riddle stepped from the cauldron, youthful flesh smooth and pale like death, face oddly misshapen with eyes a deep glowing red, the golden ring rested on his right ring finger like a mark of betrothal.

And to his most faithful servant, he gave a new mark, one that would never be hidden.

Across Bartemius Crouch Jr.'s face, a black tattooed skull grinned in macabre humor, a snake protruding from his lips to curve across one cheek.

At times, it almost seemed to move.
~End of Part Two: To Be Continued~

~*~Review Please!~*~
*Chapter 11*: Brown Soul-Eaters

Angela’s Note: Here is the first chapter of the six chapters in part three! I will post one every two days in the coming weeks until all are up. As for my eyes, my right eye has healed with perfect vision, and my left is only slightly blurry. I have some issues with my retinas causing black spots, but the doctors are hopeful those too will improve with more time. Thank you for all the well-wishes! They made me feel much better about the situation. As always, many thanks to GJMEGA, my beta and coauthor, and I hope everyone enjoys the latest chapter!

GJMEGA’s Note: Hello once again! Once more I must thank Angela for allowing me to work with her on this story. I've never independently authored my own story so I have nothing to compare it to, but coauthoring this story has been both a treat and a great mental challenge. I hope you all enjoy this next part and continue to support both it and Angela’s other work. I also hope to do further collaborations with her in the future.

The Diary had been first; his first true, savored kill, his first time fracturing his soul and shattering it.

The Ring had been second, less than a year later, and Riddle had gained a taste for it, the exquisite pain, the flood of power and strength that came with such Dark Magic.

The strength had faded, but Riddle knew how to gain more of that feeling.

Looking into a mirror for the first time, he beheld the true malevolence of what he had become; though Crouch had expected his twisted appearance, Riddle had not been prepared to see red eyes instead of hazel, split nostrils and gaunt cheeks instead of round, human softness. Though he was younger by decades than his older self had been, the dark magic of the resurrection ritual had twisted his form just as severely. He was no longer a handsome boy; he was a deformed monster.

But he couldn't mourn his lost looks when he had to deal with a lost
empire.

He understood something of what was going on, memories gleaned from the mind of the older wizard who had found him, inevitable conclusions falling into place.

His older self had failed; and not only once, but twice over. He did not know the details that Crouch himself did not know; any hope of regaining the memories of an older horcrux lost with the execution of Voldemort.

Had he made more? Would he ever be able to find out?

He had to regain his past glory; or was it his future glory? He had to grow in strength and take his revenge. He had to become Lord Voldemort once again, not the seventeen year old Tom Riddle who did not even remember graduating from Hogwarts.

He needed his followers; and they were locked away in Azkaban Prison.

A prison guarded by darkness, cold deep darkness, beings that knew the sweet succor of taking a life and making it shred and tear and die.

He had always thought wizarding kind should have thought harder about bargaining with such creatures.

No given meal was as sweet as one taken.

The letter came in the pale blue claws of a large owl.

Harry, of course, couldn't read it. But before he even tried his usual spell to read it aloud, so familiar he could cast it in his sleep, the tan light of the parchment unfurled on its own and began to read itself aloud.

The goblins had always been courteous to him.

What they had to say, however, surprised him greatly.

"Sirius Black's Heir?" Hermione said doubtfully, when he came to her house the next day.
"It seems." Harry replied with a frown. "He left a will, though his estate was frozen while he was considered a criminal. Most of the assets were seized by the Ministry a long time ago, though they couldn't touch the family Vault or properties. I've been granted a sizeable sum in reparations to cover what was taken, though Dripsnout, the Potter Manager who looked over the documents for me, says it does not amount to the total value lost. Nearly all the properties were sold to pay fines to the families who claim Black killed someone of theirs. That hasn't been repaid, and won't be."

"So you've basically inherited a title?" Hermione asked, and he could read the disapproval in her tone.

She never had approved of the aristocracy in any of its forms.

Harry laughed.

"Well, no. There's one house, somewhere in London, and probably a fortune in magical artifacts that couldn't be touched by the Ministry, not to mention the reparations. It's only poor compared to the Potter Estate."

Hermione's light flickered as she appeared to shake her head. Or was she nodding it? It was sometimes hard to tell. Her hair, a wild halo of blue around her head, bounced regardless.

Harry smiled.

"What are you s-smiling about? Happy to be a little richer than all of us poor normal people?" Hermione snapped, and a new voice suddenly entered the conversation.

"Hermione Jane Granger." Mrs. Granger's voice came to them down the hallway. "We are most certainly not poor. Why, your father and I own the Dentistry, and this house. When I think of all the people out on the streets…"

Hermione groaned, her light dimming. Harry only wrapped one arm around her and led her towards the kitchen, where Mrs. Granger was still preaching on the woes of the true poor.
Albus Dumbledore had thought long and hard over the summer about the possible location and form of the five horcruxes whose existence thwarted him.

Based on his own knowledge and memories of the young Tom Riddle and the boys fascination with the Founders of Hogwarts, he could assume some, if not all, of the items were related to the Founders.

But there were very few items that could truly be considered owned by an actual Founder. One was the sword he held in his own office, Basilisk venom coating its goblin-forged blade.

But Albus doubted Riddle would have wanted to use anything of Godric Gryffindor's.

Of Rowena Ravenclaw, only a long-lost diadem was said to exist, an artifact sought after for its ability to increase the intelligence of the wearer.

A talk with several ghosts, most notably Helena Ravenclaw herself, led him on a search of a forest in Albania, only to find that someone had beat him to the hollow tree where the diadem had rested for centuries.

He didn't have to guess who; only where the diadem had been hidden when Tom Riddle was done with it.

Helga Hufflepuff's descendents still lived; and the tale they told him of the departed Hepzibah Smith gave him two important clues. One, that both a cup reputed to be Hufflepuffs and a locket supposedly Slytherins had once been in her possession. The second, that a young wizard surnamed Riddle, who worked at the time at Borgin and Burkes, had been one of the last to see her alive, before disappearing soon after himself.

Three items, all belonging to founders, all hidden in places he could only guess.

The diary had been with a Death Eater; perhaps these three were as well.

Albus began to make more lists; of known followers and their houses, both living and dead.
Of the potential fourth and fifth horcrux, he could only hope they dealt with something from Riddle's past; the orphanage, or his parents.

Then, armed with as much knowledge as he could hope to gather, he called together his companions of the last war, the Order of the Phoenix, and gave to them all the next task they must complete if they ever wanted to have lasting peace again.

But he did not tell them what they sought; only that they were dark artifacts with the potential to resurrect the Dark Lord.

He knew the world did not need anymore people with the knowledge of horcruxes in it.

Crouch told him of old acquaintances; and Riddle made them new once again. He spoke vibrantly of pureblood supremacy and the inheritance of magic; its power, its sacred strength.

With a young man's fire, he ranted of mudblood encroachment, taking the life from their old values, stealing the magic of their children and rendering them squibs.

He repeated the words he had spoken to Albus Dumbledore before the crowds of the Tournament; You cannot kill me, I will never die!

And when he thought he had gathered enough eager minds, he fixed his blood-red eyes upon them and spoke of Azkaban Prison and the force that waited there.

And as a simple afterthought, he remembered the picture that had boldly proclaimed one boy as his conqueror, and thought to eradicate a thorn in his pride as well.

The desperate idea came to Harry as he tediously navigated through the muggle park, seeking his cousin with urgent intent.

The muggle world was so much darker than the magical world; because it lacked that defining brightness, that extra spark of life. The park was
better than some areas, of course; trees and grass at least gave him a floor to stand upon and a horizon to see.

But nothing could compare to the wizarding world's brightness, of magical fauna and flora and the humans themselves, souls possessing something more.

He had several hypotheses he had yet to test on just what that something was.

But he had learned clearly that his own magic, when it altered patterns, when it even touched them, transferred some of his own light to that object. When he was a child, and knew no better, he had accidentally moved things out of his way that he should not have even known where there.

And now, he really, really, needed to recreate that childhood experience.

Dudley had left him an hour earlier to meet his friend in private; Harry had been content to wait, satisfied with observing the world around him, cataloguing any new nuances in familiar patterns, working through problems in his head while his cousin discussed whatever the muggle boy didn't want his cousin or parents to know of.

And it was then that Harry had seen that familiar nauseous pattern, the putrid mix of brown and every other spectrum that screamed dementor.

Soul-Eaters.

And he had known everyone around was in danger, including his cousin. Defenseless against something he could not see, blind as all muggles would be when confronted with creatures of such darkness.

And it was taking him too long to reach Dudley, tripping over plastic partitions, stumbling into rubber swings, knocked flat by composite jungle gyms, the dementors growing closer, the chill of their presence creeping over him.

There was a spell to ward off dementors; but he had never learned it. He
had been too busy with what he thought were more useful pursuits.

*He had to find Dudley.* They had to get *out* of there.

And in desperation, Harry flung out his magic in front of him, thinking of himself when he was a blind child in a world he did not understand, stamping his light upon everything and everyone in an effort to gain some form of mastery.

And he saw the next set of swings; emerald light sparkling in their curved seats as they floated with the low level levitation charm.

Yes.

Harry felt a grim smile twist his lips; and for the first time in his life, he stretched his legs out into a careless run, a constant stream of magic flowing ahead of him, seeking, searching for his target, as he dodged obstacles right and left.

*He had to reach them first.*

Dudley leaned against the fence with a confident swagger.

Across from him, Piers rolled his eyes.

"Man, you can't be serious. Not even a little?"

Dudley's smile was sharp.

"I told you already, I'm *done* with that scene. Allison's dad's a copper, and she's the nicest piece I've ever had. She's invited me to her parents cabin next week with her family. You think any of that will happen if I take a hit?"

Piers scowled.

"All of this over some girl. You used to be fun."

Dudley straightened with a scowl of his own, his bulk putting him at a far greater advantage than the one Piers, scrawny and tall, had.
He opened his mouth to speak; then he caught sight of something decidedly odd.

The swings across the fence were levitating.

His mouth still open, his eyes saw them rise one by one; then a bright red seesaw levered in the opposite direction with a loud bang.

The hairs on his skin rose; he felt a chill where he stood under a suddenly cloudy sky.

"What the hell…?" Piers muttered, swinging around.

And both of them saw the large dome of metal monkey bars break and bend in nearly elegant lines as a single form raced through the middle of it at a breakneck pace.

Green eyes locked on them.

"Dudley! Run!"

He didn't have to be told twice; if it made his cousin run like that, using magic in broad daylight outside, he didn't see the point in asking why.

He needed help, and he needed it fast.

His lungs burned; his magic was weakening from the constant stream of levitation around him. Ahead, Dudley and Piers' patterns jerked and flickered, blind panic in the second boy's voice as he shouted questions at his friend.

Dudley didn't answer, save to repeat Harry's command to run.

But the dementors were drawing closer; Harry felt them at his back, cold fingers at his nape.

And they were simply too far from the main streets. Only mere minutes had passed; and the dementors showed no sign of slackening their pace.
He had to face the facts as they were lining up; the dementors were after him specifically, and worse still, the aurors whose patterns he had seen following him ever since the Tournament, silent unofficial guards, were nowhere to be found.

And Harry was positive the Trace was still not active on his magical signature. He had performed too much magic with no repercussions.

*Help wouldn't be coming.*

"Dudley." Harry panted, and saw Dudley's pattern slow. "Keep… going. Call... *Hermione.* Tell her... *dementors. Ministry.*" Harry felt a slight pain at his side; a flick of magic soothed the ache.

"*Hurry.*"

"But..." His cousin began, but Harry was slowing.

"*Go! Now!*" Harry barked, and turned, facing the poison in the air.

The patterns, two of them, twisted and brown, sucking in the light from everything around them, even some of his own green from where it lay in levitation charms.

*They can eat magic, too, then.* The useless scientist in him made note. *Or perhaps it is the emotion used when casting the magic. Fear, anxiety, frustration.*

"I suppose it's time to test another of my hypotheses." Harry said aloud, looking over the dementors. He stood tall, his staff in front of him, searching for calm, searching for peace.

But the brown patterns seemed determined to draw out every negative emotion and memory he had ever had.

Distantly, he heard a woman scream his name, loud, agonized, *terrified*. His heart skipped a beat.

They made a sound; a pleased hiss. Harry saw deeper emerald creeping into the muddy mix of colors, his own strength becoming theirs, and a core
of anger rose inside him.

"No." Harry snarled, and he gathered his light and latched onto their pattern.

Then, he made the movement of the brown light stop, and it was not a woman whose scream tore the air in two.

There was a very good reason no aurors had been watching Harry Potter that day at the end of summer; only an hour before the dementors appeared in Surrey, Death Eaters attacked Azkaban Prison in force, seeking to free their incarcerated sympathizers.

For Rufus Scrimgeour, that hour passed like the blink of eye; orders given and followed, constant updates, all available personnel being called in, sending reinforcements to certain apparition points, beefing up security in various Alleys in case the Prison was a decoy attack for some other more devious plan.

But his preparations of the last year had not been done in vain.

Britain was ready to face the threat; and though they sustained casualties, it was the Death Eater forces who lost the battle and died in droves.

The convicted Death Eaters that had not died in the revolt were being rounded up for execution; the time for half-measures was long past.

Another statement would be made.

And the dementors, which had turned traitorous, were even now being rounded up for banishment.

He had never really liked the beasts anyway.

"Sir!"

His aide piped up, nervous voice quivering. *Weasley.*

Rufus turned slightly, one eyebrow raising in question.
The freckled man quickly spoke. "One more incoming alert. Disturbance reported in Surrey, um, Harry Potter…"

One name, no more, and it was enough to galvanize Rufus into action again. One target, the most important one of all. He should have thought of that first; of course, it was so obvious. With Potter defenseless, the Death Eaters would take their opportunity to attack.

"Tell me on the way." Rufus ordered, and began to stride towards the lifts.

Hermione hadn't wasted time when she listened to Dudley's frantic call. She went immediately to the emergency portkey provided for her by her tutor, in case of any magical emergency, to take her directly to St. Mungo's.

There, she told the front desk clerk her urgent message, and had it delivered to the Ministry.

It would be hours before they remembered her, and an auror was sent to pick her up to return her home.

Harry tore out the yellow first; a girl's soul, bright like a flower, dead in its youth and innocence. Then he took the orange and the reds, magical creatures that might have been goblins or perhaps only wizards with such ancestors.

The pattern, its sickly brown light frozen in some semblance of death, revolted him. And because he would not leave it alone, where it might possibly reanimate, he had decided to destroy it utterly instead.

He reached for the brown and shredded it, pulling out the loose colors like unraveling a tapestry piece by piece. A blue one; a green; pale and dark, so many, hundreds, thousands of souls, all trapped and spun together and lost. He ripped into it with all the emerald light he had, angry at something that had stolen the beauty from the world and made it ugly.

Also, a little curious, and a little bored, and the adrenaline from his wild search for Dudley still pumped through his veins so he had to do
He chose to destroy, so destroy he did, but in a very scientifically thorough manner.

He had confirmed two theories already, after all. He had proved that he could use basic spells in order to see obstacles in his way, and he had proved that he could make something die by freezing the natural movement within a pattern.

That made it a productive day.

With a small smile on his lips, Harry grabbed a long thread of deep purple and pulled it free, watching it shimmer and glisten as it floated into the air, shimmering into a white hue before fading away to some other place, where all the colors go when they die.

Then, the aurors arrived, the Minister himself with them, and Harry had to answer some very difficult questions.

Dementors could not just be killed with a spell; Rufus knew this for a fact.

They could be banished to the sea; they could be repelled and forced to flee. They could be enslaved or bargained with. They were rumored to fade away if advanced age was attained, which was why the world was not overrun with them.

But they couldn't be killed.

Which was why none made a move when they arrived in Surrey and saw Harry Potter, tall staff held in hands that glowed with green light, in the process of tearing apart what could only be a dementor's carcass.

It was an ugly, twisted thing; The black tattered cloak fallen away, grey skin stretched tight over bones that were not entirely human nor animal, jagged things with sharp angles.

There were two carcasses, one of which looked flayed open, long strips of skin gone, some bones vanished, pieces of its cloak ripped loose and cast
And as they watched, Harry Potter turned blind eyes to them, green orbs glowing slightly just as his hands were, an odd smile on his face.

"It appears that the souls are used as fuel to keep their forms corporeal and alive, assimilated shoddily into their physical body, and even their clothing."

Rufus felt a shiver go down his spine at the calm, calculating words. Then, the boy shrugged.

"I'm sorry if my cousin was quite panicked when he sent his message. I was not certain I could deal with them on my own, but... it seems they are not quite immortal after all."

And to the Minister's surprise, one of the aurors on his right barked out a laugh.

Harry could not tell them how he did it; though he knew the Minister was not an ignorant man, and probably guessed that there was nothing accidental about him killing the dementors. That Harry broke the Statute by using magic in front of Piers Polkiss was waved off after a quick oblivation charm and a promise that Harry would act more discreetly in the future.

The Minister, instead, apologized for the lack of auror guard, and explained some of the difficulties that the Ministry had faced that day.

"You'll read all about it in the papers, of course." The man concluded, and Harry shrugged. He was certain the papers wouldn't label it a difficulty; probably more like a fierce battle for the freedom of wizards and witches everywhere.

"Were all the Death Eaters caught?" Harry asked, and saw the Minister's pattern, a strong greenish-yellow thing he knew would be called chartreuse, pulse with pride.

"Nearly. I must return now, for more reports. If you are quite safe to return
home yourself…?"

Harry lifted one shoulder and smiled.

"I'm not alone. You've already set more of your men on me."

The Minister laughed; but he didn't deny it.

It would be bad for Britain, after all, to lose its savior.

Hermione was distraught; the only thing that distracted her from her panicked relief that he was not a soul-less husk was him demonstrating his new form of "sight".

"I'm... n-not sure what to s-say." She finally mumbled, observing a room of floating objects. "It's a bit... noticeable."

Harry laughed.

"Levitation was the first thing I thought of. Imbuing normal, shadowy objects with magic to make them visible to me. Color charms should work as well, though I cannot know what color I make them. Any low-level spell would work, though used too long and it will wear me out."

Hermione folded her arms.

"Any spell would be commented on in public. This would only work if you are alone."

"I'm going to practice. Find a way to make it less spectacular." Harry answered her, and saw her pattern gleam.

"You're sure you're a-alright?" She asked softly, and Harry stepped forward, carefully pulling her into his arms.

"Perfectly fine. It seems a test was in order, that's all."

Hermione laughed brokenly, shaking her head.
"Only you would call an attack by rogue d-d-dementors trying to kill you a test."

"Experiment, then?" He teased, and she growled.

"Experiment like that again, a-a-and I'll…"

Harry cut her off, lifting her chin to place his lips on hers in a long kiss.

When he lifted his head away, she was silent for a moment.

Then she hissed at him. "D-don't think I'll get distracted by physical affection!"

Harry grinned.

Then he decided he ought to test her conclusion, in the name of science of course, and kissed her again.

~*~Review Please!~*~
Riddle did not understand what had gone wrong.

The plan had seemed so solid; and with the dementors on their own side, flawless. The initial assault had gone as planned; wizards on brooms, the dementors turning upon the auror guards among them at the signal.

But there had been far more guards than Crouch remembered his father speak of; and the aurors that had been called from the interior floos had been prepared and ready in formation to defend with vicious measures.

There had been no simple binding spells and defensive maneuvers, no Hogwarts-grade spells to petrify or stun. The Ministry aurors had aimed to debilitate and kill; and their fire had been burning bright to get their own revenge for their brethren lost during the Tournament.

His Death Eaters had not stood a chance. Riddle had watched them die in droves from his broom; and then saw the auror wands turn upon the prisoners with riotous intent of their own, the bloodlust upon them as dark as any he had seen in his own followers.

Almost, it seemed the aurors were the true Death Eaters, and the witches and wizards who followed himself heedless victims in the face of their fury.

Crouch had quietly read him the list of known casualties, the wizard's voice thick with disbelief.

Of the thirty who had attacked, only seven returned. Of the nearly four dozen imprisoned Death Eaters, only ten had actually been freed from their cells, and they had all been struck down before they could flee the black stone castle.

Tom Riddle was now Lord of only five men and two women. Anyone else who might have joined him if he had succeeded had changed their mind the moment Rufus Scrimgeour had boldly announced the Ministry's overwhelming victory, and the subsequent Daily Prophet articles that had compared all of Riddle's efforts of the last months to the mere yapping of
a dying crup; the last baying sounds of a creature nearly dead, a movement nearly vanquished to the annuls of history.

*How had he done it in his future? How had Lord Voldemort risen to such heights?*

*What had he learned that had made him so feared, so respected, so powerful?*

*And how could he possibly recreate his own self?*

"We have had no news about the dementors set on Potter." Crouch finished finally, the black mark on his face moving with each word. "But as nothing was said regarding an attack, we can only assume the Ministry prevented it, as well."

Riddle waved one hand in petulant dismissal. "Who cares about that blasted boy, when the attack on the prison failed? I'll never understand why I wasted everything trying to kill him when I already had all I needed in my grasp! I could have destroyed the Ministry within weeks! I could have taken Hogwarts itself!"

The thought drew him, of having the revered castle under his control. His home, really; and Salazar's Chamber underneath, the perfect throne for an Heir.

*Dreams, all lost. All because his older self had tried and failed to kill an infant; and later, insisted on targeting the boy instead of using a more suitable specimen for the resurrection ritual like he himself had done.*

Crouch licked his lips nervously.

"My Lord, you were very eager in your pursuit of him. It was… a preoccupation."

More like a rabid addiction, by all accounts. Riddle had begun to wonder if perhaps his future self had delved too deeply in the darker magics and gone insane.
And he would never know.

"Some even whispered that you were aware of the boy's potential to defeat you; that you sought to kill him as an infant instead, but... failed."

Crouch ended the last with a cringing wince, as if expecting some blow.

Riddle detested the way they all acted as if he might harm them at a words dissent. Was he a fool, to surround himself with fools, who had to be whipped in order to obey?

And Crouch's words had merit. Had his older self somehow known what was going to happen?

It threw his erratic actions in an entirely new light.

Riddle sat up straighter in his chair from the slump he had been in before. A new possible direction to go in; and perhaps an answer.

Maybe it had not been his own fault at all; maybe there was simply something special about that boy that unraveled all of his plans.

"That would make far more sense than simply trying to eradicate the Potter family. Look into it for me; we certainly have little else to do for the next few months, with the Ministry dogs hounding our every step."

"So you have a house now?" Dudley asked casually, as Harry sat at the bar in the Dursley kitchen watching his aunt's pattern flicker to and fro in food preparation.

He had been attempting to test a new hypothesis; simply infusing his magic into objects, making them visible, without actually enchanting them to do anything.

It had seemed to work; he could see the plastic utensils and corian counters in vivid green detail.

But when he spread it out statically around him in a sphere, his light inevitably also infused the human patterns as well.
It had a decidedly odd effect on his aunt; she seemed to have a sudden burst of energy and a craving for homemade cookies, puttering about the kitchen like a fiend.

And her pattern, if he was not mistaken, was actually feeding off his own energy, drawing it faster than the mild influence of the plastic composites.

Like a mild drug, Harry mused, stimulating the senses. Increasing already present feelings, in this case hunger, but also equally affecting energy levels so that the elevated desires can be met.

*Is it always hunger? Would...?*

"Harry?"

He blinked, turning slightly to observe Dudley where the boy sat. The soft green imprint of Harry’s own magic lit the boy’s natural hues, making his form more distinct to his sight.

"Yes?" He asked, and saw with fascination as something like a frown seemed to alter a mouthlike shape on his cousin’s face.

He had never been able to see facial expressions before; but this close, his green light managed to fill in normally opaque details.

*Not perfect; but if he increased the amount of magic released closer to his body…*

"Mum said you inherited a house."

His cousin’s voice was slightly impatient; Harry nodded.

"Yeah, seems so."

"And…?" Dudley questioned, and it was Harry’s turn to frown.

"And what?"

Dudley rolled his eyes; Harry saw the gesture with fascination, round orbs seeming to rotate in an open skull.
*Wait, skull?* He was certain that was not right. Not only was his cousin large framed and cheeked, one's bones were never that sharply defined with muscular structure.

A slight flicker of his magic altered his vision again, the sight of a skull fading away, replaced with the smooth lines of a green cheek.

Only, the eyes were now empty hollows of color.

Dudley leaned closer, and the macabre sight of an eyeless emerald face drew near.

His cousin's voice dropped to a whisper.

"You know, have you taken Hermione there…?"

From the kitchen, Harry was abruptly aware of the sound of his aunt's movements. He let the magical expenditure of his test fade away, his cousin's form collapsing to the gentle swirling pulses of the muggle pattern he was accustomed to.

Harry gestured away from the bar and stepped off the stool, moving toward the empty living room before turning to hiss at his cousin.

"Quiet! You want aunt Petunia on my case now like she's on yours? Of course I haven't taken her there. I haven't even been there myself."

Dudley snorted in disappointment.

"Seriously? You have access to an empty, private place and haven't taken advantage of it? I would *kill* for…"

Harry reached out to idly swat his cousin's arm.

"Stop it. I don't… I mean, I haven't really thought…" Harry drifted off.

Well, of course he had thought of, well, *things*. Who doesn't? But he had never even considered trying to bring Hermione to some abandoned London house.
First off, she would be far too busy exploring for any books or magical artifacts to bother making out.

Secondly, there was every likelihood he would be right beside her digging around for anything interesting.

And thirdly, it would be just his luck if the place was either about to fall in on itself, or cursed with some sort of odd spells or magical creatures.

Still, now that he really thought about it, he did need to see if there was anything interesting over there, and of course Hermione would insist on going with him…

Dudley laughed.

"Well, you're thinking now! Go for it, man. She's really changed since last summer, you know. That new thing she's doing with her hair…" Dudley suddenly stopped, awkward. "That is, she's ah, tamed it a bit. And I think those parents of hers must have fixed her teeth, too, or maybe it was a spell, but they're not nearly as, ah… noticeable…"

Harry shrugged casually; but inside his heart sank.

He hadn't ever seen her hair or her teeth. He knew the former was brown only because Dudley had told him so years ago.

And it had never bothered him before to not know.

But did it bother her, that he couldn't notice such changes she made? She had never even mentioned problems with her teeth or that she had gotten work done.

"Yeah." He said simply, and left it at that.

Hermione frowned at where Harry stood, leaning against one wall, his staff propped against his shoulder while his hands absently twisted the fabric of his green shirt.

His aunt always dressed him in green, black, or grey button down shirts;
with black trousers. Hermione wondered if Harry had ever even bothered to state a preference, or if he was content to simply let Petunia buy all his clothing.

Then again, according to Harry, all clothing was usually brown, green, or shadowy black, with the exception of magical clothing which might bear the stamp of a spell pattern or innate magical characteristics.

"Why did you change your hair?"

The question startled her; she looked up from her study of his dragonhide boots and her thoughts of what it would be like to see fire patterns on one's feet.

"What?"

Harry's mouth turned down in what was nearly a frown, only his eyes seemed to smile. She had long gotten used to the fact that Harry's expressions did not always show his true feelings; he couldn't observe the minute details other people's body language, so often his own did not match.

"Dudley told me you changed your hair, and... well, your teeth."

She resisted the urge to raise a hand to cover her mouth; her overly large front teeth had been a source of contention from her earliest memories. Too many mean nicknames, and too many laughing gestures.

In a moment of vanity before the Yule Ball, she had fixed them herself; then had to deal with her parents extreme disapproval at the tactic.

As dentists, they did not like to see how easy it was for magic to put them out of business.

But she never even thought Harry would notice. It hadn't been done for him; rather, for the girls who glared at her because she had him on her arm.

"I did."
Now, Harry’s eyes frowned too.

"Why?" He insisted, with the same expression he would have worn when questioning the legitimacy of a difficult puzzle.

Hermione wrinkled her nose.

"Why *not*? Because I could."

Harry blinked at her.

"But why does the size of your teeth or your hair matter?"

Hermione reminded herself that she was talking to a boy who did not even care what color clothing he wore. Also, he was a boy, and according to her mother, they would never understand the fine arts of beautification.

"I wanted to look different." She wouldn’t say pretty, because that sounded silly. "It’s not like I had surgery."

Harry folded his arms, moving the staff to his opposite shoulders with liquid grace.

"Why would you want to look different?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "What’s gotten into you today? I thought we were going to practice new means of sight."

Harry’s eyes remained fixed somewhere on her right cheek; not looking to the side or wavering in the slightest.

"I just want to understand why you would change your physical appearance." He finally said, and Hermione sighed.

"People do it all the time. For convenience, to blend in, to be popular; all kinds of reasons. I’ve never liked my front teeth, and my hair is frankly impossible to deal with at times. Magic allows me to change both far easier than any muggle means I’ve ever used. Why the sudden questions? You’ve never cared before."
At that, Harry finally looked away, down at his boots, his wild black hair mostly covering the scars that ran across his face.

"I don't know. I... don't understand. I never would have known you changed anything if Dudley hadn't mentioned it."

Hermione stood and crossed to him, a frown of her own on her face.

"What is this really about?"

Harry was silent a long moment; then, finally, he looked up again, a slow raising of his head, his eyes moving from her toes to her face with leisure.

From any other boy, she would have flushed with embarrassment at such a look; but there was something about the way Harry looked at her, with such reverent admiration, that made her only feel beautiful instead.

"I've never cared because there was no reason to care about something I can not control. But now, I... I want more. I want to see you as other people see you; I want to know everything about you, not hear about it from my cousin. I... I want to know when you're sad or happy by more than the way your heart pulses in patterns of light." Harry's eyes paused at her face, and Hermione felt something; a rush of energy flooding her veins, more than just his words should have invoked; it was invigorating. He raised a hand, and to her surprise, he cupped her face without fumbling, and his vivid green eyes seemed to run across her cheeks and nose and back again, then down to her mouth. "I want to see your teeth when you smile." He murmured, leaning closer, and in reaction she couldn't help but smile.

He froze, and the energy she was feeling doubled, making her shake in his hold. His eyes flickered back up to hers, and for the first time she met his eyes full-on, and felt her heart race in reaction.

"Y-you can see?" Hermione breathed, and Harry's eyes smiled into hers.

"I've been practicing, with Dudley and my aunt. I didn't want to try on you until I was sure." He said, before a crease formed between his brows. "It's not perfect, not yet. Everything is green, my own soul's color, for one. And
details tend to be off... well, with more practice, that can be solved. But placing my magic into people takes a greater toll than placing it into objects, and it has side effects."

"Increased energy." Hermione whispered in wonder, and Harry grinned, his thumb moving across her cheek with soft a caressing motion.

"Yes, and I hypothesize an increased desire for whatever temptations plague a person. My aunt has gained two pounds since I started practicing, she practically shrieked it from the scale in the bathroom. Uncle Vernon leaves for work early, or works on his portfolio. Dudley calls his girlfriend, or goes off to meet her, or talks about her and other..." Harry drifted off, then shook his head, his hands falling away, leaving her skin feeling oddly cold.

Then, he stepped back, and the energy she had been feeling sapped from her.

But her heart still raced, and she found herself leaning towards him.

"...it doesn't matter. I wanted to surprise you." He finished awkwardly. Hermione stepped closer to him, putting them nearly nose to nose.

"It's brilliant, Harry! Just what you've been wanting for so long!" She insisted, confused when he did not look as happy as she was. "Aren't you glad you've been able to make it work? And without using levitation charms or noticeable spells?"

Harry nodded his head; but he still hadn't smiled. His eyes flickered up to her face again, focusing between her eyes.

"But I won't be able to use it all the time; it makes me feel drained to use it too often, or too long. Does it matter to you that I sometimes won't be able to see you?"

Hermione huffed in dismissal.

"Honestly, Harry, you c-can see me. You can pick me from a crowd of hundreds in hardly a second. You said I'm unique. What does it matter if you can't see the color of my blasted clothes, or the shape of my nose."
You can see human souls. You can study magic on a level I can only dream of; I would give up my own sight in a s-s-second to have a glimpse of what you can see of the world." Harry gaped at her; Hermione poked a stiff finger into his chest for emphasis, gratified when he winced. "And don't go looking like a kicked puppy again because your lady-chasing cousin tells you I cut my hair or pierced my ears or some sort. If I want you to know about it, I'll tell you myself."

Harry rubbed his chest; and with a spike of energy, his eyes roved over her face, lingering on her stern expression.

He slowly smiled; and the sight of it tried to take her breath away.

"I would know if you pierced your ears anyway." He said softly, grinning. "and I would never let you try to trade normal sight for what I have. It's very inconvenient at times." Hermione snorted at that; she doubted anyone but Harry would call his disability simply inconvenient.

Harry took her hand in his and leaned even closer, voice dropping to a whisper.

"Now, with that cleared up; do you want to explore an abandoned wizarding manor with me?"

Hermione blinked at the quick change in subject; then, she smiled with eagerness.

"You don't even have to ask."

Grimmauld Place was very dark and gloomy to Hermione; she muttered as much to him more than once, while groaning about cobwebs and brandishing her wand to fight off the layers of dust that flew into the air as soon as the old wooden entrance was opened.

To Harry, the place sparkled with centuries worth of magic, every color of the rainbow that he could see, nearly as vibrant as Hogwarts. The green wooden floors were old enough that any movement to their patterns had long since stilled; and the old plaster upon the walls gleamed with pinpricks
of purple earth mixed with the many brown threads of animal components.

Ahead, a large portrait dominated the hallway, the unique deep brown signature of expensive silk curtains beside it hinting at the wealth the Black's once possessed.

The portrait held within its painted hues the faint echo of a human pattern, the mimicry of a soul's personality and no-doubt appearance.

He had found wizarding portraits both fascinating and disturbing; that a spell could copy a soul's pattern onto canvas so accurately was one thing; that it might instead be stealing part of one's essence entirely another. He never had been able to find out which was the case; the secrets of the spells that made portraits live were passed down through generations of master painters and apprentices.

He only knew he would never be getting one made of himself.

"Who's there?" A strident voice demanded. "Who's come into my house?"

Hermione startled; then walked forward, Harry following at a slower pace. He found it odd to converse with something that was not alive.

It really seemed pointless.

"Hermione Granger, and Harry Potter. He's inherited this house." Hermione answered, and the portrait let out a shriek.

"POTTER!? A Potter, inheriting the Black house?! NO! I REFUSE!" The portrait sucked in an audible breath. "KREACHER! Kreacher, come, at once!"

There was the trademark yellow warning swirl of a house-elf transporting in; then it exploded into light inside the room, sending Hermione jumping sideways in surprise.

The portrait commenced its screaming.

"KREACHER! REMOVE THESE INTRUDERS FROM THE GROUNDS AT ONCE!"
Harry saw the house-elf's light growing stronger; and he stepped between it and Hermione, his staff held in front of him with a loose grip, prepared to defend if needed.

"Be still." He said, and saw the yellow freeze; and heard a horrible, low groan.

"KREACHER!"

The portrait screamed again, and Harry turned on it with a fierce scowl.

"Stop howling this instant or I'll remove you from the wall and shove you in the nearest closet."

The woman in the portrait went silent; then it growled.

"This house will never be yours, Potter. I don't care what my despicable, blood-traitor son has done. It belongs to the family! Kreacher, do what I say, at once!"

The house-elf seemed to be wilting, shrinking closer to the floor.

"Mistress, Kreacher can not. Kreacher has been told to be still."

And the elf seemed entirely horrified that it had to comply. Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

Well, he had figured the exploration wouldn't go smoothly. The cloaked aurors following them had certainly not seemed happy when he and Hermione had walked up the steps, their lights flickering in anxious waves of light.

"Don't blame him, he can't disobey a direct order from whomever holds his contract." Harry said sternly to the woman. "Which is a despicable thing to put in a contract, but I doubt you care about that. I own this house and that house-elf, apparently, and there is little you can do about it."

The very light within the portrait seemed to flash; seconds before the screaming startled again, curses so vile and loud that Harry winced.
Then, he stomped his staff hard on the wooden floor and focused on the portraits construction, the green wooden frame which was no doubt elegant, and more importantly the elaborate binding spells that tied the entire thing to the very wall of the house.

It wouldn't be easy to remove that nuisance with conventional magic.

Luckily for his abused ears, Harry wasn't very conventional.

He tightened his grip on the vibrant red of his staff, and willed the pattern within the portrait to change; the horrible echo of a pureblood witch who was no doubt filled with righteous indignation to see a non-blood relation inherit.

He replaced it with a recreation of the simple pattern of the wall behind it.

The house-elf let out a squeak.

"Mistress! Oh, Mistress! Where has you gone?!" The creature wailed, long spindly yellow beams of light beating at its own head.

Hermione gasped.

"Stop! Stop it, it's alright! P-p-please!"

Was the thing really that attached to the tyrant he had just saved them from?

"Stop it." Harry repeated, and was gratified when the elf froze. "I'm very sorry, but that thing was ruining the good impression I had about this place."

The elf muttered under its breath. "If the Mistress did not like you, Kreacher shall hate yous forever."

Hermione sniffed.

"I respect your right to have your own opinion, but we did nothing wrong. We never even met Sirius Black. The goblins sent Harry a letter saying he owns this place, and we came to see if there was anything interesting."
Like books."

The house-elf seemed to consider.

"Sirius Black was a despicable, traitorous wizard. He did not respect the family."

Hermione crossed one violet arm over another.

"So? That has nothing to do with us. At all."

Harry sighed.

"We'll stay out of your way. Or if you wish, I can let you out of your contract with the customary clothes and you can find new work at the House-Elf Registry in Diagon Alley..."

Before Harry could continue, the yellow elf began to wail.

"No! Kreacher has always served the Noble and Most Ancient Black's! Kreacher was born in this house, Kreacher would never leave it!"

Hermione scoffed.

"Well, Harry's not a Black, and if you find us so unbearable as to hate us..."

"Oh!" The elf wailed, and seemed to fall even lower if it was possible. Kneeling? With a flex of energy, Harry confirmed that the house-elf was, indeed, on its knees. "Kreacher has just remembered! On the Black family tree, a Potter is there. Kreacher will serve Master Potter, because Master must certainly have Black blood as well. Only, do not send Kreacher away; Kreacher will do anything."

"Like clean?" Hermione muttered, which led Harry to gather that the place was reasonably filthy, as befitted a house abandoned for at least a decade.

"Alright." He said with a sigh. "Whatever you want. I just want to check the place out, I promise. Is there anything I need to know?"
Like, perhaps, if there were more portraits that might bloody his ears?

"Oh no, Master Potter, nothing at all. Kreacher shall clean and make the house suitable right away for the new Master."

And the yellow collapsed into itself with an audible pop.

Hermione echoed his sigh.

"What next?"

Harry cast her a grin.

"We proceed from the hallway into the great unknown?"

Hermione's wand came into her hand, its dragon heartstring burning with flickers of orange dragon-fire.

"Let's find the library then."

In a day, they found a library full of cursed books, a living room with no furniture, and two bedrooms that had all manner of annoying magical and muggle pests within.

In a week's time, the house-elf had cleared out the pests, though one closet housed a boggart and a great number of cursed objects had been painstakingly marked with elf magic as a warning.

Kreacher, it seemed, loved his House more than he might dislike his new Master, and would indeed do nearly anything to remain. Harry and Hermione both were polite to the overwrought creature, in the hopes he might stop wavering between muttered curses and overly eager inquiries. Harry, for one, would be scared to spend one night in the house for fear the elf might lose his mind and murder him in his sleep.

With several weekends spent exploring, one bedroom converted to a bare testing room, another a laboratory, removing the spells from dozens of cursed books, and one ornery boggart-pattern taken care of, Hermione commented that Grimmauld Place wasn't 'half bad'.

Harry remembered Dudley's frequent insinuations, and looked away with a flush.

Despite all the time they had spent alone, nothing more than a kiss and a brush of hands had passed between them. Harry had found himself spending far too much time thinking about the pieces of her form that he couldn't really see the details of, even with his increased sight. Even when he tried to turn his thoughts to science and the study of hormones he couldn't succeed in distracting himself; contemplating the potential percentages of testosterone and oestrogen that made one's brain become inordinately focused on female anatomy only led him to think more heavily about what the end-purpose of said hormones was, which made far more than his face heat.

Nor did it stop him from dreaming of warm blue-violet light, and how smooth Hermione's cheek was under his questing fingers, and what else might be warm and soft that he hadn't felt yet.

It was entirely too distracting; and the only thing that could make his brain function properly was to find new puzzles and work to solve them.

With the summer nearly gone, his aunt insisted he finish his enrollment in Imperial College London.

Harry, with his thoughts on magical fuel and its potential uses, settled on an engineering path that would place him in the perfect spot to continue his research into the relation between electricity and magic.

Then, bored with the thought of waiting nearly two years to even touch a working transformer let alone take one apart, he also entered into classes dealing with medicine and the human body, as eager as ever for some new thought that might further what he knew of the soul and its delicate, yet strong, link to the human body.

Yet without Hermione, the classes seemed to move too slowly, dull and dry compared to his study of magic and the bright structure of Grimmauld Place.
He ignored his peers, all older than him and curious about the fifteen year old in their midst. As soon as classes ended on Fridays, he took the bus directly to Grimmauld Place, which lay only a short ride from the College. There, he continued his studies into science and magic and waited impatiently for Hermione to arrive, her soothing light like a balm.

His uncle didn't seem to mind picking him up later and later on the weekends; his aunt, on the other hand, didn't think it proper that he spent so much time alone with his girlfriend.

Dudley only winked, one large elbow nudging him a bit too forcefully.

Harry jumped from project to project; and as the air grew colder and the months passed, he found himself moving things of his own into the magical rooms of Grimmauld Place. Books in Braille that he used in study, binders of printed notes, occasional extra pairs of clothing for when a test when wrong.

What he couldn't move, he created; a desk, chairs, tables, shelves, glass beakers and metal cabinets. The first floor nearly became dedicated to the exploration of knowledge, the extensive Black library next to his own collection of muggle and magical works, his lab and testing rooms directly across the hall. Only the kitchen was safe; Kreacher insisted upon no wizarding magic in his own domain, though Harry was sorely tempted to test the ever-flowing curse on the kitchen sink and the preservation spells in the pantry. The upper floors were used to begin sorting through the magical artifacts he had bought himself or found in the building or his vaults, all to be studied or experimented upon when he had the time or inclination. One bedroom became his; though he hadn't yet been able to convince his aunt and uncle to let him stay overnight. The attic remained a cluttered room of the countless cast-offs of a wizarding family; and Harry hadn't yet had time to explore it.

Once, he tried to take his curious muggle family inside the wizarding dwelling, only to learn the more unique look of anti-muggle wards. When he finally convinced them to walk through the wards holding his hands his aunt gawked over the antique furnishings while Dudley gaped at Kreacher and his uncle marveled at the proof that, once again, magic is real and does magical things.
Life seemed to settle easily into familiar patterns; study, test, learn, confirm, retest, study, all done with precise steps and the ever present search for something new.

It didn't matter if the subject was for his muggle college or for his own magical studies; always, he had his mind on future projects, trying to make sense of the two parallels and how they might come together.

With Hermione, he basked in simply sitting in the light of her presence as she rambled on about her current studies and questioned him on his own, speaking of Viola's next paper or the new reading she had been assigned by her tutor in magic.

And every Sunday, she read him aloud anything interesting from the Prophet, which was how he knew the fine details of the failed prison break in Azkaban lead by Crouch, and of the escape of only three or perhaps five Death Eaters with him, who were being hunted down. She told him about the new Ministry laws targeting potential Death Eaters; of the relaxation on the laws governing the use of Veritaserum on government employees under suspicion of terrorist activities, and the increased scrutiny into supposed 'dark magics'. Of the very notable arrest of Lord Malfoy, a member of the Wizengamot itself, and his subsequent sentence to Azkaban for multiple violations of Ministry law, an example that even the most powerful were no longer safe behind bribes and political clout.

He should have known that the wizarding world wouldn't be content to let him simply fall away from it so easily; in every addition, there was some inquiry into his own whereabouts; Witch Weekly even ran a hotline in case any lucky witch spotted him about one magical town or another.

But none yet had placed him in the muggle world.

To the students of Imperial College London, Harry Potter was an oddity; often speculated about. He was not the youngest to ever attend the college, but he was the first blind one at that age. While the facilities were in place, Braille schoolbooks and advisers for the blind, and each used normally, the boy did not take advantage of a service animal or even a guide, preferring to use a large walking stick that some joked resembled a
prop from Lord of the Rings.

And yet, Potter got himself around without help, spurning offers, seemingly lost in his own world. He went from class to class with single-minded purpose, sitting in the front of each classroom, uncanny eyes fixed on the chosen professor as if memorizing every word.

He took no notes; not even on a computer, where Braille words could be printed later and read. But he always knew the answer, and could be counted on to turn any problem around and show it in a new light. Several of the professors began to rely on questioning the boy to advance discussion on the chosen topic; and more than once found themselves excited by his scope of knowledge.

But Potter would not join the many study groups that offered and even begged. The blind boy was always busy; and though he carried no notebooks and few school books at all, claimed to be working on advanced physics and his own theory of relativity.

The only ones who doubted him where those who had not yet attended class beside him.

Crouch couldn't find the boy himself; though he spent weeks combing through magical alleys and towns in search. He followed rumors and hints, speculations and absent comments.

When it all proved fruitless, he turned instead to the old news, the many things he missed when captive by his father. The first suggestions that Harry Potter was the Boy-Who-Lived; a Savior, destined to defeat a Dark Lord.

All threads led back to Albus Dumbledore and his Order, threads of a spider's intricate web.

And following those threads, Crouch listened late one night as an Unspeakable moaned into his cups about his job and the things he had seen. With only a few spells, the wizard spoke far more than normally able; and when that information proved even more useful, he led the
drunken man out into the dark streets and pinned him against a murky wall, looking into bloodshot eyes that finally began to show fear.

Then, he ripped into the man's mind, past oaths of silence and the spells meant to hide the things seen in one of the Ministry's most secret places; The Department of Mysteries.

The wizard would never be the same again; probably never speak or move or perhaps even breathe, when Crouch was done with him. Crouch hardly cared; only revelled in finally finding some truth.

A prophecy, laid on a certain shelf, given to a wizard with Albus Dumbledore's initials, from a witch who bore also bore the same initials as Hogwarts's resident seer.

A prophecy that said it concerned a Dark Lord, and Harry Potter.

Crouch let the man fall to the ground, and apparated away without waiting to see if the man still lived.

For nearly a year after the Tournament, Albus Dumbledore and his Order searched for the five remaining pieces of Tom Riddle's soul.

Severus Snape told him about the new resurrected sliver; the true force behind the failed prison break, as disfigured as his older self, but far less skilled. Severus had sneered; and Albus, after listening to the description of the ring upon the man's finger, knew that one horcrux could be accounted for in the Gaunt Ring.

The Gaunt House, on the other hand, had recently been burned to the ground, just as the old Riddle mansion he had searched diligently had been burned long ago.

One by one, they searched the old dwellings of Death Eaters. Malfoy Manor was a dead end; but he had long suspected the origin of the disposed Diary had lain there. The Mulcibers, Lestranges, Rosiers, Rowles, Macnairs, Carrows and the Notts. They found a wealth of dark artifacts, some nearly as evil as the horcruxes they searched for. The Ministry followed the tips the Order gave, and the arrests began to pile
one on top of another.

But no Cup, or Locket, or Diadem.

After deep thought, Dumbledore figured he had only three more avenues to follow, if luck was with him. One was Hogwarts itself, which the young Riddle had visited on at least one occasion to apply for the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. It was a bold move; just the kind of sly and daring thing the young Riddle thrived on.

Another was in the vaults of those most trusted and pureblooded Death Eaters; the Malfoy, Lestrange, and Nott Vaults.

He discounted the Malfoys; the Dark Lord would not hide two horcruxes with one family. The Nott's seemed unlikely; not the entire family had followed the Dark Lord, only the eldest and most vicious brother.

But the Lestrange's had been fanatic and loyal to a fault.

Getting inside the vault would be truly difficult; when the Lestrange's had died in Azkaban at the wands of the Ministry, all their possessions, with no Heirs left, had been surrendered to the goblins as part of their due.

And the goblins would only trade one wealth for a greater one; Albus sent Bill Weasley, who was used to their dealings, to them to begin the negotiations to gain access to the vault to see if any of the three horcruxes was within.

The last place to look was in Tom Riddle's past; and with that in mind, Albus Dumbledore sat at his desk with his large oval pensive before him, and began to search the memories of his own mind for any clue of where Riddle might have hidden a piece of his soul.

~*~Review Please!~*~
Harry stood in his testing room, every wall covered in the golden gleam of defensive charms and protective wards, each distinguishable from one another only by the geometric shape of their patterns.

In striking contrast, the floor under his feet had been changed to deep purple stone, a mimicry of Hogwarts that did not hold Her slow pulsing life, only the steady gleam of rock.

There were no lights; when Hermione came, Harry cast charms in the corners for her to see by.

To him, though, the world was never dark.

By his feet, the small bird he had caged chirped indignant tones, angry at the imprisonment. A common pigeon of the London streets, pale blue light, so alive and flickering with the desire for freedom.

Harry gestured his staff towards the wall, and its red light left him alone in the center of the room, his hands empty and bare, only emerald green fingers of light.

He knelt; and with a touch, let the metal cage fall away as his hands trapped the bird in his palms, its wings beating angrily, its clawed feet squirming.

*I'll bring it back*, he reminded himself. *But I have to know.*

The pale blue light stilled, as if it heard his intention like an audible song.

Harry closed his eyes, though the vision before him did not dim. He had never needed open eyes to see; if it was his eyes that really saw at all. He rather thought it was his mind; his brain trying to reconcile the fact that he was seeing by letting him control its vision with ocular muscle movements. But lately, more and more, he had learned to widen his sight far past the constraints of human eyesight, nearly to the back of his head.
He flexed his power and Looked, his own emerald green light filling in the details of wings and feathers and a heaving breast as the bird sucked in panicked breaths.

The bird shrieked at the feeling of his power, animals so much more aware than humans of when he regarded them with his new technique, reacting with fear just as the dogs in the park had, and the cats, and the rats in the alleys and the birds in the trees. Knowing something Looked at them that was dangerous and powerful, a great predator of the world.

Harry sighed, and let the energy fade, the pale light of the bird alone except where his emerald fingers caged her.

And with another breath, Harry willed her light to stop, and felt her struggles cease.

Life, gone, with the stopping of a pattern. He Looked at her, and saw her limp neck and claws, wings no longer pressing tightly against his hold.

With a grimace, he made her lights move again, and the bird shrieked in surprised panic. She fluttered wildly against his palms.

Again, Harry stilled her light; again, she fell still.

This time, he waited, falling to the floor on his knees and sitting upright, staring down at the bird in his lap.

He counted, and felt her body cool, the heat leaving her.

He fleetingly wished Hermione was there; she could take temperatures and readings that could only be read, not listened to audibly. But he hadn't wanted her here for this; hadn't wanted to know himself just how far he could go.

When the bird was stiff with death, he made her light Quicken again, and warmth burst from the cold carcass like it was infused with the sun, the light that had grown paler with aging death deepening to its normal blue hues, pulsing, racing with life.

The bird leaped into the air, free, only to flutter wildly at the nearest wall,
unable to see in the darkness.

Harry stood, and with a spell caged her again.

Next time, he would try a larger, smarter animal; and he would wait longer before he Quickened them again.

He had to know, for sure, just how far the boundaries could be pushed.

After all, the magical world claimed true Necromancy was impossible; inferi did not possess souls, zombies had no sentient brain, and Skeletons no skin or will of their own. All only did the bidding of the dark witch or wizard who created them. The dead could not come back to life, not as they once were. Resurrection was not possible by any law of magic.

But in Surrey, he had made a dead tree live; and now in Grimmauld Place, he had killed a pigeon and brought it back.

And in time, he would need to learn if it was only plants and animals whose patterns could be Quickened.

When Crouch told Riddle of the potential prophecy, it was in low tones of excitement.

The Death Eater explained how it all could have happened; how a prophecy could have led to his Master's defeat, how it must speak of Harry Potter as a catalyst that would throw apart all of his plans.

How Voldemort must have learned of the prophecy, no doubt by Dumbledore's taunts, and been led to kill a baby on his own without proper plans in place to destroy him.

"It was a trap; yet impossible to resist. And if you yourself can not kill him, my Lord, then you must make his death come about in some other way. Send assassins; or raise an army. Once he is dead, your rise should go unimpeded."

Tom Riddle knew the reasoning was not sound; some part of him, the analytical, bitter part, was angry that it was not.
But he wanted to believe it; wanted to blame a boy for why everything was not falling into place as it should, for why with greater numbers and skills and values his former army had failed. For why most of his followers were dead, and why no new ones would come to him. Dead or cowards or both.

"I have no more money to hire assassins or raise any significant force." Riddle said finally, sparing a thought for lost opportunities and the fact that those of his that had died had also been the most wealthy.

"Then we make them, My Lord." Crouch hissed in fervent tones, the snake on his cheek hissing in syncing counterpart. "We create them."

And Tom Riddle reluctantly began to smile.

*He certainly had few better ideas.*

Kreacher was sensible; his new Master was odd, for certain, but not harsh or unforgiving.

Kreacher could live with Master Potter as Head of House Black.

He did not seem to mind dirty floors or hallways, though his witch friend did. He barely seemed to taste the food placed in front of him; and never suggested a favorite dish or expressed a dislike of any particular food. Master Potter would wander in after muggle schooling and toss a bag into the same chair in his office and disappear for hours into his 'lab', a room of odd devices Kreacher had never seen.

He watched Master Potter frequently, as the Master worked magics or sat back in a long chair to listen to a book read aloud.

Master Potter was blind; but not in any way Kreacher could fathom. Kreacher did not like those green eyes on him, disliked even more the spike of energy that came from the Master on occasion, speeding his heart and making him have a marked desire to clean vigorously the cluttered attic or a dusty closet.

Kreacher was an old elf, for such a large house, though he would never admit it. His bones grew weary after too much magic, his skin tight and
leathery. But when the Master's eyes gleamed brighter and the energy filled him, Kreacher nearly felt like a young elf in his prime with his first contract, ready to take on a manor full of Irish pixies and poltergeists.

And worse, so much worse, when the Master's gaze moved away, Kreacher felt bereft, the loss keener with the reminder of how far he had fallen.

It was enough to make an old elf seek the Look; seek out the Master's approval, if only for a moment, only for a second in time.

He loved and hated that desire with equal fervor; hated that it came from someone the Mistress had so despised before the Master did the impossible and displaced her against house-elf magic, which should have prevailed. And yet he loved being useful again, a good elf, with a Family to serve and a House to set to rights.

So, confused, Kreacher did what he needed to do; he dug out an old reminder, a failed job, and placed it where the Master might Look upon it, and waited to see what might happen.

And he hoped, if he was right, that the Master would Look on him, too.

Harry had made a point of telling the house-elf that nothing was to be moved. Growing up, moving furniture was his worst adversary; the casual displacement of a chair enough to send him to the ground, or a dropped plastic toy to stab his unknowing foot.

Now, even with his increased sight, moving things bothered him. He couldn't maintain Looking for more than minutes at a time without growing increasingly tired, so he liked his home ground to be stable and organized; everything in its own place. He figured he might be slightly obsessive-compulsive; though movement made him more angry than nervous or distraught.

He knew the location of everything in Grimmauld Place, with the only exception being the still cluttered attic and Kreacher's own realm off the kitchen pantry.
So when he stepped into the hallway from the rainy streets, shrugging off his damp cloak and hanging up his bag to dry, he knew something was not right.

It didn't hit him at first; the brown and purple light of the plastered walls nearly hid that all-too-familiar pattern that he had seen before.

It made no sense; he had been at Grimmauld Place only the day before; there was no wooden table against the wall where the screaming portrait once had been; and definitely no bloody red soul centered upon it like a macabre offering.

Harry hissed, his hand tightening on his staff in reaction.

"Kreacher."

The yellow came; and Harry Looked upon the elf as it fell to the ground at his feet and trembled, the green of his magic covering its natural yellow light and highlighting every feature in keen detail, from the flopping overly large ears to his large hairy bare feet.

"Master, Kreacher sorry, Master, forgive Kreacher..."

The thing began to beg, and Harry knew the beast had somehow placed a sliver of Voldemort’s soul, the blasted wizard he had hoped was dead, upon a table in his own house.

"Is this a trap?" Harry asked, inanely, then shook his head.

If it was, the house-elf would not tell him so. Hadn't it vowed to hate him forever at some point?

"NO!" Kreacher wailed. "Kreacher only wants to show the Master something Kreacher found."

Harry's lip curled.

"Don't lie to me."

The house-elf’s mouth snapped shut, its teeth clicking. He saw its ears
drop further, long claws digging into the wood under its feet as it whispered.

"Kreacher was given the locket from Master Regulus, before Master Regulus died. Kreacher was to destroy it, but could not. Kreacher punished himself by not cleaning the House for ten years, one year for every time Kreacher tried and failed… then, Kreacher decided to not ever clean again."

Harry blinked; a useless reaction to surprise, as reactions go.

He supposed, to a house-elf, not cleaning would be punishment, but…

"Regulus Black? The Death Eater?"

Kreacher trembled again; and the longer Harry Looked at him, the more the elf seemed to sink into the floor, his hands now limp at his sides.

"Yes." Kreacher whispered, and Harry frowned, casting a glance at the glimmering red pattern laying docilely ahead.

"Why would a Death Eater by trying to kill part of Lord Voldemort?"

*And more importantly, this would be three so far. How many bloody times was that blasted dark lord going to be popping up in his life?!*

Kreacher raised his palms up towards him.

"Kreacher does not know, please, Master. Kreacher does not know."

Harry sighed.

"It's fine, don't worry about it. If you couldn't kill it, no doubt Regulus couldn't either, and I'm sure he tried. The blasted snake was the same way."

Or at least, the charms upon it had been hard to break through. Killing it, not so much.

*Still.*
"Get up, already." Harry snapped, and was pleased when Kreacher leapt spryly to his feet, wringing his hands together, stepping far too close for comfort.

Harry moved down the hall towards the red pattern, and heard its faint whisper not with his ears, but inside his mind.

_**I'm beautiful… captivating… put me on, put me on…**_

Harry didn't think the bloody red light of Voldemort's soul pattern was either beautiful or captivating in the least. He saw a glimmer of metal underneath the red, and supposed whatever object the soul inhabited might be pretty if seen with more usual eyes.

But to him, the thought of a human soul inside a metal shell was disturbing. Could it _do_ anything at all? The snake had seemed to act independent of the soul it hosted; but the weak Voldemort piece that had been Kissed had been wholly human, if monsterous.

Harry Looked closer, observing a closed locket, then finally reached out and held it in his hand, the metal far colder than it should be.

The hiss inside his mind came louder, but he pushed it away with disgruntled huff.

"Master? Can yous destroy it?" Kreacher asked tentatively, and Harry turned to Look back at the house-elf, who straightened under his eyes like a soldier coming to attention.

"Yes." Harry mused softly, then ran his gaze over the deep red pattern. "I will. When I'm through with it."

He had dreaded finding a human soul to practice upon; but lo and behold, a sliver of one had just found itself within his grasp.

Surely a little experimentation on a dark lord would be forgiven.

After all, the wizard had mutilated his _own_ soul _first_.

Over the last months, Harry had learned enough about Quickening from his tests on animals to know most of its limitations.

There was one.

If the body had decayed past a set point, then the Quickening would not take; first, the body had to be repaired, then the life within could flourish again instead of dying as quickly as it reanimated.

With plants, it was much simpler; any plant life could be Quickened and bud with new growth; but to repair an entire dead branch, then the branch would need to be set to a state where it could grow naturally; a root system, for one, or else like any plucked flower the life would slowly dim and die once again.

All living things were either growing or dying; and he discovered quickly that young life beat faster than old life, which had already began to slow.

And if he took a old animal and made its life fast, the old animal's body weakened much more quickly than it should, its body unable to handle the youth of its own heart.

But he could change an old animal pattern into a new one, and Quicken it at a younger speed.

The possibilities for eternal youth did not escape him; but the thought of having to kill something, over and over, only to bring it back to life younger did not appeal to him. And would the new life, reset into a younger pattern, even hold any of its older memories? Was there any point in living forever if you would not even know you were?

*How had the Philosophers Stone worked?* Flamel had managed it, somehow. Perhaps the Stone had only affected the body and not the soul at all.

But no matter how he tried it, he could not make the pattern younger without also speeding up the life within.

But that was all with animals and plants; human life had yet another layer over life and body pattern both.
A soul.

Every single person Harry had met had their own unique colors and shades and patterns; not like the generic brown of all cats and blues of all birds.

And without that soul, every human body was a white shell, empty of color.

The body pattern and the soul pattern, and within the life that made them live.

Voldemort's soul sliver was dark red infused with black, a bloody speck of humanity tainted with dark magic. Within the locket that it inhabited, Harry knew it was aware of him; it tried to speak to him again and again, different tactics each time, cajoling and threatening in turn.

That, at least, made sense with his other theories; that souls were aware of where they were, even when outside of a human body's pattern. Their soul remained the same and aware of itself; and this Locket-Voldemort was no different.

Harry killed it, and Quickened it, and killed it again; he found that he had to Quicken it quickly, or just like the snake it began to fade and go away nearly immediately to wherever human souls went, and he wasn't sure he could bring it back again.

Calling it the afterlife seemed overly romantic; a higher state of consciousness sounded more scientific, though he had no proof souls were conscious there.

Death.

What was death, for the human soul? Where did the blasted things go?! The mystery nagged at him like a splinter under his skin, worse than the constant failures to make a computer or t.v. work in Grimmauld Place.

So when he got tired of killing Voldemort, he decided instead to try something a bit different.

The wizard was pretty much dead anyway, and he doubted the bodiless thing could feel pain; it had no nerves, after all, or skin or even a brain.
Just a conscience trapped in cold, cursed metal. It was no different than performing exploratory surgery on a cadaver to take the soul pattern apart and see exactly what parts were red and which were black; what made it hiss and what made it laugh. What made it dark and what made it light, what made its pattern unique and what would happen if he changed the pattern even slightly.

He was pretty sure Hermione still wouldn't approve of his logic, though.

Hermione did not know what secret Harry was keeping, but she knew he had one.

She had expected him to more busy once classes started; but during the winter break, he had remained distant, more often than not spending long hours at Grimmauld Place without inviting her along as he normally did.

More than once she called the Dursley house to find him gone; and each time, she felt remotely embarrassed that she was the last to learn his whereabouts. Usually, it was the other way around.

But whatever project he was working on he didn't share.

She idly questioned the house-elf, and found even Kreacher strangely reluctant to complain about his Master, going oddly pale at her words and finding some task to busy himself with.

*Fear? What had Harry done now?*

When school started up again, she let her worries slide; Harry was still working with her on two other projects, after all, both of which were sufficiently complicated that she didn't know how he had any spare time at all.

But then, one day on a whim as she visited, she had the random urge to peek into the test room on her way to the Black Library, where she was to meet Harry.

And her hand on the knob found it locked and warded tight, beyond even the unlocking charms ability to open.
Her eyes narrowed at the brass knob; then, she turned on her heel and marched to the library.

*Enough was enough.*

"What are you hiding?"

Hermione's angry voice brought his head up around from the magical diagram he was observing, its complicated spell weaving a design to elegantly hide the books behind its curtain by tricking the eyes into thinking the curtains hid a dusty window.

Dust was an odd thing; flickers of brown and white, dead skin and living organisms so small their patterns were nearly indistinguishable from the lights around them.

"Harry, *I'm talking to you.*"

She grumbled, and he shook his head and focused with a frown.

"What's wrong?"

She stomped closer and flung her light into a chair with a toss of wild curling hair.

"You won't tell me what you're working on, and you've locked the door to your testing room. You've never done either before."

Harry's heart sank; he much doubted she would care to know that he had learned, painfully, that when a core thread of personality in a pattern was taken out, the entire construct collapsed with shrieks that told him the soul in question was entirely too aware of what he had just done to it.

He had been able to rebuild Voldemort's broken soul from memory; a process that had taken four entire afternoons of tight focus, and created another hypothesis.

If he was familiar enough with a soul *before* it was broken, it was possible he could in fact fix the break that marred it. If he knew a soul well enough,
it was possible that he might be able to create it again from nothing but light; and most intriguing of all, if he could just figure out exactly what made a soul a soul... he might be able to create an entirely new soul pattern.

But before either of the last two could ever happen, he would have to do much more study on soul patterns in person, not to mention attempt to catalogue what made certain personalities act in certain ways, determine how much soul patterns changed over time, and figure out why some souls broke when others did not.

It would take a lifetime to achieve, if even that was enough time.

"It's not that you have a secret." Hermione finally said softly, when Harry did not speak. "It's just that you've never kept them from me."

Harry Looked at her, his magic flexing like an idle cat would stretch its paws out in the sun. He saw the way her face creased with concern, anger fading to worry; green eyes and skin like a mask over her own inner light as his magic strove to show him the details he had failed to see before.

She blinked and shivered, and he saw goosebumps rise on her arms.

From his one trip to Diagon Alley since he perfected his new technique, he had learned that magical people and creatures knew when he Looked at them as their muggle relatives did not; something magical inside them recognizing the influx of foreign magic like one would feel the touch of strange hands at the nape of one's neck.

And mostly, they either loved or hated the sensation.

Harry let the sight fall away, and sighed.

"I have another portion of Voldemort's soul. I've been using it to test my hypotheses about my abilities that we discussed previously after Viola's paper on the laws of transfiguration."

Hermione sucked in a breath and held it, her blue-violet light pulsing with agitation.

Then she let it out and spoke swiftly.
"I can't believe you didn't tell me. How long have you had it?"

Harry lifted his chin.

"Since just before winter break. I didn't think you would want to be part of the tests."

Hermione shot to her feet and began to pace with jerking flashes of light that his eyes struggled to follow, her hands motioning in gestures he could not comprehend as she spoke.

"V-v-Voldemort's soul! Of course I would want to k-k-know! And if the tests were too much for me to handle, I would l-leave! I'm not some fainting v-violet you have to protect, or worse, hide yourself from! I can handle it if you can manipulate soul matter! I can handle it if you can kill people with a flick of your wrist, because guess what, Harry B-b-blind Potter, I can too! Maybe not in the same way, but magic makes it entirely too easy. And if you can bring things back to life, well, I want to kn-n-now! We've already violated enough magical laws already, you think this one would bother me forever? I can get over the existence of dragons and space expansion charms and love potions and barbaric house-elf registries, but not your abilities?"

She whirled and spun like a top, angry light pulsing with streaks he hadn't seen since his entrance into the Triwizard Tournament.

This time, it was definitely himself she was angry at.

"And." Her voice dropped to deadly whisper. "I've been your f-f-friend for years. I've never been scared or intimidated by your abilities. They might worry me at times, I might be scared f-for you if you are able to pull of some of these stunts and it becomes known..." She stopped and seemed to turn away.

Harry didn't risk Looking to see what her expression was; he still wasn't sure if she cared for his energy running through her, and now was definitely not the time to ask or test it if she didn't.

"Are you going to destroy it?" She asked softly, and Harry answered her
quickly.

"Yes. I've about gotten what I can from it anyway."

She made some sound in her throat.

"Well, good. I'd like to see your notes."

Harry grimaced. She had learned Braille since their friendship began, finding it useful. But that wouldn't help this time.

"I haven't typed any of them. With the subject matter… I didn't think it prudent."

"Right." She murmured. "You're right." She stepped closer to him. "I'd l-l-like you to tell me what you've learned."

It wasn’t a demand, but there was some note in her voice he couldn't decipher; Harry nodded immediately. He had already made one mistake, and now was the time to recover. "Alright. I can tell you now…"

"No." She said, and began to move towards the door. "I'm s-s-still too upset to listen. I… y-y-you… that is, I'm n-n-not happy that you didn't t-t-trust me."

Harry had never really gotten into a serious fight with her before; statistically, he knew he was due for one. Still, he hadn't ever thought she would be as upset as she was over this.

"I do trust you. I just thought I would... make things easier."

She sniffed, and to his horror he had the deep suspicion she was about to cry. The thought brought him to his feet, but she was already stepping through the door.

"It's fine. I'll be b-b-back t-t-tomorrow."

And she was gone.

Harry sunk back down into his chair, feeling hollow.
Then he frowned fiercely and rose again.

He absolutely refused to let her think for a minute that he ever intended to hurt her feelings.

He grabbed his staff and stomped to the door, casting a glare towards the golden test room on his way past.

Harry explained his dilemma with as sparse details as he could manage to his aunt; she told him to send flowers and patted him on the head like he was cute.

Harry told Dudley, and his cousin suggested flowers and chocolate.

His uncle, on the drive to the Grangers, suggested a great deal of groveling instead.

Harry opted for all three, but not necessarily at the same time.

He created the flowers from wooden splinters and placed them inside an enchanted crystal-pattern, conjuring them again and again until Dudley had sworn on his honor as a Dursley that they were 'some blooming shade between blue and fancy purple'. The chocolate was donated by his aunt, who had enough frozen cookie dough to last them through an apocalypse.

And by the time Harry and his uncle arrived at the modest brownstone the Grangers resided in, Harry knew it was late, far past the time for supper.

He left his uncle in the car, and ascended the steps. When he rang the bell, Mrs. Granger opened the door with a puzzled frown.

"Harry? Is something wrong?"

He only shook his head, and held out the objects in his hand.

"Give these to Hermione?"

Mrs. Granger gently took both crystal and plate, speaking with a confused tone.
"Don't you want to come inside? Hermione's just up the stairs…"

"No, that's alright." He clenched one fist around his staff. "I'm seeing her tomorrow. Thanks."

And with a nervous tilt to his head, he turned and began to descend the steps, looking carefully to see the concrete steps from the shadows in his vision.

"Okay…"

Her voice drifted down to him, before he heard the door close.

Without looking back at the house, he slid inside his uncle's automobile, and they drove away.

Hermione knew she was being foolish. She had overreacted, certainly.

*But he didn't tell me he had a piece of Voldemort's soul inside his house!*

That was extreme; and he had done it because he thought she would disapprove of experimenting on it? Or that she would be disturbed that he could?

She should have stayed and talked to him. But she had had the oddest desire to cry, though whether from frustration or surprise or hurt she herself hadn't even been certain.

And *that* would have been embarrassing.

She had to just get away for a moment and think things through; and that's exactly what she had done for the last few hours.

*Think.*

And now, she nearly felt she should apologize to *him*, which barely made any sense at *all*!

He wasn't obligated to tell her everything just because he was her
A knock at the door broke her from her spiraling thoughts. Her mum poked her head through, frowning.

"Hermione, honey? Harry was just here…"

"H-here?" She yelped, floundering off her bed, but her mother stepped further inside, shaking her head, something tucked in her arms.

"He was, honey. He wanted me to give these to you. Did you two have a tiff?"

Hermione stiffened.

"What makes you say that?"

Her mother grinned impishly and lifted her hands.

"Chocolate and flowers, mostly, though I must say your father never managed to carry off the flower portion so well… what a beautiful color!"

Hermione looked down as her mother gently placed a large plate of Petunia Dursley’s signature homemade cookies on her desk, followed by what had to be a creation of Harry's.

The triangular prism glowed with a soft inner light; illuminating the blooms trapped within, a single large hyacinth blossom that had its many smaller blooms ranging from deep violet external petals to piercing inner blue.

A hyacinth, so similar to the Latin word for a deep shade of blue. The only word closer to her own soul's shade was…

"What do the symbols mean?"

Her mother inquired, and Hermione blinked, looking below the blossom to what was inscribed beneath in the specific braille-code used for Latin words.
She gently ran her fingers across the raised dots, though her eyes told her already what it said.

_Pretiosum, Lux Mea, et Violaceus_

Precious, light of mine, in blue-violet.

_My precious blue-violet light._

Hermione's eyes, to her infinite frustration, began to water again. With a growl, she swiped her hand across her face and then turned to her mother defiantly.

"Can you drive me to Harry's house?"

Later, they would be teased unmercifully by both families for the drama that made Mr. Dursley drive all the way across town to the Granger house to deliver a present, only for Mrs. Granger to drive Hermione back to the Dursley house in the middle of the night to thank Harry for it.

But at the time, Mrs. Granger only thought it unbearably sweet, while Mr. Dursley grumbled half-heartedly while remembering his own days of courting the elder hot-tempered Evans girl.

He had apologized far more than once himself.

Hermione darted across the perfectly manicured lawn, but Harry had seen her pattern from inside the house and opened the door before she could step onto the small porch alcove.

She hesitated a second when his eyes met hers, shivering as his energy moved through her and he looked down at her with hesitant eyes of his own.

Then, she sprang into his hastily opened arms, and with a loudly stuttered 'S-s-sorry', squeezed him tight and refused to cry, _again_.

And Harry returned her hug with warm arms, smiling against her hair.
"I rather thought that was my line."

Hermione laughed wetly; then softly punched his shoulder as she leaned back to look up at him.

"I overreacted, but you were out of line. Agree we're mutually sorry and move on?"

Harry grinned.

"Reciprocated Despondency?"

Hermione giggled. "Very downcast and disheartened."

Harry laughed; then leaned his forehead softly against hers.

"Want to watch me slay a dark lord tomorrow?"

Hermione smiled up at him, the emerald depths of his gaze glowing softly as he looked into her eyes.

"Completely, utterly, and entirely certain I'll be thrilled to."

Harry squeezed her arms in relief.

"It's a date."

In early summer, on a bright and sunny day, Hermione Granger entered the test room in Grimmauld Place, the bare stone floor and plain walls lit only by an absently cast Lumos charm in one corner.

And Harry placed into the air a silver locket and held it there with his power, the air thick with energy as he manipulated a soul and pulled something unfathomable from the depths of engraved metal, something that looked both like a black vortex and a bright light to her eyes, all at the same time.

It whispered to her of her worst fears and her greatest desires in the bare instant she stood, frozen, to the side.
Then Harry Potter closed his fist and the light shadow simply died, no
scream, no flash, nothing that signaled that a great evil had left the world.

Later, Harry would tell her he saw the red of its broken pattern fade away
to the other place; leaving behind only a metal locket.

But all she saw was her best friend standing in his own sphere of power
that hazed the air, a silver locket hovering above his fingertips, a satisfied
smile on a face that was stark with magical energy.

And it truly hit her that she was standing not just beside a genius wizard
and a brilliant scientist; but a very, very powerful sorceror.

In six months time, Albus Dumbledore had made so little progress that
even his own patience was wearing thin.

Severus Snape reported that the Tom Riddle from the Ring had retreated,
hiding in some warded area where his spy could not reach him, licking his
wounds and planning, giving Albus' Order precious time to find and destroy
what they could of his soul pieces.

His professors had begun searching all of Hogwarts that they could; even
going so far as to confiscate the Marauders Map and its secret from the
Weasley twins, exploring every passageway and hidden alcove. But as the
term ended, no horcrux had yet been found.

Dumbledore's pensieve had proven useful for storing memories; but with a
normal term as Headmaster at Hogwarts and his duties as Chief Warlock
over a very anxious and fretful Wizengamot, time spent reliving the past
had not been frequent enough for him to make much headway into places
Tom Riddle might have hidden something as precious as a soul.

His guess about the Lestrange vault had indeed been correct; the
Hufflepuff Cup and its resident horcrux were indeed inside.

But the goblins were taciturn and unhelpful, sneering at every offer of mere
gold or property or jewels.

They wanted goblin artifacts; and more specifically, they wanted the Sword
of Gryffindor, which they knew he now had in his possession after its loss of more than a century.

Dumbledore wouldn't have minded much giving them the sword; it was enchanted to return to the next person who needed it to defend the school, an enchantment the goblins could never break on their own.

What he did not like was that they also wanted an extravagant amount of gold, jewels, and property along with it.

When he finally settled on an amount, the goblins insisted on running tests upon the Sword to ensure it was not a forgery, a blatant insult to Albus' own honor, and counted each individual galleon and inspected every single priceless jewel offered from the Dumbledore vault, a process that took another entire week when certain jewels were deemed 'unworthy'.

The short creatures smirked the entire time with their sharp teeth, but when Albus finally held the Cup in his hands, he knew it was worth it.

The horcrux reeked of dark magic and curses of protection, and was undoubtedly a portion of Voldemort's soul.

Destroying the horcrux was another matter entirely, however, for without the Sword that he suspected would have sliced the Cup into pieces, freeing the protected soul to be destroyed, there was only one other force that could destroy things charmed to be indestructible.

Fiendfyre, sentient flame infused with dark magic, whose use was regulated strictly by the Ministry.

*Well, what the Ministry doesn't know won't hurt them,* Albus Dumbledore thought merrily, and set off to find a private place to kill what should have died long ago.

"More corpses, my Lord."

Tom Riddle turned back from the cave in the Scotland mountains, looking over the three dead bodies flung onto the rock.
Muggles, wizards, witches, all the same in death, all empty husks able to be reanimated into soulless puppets.

He had always liked the idea of inferi; creatures of the dark, following his every whim. It appeared in his own future he had made his dreams come true. Crouch claimed he had made an entire army of the fell monsters, though where he had hidden them away was a mystery.

Now, he made more; from homeless muggles and old, frail men and and women who would simply disappear, to witches and wizards drunk in bars or traveling alone.

Dozens; then hundreds. An army, impervious to pain and hunger, immune to nearly everything that could harm normal humans, each individual stronger than ten men. Only weak to the power of flame and daylight.

Tom Riddle figured he would attack by night; and even if Potter managed to cast a flame spell on several dozen, there was no conceivable way for him to destroy an entire army of the puppets from every direction.

He would be waiting with them; he, and all who were left that followed him, Crouch, the two Carrows, Yaxley, Jugson and Avery.

If somehow the inferi failed, his Death Eaters would not.

And with Potter dead and the prophecy obsolete, he would be free of any predictions there might be of his own downfall; free to begin infiltrating the Ministry once again, seeking whatever crack there was in its defense.

Lord Voldemort would be a feared name once more.

~*~Review Please!~*~
Rufus Scrimgeour narrowed his eyes at the venerable, and extremely innocent looking, elderly wizard.

"We find significant evidence of substantial use of fiendfyre only ten kilometers from Hogwarts, and you expect us to believe you don't know anything about it?"

Albus Dumbledore folded his arms.

"Some of the damage you speak of was done quite a few months ago. I can only assume some students were experimenting."

Rufus flung his hands into the air.

"Experimenting? With dark magic? And what of the recent damage? Students sneaking back into school to practice said dark magic?!"

Dumbledore sighed deeply.

"I cannot say, Minister. I do not monitor the grounds outside Hogwarts and Hogsmeade at all hours of every day. I do have important duties."

Rufus slapped one palm down on his desk.

"Fine. But if I find one more instance of evidence of the use of dark magic in that area I will be sending in a team of aurors to investigate. There are still Death Eaters out there, and rumors of them raising some sort of force. Over a dozen reports of witches and wizards disappearing on their own property, then several more failed attempts by masked Death Eaters to apprehend them. The Ministry has been forced to place a warning in the Daily Prophet."
Dumbledore clasped his hands in his lap.

"I read the statement myself. The information is alarming. Have you any leads?"

Rufus resisted the desire to snarl; Albus Dumbledore, for all that he tried to look innocent and grandfatherly, held significant power behind him. It wouldn't do to rail at the man like his predecessor, and find himself kicked from office months later.

"They're in Scotland, in the wilderness. Four or five Death Eaters, no doubt led by Crouch Jr."

"Close to Hogwarts?" Dumbledore raised a brow, and Rufus shook his head.

"No, I don't think so." His eyes narrowed. "And I doubt they were flinging Fiendfyre about, either, but I'm leaving no stone unturned. I have groups scouring the mountains. It's only a matter of time before we find them."

Dumbledore nodded solemnly.

"I wish you luck, Minister."

Rufus sat back in his chair, eyes drawn to the large map of the country on his wall, the parchment marked with multiple lines drawn in red and blue.

"I don't believe in luck."

Harry leaned back into the sofa cushions, one arm tossed around Hermione's shoulders as she rested against him, a slim book of tan light cradled in her hands as she read aloud.

The Grangers had thrown him a birthday party at their house; he was now sixteen years old.

He absently listened to the comforting rise and fall of Hermione's voice as she read about the life of Albert Einstein, a renowned physicist who had invented the theory that Harry hoped to reconcile with magic. A book given
to him by Dudley, who saw the word physics on the front and assumed Harry would find it interesting. Harry hadn't had the heart to tell the other boy he already knew nearly everything there was to know about Einstein, from biographies three times the size of the one Hermione read from.

It was certainly still nice to listen to Hermione read, her familiar soft tones rising and falling, while the rest of his and Hermione's families talked in laughing tones to one another around the large dining room table and scattered living room chairs. Mrs. Granger had his aunt off in the corner with two of Hermione's aunts, all discussing something in whispered tones. His uncle and one of Hermione's uncles were talking about the latest renovations to their favorite golf course, while Hermione's dad and her other uncle ranted about automobile designs and car racing tracks, with Mr. Granger far preferring Formula One while the uncle thought anything other than dirt tracks were pretentious and overly driven by endorsement deals.

Dudley sat with three of Hermione's cousins, all four boys concentrating on the widescreen t.v. and the multiplayer shooting game, frequently hissing curses at one another one second and laughingly joking the next.

Hermione's only other cousin, an older girl called Jessica, sat alone by the window, a faint lavender pattern that had once been pristine now marred by ugly cracks, threatening to break.

Something was going wrong with her; though earlier Hermione insisted she had heard nothing off regarding her oldest cousin. Harry could see the truth; something had hurt her soul enough that the strain was making it weaken and fray. No doubt worse because she was apparently keeping it quiet.

He narrowed his eyes and focused on the swirl of pulsing lights by the window, extending his power for the first time that evening in an idle flex to Look.

Jessica was tall; tall and thin, skin tightly covering little muscle and barely any fat, her skeleton strong without weaknesses. Perhaps too thin; Harry was still new to observing the human bodies around him, and he sometimes saw deeper than he wished, beneath clothes and flesh to the
hidden organs underneath. She was dressed in long pants and a sweater, odd choices for July. Her arms were crossed across her stomach, sitting hunched over on the window seat.

As he Looked, she shivered and held herself tighter; not the average response to the touch of his magic in a muggle.

"Harry?" Hermione asked softly, and he became aware that many of the conversations in the room had stopped.

An unwelcome side effect to his Look; it often spread out without his notice, touching on the others in a room with brushes of his power. As he had focused on Jessica, it had managed to cover most of the room with traces of emerald magic like odd splashes of paint by a careless artist.

Harry withdrew it immediately, the natural colors of things instantly shining back through, the shadowy carpet floor with its green wooden tables and brown leather chairs.

And the hues of people in it that he distinctly felt were looking at him.

After the last few months of experimentation with his vision, all of the Dursley knew what the sensation of the Look was, the rising energy and enthusiasm; but while Mr. and Mrs. Granger knew something of it and magic both, Hermione's uncles and their families knew nothing of either.

_Blast it._

Hermione's hand squeezed his; and Harry turned his face into her hair and whispered quickly in her ear.

"Something is wrong with Jess; she's breaking, even as we speak."

Conversations were haltingly starting back up again; the Grangers shaking off the odd sensation as perhaps a temporary malfunction in the AC; and the odd way the Potter teen had stared at their Jess written off as a blind boy simply not knowing where he was looking. And surely his eyes had not been glowing; just a trick of the light.

The Dursleys knew better; his aunt's voice had risen a bit too high in a
laugh not quite real as she tried to draw attention back to herself and off of her nephew's odd behavior.

Hermione leaned closer to him.

"You're sure? Is that all you know?"

Harry sighed.

"Yes. Her body is healthy in every way I can see, only her soul pattern seems affected."

Hermione breathed softly against him, quiet as her mind raced in thought, before she seemed to come to some conclusion.

"I'll be right back."

With that, she pulled away and stood, moving towards Jess with purposeful intent.

And soon after she reached her, Harry saw one crack widen and begin to split. The girl's voice rose, audible even where he sat across the room.

"...nothing wrong with me!"

"Jessica." Her dad said sternly, his voice a mixture of embarrassed and confused at the near-yell.

Another crack; the girl was nearly panting with emotion.

"Jessica?" Her mother, now, questioning, pale light so similar to her daughters moving closer, parents drawing into a protective circle though they had no idea what was going on.

Everyone was watching now; Harry saw Hermione's light dim and waver in uncertainty. He found himself standing, moving closer with careful movements, no guidance with his staff far away by the door.

Jessica's pillar of light stomped one foot.
"What is wrong with you guys? I told you to leave me alone! I didn't want to come to this stupid party anyway! Just leave me alone!"

Her voice rose to a new height; and to his dismay Harry saw from up close that the damage was more extensive than he had thought; pale purple swirls turning jagged and sharp and beginning to pull apart.

He lost the thread of conversation; conscious only of that light, crumbling before his very eyes, a delayed reaction from some horrible blow in the past few days, on its way to looking like Luna's and the few muggles he had seen in the college hallways that had the pattern of their consciousness broken and scarred over.

Previously, he had thought such breaks must come about from great trauma; the death of a loved one in some horrible manner, a life-threatening illness, the shock of war. Some books even said that using dark magic would fracture one's soul; the Killing Curse in particular.

But what could have happened to Jessica Granger, a nineteen year old girl in college herself, loving parents, good grades…

"Jessica! Stop that right now!" Steven Granger's voice was rough with embarrassment and growing anger. "That is no way to treat your cousin or your aunt and uncle!"

Even as Jessica's words grew angrier and louder, lashing out in return at her father, Harry saw her light fading in response to some terrible emotion, at odds with how anger normally effected the soul.

"Stop." Harry said abruptly; and heard the unintended whip of power in his voice. The growing argument halted; Jessica sucked in a large breath, no doubt to turn her sharp tongue on him for interrupting her.

Harry stepped closer, passing a frozen Hermione, to stand closer to Jessica than was probably proper. She shrank back in unconscious reaction.

"You're doing more harm than good." He said simply, speaking to both girl and father. "Something has gone wrong."
Hermione’s blue-violet light hovered closer at his shoulder, a hand grasping his arm. "Harry, I’m not sure…"

Stephen Granger spoke at the same time. "Young man, I'm very sorry for this scene during your birthday, but…"

Harry shook his head sharply. "You need to fix this, now, before it can't be fixed. She's falling apart."

"What?!" Jessica snapped. "What in heaven’s name are you blabbering about now?"

Harry pinned her lavender light with his gaze.

"I'm talking about whatever happened to you in the last day or two that you are hiding from everyone who loves you, preventing them from helping you heal."

She sucked in a breath; then began to wheeze, backing away.

"H-how do you know?!" She demanded ragidly, her voice breaking.

"Honey, what is he talking about?" Her mother asked.

Harry turned to Hermione and took her hand after a few clumsy grasps. He began to walk away, dragging her behind him.

"Whatever it is, I don't need to know, just tell someone before it ruins you." He said softly over his shoulder into the silence, determined to move away and give the panicked girl space. He didn't want to elevate the pressure on her when she was so close to breaking.

"I'm already ruined." She whispered softly, and Harry heard his aunt ushering Dudley and the other cousins away with sharp words, clearing out the large living room with the efficiency of a mother used to rounding up eavesdropping boys.

Harry paused at the door, looking back to where Jessica stood alone beside her worried parents, pale lavender between the deep purple of her father and the fuchsia tint of her mother.
"Not as long as you don't let it break you."

And with another sharp tug on Hermione's hand, he left the room.

It was nearly three days later when Hermione approached him in the wide library of Grimmauld Place, her steps a familiar sound in his ears, the yellow of Kreacher on her heels with a metal tray bearing refreshments.

The house-elf had turned a new leaf with the destruction of the soul within the locket; and had been more than devoted when Harry gave the elf the silver necklace as a momento.

He could see the pinpricks of metal about the elf's neck, and knew Kreacher still wore the locket with devotion.

It was a good thing jewelry did not count as clothes, or he would have been rewriting another contract no doubt. Though, that needed doing regardless. Surely the elder elf, if he insisted on working, would enjoy better clauses binding his service.

Hermione sat across from him, oddly silent as Kreacher placed ceramic mugs between them and disappeared.

When she finally spoke, it was in a whisper.

"Mum told me it was her student advisor. They've convinced her to press charges, though it will be her word against his. Times like this I wish that muggles had Veritaserum."

He felt a hard pang in his chest at that news; he slowly nodded, and at the encouragement, Hermione began speaking faster.

"And healing potions, too, for that matter. And, a-and wards, and... oh Harry, we spend all this time working on new theories and challenging laws of science and magic, when the world is suffering. I can understand a little of why wizards hid themselves away, but all the g-good we can do... surely it outweighs the evil. Surely we can find some way to come together. It's not the dark ages anymore, with superstition and witch hunts, especially when even then they did our kind little harm. I...I j-just want to h-
help somehow."

Her words ended with a fractured sob; Harry stood, his chair scraping back with a loud noise, rounding the table quickly to sink onto his haunches beside her, gathering her into his arms.

Against his shoulder, she shook her head with sudden anger.

"I hate feeling helpless. Worse, I hate being a-able to help, and yet being prohibited from doing so. When I think of what we could do to fix the world…"

She pulled away, and Harry Looked down at her to see that whatever tears she had cried were gone, replaced with firm determination.

"That's what I want to do, Harry. I don't want to just be Viola James, talking theory and magic in papers. I want to find a way to help the muggle world, too. Find a way to help them accept magic for what it is; the answer we've all been looking for."

Harry smiled; and felt an answering drive catching in his own heart at the fire in her voice.

"We'll find a way, then. Between you and me, we'll find a way."

And if his gaze ever fell on the man who raped Hermione's cousin, he would be strongly tempted to develop a new skill in breaking souls himself.

The summer break seemed over as fast as it had begun; and classes resumed like the inevitable change of the seasons.

Hermione began to carry her things to Grimmauld place to study after classes, copying Harry's movements from the year before.

But more often than not, it was not their classes or new magical theories that they spoke of. It was the nature of magic and science itself; and between the two of them, a plan began to form.

It would take years; years of planning, studying, networking. It might even
be impossible; the Ministry, if it got wind of it before they were ready, would surely retaliate. Or worse, the ICW; the entity made to regulate the use of magic to ensure no muggle could ever discover their society.

But that was the genius of the plan; so many things muggles did seemed like magic already. Many wizards and witches did not even realize just how far technology had come; nearly to the point of being more efficient than magic in some cases.

But not beyond it; not yet.

Hermione was the first to speak of how it could be done; 'discovering' magic with science, introducing it as some element or compound or force, something muggles could understand and study and not even consider to be something as superstitious as *magic*.

Harry was the one to think of the theory of relativity, and how it might be reconciled with quantum mechanics. The thought that not all of the discovered elements in the theory were in place; that maybe magic itself was what was missing.

"We'll start a company." Hermione whispered to him as they leaned against each other on the frayed rug in Grimmauld Place, a fire roaring in front of them tended by Kreacher. "Start with pharmaceuticals, maybe. Genetically modified plants that are not modified at all; introducing magical specimens under the very nose of the Ministry. Concentrated serums from these organisms in order to cure the common cold, or influenza, or cancer. Shots that can heal muscle tears and repair bones. Potions made on a large scale and simply called medicine. Who would ever suspect it's magic in the beginning? We'll just be entrepreneurs."

It was late; she should have gone home over an hour before. But planning and dreaming had made them lose track of time, sharing thoughts between them on how it could be. Papers were scattered behind them; flow charts and graphs, ideas and strategies for the future. Harry ran a hand through her soft, curly hair, the heat of the fire causing static to spark between them.

"And we can contract with the government privately." He murmured back.
"Truth serums, new drugs to use in interrogations before they become mainstream. Provide us a measure of security, political power."

She wrinkled her nose; he felt it against his shoulder and knew she didn't like the idea.

But she nodded anyway.

"And then, when everyone accepts it, we do more. More and more spectacular things. The whole world will be using our inventions. Progress, they'll call it. Science."

"It is science." Harry responded with a smile, watching the red lights of fire swirl and spark and eat hungrily at the green wood burning beneath it. One pattern fueling another, green life going still before it made the life of the fire burn more brightly.

Yellow light came and went; Kreacher bringing hot chocolate from the kitchen and hovering at the door as he liked to do, listening in on them, watching for even a hint of something to do.

Perhaps the elf would at least like a companion. Surely he grew bored simply bringing them food and cleaning Grimmauld Place.

"What do you think will happen, if the Ministry catches on?" Hermione asked softly, after a moment had passed.

Harry squeezed her gently where she lay against his side.

"Depends on when they find out. Try to stop us, I imagine, if it's early enough. If it's not, hold endless meetings where they agonize over the imminent destruction of our culture by muggles. Pass around a lot of paperwork and send their drones to every Ministry in the world to share in the terror of the thought."

Hermione laughed; but he could still feel the tension in her shoulders.

Harry sighed.

"Nothing that's worth doing comes without risk. I don't have to give you
examples from history on that score. We won't really know what they'll do until it happens. All we can do is move forward and prepare for any scenario."

Hermione's chin tilted up at him; he glanced down into moving blue-violet light, beautiful constellations of color in moving streams.

"Hope for the best, prepare for the worst." She said with a smile in her voice.

He smiled in return and gently leaned forward to meet her face with his own.

When college let out for the winter his aunt made it plain that just like any college student away from home, he was expected to return to Surrey for a few days of family company at the least.

Within a day, he was thinking fondly of his lab.

Within three days, he even missed Kreacher and his incessant demand for ways to serve the Master.

His aunt had redecorated; Harry expended far too much energy the first afternoon looking about and memorizing the new placement of the living room chairs and end tables. She had placed a large plastic tree before the wide flamed windows, its black shadowy leaves highlighted with pricks of metal ornaments and electric lights.

When the first strand burned out under his gaze, Harry was commanded to reduce his use of magic until after Christmas.

Dudley brought his steady girlfriend of two years to dinner; the local police inspectors daughter, a short magenta pattern who preferred to be called Bea instead of Beatrice, which she claimed was stuffy. Harry had never spent much time in her company before; and after doing so, was glad of it.

Bea was, in one word, bubbly; her energy practically frothed from her like an incessant fountain, a colorful display that threatened to give him a headache. For a muggle, her soul was a bright beacon of happiness. Harry
was sorely tempted to ask if she had magical ancestors, but to do so would cause awkward questions he doubted Dudley would appreciate.

Hermione, beside him at the dinner table, slipped her hand inside his own, and Harry relaxed at the touch, looking over at the much more calm light next to him.

He smiled at her, feeling her hand squeeze his in response.

For the next hour, he kept his hand in contact with her light; whether her hand, her side, her waist, and each touch made the family dinner a great deal more pleasant.

And he tried very hard to ignore Dudley's snicker at his admittedly lovesick actions.

1997

When he returned to Grimmauld Place, after nearly a week with the Dursleys, Harry took a deep breath and bathed in the silence.

As much as he loved his aunt, her constant motion, either cooking, cleaning, or spying on the neighbors through the drapes along with constant commentary had worn him down. Having gotten used to being alone, the activity within the Dursley house had been unwelcome.

He liked the order of his own home. Did that make him crotchety?

"Master is home!" Kreacher's high voice came from down the hallway, and Harry smiled to see the yellow drifting closer from the kitchen.

He tossed his outer cloak onto the rack, his gloves left on the entrance table as he gratefully toed off his orange dragon-hide boots.

"Finally! Happy New Year, Kreacher." He said, and passed the house-elf as he strode towards his room.

"Can Kreacher get yous anything?" The elf’s voice followed him along with
the light patter of feet on hardwood.

"No." Harry replied over his shoulder, before ascending the steps two at a time.

"Is Master sure?" The house-elf was following him, and there was an odd note of desperation in his voice.

Harry frowned and paused at the top of the stair.

"Are you alright?"

The elf shifted on his feet; a loose floorboard creaked in the silence.

Harry looked at him with a gentle extension of green power, and saw an elf slumped slightly, ears drooping.

But before he could comment, like a flower blooming in the sun, Kreacher straightened his shoulders and raised his chin, body nearly vibrating with energy.

His energy.

"Kreacher is most fine now, Master Potter." The house-elf said, the sudden cheer in his voice at odds with the previous pleading words he had spoken.

"Wait." Harry said, as the yellow swirled in the beginnings of teleportation. "What do you mean, now?"

Kreacher hesitated, fingers absently clasping each other against his chest.

"Kreacher is very glad Master has returned."

Harry frowned. "You looked off until just now."

The house-elf shifted on his feet, and the floor creaked again. "Kreacher missed the Master's eyes the most." The elf finally said, his voice defiant, as if the admission was going to cost him something.

Harry tensed, a suspicion niggling at the back of his mind. "My eyes?"
The elf nodded with quick jerks of his head, speaking faster, warming to the topic. "Yes, Master. Master Looks at Kreacher sometimes, and Master makes Kreacher feel young and strong again. Kreacher missed the Look."

Harry, at that last word, withdrew his power with a snap, the defined features of his house-elf becoming yellow and blurred again, a smaller splash of color against the familiar walls of Grimmauld Place.

He knew his Look had an effect on others. In animals, it was usually fear. In muggles, increased energy levels during the duration of the Look, usually focused on some task that was enjoyable or pressing. In magical people, the effect was skewed if the people he was Looking at recognized himself as the source of energy; they were either afraid or uncomfortable to be touched by foreign magic in such a way.

He hadn't thought to test long-term effects of daily exposure to his own energy, and had done no testing at all on its effect on magical creatures like house-elves. He had rather thought it was probable they would react like people or animals according to their level of sentience.

But Kreacher sounded like he not only enjoyed the sensation of his energy, but actively sought it out. It would certainly explain why the elf was so eager to please the last few months.

And that, more than anything, raised warning flags in his mind.

"I see. Thank you for telling me." Harry said simply, and turned away, hearing the elf pop out behind him.

In his room, he closed the door and sat on his bed, looking down at his feet as his mind raced.

He had to do more tests, immediately. He had to know if it was simply because Kreacher was a house-elf, or a magical creature, or if it was the frequency of Looks he received.

He had to come up with a way to stop Kreacher from relying on the energy boost of his own power in any way. Was the work too much to handle?

Most of all he really, really needed to talk to Hermione.
"How does it feel when I Look at you?" Harry asked straight out, as soon as he finished describing how Kreacher had acted and spoken.

Hermione bit her lip, fidgeting in her chair in the library, trying to decide how to describe the feeling.

"Well... it's not unpleasant." She began, then shook her head. "Actually, unpleasant is far from how I would describe it. I can tell right away, your magic just... touches my own." She stopped again, looking out the window as people walked by on the street. How to say it? "It's w-warm..." It makes my heart beats faster "...kind of like a hug..." Or your fingers on my skin "...and it makes me feel safe." And loved, very very loved. Like you've put a mark on me that says I'm yours.

Hermione tossed her head and shifted in her seat. "I do feel a rush of energy, but I don't feel particularly stronger, and the sensation fades as soon as you look away." Though, she wouldn't mind if he did it more often. She could sympathize with Kreacher in that desire.

Harry sighed. "I talked to him more this morning, and I can't help but draw correlations between what he feels and what an addict feels. He admitted he is tired a lot, and that taking care of Grimmauld Place takes a toll. He has been using the energy bursts to do some of the cleaning and cooking."

That would certainly explain why Hermione noticed the house was not as clean as Hogwarts. She had figured the house-elf just disliked completely spotless homes, after living in a decade of filth. Or perhaps had just lost his knack for it.

But knowing that the elf had struggled instead made her feel mildly guilty for all the times she had pointed out a dusty bookshelf.

"Does he want to retire?"

Surely house-elves had some sort of retirement. They couldn't work forever.

"House-elves don't retire. Their contract is until death." Harry's voice was
grim. Hermione straightened in outrage.

"*What?!* That's preposterous!"

Harry's face twisted in distaste. "I know. But Kreacher won't even talk of renegotiating his contract with me without going into hysterics. I think I'm going to have to purchase another house-elf to help around here."

Hermione lifted her chin. "Absolutely *not*, if their contracts are that horrible! Someone should do something. It's inhumane."

Harry leaned his head back in a stretch, letting out a long breath before he straightened. "I know. The wizarding world has a distinct lack of civil rights for many magical creatures. But there is not much we can do about it now."

Hermione folded her arms. "If Kreacher can't handle the workload because he is old, then make him younger."

Harry's body tensed; she saw even his fingers tighten on the armrest. "*What?*"

Hermione met eyes that did not focus on her own. "I've helped you write out your notes on the tests done on the soul sliver. You implied there was a noticeable difference between young and old patterns. If you can see that difference, it stands to reason you can change one pattern to another."

Harry moved uneasily, and his gaze dropped to the floor. "Hermione, I..."

One look into his guilty face, and she huffed in sudden realization. "*You've already* done some testing on age reversal!"

At the accusation, Harry shrank in his chair. "*I...*

Hermione leapt to her feet and stomped the five feet that separated them. *Harry James Potter."

*I'm sorry!* Harry yelped at her angry tone. "At the time, after how upset you were over the soul... and then after, everything was going so well... and I just..."
"Stop before you dig the hole deeper." Hermione demanded. "You know how important it is to document all tests for future experiments. In leaving me out of it, we could have lost valuable data!"

Harry raised his hands in supplication. "I haven't done anything in nearly a year. Since before Kreacher gave me the locket to practice on. I got enough to draw some basic conclusions, but I hit a dead-end."

Hermione, after a seconds contemplation, gingerly slid into his lap, rewarded by his frustrated face twisting into surprise and distracted pleasure. His hands hesitated a moment over her shoulders before settling there.

"You've got all those experiments put away in that mind of yours, and I want you to tell me about them and why you are reluctant to try making Kreacher younger." She spoke softly to him, her own hands on his chest. "I'll have a new perspective, and might see something you missed."

Harry sighed, his chest rising and falling under her hands. He pressed her closer, and Hermione turned into his side, cuddling down in the chair like it was made for two people instead of one, her legs swung across his own.

His arm wrapped around her shoulder, and his breath ruffled her hair softly.

"You're going to be somewhat disappointed in me." He admitted finally, and Hermione shook her head.

"You have a reason for everything you do, even if I disagree. Disagreement is not disappointment."

Harry snorted, then ran one hand up and down her arm, as if to calm an anxious cat.

"I tested on animals."

Well, maybe she could be disappointed a little. Hermione's heart sank. More than anything else, she hated animal testing in any of its forms. A fact he was well aware of. Animals could not give consent; and the only thing she had found more horrifying than muggle animal labs was the potential that transfigured animals were aware when magical students
practiced on them, twisting and sometimes killing their bodies. Animals had no rights in the wizarding world, from the smallest mouse to the largest abraxus.

"Go on." She whispered, and Harry's arms tightened.

Then, he reluctantly began to speak, in dry clinical terms.

"I started with a *Columba livia domestica*, a species of street pigeon I obtained from outside. Standard pale blue bird-pattern. I practiced Quickening first…"

Hermione closed her eyes, resting against his side as he spoke, and tried not to think about the fact that in order to bring something to life, you had to kill it first. And that Harry would not, as any scientist would not, be content with doing an experiment once. It had to be replicated; which meant her Harry had killed a defenseless animal over and over.

And somehow, to her, that thought was worse than knowing he had split a human soul into strands of light to see how its personality was structured.

*He had to know.* Hermione reminded herself. *We both have to know.*

But at that moment, she would almost rather *not."

Hermione spent a week of her free time before classes resumed on organizing a new folder, binders of crisp white paper rapidly filling with notes and untested hypotheses, along with what experiments had failed.

Harry had not just practiced on one pigeon. He had tested Quickening on several different species of mammals as well, mostly stray cats or dogs with the odd owl thrown in, as well as a wide variety of plants. Enough to confirm that death in an animal body was a temporary state, able to be reversed with the right pattern restoration. Not enough, however, to confirm if the animals once Quickened retained the same personality as before. In plants, Quickening usually resulted in new growth, buds or leaves forming from a branch or stalk, not necessarily the restoration of the old growth.
But in his experiments with making old patterns young again, the results had been erratic at best, and at worst a total failure.

"It doesn't seem to make medical sense." Harry told her as she sat at her own designated desk in the wide library. "The old pattern's light simply moves slower, though its heart might beat at the same rate as a younger specimen. When I speed up that light, that life seems to wear out the body at an exponential rate. Mere days, in some cases, and they die. The only way to truly revert them appears to be to change not only the speed, or age, of their light but to also revert the old pattern to a new pattern, an entirely younger body. And I couldn't do that properly without first killing the pattern, making the dead body younger, then Quickening it at a younger speed."

Hermione tapped her pen on the desk, brows drawn together in thought.

"So, we have two elements at work in plants, the light of its life and then an ageless genus pattern. In animals, three elements; the light of its life, which slows with age; its genus pattern that is set for its species with color; and the age of its genus pattern, which seems to be manipulated by various geometric shapes?"

Harry nodded, and Hermione continued.

"Then, in humans, four elements. Light displaying life and at times emotion, the genus pattern whose soulless base is white, the age pattern of the body in shapes, and then the soul, which has unique color but also unique shapes?"

Harry smiled, shaking his head with a laugh. "Humans are nearly impossible to categorize. Not only are their lights unique, but so are their shapes, and those shapes age at different rates than everyone else. Even thinking about de-aging a human pattern permanently seems impossible without risking accidentally changing them into someone else while doing it."

Hermione only turned a page and made another notation above a simple chart she had drawn. "That's why we're starting simple with animals. No added soul to factor in alongside unique geometric shapes." She frowned
down at the paper. "Though, it bothers me to think that magical creatures have no unique souls, when they obviously have unique personalities. So do animals, for that matter. I guess I always subscribed to the idea that everyone deserves a heaven to go to when they die."

"I'm not sure the afterlife is heaven." Harry countered. "Or even a place at all." He stared off into the distance, eyes shuttered in thought. "And just because humans have unique souls that go somewhere else does not mean that magical creatures and animals do not have unique consciousness'. I've long wondered what happens to that consciousness when I change the pattern, and whether these younger patterns will have the same memories as the old one. I'm changing their brains, Hermione. I don't realistically know how that won't make them an entirely new person."

Hermione put her pen down and sighed. "I know. I want to say magic can solve it all, but magic is still science, still follows rules. Changing the brain in any way will affect things. Have you looked into specific patterns for different parts of a body? Changing everything but the brain?"

Harry wilted where he stood. "I've thought about it, but I can't at this point. I see barely any difference in individual body parts from the outside, as they all make up the body pattern together. In order to do so..." He paled, but continued. "I would have to observe each individual organ and bone separately while it was alive to see how it fit into the pattern. And not only once, but for every animal I thought about de-aging. It would be rediscovering the entire human and animal body by myself, and memorizing each individual part of a pattern. And not every specimen's organs and flesh would be the same... the vast scope of it would require years dedicated solely to that one task. Duplicating known patterns is easy, but changing them... it requires far more knowledge of individual portions. It's not an easy fix."

Hermione closed the notebook and straightened the desk, her hands moving restlessly as she tried to turn the problem over in her mind.

"You created a dragon from stone without that kind of knowledge. How?"

Harry leaned over her desk, black hair falling across his face as he answered. "Easily. For one, it was not alive. It was fueled by my own
power, which after the fact was not the best use of magic in a duel, as it exhausted me within minutes. I simply took the pattern of the dragon I faced at the tournament, which was a very unique genus pattern that was easy to memorize, and forced that pattern onto the stone underneath my feet, which gave it the color of stone but the pattern of a dragon. It wasn't very neat work, but I was a bit distracted. As soon as I stopped fueling it, however, it fell apart back into stone. A dragon can not live with a stone body, even if every piece of the pattern is in place. If I had tried to Quicken it to its own life, it would not have taken."

Hermione hummed in agreement, looking up into Harry's face as he leaned over her. He seemed to be looking at her fingers, eyes flickering back and forth, but it was hard to tell.

She smiled slightly. "How about lunch? And we'll talk to Kreacher about at least giving this a try. If all else fails, we return him back to his current state, and reconsider getting more help."

Though, she wouldn't hire a single elf without a contract that didn't equal modern slavery. She was certain Harry would agree with her on that score.

He brightened.

"Deal."

Kreacher hadn't hesitated to agree to be their test subject. Harry hadn't been certain if it was because the house-elf wanted to be younger again, or because it meant Harry would be focusing a great deal of energy on him, and doubtless a great deal of Looks.

But by the second week of the new term, Harry stood in his laboratory with Hermione, and told Kreacher to take a seat. Hermione had come up with what she hoped was a workable plan, after going through some of their previous notes on transfiguration and pattern-manipulation.

Harry had spent that time studying Kreacher’s pattern until he was completely certain he could recreate him if something went direly wrong.

He was the neon yellow of all house-elves, but Kreacher's light was slightly
slower than a younger elf's would be, and yet his magic was still strong. His pattern tended towards trapezoids and parallelograms, a mix of sharp angles and sloping lines over a short spindly humanoid shape. And in his study of the old elf, Harry noticed something he never had before in quick glances; underlying the yellow was much more subtle detail, an infinitesimal pattern within the larger hue. He wasn't sure if it was unique only to Kreacher and house-elves, or if there was something similar in other magical creatures. Harry had made a mental note to study the phenomenon later once they were finished with their current project.

"Kreacher is ready, Master." The house-elf declared, and Harry smiled before sitting down himself in another chair that had been placed in the room.

Hermione began to speak to the magical quill.

"First test, February seventh, on house-elf Kreacher at Grimmauld Place. Harry will temporarily stop the life in the subject, then attempt basic pattern changes regarding the shapes that make up a younger house-elf body, based on observations of other house-elves at the House-Elf Registry office in Diagon Alley. When the new pattern is established, Harry will Quicken Kreacher and adjust the speed of light to confirm his new youthful state, and then we will interview the house-elf to see what, if any, memories or personality changes have taken place."

As soon as Hermione stopped speaking, Harry's hands tightened around his staff, and he locked his gaze on Kreacher's pattern as it squirmed in the seat, legs swinging loosely in nervous anticipation.

Then, he made the pulse of light still.

Hermione made an agonized sound behind him as the yellow pattern slumped down in its chair, nearly falling from the seat. He knew she hadn't liked the idea of what they were doing, regardless if it was for a good cause. He also knew that this was the first time she witnessed him kill a live being directly in this manner.

Harry let out a breath and pushed how she might be feeling from his mind; it was time to get to work.
He began to rearrange the pattern, a line here, another there, duplicating the lines of the younger patterns he had seen. He focused entirely on his task, even when he heard the door to the lab open and close again.

When he was finished, he looked away.

Hermione was gone.

With a glance towards where a younger Kreacher lay sprawled, Harry strode to the door, frowning as he looked out into the hallway.

Hermione's light approached, but it was dim with strong emotion.

"Are you alright?" Harry questioned, and Hermione brushed past him to stand beside the quill.

When she spoke, her voice was stiff. "The Quill is still transcribing."

In other words, she didn't want to talk about it.

With another frown, Harry retook his place in the seat. "I've finished the de-aging process. Now I will Quicken him. Time?"

Hermione's voice replied steadily. "It's been one hour and fifteen minutes."

More than he had suspected. With a nod, Harry flicked Kreacher's light into motion, a quick lively beat of health and strength.

The elf jerked, jumping from its chair which clattered to the ground.

Harry held his breath as Kreacher floundered for a second.

Then, his elf's voice began to speak in the same hissing tone he had used when he first came upon them over a year before. "Intruders! How dare you invade the Master's house!"

Hermione's light, already weak, dimmed further in disappointment. Harry spoke quickly as he saw magic rising in the small figure. "Who is your master?"
The elf raised its hands in indignation, magic sparking like live yellow fire in its palms. "Master Orion Black!"

Before the spell could be cast, Harry stopped the elf's light, and the creature fell to the wooden floor with a unpleasant crunch.

Harry winced, and heard Hermione groan.

Harry cleared his throat. "Experiment has failed. Body regression appears successful, but subject lost at least one to two decades of memory. I will now return Kreacher to his original older form."

"Deactivate." Hermione snapped, and Harry heard the quill clatter to the table it and parchment had been placed upon. "I'll be outside when you're done."

Before he could ask what was wrong, the door was closing behind her.

Harry sighed, taking a moment to lean back in his chair, an ache developing in both his neck and his bottom from sitting so long already in one position.

Then he looked at Kreacher dead on the floor, and set about putting him to rights again.

Two hours later, Harry found her light curled up on his bed, a green sheet thrown over her legs.

"We'll try again." He said softly, uncertain if she was asleep.

"I know." She wasn't.

He walked closer, sitting on the edge of the mattress. "Will you tell me what's wrong?"

There was a moment of silence, then her hand touched his own, fingers twining with his. "Just another difference in what we see, I think. It was very disturbing to watch you tear apart and transfigure skin and bone before threading it back together. I t-threw up."
Her voice jerked; Harry sucked in a breath and swung his legs over, laying down so they were face to face. "I'm sorry. I didn't think what the process might look like to you."

He felt the bed move as she shook her head, blue-violet light shifting.

"I'm fine. I just don't do well with b-blood, not after... the t-troll." She growled the last, and her hand tightened on his. "It's silly, and I feel stupid for responding that way. I'm not going to stop watching the experiments, so don't even say it." Harry snapped his mouth closed. He had been about to suggest just that. "I'll get used to it. This is part of science, it's not all clean and magical. Sometimes it's messy. Is Kreacher alright?"

Harry reached out with his other hand until he felt her warm shoulder, then ran it down her back with soft motions as he replied.

"He's fine. A bit disappointed to still be old and wrinkly."

She laughed choppy, then shifted until he felt her breath against his cheek. Soft skin touched his own, and his vision narrowed until all he saw was the beautiful shades of her pattern.

Despite the situation, he very much wanted to roll her on top of him and bathe in her light. He was very aware of the fact that they were in his bed, a situation he had never been in before and one he was probably enjoying far too much.

Then Hermione's face rubbed softly against his own, and he felt the drying liquid on her face, smelled the salt of tears. All thoughts of sex were pushed to the back of his mind, far less urgent than the fact that his Viola was feeling wretched.

Harry pulled her closer and held her against him, her hair falling over one hand, the other clasped tightly with hers as he whispered in her ear.

"It was just the initial experiment. We'll try our other ideas, one a week for the next two months, as we planned. If they all fail, then we get another elf. I'm not sure I even want to succeed." When Hermione jerked in his arms, Harry made a sound of amusement. "I don't want to make
something live forever. It seems like a big responsibility, being the fountain of youth. I have enough unique abilities on my hands to last me a lifetime."

Her mouth lifted in a reluctant smile against his neck. "You're probably right. We're going to try anyway though."

"Yep." Harry said, and laughed in earnest. "If the possibility exists I have to know, even if I regret it."

"I'm sure every scientist who discovers something of magnitude feels somewhat the same. Like your idol."

Hermione had begun to refer to Albert Einstein, the german physicist whose work Harry studied so thoroughly, as that. Harry rather hoped he was his role model instead; if he had half of the intuition and insightful nature Einstein had, surely he would see much more clearly in solving his own problems.

But then again, Einstein was still just a man. He had no doubt struggled just as much with his own discoveries, and also with what they had brought to light. One simple equation that had eventually led to the creation of a weapon whose scope was far greater than anything that the wizarding world had ever created.

Harry strongly felt that even fiendfyre was inferior to a muggle atomic bomb.

Hermione yawned and relaxed. After a moment's thought, Harry grabbed the pattern of the green blanket under him and pull it out to settle it over them both.

"Just a short nap." Hermione murmured to the pillow.

Harry lay his arm back over her shoulders, breathing in her unique scent with a pleased sound.

"Okay."

All of the experiments failed. By the time March came to an end and April
began, both Harry and Hermione were sick of testing anything at all on Kreacher, who while patient, was still just as needy of Harry's energy as he had been at the beginning.

Harry liked being used a drug even less than the thought of being a pseudo youth elixir.

"We've done all we can do." He told Hermione with a slashing gesture towards the notebook in her hands. "There's nothing left to try, unless you're ready to do invasive experiments on his inner organs."

He didn't have to see her light pulse in agitation to know that thought disturbed her a great deal. While she hadn't gotten sick during any of the other experiments they had done, she obviously didn't like them any better regardless.

Who could blame her?

"We'll go to the Registry office after the end of the school year then and start searching for a reasonable house-elf contract." She said, and arms of light waved erratically. "I have to start studying for finals on the weekends."

"Then we're agreed to close this project?"

She sighed, but walked to the desk and dropped the book on it with a thump. "Yes. Temporary findings is that memories and personality are directly related to a patterns age." She paused, and he felt her gaze on him. "You're aware that this probably won't apply to humans? If the soul contains the consciousness and is a separate element, it could reasonably be taken from an old body and put into a new one. Just like the silver of Voldemort you destroyed."

He grimaced. "Yes. I don't feel like testing it though."

She sniffed. "Believe it or not, human testing isn't regulated in the wizarding world as long as consent is obtained. The rules are far more lax than in the muggle world, where they actually care enough about people's live to ensure things are done properly."

Harry snorted in response. "Until the Ministry finds out we're doing
experiments on souls. Magic relating to souls is considered Dark Magic, and therefore illegal."

Hermione sighed. "I know. I can understand why, even if I don't completely agree with it. You have to research somehow."

"You can." Harry returned. "If you work with the Unspeakables and never share your findings with anyone but the Ministry."

She laughed, walking closer to hook her arm with his as they left the library. "And we both know that will never happen. I firmly believe knowledge shouldn't be kept secret."

Harry raised a brow. "That's not true. You think we should keep the full extent of my abilities secret."

Her fingers pinched him. "That's not the same!"

Harry rubbed the painful spot and grinned. "Hypocrite!"

Her light danced closer to his and he jumped away in response before one hand could swat his head.

"I am not! I'm..." She sniffed. "Selfish. The only person who can hide knowledge is me."

Her voice was amused. Harry laughed.

"That's the definition of a hypocrite in one sentence. Congratulations."

She lunged for him and he dodged, heading for the kitchen at a run with a quick Look for obstacles.

"Come back here!" She demanded behind him, laughter making the command nothing more than a friendly suggestion.

Harry's smile widened. He jumped around Kreacher and headed through the kitchen. "Make me!" He tossed the words over one shoulder.

"Oh I will." Her voice was full of determination. He had enough time to see
the green and orange of her wand in one hand.

Then his world became blue-violet and he stumbled to a stop.

The fiend had cast a wordless *bubblehead* charm on him. *When had she practiced wordless incantations*?!

"Now, what am I going to do with you?" Her voice came closer, satisfied, and Harry was too thrilled to even bother dispelling the charm. He smiled, blind as a bat in broad daylight.

He certainly hoped that whatever she decided to do it lasted a *long* time.

"We're ready, my Lord." Crouch said in soft, eager tones. Behind him, hundreds of eyes glowed in the darkness with pale fire.

Tom Riddle turned, adjusting the sleeve on his long robe over his wand holster. He met the fervent eyes of his closest advisor, saw the madness there in the too-bright gaze. His glanced at his other Death Eaters, assembled like a group of young wizards about to pull some elaborate prank. Excitement with just a hint of fear.

Fear, of a sixteen year old boy, who may or may not have been prophesied to stop him. A boy who had spelled his own defeat not once but twice. The savior of the wizarding world.

They knew the roads he traveled and the muggle conveyance that often carried him; the aurors who guarded him were easily followed from one warded location to another. The Ministry, so diligent in protecting and watching their savior that they did not watch their own backs.

Riddle would see how the boy and only two guards fared against the inferi.

Harry, leaning back in the passenger seat, saw the wall of magic coalesce in front of them.

"Stop!" He yelled, and jerked forward against the seatbelt as his uncle stomped on the breaks of the automobile, the tires shrieking in protest.
But they still hit that wall, the front of the car crumpling, metal collapsing. From behind them, cars honked in confusion.

Harry blinked, and the wall that had crushed the front hood disappeared, leaving behind something else.

"God help us." His uncle said hoarsely, and Harry hissed a question.

"What do you see?" What Harry saw was impossible; the blank white of human cadavers, too many to count, a legion of death. How had no one noticed?

"P-p-people. They're... they're staring at us. It's hard to tell in the dark... they don't look right. They aren't right."

It was supposed to bedark; the sun had set hours ago, before his uncle had picked him up from Grimmauld Place after a long day at the office.

"Stay here. Lock the doors." Harry said to his uncle, and didn't protest when he heard the man rapidly dialing some number on his cellphone. He opened his door and slipped out, holding his staff in one hand.

Behind him, on the sidewalk, the two aurors who had been following above them on brooms rapidly approached, one landing beside him with a quick clap of boots on asphalt.

"Mr. Potter! Come with us, now. You are in great danger."

"What are they?" He asked, eyes never leaving the hoard of white ahead of him.

"Inferi. Climb aboard and we will take you to safety."

_Inferi._ Dead bodies enchanted to life with dark magic. He didn't doubt if he was closer he would see the stamp of black magic hidden in the shining white of each corpse.

Inferi, who would kill anything in their path, possessing ten times the strength and speed of a normal person.
Why hadn't they attacked yet?

"What's going on here!?" Angry shouts came from behind them, people leaving their cars. The street hadn't been busy; but at least three cars had been behind them, perhaps more. A young voice called out over the agitated murmurs. "That man has a broom! And a pointy hat!"

The auror cursed. "Now, Mr. Potter. The longer we wait..."

"And the rest?" He asked softly. "Who will protect my uncle and the muggles here?"

"It can't be helped! They could attack at any moment." The aurors voice was urgent; above them, the second auror twirled his broom in a circle, scanning the scene below.

"What are they waiting for?" Harry asked, ignoring the man's extended blue hand.

"Who knows? Please..."

The white parted; and from the middle a pattern he was familiar with, intimately familiar with, appeared.

A pattern he had captured and killed and quickened and shredded and rebuilt and finally destroyed.

Not another bloody, broken Voldemort.

The auror hissed in a breath; Harry saw him swing his leg over the green light of his broom.

"Bringing reinforcements, then?" Harry said casually, even as the auror cursed and lifted off the ground with a shout up to his companions above.

"It's You-Know-Who!"

"Is someone hurt? What's going on? Who are these people?" The angry muggle voice from behind approached closer, no doubt trying to squint in the darkness.
"Get back in your cars." Harry said, beginning to walk towards where the blood-red pattern of Voldemort waited. "These men are armed."

He heard the muggle curse; and his alarmed shouts to the others. No doubt in minutes the police would be arriving, thanks to his uncle. He was standing in the middle of an incident that would keep a dozen obliviators busy, when they finally arrived.

Harry held his staff tight in one hand as he approached; and a voice called to him from the pattern ahead.

"Harry Potter! I've come to kill you!"

*Wasn't that much obvious already?* Harry stopped a few paces away, frowning at the broken wizard.

"How many of you are there? This makes three I've encountered so far."

Voldemort laughed, a high shriek of cold humor. "You'll never know Potter."

Other patterns were coming; and among them was the grey taint of Crouch Jr, who he had faced at the Tournament.

The remaining Death Eaters the Ministry had been searching for, all lined up and ready, wands shining in their hands.

"Why come after _me_?" Harry said quietly, burning for some sort of answer. "Is it because I've defeated you before?"

Voldemort's red light flickered; and Harry looked at him, seeing the man's angry serpentine face for a brief moment before withdrawing his power.

He would need all he had when the men attacked. Five wizards and an innumerable amount of inferi. No wonder the aurors had gotten on their brooms; he wouldn't be surprised if they outright fled to the Ministry. Only minutes had passed; and it would probably take at least ten more for the aurors to reassemble and return in force.

If Harry left, none of the people here would stand even one of those minutes. *Collateral;* the Death Eaters assumed, correctly, that Harry
wouldn't leave them defenseless.

He tightened both his hands on his staff and held it in front of him, as Voldemort spoke.

"Why? Is the fact that you are a thorn in my side not enough?" The inferi began to move, silently circling him, spreading out, no breaths sounding in his ears, only the scuffs of feet moving across the cracked road. "Or that you killed me twice before? Or that people claim you are greater than me?"

Another minute, passed. The Death Eaters were growing restless with their Master's gloating, their lights flickering, heads turning up to the sky. They, at least, knew that the Ministry would be soon arriving.

In the distance, he heard a siren.

"Or maybe, I simply want to see you die, and not even at my own hand. I'll enjoy watching my army tear you apart and consume the pieces."

Harry closed his eyes; he didn't need them. He heard the dark lord laugh; the nervous chuckles of the wizards behind him, the many sounds of multiple bodies moving on all sides of him, waiting for the command to attack.

He had no time to wait; and really, what was the point? Inferi had a weakness; a large one, one that he would be happy to use.

Really, the dark lord should have rethought his idea of an army that could only attack physically, and only defend themselves with brute strength and bare flesh.

"Kill him!" Voldemort hissed, as white light gathered to strike as one.

"Potter!" He heard the shout from above; a single auror in the sky screaming a warning.

Harry smiled, tilting his head back, his mind expanding to see the patterns gathered around him, white humans with no souls, no life other than the red-black fuel in their veins that tied them to Voldemort's will.
Human patterns, empty cadavers, who could not bear the touch of fire.

"Fiendfyre." Harry breathed, his own green light growing in strength, pooling into the red staff in his hands, phoenix song singing its exultant counterpart.

The flame patterns gathered about him, as white as the inferi, but burning, hot, untamable. It rose in the shape of a phoenix, wide wings spread wide, long tail streaming behind it, flames wreathing its form like a shining halo.

Voldemort screamed in rage as it fell upon the inferi, consuming with single-minded purpose, white becoming white, human patterns changed to fire in less than a moment, a blink of the eye; a phoenix of wild heat and hunger that raged among them.

Harry saw it take two of the Death Eaters in its flight; saw Voldemort's red strength rise and hold its first strike at bay, the grey light of Crouch huddled behind his master.

The phoenix was singing; or perhaps it was only his staff, humming under his fingers at the sheer amount of power being channeled through it.

One Death Eater came for him, dodging flames and raising his wand to strike. Harry made the wizards pale red light stop with death, the human pattern falling to the ground as the rusty soul rose to disappear at the loss of its body.

More and more inferi came; his phoenix ate them whole, its form grown so large now that it wrapped around him, fiery feathers falling to liquid flame that raced across the bare ground.

He heard screams from behind; men and women fleeing from the wild flames. The sirens screeched, police boots hitting the ground. He smelled burning flesh and clothing, the formerly cool night air turned to stinging heat.

Sweat gathered on his brow; the Fiendfyre pulling at his own power, threatening to break from his control as it had long ago while testing the spell at Hogwarts, running out of targets to consume and turning its wild
eyes to wide destruction of the buildings around and the cars behind.

"I'll kill you!" Voldemort screamed, one slash of his wand turning the phoenix aside to fall upon one of the last Death Eaters left, who had turned to flee.

The dark lord strode toward him, wand alight with curses about to come free.

Harry looked at the wizard's wand, and made green wood and orange dragon essence into tan cotton string, falling limp in the man's hand. Voldemort screamed; and wandless black spells rose from his scarlet form, daggers in the air to pierce him.

From the side, grey light sprang, a wand in another wizard's hand, Crouch attacking as one with his master.

Harry jumped back, and with a slow angry beat of his heart took their souls and tore them in two.

Crouch screamed, falling to the ground with the same horrified sound that the Locket had made when he tried to make it something other than itself.

Voldemort did not fall; the broken pattern, frayed and tattered, split and seemed to hang, clinging, to the body it inhabited, a poor fit after all. The wizard cried out, struggling to remain conscious, and Harry took hold of the two souls and tore them again, slowing the life giving pulse of life to the stillness of death.

He watched the grey of Crouch fade away, broken by Harry's hand into multiple parts that each disappeared one by one, the unbroken white body left behind, crumpled on the ground.

Voldemort went to his knees, and Harry Looked at him, saw eyes wide and still, orbs in a skull that no longer held consciousness inside of it. The red of his soul, broken too many times over, shattered and gleaming like fallen pieces of a mirror.

The wizard fell forward limply, and the phoenix fiend turned and sang to fall upon them.
Harry seized the white fire pattern and with a wrench turned it to a water pattern and hue instead, the heat of flames changed at once to cooling mist that fell in soft droplets of blue haze.

Harry turned, Looking around.

The Death Eaters and inferi alike were all dead; what the fire had not eaten lay strewn about in white pieces, melted bodies and limbs randomly placed in a macabre pattern. The buildings that lined the street appeared untouched; and his fire had never reached the cars on either side of the battle, though the empty one nearby looked fairly twisted.

He Looked at Voldemort again; the man fallen face down on the ground. Something caught his eye; a pattern he had never seen before, a hole on the hand of the dead white body.

But it wasn't a hole; it wasn't a shadow, either; it was light. A light that did not shine; a light made of shadows.

Something that made no sense and correlated with nothing he had ever seen before.

Harry knelt, looking closer at the body, and saw the shadow-light attached to a ring, one made of a gold alloy, the sharp crispness of its pattern enveloped by the odd pattern that rested within a stone inside it. He reached out and pulled the ring from the dark wizard's body, then stood, looking down at it in his hand.

Had it something to do with the inferi? Or the reason yet another part of Voldemort had attained a new body?

Or something else entirely?

The non-light of the stone mocked him; triangular patterns of bright shadow, an impossibility he could not explain.

"Harry?" His uncle called cautiously, and Harry slipped the ring into his pocket, turning again to see his uncle standing next to two men wearing the pinpricks of metal badges, policemen.
"Mr. Potter." The second auror, who had called his warning from above, landed beside him, tall broom in hand. He heard the policemen cursing, his Uncle trying to explain haphazardly what was going on. "More aurors will be here in moments. We'll handle the muggles."

Harry only Looked at him, his hair growing wet and sticking to his damp skin in the mist.

"How will you explain this?"

The auror wouldn't look at his face; the man's head was turned down and away.

"Oh, standard obliviation spells mostly, not much explanation necessary. Perhaps a car explosion or something of the sort. A wreck, even." His voice was nervous; Harry withdrew his power and leaned against his staff with a long sigh, the exhaustion of changing so many patterns finally beginning to take its toll.

He was getting stronger; a year ago he would not have been able to handle so much magic as easily.

Harry saw light explode around them; multiple aurors apparating in, the light of their souls bringing a multitude of colors into the shadowy street, wands held in front of them at the ready as the core held their formation and the exterior ranks rolled to the side to avoid any potential enemy fire.

The muggle police cursed again; but were soon silenced by a spell as the aurors took in the situation.

"Not my uncle!" Harry called out hastily, moving towards the large Dursley. "He's with me."

"Of course, Mr. Potter." One of the closest aurors quickly said, backing away at his approach as if he had been confronted with a dragon.

Harry realized abruptly that all the aurors were keeping their distance; talking in low tones as they moved around the street.

When he reached his uncle, the older man hesitantly asked if he was
alright.

"Yeah." Harry said simply, and Looked over the aurors. When each one's form that his light made whole glanced over at him in turn, he saw the way they quickly looked away, hunching their shoulders at the touch of his energy like whipped dogs. Harry sighed again, shaking his head as he stared blankly at his uncle's smashed car.

With a squeeze of the wooden staff in his hand, he made the car's unique pattern whole again, the automobile's metal screeching as it unbent and reformed, the complicated engine snapping into proper place.

Any electronics would be fried, and even on the older car that would mean the starter was no good. The thing would need to be towed.

"Good show back there." His uncle finally said, once he stopped staring at his repaired vehicle. "With those, ah, criminals? And the… fire…"

The man's booming voice trembled a bit; Harry supposed knowing you housed someone capable of mass destruction was one thing, witnessing it personally quite another.

Perhaps his uncle might be a tad more lenient when he requested to move permanently to Grimmauld Place at the end of the school year.

~*~Review Please!~*~
Auror Hill had opted to stay. He knew it was foolish; surely the Boy-Who-Lived, as powerful as he had proven to be, could not survive the odds against him.

The Death Eaters would target him, next. He flew above them in the cloudless sky, his red robes grey in the darkness but all too visible from below.

He should have fled like Oliver; ran back to the Ministry for reinforcements and safety in numbers. But he had followed Harry Potter for over a year now, on one shift or another, and he felt some obligation for the preoccupied boy who at times seemed so powerful and knowing, looking over his shoulder directly at where they hid guarding him with a slight smile.

And yet, at times, so fragile; stumbling on a curb, jerked away from running into a plastic muggle sign with a sharp tug of his muggleborn companion. It had not happened as often lately; but Hill remembered each time the teenager had faltered and misstepped because it was so at odds with the powerful figure that had summoned a dragon from the stone under his feet with only a wave of his staff. It made the boy human; less a sorcerer and more a teenager. An impression only heightened by the way the boy snuck off with his muggleborn girlfriend to a house in London, reminding Hill of his own young loves, stealing kisses in alleyways with a mischievous grin.

Now, the boy who he had watched so closely faced off against his enemies alone, nearly surrounded by hundreds of pale inferi, a Dark Lord and his remaining minions.

A Dark Lord who should be dead; Hill had seen the grotesque infantile version Kissed himself, standing by the Minister as it happened. This man
was not a misshapen child; he stood tall, so similar to the Dark Lord who had terrorized the Ministry when Hill was only just entering Hogwarts. Was it really him? Had some Death Eater merely taken on his appearance? It would not be beyond them.

The Dark Lord look-alike approached Potter; called out some threat in a loud voice. Hill barely heard it; and Potter's reply was lost to the wind in his ears.

Hill flew lower; he doubted a few feet would matter, once the inevitable duel took place. Potter spoke again; a quiet murmur. Hill tightened his fist around his wand, holding the broom steady with his knees.

If they could only keep talking, stalling until the Ministry arrived…

Hill sucked in a breath when Harry Potter's eyes began to gleam in the dark light, their green irises letting off piercing light, power thickening in the air and thrumming in his own heart, a pulse of foreign energy touching him that he did not expect, making his broom waver in response.

"Why? Is the fact that you are a thorn in my side not enough?" The pale wizard spoke loudly, and Hill saw the inferi begin to rotate and waver, creeping closer and around the teenager, eyes locked on his form like kneazles stalking a mouse. "Or that you killed me twice before? Or that people claim you are greater than me?"

Twice before? Was this wizard claiming in fact to be the Dark Lord resurrected? That was impossible!

The Death Eaters spread out as well, some uneasily looking at the inferi nearby, even as Hill heard muggle sirens drawing closer.

It would be a bloodbath if the inferi turned upon the muggles next, as they doubtless would. Hill could try a few flame spells; but he doubted he would get many off before the Death Eaters took him down.

If only the Ministry would hurry the hell up…

"Or maybe, I simply want to see you die, and not even at my own hand. I'll
enjoy watching my army tear you apart and consume the pieces." The wizard continued, mocking, smiling with sharp teeth, slitted nostrils widening in excitement.

Hill watched as Potter closed those glowing eyes; was the boy not going to even try to fight?

The wizards in dark robes laughed, the inferi beginning to crouch in preparation of a strike.

Hill saw the wizard lift his wand, gesturing toward the inferi, the blind boy's eyes still closed, head tilted back.

"Potter!" He yelled helplessly in warning despite himself, trying to get the boy to do something. Surely he could recreate his dragon? Use fire? Did he know nothing of inferi?

The inferi began to pounce at the wizard's urging, a wave of dead human flesh ready to rend and tear and feed...

Harry Potter smiled, his lips moving with some spell, the runes carved into the staff in his hands beginning to shine. White hands with dirty black claws reached for his torso, teeth snapping towards his skin, and Hill lifted his wand only to be suddenly tossed back high into the air as a wave of heat flooded from the boy, fire on its heels with feathered wings spread wide and open, a regal neck lifting in some song he couldn't hear with his own ears, only felt trembling in his bones.

Fiendfyre; the boy had cast fiendfyre! Hill, like all aurors, had seen it only in training, enough to recognize the illegal dark spell if he ever saw it... enough to know that he could never possibly control it.

The inferi cowered; and then the firebird fell upon them, every piece of flesh its fire touched vanishing like air, consumed by a hunger far greater than their own. It swooped around Potter, the roar of its fire pushing him farther and farther up, inferi burned away with each beat of its wings, dozens and dozens, some completely, some only losing heads and torsos and hands and feet, anything the flame touched...
The bird flew through two of the dark robed wizards, and they vanished as quickly as the inferi; fiendfyre knew neither foe nor friend, consuming equally those weak to it as those strong. The pale wizard who so resembled the executed Dark Lord managed to hold it at bay for a moment, turning it aside, speaking some spell that made his ears burn.

To Hill's astonishment, the firebird left the wizard behind, turning to seek easier targets still proliferate around Potter, circling wildly and growing larger, beak open, feathered flame streaming heat and fire.

Another Death Eater dodged the flame and leaped toward Potter through its coils; before Hill could even think to shout another warning, the wizard dropped face-down to the ground.

*Dead? How?*

Hill abruptly noticed that Potter's gleaming eyes were open; leaving the prone form before him to look towards where the leader stood.

The fiendfyre wrapped around his standing body like a protective shield, its extended wings sweeping up inferi as they approached, mindless, at the bidding of their creator. Hill had never heard of the flame spell used in such a way; had not known it was possible.

The pale dark wizard screamed something, lifting his wand, flicking the fiendfyre aside again to kill one of the remaining Death Eaters. Harry Potter only watched him, emerald light growing stronger, the staff in his hand shining brightly enough now that Hill could not look directly at it even through the swirling fire.

Potter still did not move, as the Dark Lord approached; and Hill saw no spell spoken or light fly as the raving wizard's wooden wand was transfigured to limp string, which was then tossed aside with an angry scream as raw power rose from the man, making the fiendfyre back away from Potter's form like a cowering child.

Potter only stood, motionless, as spell light rose to fall upon him. Movement, to the side, the long hunted Crouch Jr. raising his wand, more curses cast out.
Then, finally, the boy jumped back, and even as Hill saw the cast spells falter and splash against empty pavement, Crouch screamed in horror as the Dark Lord froze in place.

Potter had cast no spell that Hill could see. Crouch fell to the ground, howling, scratching at his hair, pulling it, eyes rolling in the back of his head as he thrashed.

The boy blinked those eerie glowing eyes, and the wizard who looked like the Dark Lord yelled out some garbled sound, shuddering, as Crouch's thrashing abruptly stopped, the wizard going still on the ground, face turned slightly, blank eyes staring dead across the black road.

The Dark Lord fell to his knees, eyes sightless, as Potter looked at his kneeling form with clinical detachment, no pity or sorrow on his face, only mild curiosity. His blind eyes gleamed emerald, roving over the wizards robed form as if he could actually see him on his knees.

Then, the wizard fell forward to crunch with a broken sound upon the pavement, as Potter's firebird flapped its wings and opened its beak to take the offering.

Hill watched, feeling oddly distanced to the situation, something like shock at what he was seeing flowing through him, as Potter flicked his tall staff in an annoyed motion, and the dark magic changed from hungry fire to cool misty rain.

Hill, above it, only stared, numb. Potter turned in a circle, energy streaming off him, looking around like he was cataloguing the damage done, that odd light in his eyes that made Hill both fearful and longing to have it upon him, wandering wildly what might happen if he met Harry Potter's gaze when that light shown from them. Would he die, too, screaming like the Death Eaters?

Hill shivered, that foreign energy he now knew was Potter's touching him, and he began to reluctantly descend, keeping his distance at first from the boy who was now kneeling beside the face down wizard.

The boy's uncle called out his name; and Hill shuddered as the boy looked
at the three muggles who stood far across the street.

But they didn't scream, or die. Only stared with fearful confusion.

Hill remembered, abruptly, that he had a job to do.

He landed, gruffly assuring the teenager that he would take care of the muggle law enforcement.

But he couldn't meet his eyes; couldn't forget the way Crouch had screamed like he was under the Cruciatus Curse, being flayed alive from the inside out. He felt the boy's eyes on him like a physical touch, fingers seeming to rove over his very heart and magic with a proprietary gaze.

"How will you explain this?" The boy asked absently, and Hill wet his lips and cleared his dry throat.

"Oh, standard obliviation spells mostly, not much explanation necessary. Perhaps a car explosion or something of the sort. A wreck, even."

And just like that, the touch was gone; the energy leaving him cold and oddly alone.

Against his better judgement, Hill glanced up; and found the boy's gaze as normal as it usually was, no sign of the gleaming eyes present, the scars framing his unfocused eyes pale lines on his skin from one side of his face to the other. The boy turned to lean against his staff and sighed, looking away from Hill in obvious dismissal.

Hill moved away stiffly towards the muggles, just as the Ministry finally arrived, too late to be of use for anything but damage control.

And still hearing Crouch's tortured screams, Hill raised his wand to begin obliterating.

Harry stepped away from the idling cab, his uncle remaining inside, as he approached the Granger's house. He hesitated only a moment before ringing the doorbell.
He was tired, and it was late. Past midnight, in fact, by the time a wrecker had been set up to tow his uncle's car and a cab had been called. Statements had been taken by confounded police, and Harry had had to deal with the looks cast at him from the aurors nearby.

It hadn't escaped his notice, either, that he had not been followed away from the scene by guards.

And as much as he had wanted to simply go home and fall into bed to sleep off the growing magical exhaustion, he knew Hermione received the morning paper, and had no doubt at all that the Daily Prophet would rush through some sort of special edition of the night's events. She would worry first, and be angry later, that he hadn't assured her he was safe.

"Harry?" Mr. Granger's confused voice came from the doorway, the man's dark hue a slow, tired swirl of color.

"I need to speak to Hermione." Harry said quietly.

"It's late, son. She's in bed…"

"John?" Mrs. Granger's color peeked around her husband. "Harry? What's going on? Something smells horrid."

Harry was well aware that the scent of burned inferi clung to him like macabre perfume. He grimaced.

"I just need to talk to Hermione for a minute before I go home. There was an… incident, tonight. It will be in the papers, and I didn't want her to worry. I'd have called, but your house was on the way."

And he really could use a hug at that moment, and Hermione's unique scent to cover up the stink of dark magic and fire. Her soft hair on his face, her warm hands around him, her color blocking out the chaotic light of the world.

"Of course, dear." Mrs. Granger moved away with swift efficiency, and Harry stepped inside at Mr. Granger's beckoning motion.

He sat on the wide couch, resting his head against his staff where he
propped it beside him. He had cast a cleaning charm on himself, removing the soot, but scents were much more difficult to get rid of. He dearly hoped he wasn't going to set Mrs. Granger into a cleaning frenzy.

"Harry?" Hermione's voice was worried, her steps clattering down the stairs from her bedroom in a rushed fury.

He Looked at her and her hue became detailed and green, her riotous hair tumbling over her shoulders, a robe hastily tied around her, bare legs swiftly approaching.

And despite everything that had happened that night, he no longer just wanted a hug. He wanted to run his hands over those legs and…

"Harry? What happened?"

He blinked and let his Look fade away with a shake of his head, Hermione falling into the seat beside him.

And with a deep breath, he started at the beginning in his uncle's car.

______________________________________________________________

Jane Granger shivered when she saw the teenager's eyes glow.

"My goodness, I'll never get used to that." She mumbled to John, who leaned against the door jam beside her, watching as their daughter rushed to sit beside Harry. "It's just so unnatural."

It didn't help that only one solitary lamp was on in the living room; the darkness only made the glow more eerie.

John grunted assent, and Jane continued, her hands beginning to restlessly pluck at her pajama shirt's hem.

"Should I make cocoa, you think? How long will Harry be staying? I saw a hackney outside. It's going to be a dreadful fee if he's left waiting out there for very long. Was Vernon inside? Should we invite him in? Look at the poor boy. I was thinking we ought to just let Harry sleep on the couch tonight, though a shower is certainly in order first. If it's going to take very long for him to tell his story. It's past midnight already! Dreadfully late. We
all ought to be in bed at this hour. Do you think Harry is alright? Besides that *smell*?

Her husband was frowning at the two on the couch, and Jane looked over to see Hermione practically crawling into the young man's lap, wrapping her arms about his shoulders. If the boy didn't look so distraught, she would have had to protest.

For appearance's sake, of course. Jane herself had done far more than crawl into boy's laps when she was seventeen. *Though*, not in her parent's living room. In *front* of them.

John cleared his throat, and Hermione's head whipped around with a stubborn flash of brown eyes. Jane knew that look; she saw it often enough in the mirror. Her daughter wasn't going to budge.

John grumbled and turned away, sidestepping Hiss as the cat came to investigate the commotion.

"I'll let Vernon know the boy's staying the night. *On the couch.*"

He stomped off, and Jane repressed a smile. Her poor John, refusing to see that his little girl was all grown up.

"Who wants some hot cocoa?" She called out cheerfully to the couple on the couch.

Hermione stood beside the sofa in the early morning light, watching as Harry slept, her mother's plush comforter thrown over his torso, his bare feet hanging over one arm rest in a position that looking anything but comfortable. Despite it, he slept so soundly she doubted she could wake him with an airhorn.

*She* hadn't slept well, herself. Thinking on Harry's words, the things he had done. His voice as he whispered the realization that finally sunk in as she held him in her arms.

*I didn't just kill them, Hermione. I looked at them and I shredded their*
Worse still was how very easy it all had seemed when he told it. A single thought, and a person was worse than dead.

But that was both the horror and the wonder in magic. With only a thought and a desire, nearly anything was possible.

"Hermione." Her mom whispered from the kitchen. "It's here."

She turned and tiptoed out of the living room, looking at the large white owl that preened on the windowsill under her mum's attention.

In its claws was a rolled up newspaper.

"Time to see what rubbish the wizards will spin about it all." Hermione muttered, claiming the paper, as her mother cooed and offered treats to the smug bird.

She only had to look at the headline to know.

"Hill said his eyes *glowed*..." Rufus heard one auror whisper to another in the long hallway. "...and we saw burned bodies everywhere..."

"Hill's seriously spooked. When we got there, Crouch was just dead on the ground, like he'd been hit with a Killing Curse!" Another added. "Though Hill claims he didn't see one cast. And this Voldemort look-alike was face-first on the ground, dead too, same thing. 'Course, it was probably just another crazy Death Eater who'd transfigured himself or somewhat. Maybe we've got 'em all now."

"You mean, *Lord Potter's* got them all." The third snidely said, and the first two aurors nodded their heads in slow agreement.

Rufus turned away, ducking back into his office, closing the door with a loud slam.

He limped to his chair and let himself settle into it, one leg stretched before him to rest while he looked at the embellished newspaper on his desk.
Lord Potter, the Blind Sorcerer, attacked in Muggle London! Destroys Death Eaters With Only A Look!

Below the headline, a bare summary of events were displayed, all the facts that the media had been able to garner overnight. The muggle authorities, obliviated; the muggle press, satisfied with a yarn about exploding cars and gang warfare. Aurors, responding to an attack on Potter, arriving at a scene of burned inferi and dead wizards, all of which bore the Dark Mark except for the leader, whose body was nearly identical to the Lord Voldemort who had reigned before he was temporarily defeated by an infant Harry Potter.

And best of all, for the eager wizarding public, that Potter himself, the now widely dubbed Blind Sorcerer, had been responsible for it all.

Someone, somehow, had gotten a picture of the teenager as he stood beside his uncle in muggle clothes, black trousers and a grey long-sleeved shirt, the tall staff held in one hand as he looked out over at the aurors with visible power in his gaze. Power that you could see even in a black-and-white moving picture in a crinkled newspaper.

And Hill, blast the fool, had given an interview to the eager reporters without consulting himself or the Head Auror first, spouting shakily about the teenager's glowing eyes and power. Claiming the boy had merely looked at the dark wizards and killed them. He would be reprimanded; but the damage had already been done. Not only was the public aware that their elected savior had used dark magic in the form of fiendfyre, which the reporters had loved to report took the form of a phoenix, perhaps the greatest symbol of Light magic that there was; but they now all probably believed that the boy could kill with only a glance. The public would either be awed to the point of worship, or fearful to the point of hiding their children if he approached.

Rufus figured if there was one thing good that came out of it all, it was that no longer was the public afraid of saying Lord Voldemort's name; after all, the infamous dark wizard had apparently been killed three times over now, and any remaining Death Eaters who were not slain or executed now rested in the renovated Azkaban Prison.
There was nothing left to fear of dark wizards for an irrational public that now trusted with all their hearts in a teenager that would save them. A blind teenager, one with powers Rufus was not sure he believed in; and even if it was true, as the wizarding sheep doubtless would think, would mean Harry Potter was a risk far greater than any self-proclaimed dark lord.

He would have to talk to him; have to decide for himself what to believe, what measures to take.

His own job within the Ministry was nearly complete, after all; an auror force that had never looked as good, never been trained as well. A Wizengamot no longer bound by pureblood agendas, nearly half of their ranks made up of muggleborns and half bloods. All ready to find peace and guard it fiercely.

The tide was beginning to turn; and Rufus Scrimgeour knew soon he too would be a relic of the past.

Albus Dumbledore heard the news from Kingsley; and he did not for a minute think that the body killed by Harry Potter was anything other than Tom Riddle himself. The force that Severus had been spying on for months, destroyed, in one ill-fated attempt on a boy's life, though the Daily Prophet obviously exaggerated grossly about the boy's power.

It was the prophecy, once again, striking true to its word.

And one less horcrux to worry about.

Neville Longbottom and Ron Weasley left the Headmaster's office for the sixth time during their sixth year, exchanging disappointed looks as they descended the spiraling staircase.

Both had been ecstatic to be given some exciting task to do that year; their fifth year at Hogwarts had been so ordinary and dull that they regretted complaining so bitterly of the events that preceded it.

At least then they hadn't been bored.
Ron scratched the back of his neck and sighed.

"Nothing. We've even found two hidden rooms and one passageway not on the Map, and still no stupid crown. I'm beginning to think the thing doesn't exist."

Neville was far past *beginning* to think it; from the very beginning he had been doubtful that Rowena Ravenclaw's Diadem was anywhere near Hogwarts, even though her daughter's ghost had reluctantly described the object to them personally. Surely someone would have found it by now.

"And now term is almost over." Ron continued. "I'm about to roam the grounds as a wolf just to see if that might give me new perspective. The Moon rises in just a few days; worth a shot."

Neville scoffed and shoved Ron from the side, rolling his eyes.

"You know good and well the Ministry would yank your enrollment here if they ever caught wind that you left the warded room, Wolfsbane or no. And there's students here who would delight in reporting us."

Ron's brown eyes glinted with gold in response; but he said nothing.

Neville looked down at his shoes.

"Well, maybe not. I guess things are different now."

Different was one way of putting it. Enrollment at Hogwarts had dropped by nearly a fourth after the Tournament; and their numbers had already been lowered before that with the events of their second and third years. What remained now of Slytherin were those from neutral families, and the odd group of half-bloods that had been sorted into the pureblood House, a development they had found to be most uncomfortable. The only rival they had once had, Malfoy, had gone from a loud, bold and sarcastic nuisance to a silent, wickedly sarcastic loner.

In their fifth year, Hogwarts had been oddly silent; the Headmaster often absent on tasks of his own, McGonagall taking over the school with a firm hand. There were less pranks, less jokes. Everyone remembered
classmates gone or dead, every House losing at least one student during the Tournament Tragedy.

Sixth year had been slightly different; with a year between them and the uproar of times past, new students coming in, new hope, the world had seemed a little brighter. And with something to do, to focus on, Ron and Neville had spent most of their free time scouring the castle with Dean and Seamus for any hint of the ancient artifact that the Headmaster claimed was central to Hogwarts' safety, cursed somehow by dark wizards and hidden within the school.

And now, there were rumors that Headmaster Dumbledore was to retire; and not entirely of his own choosing. Neither Ministry or School Board was happy with the events that had happened at Hogwarts under his watch; claims that the elderly wizard was failing were abundant, not helped by the way the wizard dressed and the odd things he said at times.

They desperately wanted to find the Diadem; to give their mentor something back for all they had been given.

"I'm hungry." Ron abruptly said with a hint of a growl in his voice.

"You always are, especially this time of the month." Neville sighed, but turned down the corridor that led to the kitchens.

The house-elves were always glad to provide food for any hungry witch, wizard, or werewolf.

It was either extraordinary luck, or fate, depending on who told the story. Ron, eating his second plate of nearly raw steak, happened to roll his eyes at Neville’s worried glances over the map where it lay unfolded on one of the kitchen tables.

Neville, catching the Gryffindor's sarcastic gesture, lost his famous patience.

"Fine! You think it's so impossible to find some bloody hidden chamber or wardrobe or, or… crown holder! Then maybe I'll just let you out next full moon and get caught by the aurors trying to find the stupid mythical thing!"
Ron, with another eye roll, gestured for another plate from the wide-eyed house-elves.

Neville jumped to his feet, slamming one fist down on the map, anger and annoyance whirling within him.

"It's so ridiculous!" He said to the room at large, hearing the sounds of cooking still at his shout. "If Dumbledore couldn't find it, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, how on earth are we supposed to!?

"Sir, Mr. Longbottom, sir?" Came a tentative query from the side.

Neville turned with narrowed eyes, about to deny what was no doubt a plate of biscuits or dessert shoved towards him to quell his temper; house-elves thought food solved everything.

"Pickly knows where a room of hidden things is. Anything hidden at all goes there. Lost socks and broken furniture and knick knacks and books and…"

"Where?" Neville broke in urgently, stepping forward to grab the scrawny thing's shoulders.

At the table, Ron sniffed, looking over at the waiting plate of meat with a mournful glance.

"Guess I won't be needing that third plate."

When the house-elf told them how to enter the room, Neville and Ron found it was not on the map; a blank wall where no room should possibly be, a door where none existed.

They only stepped inside for a moment, watching their own dots disappear off the map, seeing endless rows of items in every direction.

If anything was hidden at Hogwarts, it would most certainly be somewhere in the mountains of trash.

With triumphant grins, they left to report their success.
Albus spent three hours combing through the Room of Hidden Things, marveling at yet another secret Hogwarts had hidden from him.

Misplaced textbooks; the detritus of students long gone, wands, parchment, clothing. Objects of power, crystal balls and rusty metal bowls, jewels that gleamed with inner light. Broken and unbroken furniture, cursed and mundane decorations.

And on one shelf, inside a leather box, rested an ancient crown, its metal gleam disturbed with rust, the jewels sparkle clouded with dust.

An object of great Light; enchanted to increase memory and the speed of thought, traits that were often conflated with wisdom, which Rowena Ravenclaw treasured above all other things. It was meant to be used as a guiding force; but great intelligence is not always used properly.

When Albus gently touched the Diadem, he felt the chaotic power within, a wail howling in his ears as Light and Dark battled fiercely for possession of the object. The horcrux was a poison, a darkness intolerable and unwanted.

He snapped the box shut.

If only he could save the precious artifact; it would be a tool future headmasters and mistresses would find most useful when making the difficult decisions within Hogwarts.

But a horcrux could only be destroyed with the complete and final destruction of its bound object.

Albus's face set in haggard lines, and with slow ponderous steps, he left the Room and made his way from the grounds to lay another soul to rest.

Only two more.

Two, Merlin help us, and no more.

Hermione read the request from the Minister out loud, as Harry sat in his
bedroom at the Dursley house, carefully beginning the process of packing his things.

The letter had come by owl, while Hermione was lecturing him on moving out of his aunt and uncle's house to go 'live with a crotchety overworked house-elf.'

His uncle, as Harry had predicted, thought it a swell idea. The muggle man was beyond disturbed by the sights he saw two nights previous; he had even found reasons to avoid taking Harry to the college campus himself.

Harry knew he would come around; the man's fear would pass, eased by time and his mind convincing him it had not been as bad as the first impression gave him. His aunt, of course, insisted Harry reconsider his request to relocate.

But Harry was turning seventeen in only a few months, and he craved being closer to his laboratory and the Black library, where he could experiment in peace and study at his leisure. Aunt Petunia, when she saw he was serious and would not be put off, finally agreed, though she insisted he take a full week to pack and think it over.

She still hoped to talk him out of it. Dudley, after all, still had another year before he graduated, just as Hermione did. Children, in her opinion, belonged at home where they could be kept out of trouble.

Especially children like Harry, who she still saw as slightly disabled, powerful magic or not.

"...request your presence at your earliest convenience, as soon as possible." Hermione's light pulsed in agitation. "Why do they bother saying at your earliest convenience, when this is pretty much a demand that you come be interrogated by the aurors?" She spat in his direction. "After two days, I hoped they were letting it go, illegal magic or not. It's a clear case of self defense, and there it no one to challenge you on it. One auror was there the whole time, after all. His report was good enough."

Too good, rather, Harry thought.
"I'm sure they just want to close the case with due diligence, that's all. I can go tomorrow morning."

Hermione sighed.

"I'll be in class. Not that I was invited, but... if you want company, I don't mind skipping one morning. I've gone over my exam preparation three times already, and it's all simple enough, once you do the proper reading. Very little extrapolation, mostly memorizing bare facts."

She sounded very put-off about that fact. Harry smiled.

"I'm sure I'll be fine."

Hermione drew closer, one warm hand touching his own, before she slid down to sit on the bed beside him.

Her voice, when she spoke, was low with worry.

"What will you tell them about... the Look?"

Harry ran one hand through her hair, amazed as always with how soft the blue curls were. How hair gleamed with deep light but was still, no life in it. Dead strands of genetic material, but beautiful.

"The best lie is the truth. What Hill described was merely a way I'm developing to see shapes and objects better, using an extension of my own magic to see details. It's not perfect, and can not be used for an extended amount of time. An unfortunate side effect is that my eyes give off tangible light, a concentration of my magic focused through the optical lens, which is more visible at night than during the day. I do not have to acknowledge the claims that I have "the evil eye" or some such nonsense. The Death Eaters all fell to wandless, wordless magic, not my Look. The truth."

She sighed, a warm breath against his shoulder.

"Barely. I don't suppose the Minister will push the matter anyway. You did them a public service, and the papers would never let them forget it if they tried to put you on trial. Still, I don't like how they're making you out to be some... well, superhero. Like you're going to solve all their problems now
because you managed to off some wizarding terrorists. Four separate articles stated you should officially take up your seat on the Wizengamot."

"Two seats, actually." Harry said with a frown. "And though I suppose I qualify at seventeen I doubt anyone would seriously want a teenager helping to run the government, no matter how qualified. It's madness."

Hermione huffed. "It's the wizarding world, and it is mad. A lot of the time anyway. And daft. At least the Minister seems sensible, but he's the one summoning you to his office like a recalcitrant school boy."

"No, politely summoning me, and more like I was responsible for the deaths of six men, three of which I intentionally killed, and I'm too politically powerful for more than a slap on the wrist." Harry returned.

Hermione leaned into him.

"I'm trying to feel better about this, and you're not helping."

Harry wrapped his arm around her and squeezed softly.

"I'm sorry. Everything will be fine, and for all the reasons you stated. This is just a formality."

She lay there a moment, just breathing, and he saw her light pulse with every breath she took, a nexus of light swarming from head to toe, so familiar and steady.

Then, Hermione pulled away with a toss of her head, strands of light flying as she stood.

"Well, that's that. Does this one stay or go?"

She held up a green mass of light.

Harry looked at it, ignoring the slight shiver that he saw flow through her in response.

"It stays."
The girl noticed him first; she had seen his face in the papers more than once, the iconic scars that tarnished the natural symmetry of his face.

She rather thought it made him more handsome; she was sure she would marry him one day. *He was a hero!* Just like the knights in her fairytales, fighting evil men from the back of a dragon.

As she stood in the Atrium, she tugged sharply on her mum's hand, and was ignored, as usual.

With wide eyes, she watched the cloaked man pass her by, and smiled brightly up at his face.

When he did not so much as blink in response, she reminded herself that he was *blind*.

But that didn't mean he wasn't still *perfect*.

In the lift, the two wizards noticed whom they shared space with, and quickly got off on the next level, both amazed and afraid of the Blind Sorcerer.

On Level Four, the witch about to step inside paused; her breath stalling in her throat as she looked into green eyes. She froze; and the doors slid closed before she thought to enter, her legs trembling in fear.

On Level Two, an auror stomped inside, casting only one quick glance into Harry Potter's face. In a low tone, he whispered a quick congratulations on the teenager's swift and final action days before.

When the lift reached level one, the black-haired boy smiled at the auror in thanks, and ignored the way the man's light pulsed with adrenaline, as ready for battle as any wizard faced with a charging griffin.

Harry stepped on the tangled pale green light of plush carpet that covered the entire floor of Level One of the Ministry of Magic, home to the Minister and his Staff's offices.
He approached the desk of a bright lime green secretary, their color bubbling with emotion.

"Can I help…" The witch's excited tone halted awkwardly.

She cleared her throat, and he heard the distinct scratch of a quill on wood.

"...you?"

"The Minister asked to speak with me." Harry said, and heard her aggressively rearranging papers on her desk, lines of brown light fluttering.

"O-Oh, of course. I was told... that is, I thought you'd owl... oh, but of course, that doesn't matter! You are welcome, always welcome. Um, I'll... I'll just check..."

Her light sprang from a chair, her voice fading away as she moved down the hallway, decidedly less bubbly than before.

Perhaps he had underestimated the power of the Daily Prophet. He had been skeptical when Hermione insisted people would believe anything it said. He hadn't been expecting quite the level of avoidance and downright fear he was encountering.

But, maybe with time...

"Right this way, Lord Potter." The lime green witch spoke from beside her desk as she returned, and Harry blinked.

Lord?

He owed Hermione an apology. It seemed even the Ministry employees were ready to fling a title upon him before he was old enough to take up his seats in the Wizengamot; though, admittedly, it was only a matter of months until he was officially 'Lord' Potter whether he wanted the bloody seats or not.

The lime witch held open a wooden door; and closed it behind him with a soft, nearly inaudible snick, leaving him along in the Minister's office.
It was green; Green wooden floors, green paneled walls, ancient green furniture.

And seated behind the desk was the Minister, whose green-yellow hue contrasted perfectly with the golden layer of protective wards he sat within.

"Take a seat, Mr. Potter."

Rufus Scrimgeour said in a gravely voice, deep and strong.

Harry took one of the green chairs, settling on it, eyeing the golden wards speculatively.

Where they there just for him? Or were they a standard practice for political figures in the wizarding world?

"I'm glad you came so promptly. My aide was under the impression you might be reluctant to come here, considering the press and it's... exaggeration."

Here was one wizarding skeptic at least, a rare breed in the magical world.

"When the leader of part of your world asks for a conference, you comply unless you are an idiot or guilty of something."

The Minister choked out a laugh.

"You're frank. I like that." The man resettled in his chair, light shifting over light. "So I'll be frank as well. Auror Hill's interview was a mistake. Such details should not be given to the press, and most certainly not before they are confirmed by the administration to be fit to print. As it is, a firestorm is brewing around you and what the world thinks you can do. I need to confirm or deny these claims, and clarify certain actions Auror Hill said you took two nights ago."

Harry sat back in his chair and nodded.

"I'll be happy to answer any questions you have about that night."
The Minister made a noise in his throat; and Harry wished he could risk
Looking to see what facial expression the man might hold.

"Are you in fact blind, Mr. Potter?"

Harry faced the man's chartreuse light without looking away.

"Conventionally. I have some form of mage sight, but it can be lacking."

"Auror Hill said your eyes glowed, and your movements that day and today
show me it is not as lacking as you imply."

Harry did not blink at the rapid question. Standard interrogation technique;
not giving the person a chance to think over their answers, and therefore,
lie. "I'm testing a new version of mage sight, and it often has the side
effect of creating an optical illusion that my eyes glow in the dark. But it
allows me to see more detail, if not true colors."

"You are aware fiendfyre is illegal." the Minister jumped subjects.

"Just as much as creating inferi, sir."

"Have you ever tested its use near Hogwarts' grounds during your time
there?"

That question caught him by surprise; Harry paused a second before
answering.

"I test everything I question, Minister."

"What did you question about fiendfyre? Why it is illegal?" His voice was
snide. Harry lifted his chin.

"The fact that it is both uncontrollable, and can consume anything."

A brief pause; then the Minister shifted again in his chair.

"Auror Hill claimed you controlled fiendfyre to destroy the inferi. This
implies a lot of practice."

The Minister was determined to achieve something; Harry wondered just
what his aim was.

"I did not control it so much as aim it in the right direction. I do not yet know of a way to truly control it."

The truth; not yet.

"You achieved a corporeal form, a phoenix. It was stated in several reports that the Dark Lord managed the same in the past, except with a serpent form."

"My staff's interpretation, not mine. With a sufficient amount of power fiendfyre takes on a semi-sentient life of its own, influenced by the caster. If given enough leeway, it will eventually consume the caster and continue to eat everything around, until the magic that fuels it is spent. That is why it's illegal."

"Just like the Killing Curse, Mr. Potter. Magic that kills, that can not be defended against. Evil, dark magic."

The Minster was pushing for something, again. Harry frowned.

"I have not seen or experienced the Killing Curse since I was an infant. I do not think that any magic is inherently evil, only tainted, broken, by the people who misuse it. Any magic has the potential to be deadly."

"How did you dispel the fiendfyre?" The Minister switched subjects again, smoothly.

Harry had the distinct, fervent wish that Hermione was with him. This was what he got for underestimating the tenacity of a Minister who had served as Head Auror during a war.

"Minister, are you more concerned that I used illegal magic or that I did so without dying?"

"I'm most concerned that you are directly and indirectly responsible for six deaths, and yet you sit here as if that fact does not bother you in the least."
His voice was dark; and Harry stiffened at the insinuation in it.

"They wanted me dead, so I defended myself, sir; and with the inferi, I could not be particular about how I did so. Fiendfyre can not be easily controlled, and I had multiple obstacles. I had to keep it focused around me, and not on the muggles crowding the street behind, or Hill up in the air, or the buildings beside me. The two Death Eaters it consumed were collateral damage from using it as a weapon. Any lesser flame spell would not have had the range or sentience to protect me from so many attacking inferi. I am not bothered that confirmed, wanted murderers died when they were trying to kill me, and would have went on to kill others, including my friends and family. I won't apologize for it."

The Minister's voice was soft when he replied.

"Not many people can kill, even when facing death themselves, not and remain so undisturbed by it. Hill claims you looked at Crouch, Jenson, and the unknown Death Eater and they, as he says, 'screamed and fell dead.' If that does not sound like dark magic, I do not know what does. I know you had the capability to capture them instead, just as you captured Voldemort and Pettigrew."

There was accusation there; and a measure of truth.

Harry didn't falter.

"I did what I thought best at the time, under pressure. The dark lord was powerful, and attacked in tandem with Crouch. Both would have been executed anyway. Both could have potentially escaped. Both were trying to kill me. Would you have done any differently?"

There was a moment of silence; then Scrimgeour's light flickered and shifted like candle flame in a breeze.

"I do not know. I only wish you hadn't done what you did, and in the manner you did; and most of all I wish that it hadn't become common knowledge."

Harry laughed; he couldn't help it.
"I wish I had not been attacked at all. All I've ever wanted is to be left alone, in peace."

The Minister snorted, raising a yellow-green hand to wave in dismissal.

"Then we will both be equally sorry; for I will have to deal with the press for the next few months, if not until I retire, and you will most definitely not be left in peace. Not for a very long time."

And Harry, remembering the people he had encountered on his way to the green office, had a sinking feeling that the Minister was very, very correct about that.

For another hour, Harry sat in the Minister's office and listened to the former auror's barely veiled warnings about further use of dark magic; and managed to deftly sidestep answering too clearly just what he was capable of.

When it came time to leave, Rufus Scrimgeour passed through his golden wards to shake his hand, the Ministers rough palms calloused from frequent wand work.

It meant something, that the wizard left his protective wards behind, meeting him without their protection in place. Was it some form of trust, respect? A gesture that he did not think him a threat?

"You're in a position now, Mr. Potter, to influence our world. Whether you deserve it or not will not change that fact. You will never simply be an anonymous wizard again, if you ever were."

The advice, spoken in a gruff tone, fell between them as Harry stepped away.

He nodded his head in response as he spoke. "Favor easily gained is just as easily lost, Minister. I don't trust it."

The older man walked behind his desk, carefully sinking into his chair, yellow-green light swirling behind golden wards once more.
"You might last after all, Mr. Potter, if you remember that fact."

And behind him, the door swung open as the nervous secretary reappeared to escort him away.

~*~Review Please!~*~
Albus Dumbledore waited at the edge of the wards that circled the grand Hogwarts castle.

The students had left the week before; leaving the castle empty except for the professors who preferred to summer there and the myriad ghosts and house-elves who couldn't leave.

His last year at Hogwarts was over, he knew. Too many things tainted his headship of the school in recent years; too many deaths, too many doubts. If he did not respectfully retire now, he would be shamefully cast from the school within a year.

He had given himself the summer to prepare; to begin the task of moving his many things to the old Dumbledore property in Godric's Hollow. Minerva Mcgonagall would take his place; and her new deputy would also be the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, Severus Snape.

He would miss the grand school; her hallowed halls, the portraits he knew by name, the ghosts, the secrets he would never solve. The friendships gained over decades, the students who brought life into the ancient school, watching them grow older, forming their own friendships and bonds.

But it was time for an old man to find what peace was still available to him.
"Headmaster."

Albus turned from looking up at the magnificent height of the Astronomy Tower.

Severus approached, cloaked in his trademark black, dark eyes as expressionless as ever.

Albus met that gaze and left his mind open, pushing the destination through in a sleight of mind that only one master legilimens could do with another.

The dour wizard grimaced in response.

"I suppose we'll be getting wet."

He had searched the old orphanage; had visited places of Tom Riddle’s childhood, pouring over old interviews and memories, delving deep into the mind of a burgeoning child sociopath. Countless hours in his pensieve, sifting through the barest reference to any place or object that might be held sacred, have importance greater than any other.

And finally, he had found something.

A simple holiday for the orphanage; a trip to the sea, where a particular incident would happen between young Tom Riddle and two muggle children that would scar them both for life.

Mrs. Cole, the matron of the orphanage, had told him the children were never the same after that trip; quiet instead of outgoing, deathly afraid of Riddle, never speaking of what happened there, their actions telling a horrible story for them.

Dumbledore, returning to that seaside, had spotted the cave and felt the power emanating from it; and knew no way to get to it except through magic, its high cliffs and pounding waves making even a boat ride dangerous.

He could only guess what Riddle had done there; apparition, perhaps, if the child was as powerful then as in his Hogwarts days. Taking two
children with him, alone in a cave... that alone would have scared them near to death.

But Riddle would not have been content simply to frighten them.

Albus suspected it was the place of his first human torture; and therefore, a place of fond memory and importance, where perhaps a dark lord might hide a piece of his soul.

"Here?" Severus sneered, wand light spilling forth in front of them, illuminating the rocky entrance. "I see no wards in place."

"Look for traps." Albus had known better than to come alone, and so brought with him someone who knew both Tom's personal style, and had an affinity for dark magic. "I'm certain it's here."

He could sense the evil within; like a spider waiting still and patient for the moth to flutter closer, closer, closer... until it was too late.

Albus raised his own wand, and began to stride into the darkness.

Severus recognized the curse upon the small entrance within the cave first; Albus only a second later.

It was simple; a work of magic probably constructed only weeks after Riddle's graduation, before he learned the finer arts of dark magic.

With a conjured knife, Albus slit his palm, and smeared his own blood across the door.

And with the payment, the entrance opened to them.

Inside, a large black lake waited, the cavern echoing with single drops of water falling from the depths to plop into the water below.

Still, quiet, the spider's web.

"Inferius." Severus hissed, looking into the lake. "I recognize their stench. He desperately wanted to keep people from that island out there."
The island in question, a small sliver of rock, glowed slightly with green magical light from some basin in its center.

The horcrux would be there, protected.

Albus raised a brow.

"And yet, I see no wards to prevent us from simply levitating across, though there are anti-apparition and transfiguration wards. He suspected no one truly powerful would discover this hiding place."

Severus frowned, lifting his wand once more.

"We'll stay far above the water, in any case."

They didn't need to speak of it further. Together, they began to levitate themselves across, approaching the small island from the heights of the dark cave. Underneath the water, pale flesh occasionally glimmered in the soft phosphorescence of the water.

Within the basin, Albus saw Slytherin's Locket, its silver surface gleaming under the green water.

Severus looked at the green substance with surprised longing. "The Drink of Despair. I'm a bit sorrowful I was never commanded to brew it. The Dark Lord invented it himself for use in torture. I never did discover how it was constructed."

Albus frowned. "Any way to dispel it?"

Severus wand was alight; but after only a few wordless spells, he lowered it.

"As I suspected, no. It can only be removed by a living being's flesh, and with the sheer amount, that would mean one of us has to drink it." The former Death Eater looked paler than normal in the dim light. "And it was not called Despair for nothing. Pain, first; then it weakens the mind, drawing up painful memories relating to despair and guilt, before causing immense thirst of which one would do anything, say anything, to quench. It made interrogation easier, if less... stimulating. For the others."
The last bit was said with a sideways glance at the Headmaster, apology in his gaze, as he continued. "And considering the Inferi in the water, a last trap. If the transfiguration wards prevent conjuring water, anyone who succeeded in drinking it would disturb the water around us in desperation."

Dumbledore eyed the emerald potion. "So, if I drank it would you...?"

Severus blinked, then scowled. "Of course not! That would ruin what is probably the last known sample of the potion." The wizard folded his arms. "Which I would like to study, in my own lab. A potion that can not be dispelled or transfigured is an anomaly seen in no other potion. A mystery I've tried to recreate a hundred times over."

The slytherin turned to face the upraised pedestal, eyeing the basin atop it with narrowed eyes.

Then, his lips twitched into a dark smile.

"We will simply cut the basin free and take the entire construct with us out of this godforsaken cave. I can study it at Hogwarts and work at removing that item you're after."

Albus paused a moment; then he rested one wrinkled hand on his professor's shoulder.

"That, my boy, is why one needs a slytherin on one's staff."

It took three hours of testing before Severus Snape cut a hole into the original stone basin, draining the potion out from the bowl into an identical basin below.

The Locket, once confirmed free of curses, was given to the Headmaster, who held it in his hands and began to frown severely.

And without leaving the potions lab as he had planned, he flipped the locket open with growing suspicion to see a folded paper within.

"It's a replica." He said simply, dropping the metal jewelry to the stone with an expression few others had ever seen on his face. He opened the paper,
and read aloud what was written within.

A note to the Dark Lord, from someone unknown who had discovered the horcrux and planned to destroy it. Someone who had suspected they would die in the attempt or soon after, and knew just what they were risking their lives for. Something to make the Dark Lord mortal once more.

"Regulus Black." Severus breathed, stepping closer. When he saw the writing, he slowly closed his eyes, shaking his head. "The foolish boy. No one ever knew exactly what happened to him. I liked to think he fled, one of the few to escape the Dark Lord while he was alive." The slytherin turned to fix Dumbledore with his black gaze. "Mortal?"

Albus waved away his question with one hand.

"Exaggeration, I'm sure. The item was certainly powerful, and extremely difficult to destroy. I doubt, from what I remember of him as a student, he would have been capable of the feat. Where would he had hidden it if he failed? The Black Vault?"

Severus Snape folded his arms across his chest.

"His vault, or the Black House. Both of which can not be entered without a Black."

Albus looked down at the paper in his hands, his brows drawing together with reluctance as he slowly spoke.

"I suppose it is good that one still remains, then."

"It's for your birthday." Dudley muttered, and Harry narrowed his eyes.

They were standing out on the front lawn, alone. Aunt Petunia had summoned him for a family dinner; one Harry well knew was really a surprise birthday party for himself. He had recognized the same pattern of behavior from three years before, when a similar party had been thrown.

But he wasn't at all sure why Dudley had met him outside on the front lawn, unless it was to stall him from going inside yet. Why that would
include a private gift-giving he wasn't sure.

Harry ran his fingers across the rectangular object in his hand, the thing nothing but a thick block of shadows. It was roughly the size of a tape, if he wasn't mistaken, underneath smooth plastic wrapping.

"Why not give it to me inside?" Harry asked, and Dudley groaned.

"I knew you would know. Just like last time. Should have had it at a restaurant." The boy grumbled, then fidgeted, one foot aggressively rubbing the grass under his feet and subsequently killing it. His cousin leaned closer, voice dropping to a whisper.

"It's an audiotape."

Harry flipped the thing over in his hands. He had been given audiotapes before; he owned a plethora of them, though his tape player wouldn't work in Grimmauld Place. If he wanted to listen to them, a walk outside was required.

"Okay…?" Harry drew out the word, waiting for more of an explanation than that.

Dudley killed more grass, then let out a breath.

"I don't want to imply, ya know, that you're not a man." When someone said something of that nature, it usually meant they were about to refute it in the next sentence. Harry narrowed his eyes. "But…" Here it comes.

"I-know-you-haven't-done-it-yet-so-I-bought-you-a-how-to-sex-book." As Harry stiffened in shock, Dudley rapidly continued with only a deep breath to refresh his lungs. "You have to please the women! Let me tell you, that part does not come naturally. Piers gave me, us, well me, a book with pictures and stuff but I couldn't exactly pass that on to you, now could I? And by the way you and Hermione dance around each other I can tell, Piers can tell, everybody can tell you haven't done it."

His cousin finished with a self-righteous stamp of the grass-killing foot.
Harry rocked back on his feet, the staff in his hand threatening to fall from his loose grasp. He gaped at Dudley.

"How did you even find something like that on audio?"

Dudley's light lifted in something like a shrug. "Oh man, they have everything at those sex shops."

Harry shook his head, quickly, wondering if he was hearing things.

"You can't get into a sex shop. You're not old enough!"

Dudley snorted. "Harry, you are the only boy I know who cares a whit about the rules when it comes to getting into a store like that. I've been sneaking in since I was fourteen."

At that, Harry remembered the true topic of this conversation, not his cousin's unsurprising criminal activity. He had had the standard 'Talk' along with Dudley from Uncle Vernon ages ago, and one extremely embarrassing moment with Aunt Petunia where his aunt had insisted that they both be 'smart and protected unlike Mrs. Gilligan's sixteen year-old son who got his girlfriend pregnant, which would embarrass her so much she couldn't show her face in public.'

He knew what went where and under what circumstances. He wasn't an idiot, and he had studied human anatomy far more than his cousin ever had. Harry sniffed haughtily as he spoke.

"You think I need a guidebook to... that."

Dudley began to laugh, then cut it off with a squeaky sound. Obviously, he was trying to preserve some of Harry's pride. But not much of it.

"You won't even say it! Sex, sex, sex."

Harry felt his face heat. He had missed out on a lot of the conversation most boys his age were old hats at; he had never truly been interested in the physical shapes of women, and discussing the color of their souls only made Dudley uncomfortable. By the time his cousin started talking less
about looks and more about acts, Harry was far too busy with his own projects to waste much time listening to it.

Now he regretted that. Harry hissed back at the teasing. "Shut it, before someone hears you."

His cousin knocked one hammy fist against his shoulder, throwing him off balance, and in the same second lifted another hand to steady him. Dudley never did know his own strength, but he was relatively good at mitigating the damage.

"Listen, Harry. I don't know why you're waiting around, but when you finally get down to it, you gotta know what you're doing. Trust me, I've heard stories. Jessica broke up with her boyfriend because he couldn't last longer than fifteen seconds, and girls take a long time to come around, if you get my meaning there. You're going to want to make a good impression."

Harry wasn't sure he could get any hotter. His face felt like it was on fire. Another quick scan around at least guaranteed they were alone. If he was still being followed by auror guards, he would have put up a silencing ward from sheer self-preservation.

Harry tried not to choke as he replied. "Fine. Alright. Thanks." He would say anything to end this conversation.

Dudley smacked him again with a good-hearted chuckle. "That's it, Harry! And if you have any questions, me and the boys can give you some tips…"

"No need! I mean, if I do, I know where to go." Not to Dudley or his bragging friends, that was certain. "Thanks, ah, for the tape."

As he followed his cousin inside, slipping the present into his pocket, Harry tried to regulate his breathing. When he saw Hermione's signature color, his efforts redoubled, and his smile was a bit shaky. A new worry, one he hadn't really contemplated, was nagging him now; would Hermione be happy with him? Would she know what to do either?

Had she read a sex book?
He felt on edge the entire party; his palms sweating. Surely Hermione would understand if he... didn't last. It was silly to break up over something like that. And she seemed to enjoy kissing him; and touching him too, for that matter.

Still. Dudley had dated a lot more girls, and apparently gotten a lot farther along with them than Harry had.

That night, when the Grangers dropped him off at Grimmauld Place, he went inside and gathered his tape player.

With a quick explanation of a ‘walk to get some fresh air’ to Kreacher, he stepped outside and pulled his headphones into place as he stood on the steps, hesitating only briefly before he clicked the button to play.

It turned out to be a very long, and extremely uncomfortable, walk.

Kreacher did not mind so much that the Master had failed to make him a younger elf. He was quite proud of his wrinkles; his great uncle Pickler had always boasted that a house-elf was not truly experienced until he had at least four age spots and seven streaks of sagging skin.

Kreacher was a little sad Uncle Pickler's head was no longer on the hallway wall to remind him of that fact when his joints ached, though.

But Kreacher was a good elf; and the Master had lessened some of his work load, insisting on shutting up some of the unused rooms before they could conscript a new elf.

He was not sure how he felt about that; training a new elf not of his blood was entirely different that raising a young kit of his own to his family's rigid standards of protocol. What if it was an elf who tried to take over his authority?

What if the elf was female?

Kreacher shuddered at the very thought. Vexing creatures always insisted on being the boss of any male elf they came across, running the House
over more able and older elves who deserved distinction. Kreacher must insist the elf be male if the House must have another house-elf.

Kreacher placed a breakfast plate in front of the Master, backing away as the young man stared into the distance, green gaze unfocused with some thought.

Without looking down, the Master unerringly picked up the sterling silver dinner fork, the kind Kreacher had learned the Master used best, better than steel or wood. The plate, as well, was silver, the fine dining set that the former Mistress would only deign to bring out for pureblood parties.

Kreacher didn't bother to tell the Master such details; 'the best for the best', as his Uncle Pickler said. It was a house-elf's responsibility to learn each Master and Mistress without worrying them overly with details and questions. And through trial and error and a great deal of observation, Kreacher had learned Master Potter's preferences, far better than the man himself did them, if Kreacher said so himself.

Kreacher knew when the Master preferred to eat; and when the Master preferred to lay abed. Kreacher knew that the Master was more likely to eat overly cooked vegetables than fresh ones; and any meat must be nearly black or he would simply move it about his plate with a grimace. Kreacher knew when to launder and when to dust, when to tread softly by the Masters laboratory or when to stomp loudly to announce his presence.

Kreacher knew not to move furniture even an inch, and he knew that the Master loved to look into a fire in the hearth whenever the inkling took him.

Kreacher considered himself an expert on all things Master Potter.

So he knew that the Master was upset about something; and it was not the normal research the man spent his time on, for he did not pace his office or thumb through pages with words being read aloud. He frowned into thin air and sat still instead, as he was doing now at the kitchen table, silent as the marble statues in storage upstairs. As he had been doing off and on for the past week, before leaving for long intervals on supposed 'walks'.
And Kreacher knew to ask for an explanation would be futile. So he did as he had learned over the last years.

He asked Miss Hermione if a house-elf might be of service and how.

Hermione was not a little observant herself. She hadn't missed that Harry had been 'busy' an awful lot lately, when school wasn't even in term. When Kreacher appeared in her bedroom, she wasn't even that surprised.

She considered the old creature to be her informant, of sorts. They were allies in a goal both strongly believed in; keeping Harry happy.

The last time Harry had been acting odd, it had been about dubious research. She hoped this wasn't more of the same; she could only think of a few directions to take their studies farther than they already had, and all were unpleasant. The mere thought of true Necromancy made her shudder. But while the recreation of life made her think of Frankenstein's monster, somehow the thought of true creation from nothing but air was worse. Her grandmother on her father's side had been catholic; the older woman would have trembled at the mere notion of humanity having such power.

But then again, Hiss and Spit was not very frightening, and still very much alive. Even ageing, if the greying fur about his muzzle was any clue.

So Hermione gathered her courage, steadied her nerves for potential mummies, blood rituals, or ghost's inhabiting Quickened cadavers, and prepared herself to do what any good girlfriend does.

Finding out what foolish idea her boyfriend had gotten into his head now, and setting him straight.

*It could have been a lot worse*, Harry supposed after the fact.

At the time, however, it was hands-down the worst few minutes of his life when he had had to stammer to Hermione just what he had been listening to before the stubborn girl did as she threatened and put the headphones on herself.
He would rather have faced down five more Voldemort soul slivers, at the same time, than Hermione at that moment.

He couldn't see her expression. He was too afraid to Look. Instead he stood there, hands limp at his sides, on the sparse sidewalk two blocks down from Grimmauld Place, where Hermione had come up on him.

He was nearly positive Kreacher had told on him. If so, the little monster was getting a stern talking to about keeping privatematters private.

"You're listening to… what?"

Her voice was disbelieving. Harry scowled down at his orange boots, feeling as if his ears were about to burn off his skull, followed close behind by the skin on his face.

He folded his arms, and told himself it wasn't a gesture of insecurity. He simply didn't know what else to do with his hands besides pull at the loose thread on his shirt.

"It's a how-to book, I just said."

She made a choked sound. "Yes, but… a how-to what?!"

Harry gritted his teeth.

"Why are you going to make me say it again?" His angry words were directed at his shoes. The dragonhide was impervious to them.

Hermione seemed to suck in a breath and try to speak at the same time, an inarticulate sound escaping. She let out a quick breath, then another, and it didn't take a third for him to realize she was trying not to laugh.

With one fierce look directed toward her swirling light, he stomped around her and began to walk back home.

"H-harry, wait! I'm s-sorry." She giggled the last word, and he ground his teeth together, picking up stride.

"Harry, stop this instant!" The humor was gone. Harry stopped, but he
didn't turn. He felt her hands a second before her scent hit him, the familiar smell of her working like a balm to his bruised pride.

"I'm sorry for laughing at you. I was just expecting something very different, and your face was just so..." Her hands pressed against his sides, her arms wrapping around him from behind. He felt her head press between his shoulder blades, a long sigh warming his skin through the thin shirt he wore, before she continued. "It's perfectly normal to... study those things. I mean, my parents are a mite traditional in that arena, but I'm sure they both don't expect me not t-t-to... that is, t-to... experiment. With you. Since we're b-boyfriend and girlfriend and... yeah."

Now, it was her turn to be embarrassed. Harry pulled away to turn in her arms, ignoring the colored hues that passed them at a slow, curious pace. "Have you read any books like that?"

Her head was tilted down, wild hair brushing his chin, as she mumbled her reply. "I guess. I used to sneak adult romances from the library when my mum wasn't looking. Not exactly the same but... I get the g-gist of things. I was curious."

Harry snorted. "I wasn't, not enough to look for something like this, until Dudley hinted that you might dump me if I got it wrong."

She stiffened. "That complete jerk! As if I'm that shallow!" She tossed her hair, and the gesture made strands float up to stick to his face. He brushed them aside as she continued with a growl. "I bet he gave you that tape, too. Well, just throw it away. We can muddle through things together, just as we've been doing. We don't need anyone to tell us how it's supposed to be. And knowing your cousin, it's probably full of impossible stories and bogus advice."

Harry bit his lip, holding back a smile. "I did wonder if some of the things
mentioned were anatomically possible."

She laughed, leaning into him, and he tightened his arms. It felt so good to hold her there; as if they stood in their own little world.

Until the real world intruded, of course, in the form of a wolf whistle from a passing group of teens. Hermione squeezed him one last time and pulled away, placing her hand tight in his as they began to meander back towards Grimmauld Place.

She leaned into his side, and whispered just loud enough so the words reached his ears and not those passing by.

"Why don't you tell me which ones you think are impossible? I'm thinking of med school after I graduate. It might be educational."

Her voice was filled with wicked humor, and Harry felt his heart begin to beat faster.

He knew the smile on his face was certainly large and dopey, but he couldn't help it.

He was quite certain he was in love with her.

"Anything to educate, of course." Harry replied. And with one sideways Look into her smiling face, continued. "Though, a true scientist tests his hypotheses."

Hermione glanced up at him, and he saw her teeth as she grinned, before nodding solemnly.

"Of course. I would never suggest we make conclusions without data to back them up."

As they came to the steps, Hermione began to ascend ahead of him. He stopped her with one hand, their faces on the same level, and let his Look fade away as her blue-violet light returned in swirls of excitement.

"How about we start on familiar ground?" He asked softly, and felt her smile against his cheek before their mouths met.
It took another whistle from the street behind to remind him that they were still, in fact, outside the door of Grimmauld Place.

When he saw the swirl of yellow inside the door, Harry quite forgot why he was angry at the house-elf, and only cast him a extremely happy Look instead.

He had paused at the base of the stairs; Hermione responded by darting past him, taking the steps two at a time, her laughter ringing down from above with a teasing lilt.

He only paused a minute to think, sucking in excited breaths. Then he raced after her, hot all over, his heart thumping loudly in his ears, so hard he felt it pulsing in his fingertips. His staff was left forgotten in the hall behind him without a qualm.

Harry Looked as he sped down the second floor hallway, and so saw the clothing scattered about his bedroom floor in emerald green tones. His control left him when he saw her in his bed, the sheets pulled up to her chin, a mischievous grin on her face blurring to patterned blue-violet light.

He dove right in after her, the bed bouncing with his weight, thrilled when she burst into renewed laughter.

Then their lips met again, warm heat and soft skin, and the colors began to run together in his mind.

They lay on a tangled sea of green and brown, oceans of cotton and silk, his own clothing a hindrance she tugged at with a curse before a flicker of an orange dragon heart spelled them away. Her wand then tumbled to the floor; in the back of his mind he heard it fall, just like he heard her whispered encouragement and heavy breaths.

He knew he was supposed to be saying something; instead he kissed her nose then her cheek then her chin before he found her mouth again, their laughter mingling together as hands roamed and more and more skin met its counterpart.

His mind was in chaos; he couldn't seem to think at all, let alone make any
coordinated plan. All the time he had wasted thinking over the last week was not even a memory.

She rolled him onto his back and peppered his chest with kisses, hands roamed wherever she willed them, and Harry closed his eyes and saw everything, green and purple and most of all her, violaceous, her hue like a warm blanket draped across him but better, better because she was touching him with every part of herself and there was nothing between them at all but such bright light he could barely lay still and let her love him.

She moaned and Harry couldn't stand it any longer. He reached for her and his hands met her hair, strands of silky tangled light that wove between his fingers as he pulled her down and rolled them over. He panted into the skin of her neck and paused for a moment, trying to make sense of everything, the smell of sweat and Hermione scrambling every rational thought in his brain.

"Spell?" He managed the one word on a groan, Aunt Petunia's strident high-pitched voice throwing enough cold water on his libido for a seconds pause.

She arched under him with a growled, impatient answer. "Yes!"

He laughed one last time, and she nipped the skin of his own neck with blunt teeth, turning the sound to a low groan.

Then there was nothing but blue-violet light and warm, wet skin, and Harry could only say her name over and over again as her hands pulled him closer and her nails bit sharply into his back.

"Violaceous."

He held her close to him, her front curled into his side, though his skin was cool now and the warmth of before was fading to a sticky, uncomfortable mess.

"I love you." He whispered to her as her hands traced idle patterns on his chest.
She didn't pause, fingers swirling softly down over his stomach and back up to his throat.

"I love you, too." Hermione's voice was a soft, contemplative murmur, and she turned her face to press a small kiss to his chest that turned into an idle nuzzle, her hair tickling his arm.

Harry tightened his hold on her, loving the feeling of her in his arms, loving how comfortable he felt with her, not in the least uneasy about what they had done, nor what they had just said.

"I can't believe we haven't said that before." Hermione whispered, and Harry laughed, the motion of his chest shaking them both.

"Me either. I think I've said it to myself a dozen times."

Hermione ran her nails across his stomach again, and Harry shivered for an entirely different reason.

"Me too." She murmured, then he felt her grin against his skin as she pressed closer. "We need a shower. Yours big enough for two?"

Until that moment, Harry hadn't considered cleanup.

Now, he remembered that Hermione had admitted to reading romance novels, and both of them in the shower sounded like heaven in more than one way and suited far more than one purpose.

Harry gathered her up in his arms, ignoring her muffled shrieks, and with a little helpful wandless magic leapt from the bed and began trotting towards the bathroom.

Hermione always had the best ideas.

The next time they saw Dudley, the boy tried to subvertly give Harry the thumbs up. The subtle effort was lost on him; but Hermione saw the gesture without a problem.

She narrowed her eyes until her boyfriend's large cousin paled.
Then she smiled brightly and cast him a wink. She wasn't above a little teasing when the situation warranted it.

And really, she might just owe him a favor after all.

Harry had been, without a doubt, spectacular.

Neville was surprised when his gran told him the Headmaster of Hogwarts was in his sitting room.

He was even more surprised when his mentor asked for the old invisibility cloak that had been gifted to him back in his first year at Hogwarts by an unknown benefactor.

But when he learned just whom the cloak belonged to from a very reluctant Headmaster, he was not just surprised; he was furious.

"You gave me." He banged one fist against his chest. "A Potter Heirloom?!"

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore!" His gran barked in dismay, but Neville barely heard her over his fury as he continued.

"The Blind Sorcerer's father's invisibility cloak?! Does he know I have it?"

At that thought, Neville paled; the papers had been full of the teenager's reported slaying of hundreds of inferi, not to mention the remaining wanted Death Eaters.

And Neville, since the Tournament, had felt he owed the blind boy a debt for taking the Cup from him. He doubted he would have fared as well against Voldemort and Peter Pettigrew. And he had never had the chance or the courage to tell Harry Potter so.

The Headmaster gravely shook his head, eyes darting towards where his gran sat, her face reddening with anger.

"No, my boy, of course not. When I gave it to you, I never thought Mr. Potter would be able to enter the wizarding world. He had no need of the
cloak..."

"It wasn't yours to decide that." Neville spat, and to his surprise and shame, realized that the respect he had always held for the venerable wizard was dissipating like dew in the sunlight. "I can't... I can't even think..."

"You know better!" Mrs. Longbottom spat over top of his halting words. "Heirlooms are sacred to the old families. Giving one away, to one outside a blood relation... it's just not done!"

Dumbledore raised his hand in a gesture for peace.

"I was to give the cloak to Mr. Potter when he entered Hogwarts or came of age. Your grandson is not at fault for the misunderstanding I had, and now I am seeking to rectify my mistake."

Neville straightened. Part of him want to simply go along; give the Headmaster the cloak without further question.

Another part, the gryffindor part, was still angry.

"Why didn't you tell me during the Tournament? I could have returned it to him personally if I knew. Why now?"

His gran harumphed in agreement, fixing narrowed eyes at the venerable wizard; the Headmaster only looked sad, his blue eyes not holding their usual twinkle.

"Things were complicated, Mr. Longbottom. Such a small thing hardly took precedence over the events of the Tournament and my other duties. It is enough to fix this now."

There was a hint of steel in his voice; a subtle warning.

Neville turned slightly away, but nodded, once.

"Fine. I'll get it to you."

And he left the room with heavy steps, hearing his grandmother berating
the Headmaster behind him as he ascended the stairs to his bedroom.

Neville gathered the cloak in his hands, feeling a strong wave of loss at losing the source of so many nighttime adventures.

At least Ron and the twins still had the Map...

His hand on the doorknob, Neville paused at that thought. The Marauder's Map, which they had learned nearly four years ago was created by James Potter, Remus Lupin, and Sirius Black.

If it belonged to anyone, it was Harry Potter. How was keeping the Map any different than what Dumbledore had done? At the time, Ron and Neville had assumed Potter would never need it, as he wasn't at Hogwarts. Later, the fact that he was blind and couldn't read or write had stalled their hand, along with a great feeling of loss for such a valuable tool around Hogwarts.

*Excuses*, to make them feel better about essentially commandeering another person's property.

Neville gripped the silken surface of the cloak and raised his chin, coming to a sudden decision.

He would write Ron and explain. The twins had graduated already, and they would too in only a year. It was time to return the Map to whom it really belonged, whether the teenager could use it or not.

*It was the right thing to do.*

Harry sat at his desk, the odd ring in front of him, the clock across the room idly ticking the seconds as they passed.

Grimmauld Place was silent. Hermione was shopping with her mother and aunt in London, something Harry had absolutely no interest in if it did not involve Diagon Alley.

The ring's non-light glimmered; or, more appropriately, the *stone's* unique pattern glimmered.
He had tried on the ring several times, and found nothing interesting in the metal band itself. Simple gold, though so pure it was nearly too soft to wear, easily bent and twisted if not for old and fraying unbreakable charms.

The stone was of no known origin or composition, harder than a diamond for no diamond would scratch its surface. Hermione said it was black; and yet no reflection was cast on its smooth sides.

To Harry, it was black and white both; impossible.

And nearly impossible to resist.

He ran a finger over it, idly flipping it in his hand, turning it over and over and watching the pattern spin and topple. Hermione had said he reminded her disturbingly of gollum from Tolkien's fantasy books; he had replied that there was indeed something precious about finding a pattern that shouldn't exist in his world.

Alien, it did not belong, did not fit. And yet Voldemort had had it on his right middle finger, as Harry now wore it on his own.

And perhaps the most marvelous thing of all, the stone refused to be changed; the only pattern he had ever encountered that could not be remade into another's shape and color. He couldn't make it emerald or diamond, no more than he could make it air or water or any known element. He had tried them each in turn. It refused to be anything other than a black-white stone, though the ring's metal itself was vulnerable enough to change.

And no matter what he tried, he could not recreate the unique pattern from any other substance. It defied the very facts he thought he now knew about his vision and the world around him. The stone would not, could not, be changed.

So what then did it do? What was its purpose?

A swirl of yellow startled him briefly from his renewed inspection of the stone. He slipped it back on his hand with a frown as Kreacher's light
bobbed in a quick bow, fluttering pale blue color held in its hue.

"Mr. Potter, sir. An owl."

Harry looked at the small owl and what he now saw was a carefully wrapped package tied to its claws, a charm upon it to only be removed by the intended recipient.

"Bring it here."

Kreacher released the owl in a thunder of ruffled feathers and raucous hoots, the dignity of the bird obviously offended by the handling. It landed on the library table in front of him, holding out one imperious foot.

Up close, he could see more of the gold and red tints of protection charms. Whatever was inside was valuable.

Harry dutifully untied the knots and pulled the package free, solid tan light under the charms. On top of the package was a letter that slowly unraveled itself, the envelope unfolding like ornate origami into a macabre mouth, paper edges like sharp teeth in a vicious grin.

The more polite version of a howler, a letter that spoke in its enchanter's voice.

"Mr. Potter. I hope this letter finds you well after the unfortunate events of two months ago. As your seventeenth year approaches, it is time to give you an Heirloom of your father's, one left in my keeping before his death. A birthday present from your parents, if you will, and the hope that you and I can perhaps be acquaintances, if not friends, in the future. It is an invisibility cloak, and one that is far superior to any cloak that has ever been made before or since. I made it my study for many years with your father's permission, and its mysteries still remain unsolved. Treasure it and know that your father and his friends brought about great mischief in the halls of Hogwarts with its use. -Albus Dumbledore."

His father's invisibility cloak?

Harry frowned as the letter unfolded itself and fluttered down to the table,
limp, the blue spell that animated it dissolved like water with it's purpose finished.

"Give the owl a treat. Send back a standard acknowledgement of receipt." Harry absently told Kreacher, beginning to untie the straps holding the thick brown wrapping, made of mundane animal hide that would repel the worst of any rain the owl might have traveled through.

He had read of invisibility cloaks, and seen more than one in Madam Malkin's. They usually had finite use, some lasting mere years before their demiguise hair faded and became visible. Others would only last days, regular cloaks instead heavily enchanted with disillusionment charms.

But one that lasted decades? No wonder the Headmaster had wanted to test it. He could almost forgive the man for waiting so long to return it to him. If his own father had indeed used it at Hogwarts, he very much doubted the wizard was supposed to wait until he was nearly out of Hogwarts to use it.

Harry paused abruptly as the brown light fell away; his breath sucked sharply between his teeth.

Before him, folded in upon itself, was black darkness and white light, geometric cones morphing into triangular prisms, the pattern that should not be possible.

He reached for it, his hands falling into soft fabric, running fingers over the cloak with slitted eyes, unable to Look and cover its pattern with his own green light, too startled by its existence.

On his finger the stone pulsed sharply, a rhythm echoed immediately by the cloak, two sentient items recognizing in the other a brother. Not exactly the same; a part of his mind catalogued that the ring was more prism and the cloak more cone; but that color!

Harry gathered the black-white to him, its long length tumbling down his legs as it unfolded, its texture like silk, yet rough with some sewn pattern he couldn't see. Magic, fueled by something other, a source all its own working some magic he could not comprehend.
He jumped to his feet, pushing back his chair with a sharp noise, and flung the pattern around his shoulders. He felt it grow longer of its own accord, adjusting to his height, extra material gathering at his neck in the form of a hood. He tossed it over his head and it fell down over his face and suddenly he saw nothing but darkness and light.

It was as if he stood among the stars, lost in space, no room around him, only a circle of green wood under his feet left to hold him to reality. The darkness reached out into infinity, white lights growing and dissipating inside of it, and he could not see where the light began and the darkness ended, where one melded into the other, endless angles and shapes surrounding him.

Harry simply stood there and breathed it in, his heart pounding, the fabric touching his face and neck and arms and hands and bare feet, and though it made no common sense he felt as if the pattern was reaching past his skin to his own magic, pressing it into a new shape, claiming it as its own.

"Master?"

He heard Kreacher's muffled voice; his tentative footsteps as he trod across the room and among the shelves. Harry could not see the yellow of him, only heard the house-elf grumble in confusion and leave the room with the soft pop of elf magic.

Harry slowly began to smile, giddy excitement flooding through him in waves.

*Hermione was going to love this!*

"I want to see it the way you do." Hermione groused, staring down at the folded cloak in her lap.

To her, it was a shimmering silver color with shining swirls that all faded into invisibility as the cloak was closed around something.

Really, she didn't understand what the big deal was about it or the stone, nor why Harry was so fascinated by them. So much so that he had barely
worked on anything else, spending the last three days of his time testing
the cloaks invisibility and any link it had to have with the stone in the ring.

Though, he hadn't complained about taking time away to spend it with her,
*alone*. She smiled at that thought and spoke.

"And I have an idea." She said, and was pleased when Harry's black head
jerked up, green eyes fixing on her immediately from where they had been
locked on the ring. "*Pensieves.*"

He blinked; then blinked again. "I can't believe I haven't thought of that.
They're typically used to sort one's own thoughts and memories, but they
can be viewed by others if not guarded."

"Exactly." Hermione affirmed, before she frowned. "Though, I've read they
are viewed in the third person, not as the actual person who made the
memory. So there is a chance it might not show things how *you* see them."

"But I might be able to use one to see *you*." Harry breathed, and she felt
herself flushing at his tone. "And colors and forms as others do. You could
place memories of color charts for me, I can truly be able to confirm the
names of the colors I see as more than extrapolations and guesses based
on their shades. I've always wondered exactly what exact shade of brown
your hair is."

Hermione reached to tug a lock of her hair in response, then wrinkled her
nose at the reaction.

"It's far more useful than just finding out what color my hair is, Harry! We
could both view memories of experiments from both points of view, maybe
catch something the other missed. Where can we get one?"

Harry frowned.

"They are rare, mostly because they are expensive to create, but also
because many are destroyed when their owners die along with any
memories still trapped within them. It's a wizarding tradition that doesn't
make much fiscal sense. And if I'm not mistaken, each is also registered
with the Ministry. I can check my vaults, if I'm lucky the Blacks or Potters
have one already. If not, some shop in Diagon Alley must know where I can buy one."

Hermione bounced in her seat at the thought of it being that easy to solve an aggravation that had plagued her for years.

*To truly be able to understand what Harry sees! To view souls as towering spheres of light, everything in the world having a pattern and hue. She had often dreamed of how that must be.*

Harry stepped closer, reaching down to pull the cloak into his arms, cradling it as if the bundle was fragile, his look of awe as he gazed at it making her wish all the more that she could understand.

"Let's go tomorrow." She blurted out, and Harry's gaze jumped up to her. He smiled at her left ear with a fond grin, and she shifted slightly with practised ease so that he was meeting her eyes instead. "Please?"

He laughed, and placed the cloak aside before pulling her into a quick embrace. "I insist on it. I wish we could go right now."

She raised up on her toes to gently touch his lips with hers, before turning in his arms and stepping away.

"Good. I better get going, my mum will be here any minute to pick me up."

She saw him frown; and found herself smiling.

He always lost track of time; even though the clock was enchanted to read it aloud every hour and on command, he never seemed to bother, and never noticed the shadows moving across the floor and the sun setting through the window.

His world was never dark, and she couldn't wait to see it for herself.

Harry walked through the mass of wardlights into the Leaky Cauldron, the invisibility cloak pinned around his shoulders underneath his normal brown wizarding robes.
Hermione had thought him odd for insisting on bringing it; but even as he felt the ring belonged on his finger, he felt his father's cloak should be around his neck. It did not make him invisible when worn in this way; after testing, the invisibility only triggered when it covered at least seventy five percent of his body, more than three-fourths of his physical form.

But when he looked down at himself, he saw the dark light of its pattern and felt oddly at ease; as if the potential to escape into its unique pattern was better than any golden ward or defensive rune.

And when he had hesitantly tested its vulnerability to curses that might harm or tear the fabric, he had found it to be indeed as strong as any magical barrier.

Its pattern, just like the stone, could not be tainted; it could not be pierced or changed or destroyed.

That fact alone was enough to wear it on his back.

"They're staring at you." Hermione murmured at his side as they crossed the room. The normal din of the pub had faded to silence as they passed, no utensils scraping plates, no idle chatter.

He heard the pop of a wizarding camera, and wondered if Hermione blinked at the flash.

"I know." He murmured back, lips barely moving as he kept striding forward, not pausing as he heard whispers around him, his name, his new 'title', his supposed magical power. Rumors and fact sprinkled liberally together like salt and pepper on a dish. "Ignore them."

"Trying." Hermione hissed, and he heard her breath a sigh of relief when they exited to the entrance of the alley and its temporary privacy. "Perhaps you should simply wear that cloak after all and pass to Gringotts without anyone recognizing you."

Harry only shook his head. That thought had come and gone already. "I can't, no more than I can wear a glamour over my face. I'll be as blind as I am in a bubblehead charm, seeing only the magic inside it."
She shifted, idly moving her wand from one hand to the next as she thought.

"We could change your hair, then. Or you could wear fabric over your eyes like you did the first time you came with your aunt."

Harry grimaced at the reminder. "That was before people were on the lookout for a blind wizard in their midst. Anything over my eyes and they'll notice, just as much as they would notice the scars across my face even if my hair was a different color. I'd also have to ditch my staff, which the paper has covered in detail now. I'm single handedly responsible for the twenty percent increase in staff sales at Ollivanders in the last year."

Color moved behind them; a deep pink shade that faltered and then backed away into the building as quickly as it had exited.

Hermione groaned. "It's useless. We'll just need to push through."

"Exactly as we agreed." Harry said, and held out his left hand for her to take.

Her light jerked in what might have been a nervous nod. Harry squeezed her hand, and faced the bricks as she tapped them in the entrance pattern.

Time to see if a few months had settled down any of the furor around him.

Hermione glared furiously at the witch as they left Gringotts. *The nerve!* The woman had actually jerked her two children away from them like they were *piranhas!*

And unfortunately, it wasn't the first time it had happened during the hour they had been in the alley.

She had been worried about being bombarded with papers for Harry to autograph; a slightly embarrassing prospect, as Harry could hardly *write.* She had been worried about people asking to shake his hand, or asking for an interview, or just waylaying them to chatter on about one thing or another.
She hadn't expected the silence that followed them; the eyes that refused to look at them, the witches and wizards who fled their presence like they were fiends, or hid their loved ones as if Harry would gobble them up for an early supper.

Harry wasn't the Boy-Who-Lived any longer, a savior-figure who could do no wrong, a symbol of Light. He was the Blind Sorcerer, someone to be feared, someone who may be able to strike them dead with a glance. That the papers had implied only *evil* beings needed to fear him had hardly soothed the doubt that he might be capable of it anyway.

The witch, seeing her glare, went deathly pale, raising one hand in some plea.

Harry tugged her away with his hand in hers. She glanced over at him, saw the lines of tension on his face.

He might not be able to see the expressions of those around him, but he was hardly deaf to the sudden silence, and surely noticed when people moved away from them to make an easy path, something she was not accustomed to in previous trips to the crowded alley. It was the largest wizarding shopping center in all of Britain; never before had she walked through it and not bumped shoulders with somebody, or had her foot stepped on by accident.

And Gringotts hadn't even had a pensieve after all, both vaults containing multiple other fascinating objects but not a single round bowl among them.

"Can you just owl the shops to ask after pensieves?" Harry's sudden question jolted her out of her angry thoughts. She blinked in surprise.

"I guess so. Don't you at least want to stop here?" She pointed only a hundred feet away, where Wizeacres Wizarding Equipment's bright sign broadcasted its many wares. It was a general store for every wizard, and while they might not have an actual pensieve, they could surely point them in the right direction.

Harry shook his head once, wild black hair falling over his face and nearly hiding the scars around his eyes.
"I'd rather go."

Even his voice was strained now. Hermione suddenly wished dearly that she could apparate them both from the street.

"It's him." A child's voice whispered nearby in excitement, echoed by others.

"Who?" A girl said, loudly, and was hushed with a rapid response.

"You know who!"

Hermione stopped and turned with horror rising in her chest. The boy and girl were staring up at Harry with worshipful eyes, having no idea what they had just implied.

You-Know-Who. A common euphemism for a dark lord whose name was so feared it wasn't even spoken years after he terrorized Britain.

And if anyone said You-Know-Who, the other person knew who you were talking about in an instant. There was no one else you could possibly mean.

Until, maybe, now.

Harry slowly turned beside her, no doubt having heard the same thing, but moving as if time had slowed down for him, taking in and cataloguing every pattern and color he saw. Hermione felt the flare of energy before she could think to stop him, and tried not to wince when she saw his eyes begin to gleam as he Looked at the girl.

Thank Merlin it was daytime, or the entire street would no doubt erupt in dramatic screams.

Lucky for them, it was also only the gathered children who were close enough to see. Some of them went still with sudden fear; others only fidgeted in excitement at the attention from their hero.

Harry's hand moved, and Hermione saw the glint of the black stone on his finger as he raised it towards them. Far away, Hermione heard someone
shout a warning.

Then, in his palm, the air began to twist and turn, a new shape taking form, long metal stems with fragile-looking clear blooms that glittered in the sunlight.

She knew that look very well from their various experiments. *Diamond.* Harry's favorite gemstone pattern.

Harry knelt and gestured the girl forward, who took tentative steps towards them, her eyes wide on the sudden appearance of flowers in his hand.

"Take one. All of you." Harry said softly, and the girl's mouth split into a wide grin. She skipped forward and the other children came with her like dogs on a leash, eyes eager at the sudden bounty.

Each got one; Harry had made just enough for each child. They thanked him fervently as he stood, and she saw that the smile on his face was genuine this time. None of them were afraid now, though the adults on the street maintained their cautious distance.

As they walked away from their new pack of fans, Harry headed towards Wizeacres instead of the Leaky Cauldron.

Hermione slid her hand back into his, and he cast her another small smile.

"Will you give them all diamonds and gold to win them over?" Hermione questioned softly, injecting some humor into her voice through pure force of will.

Harry paused at the door, looking down at her, and his green eyes were normal and human. "No. I'll give them better than that if they would only forget I exist."

"Why did you do it then? Cause they and their parents certainly won't forget when those flowers don't disappear in a few days." She asked, and Harry shook the hair from his face before looking at the staff in his hand.

"Because I could, and because they're just kids repeating what their
parents have been telling each other and reading from the papers. They don't understand, and yet they treat me more normally than any of the adults we have passed. Better that I give them some fact with their fiction."

"Normally?" Hermione demanded. "That girl called you You-Know-Who."

One side of his mouth lifted in a grin. "I thought that was kind of funny myself. Plus, it wasn't used as a title, just a reference."

Hermione sniffed, but reached for the door handle to pull it open. Under her breath, she muttered her response.

"I'm sure that monster's title started as just a reference too."

Harry waved to Hermione as she was driven away; Mrs. Granger's bright pattern seated behind the wheel. Automobiles, odd contraptions of bright metal and shadowy composites, hovering off the ground on rubber tires he couldn't see. They had scared him, when he was little, until he began to understand more about how they worked and the way they were built.

*Like the muggle version of magic carpets,* he thought absently, before he turned to reenter Grimmauld Place. *Perfected over years of experimentation, taking three to six months to manufacture and assemble parts together, and usually only lasting for several years before their decay made them unusable.*

Still, automobiles were far superior to magic carpets. Their potential alone was greater. There was a reason the Knight Bus utilized muggle technology to some extent; stealing the shell of a bus and enchanting it to run on magic, capable of feats no normal automobile could handle, nearly indestructible if its wards were maintained…

He could spend a year of his time alone finding a way to convert more muggle automobiles to run on magic in such a way that the muggles would never know it was magic at all. A synthetic fuel, perhaps. Create "enforced" steel that was in truth enchanted to be ten times stronger than
modern components. Safer, cleaner…

Harry strode to his and Hermione's notes in his office, speaking to the Self-Writing Quill as he laid out his newest idea before setting it aside.

Not yet. Automobiles would be a much harder market to enter, unique materials or not. They had to start smaller, grow their reputation first. Make connections in the business world. There were a million possibilities they could explore.

Harry sat, pulling the invisibility cloak from off his shoulders to hold it in his lap as he thought over the transaction at Wizeacres.

No pensieves were simply sitting around for sale on a shelf. They were too rare, too expensive, and not in great demand for the previous two reasons. Most families who could afford them already had one. Unfortunately, the last Black's had been entombed with Walburga Black, and the Potter's hadn't had one in generations. But he could order one to be custom made for himself, which is exactly what he had done at Wizeacres.

Hermione had been more specific than he. He hadn't really cared what the thing looked like, only that it worked. Hermione, however, seemed to take great delight looking through the options, so he told her to get whatever she wanted. It was for her, too, after all.

Only another month or two, and he would be able to see her. He still had his doubts about her seeing his own sight; but if the memory was viewed from the outside surely he could see her. It bothered him, that others could see a part of her that he could not. If there was any possible way to change that, even temporarily, he would try it.

Leaning back in his chair, Harry closed his eyes, absently spreading the cloak over his face, mentally falling into the dark light as it surrounded him, a peaceful retreat he was beginning to rely on from the constant brightness of color and light around him.

*My own version of closing the blinds against the sun,* Harry thought absently, and smiled against the fabric.
The first time Kreacher saw his Master's legs separated from his invisible body, he panicked, one too many splinching incidents from young Black sons coming foremost to his mind.

The second time, his heart leapt in sudden fear when he came upon the floating head of Master Potter as he walked down the hallway, his body occasionally becoming visible as the cloak he wore moved with each step.

The third time, he only grumbled in disgust.

Every time after, when only small portions of his Master's anatomy were in sight, shoes absently hanging out over a sofa cushion, a hand stretched out of thin air to grab a quill or piece of parchment, he only spared a moment's thought at the oddity of it all.

But he did insist, vehemently, that no Black ate at the dining table invisible, splinched, or otherwise missing some part of himself that was not lost in a worthy duel.

And his Master agreed with a Look and a smile.

"I hate them. I hate them all." Hermione said the sentence simply; an incontrovertible statement of fact. "I wish they were never born."

Harry, leaning against a brick wall outside the House-Elf Registry, only nodded once in agreement. He hadn't been much help with the contracts, but listening to Hermione's increased agitation had put him on edge nearly as much as the complete silence in the building as witches and wizards listened avidly for any word he might speak.

So out of pure stubbornness he had remained silent unless Hermione asked him a question directly, which she hadn't, not even once.

She was too furious, and she knew him too well. If she asked, he might have just turned the elderly wizard who called 'his' house-elves 'items of property' into a toad. A true, fly-eating, toad down to the last amphibian-patterned detail.

"It's slavery. I don't care if house-elves need a House or a Family or
whatnot to keep their magic. They were all so patronizing! As if witches
and wizards were doing the elves a favor by putting them into slavery! No
wages, no benefits, no vacation time. No clothing but disgusting used
pillowcases. It’s demeaning. And the house-elves are too blind and
uneducated to see it. If they were just treated properly… I could make
them understand and stand up for themselves. This can't continue."

Her voice was firm. Harry watched colors pass them by, mostly oblivious to
their presence in the slightly darkened alcove where the Registry was
located.

He sighed. "What are you going to do?"

It was obvious to anyone who knew her that Hermione wouldn't just let
something like this slide.

Hermione's light paced back and forth in short strides in front of him before
she came to a stop, one hand wrapping about his own hand that held his
staff.

"I'm going to convince a member of the Wizengamot to make a statement
supporting the rights of house-elves."

Harry looked at her, and saw the determination in the tilt of her chin, her
mouth downturned in a solemn frown.

He didn't have to ask who she was going to convince first.

"I'm not an official member yet."

She lifted one shoulder. "You have two empty seats that no one is sitting
in. I've read up on the rules, you only have to show up whenever you like at
any meeting you choose. It's an out-dated custom I don't agree with, I
much prefer a proper representative democracy, but I'm willing to use it for
the benefit of those who can't help themselves."

Harry smiled slightly. "House-elves don't want to be helped."

Hermione scoffed. "House-elves don't know they need to be helped. So I'm
not going to begin to advocate that we help them outright. Only that all
contracts binding lesser creatures be humane, and offer solid scientific reasons why. House-elves are sentient beings, and just because they need to clean and serve does not mean they need to do so in poverty."

Harry stood upright, more than ready to leave. "So we're not getting a house-elf right now."

Hermione stamped one impatient foot. "Not until we get rid of this ancient Ministry standard and the contracts are written with a time limit, not for life, and can include basic amenities like a wage and proper clothing. And an exit clause. And the option to take vacation time. And..."

Harry stopped her increasing tirade with a quick kiss, smiling. "You don't ask for much, do you?"

She sniffed, but wrapped her arm through his. "I only ask what's reasonable."

Harry began to walk them both back towards the main thoroughfare of Diagon Alley.

"And you have three months before the next quarterly meeting in September to find a way to convince the Wizengamot what's reasonable. Don't expect them to vote on it, though. Proposals are usually made at one meeting, and discussed and lobbied in the interim before being voted the following quarter."

Hermione's voice was a low grumble in response. "I'm not a politician. Your political weight is the only influence we have. Viola hasn't released a paper in over a year, and starting now might seem a little suspect, especially if you are the one to back it. I'm not sure I'm ready to be known as the Viola in Viola James, and it wouldn't take a genius to put two and two together and make four."

Harry observed the patterns stalling, drifting, and at times jerking out of their way. He didn't bother frowning. He had made that mistake on the walk in, and two young witches had shrieked while another witch scolded them loudly for being ninny's.
From then on, he maintained a pleasant, calm facade, and also considered never coming to Diagon Alley again and becoming a hermit.

"My political weight is not insignificant, based on the continuing reactions of others." Harry glanced at Hermione's light beside his own, feeling as if he was walking under an ocean of multicolored light, yet surrounded by a bubble of empty space. "If I advocate for it now, it's likely we'll have people stumbling from the woodwork to get on my good side, while the opposition chews their nails to the quick at the thought of raising my ire."

"I suppose fame is good for something then." Hermione mumbled, voice low. "If it can prevent a race from being enslaved."

Harry leaned slightly into her, drawing her closer until their shoulders brushed with each step.

"There's my optimist. I knew she would find the bright side of the general populace fearing the sight of me."

She laughed.

"It's also nice to not get my feet stomped on. And I'm vastly relieved no one has yet asked us to pose for pictures."

Harry grinned.

"Give it time."

"Master Potter."

Harry opened his eyes to the dark light of the cloak, draped over his body like a warm blanket, his house-elf's testy voice in his ear.

"Master? Kreacher knows Master is under there. You has a visitor, sir."

At that, Harry groaned. He had been up so late it was morning when he fell asleep, trying to work on his own hypothesis of integrating magic into general relativity. But attempting to put something as flexible as magic into a mathematical equation was a task that would not be solved in a night, a
month, or even a year.

But every hour still counted.

"Master!"

Kreacher's bony hands fiddled with the cloak, and Harry groaned again when it was flung off of him. He winced at the sudden influx of light, the bright neon yellow of his house-elf competing with hues of green and brown and purple and red.

"It's not a school day." He mumbled and turned over, though pressing his face into the pillow only filled his mind with the green color of cotton.

"Kreacher knows this very well, Master. Your mundane college term has not yet began. Master has a visitor."

The house-elf refused to acknowledge that his Master went to a muggle school; muggles, he said, were idiotic people easily fooled, the exact opposite of anything worthy of his Lord Black. He had settled for the term mundane. Hermione had found that both amusing at first and sadly valid later once she researched the derogatory origin of the word, and vowed to renounce the term 'muggle' as well.

Wait, visitor?

Harry turned back over and sat up, the dark light pooling at his waist as he fixed his eyes on Kreacher.

"Hermione's here?"

Had he slept past noon? She wasn't coming over until half past three in the afternoon to discuss their paper on house-elves…

"No, Master. Your visitor is Albus Dumbledore, the former Headmaster of Hogwarts."

A fact the dour house-elf apparently had found greatly amusing after reading in the Daily Prophet that the wizard was stepping down. Though now essentially working for a "light" family, the elf still held a great dislike
for Dumbledore and any of his Phoenix Order.

It seemed that one had managed to wound Regulus Black quite severely at one point during the war.

"Here?" Harry swung his legs over and stared dully down at his green feet, the light within swirling with each beat of his heart.

Each admittedly slow beat. He was exhausted.

"Obviously." Kreacher sneered. "Should I offer him tea while he waits?"

That the wizard would have to wait was a given; making Kreacher serve him tea, however, would probably turn the elf against him for a solid week. The last time he had pissed off the elf he had had to swallow down cold soup for three days, and had to sidestep furniture that had suddenly decided to relocate itself about a foot to the right from its normal designation.

The furniture moving had been worse than the horrible soup. He hated having his things moved out of place.

"No, that's alright." Harry grumbled, and blearily rose to his feet. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

He pulled on fresh clothing and began to loop the invisibility cloak over one shoulder. As he did, a thought occurred to him; maybe Dumbledore wanted the cloak back.

Over my dead body.

On second thought, Harry folded the garment and placed it inside his drawer, rapidly weaving the pattern of a ward over top of it for good measure.

Then he turned to find out just what the former Headmaster was after.

The wizard's pattern was as solid as ever, pale blue light, powerful and strong, the scarlet flecks of his phoenix familiar scattered across his chest.
like accidental paint splattered against a wall.

The red and blue really did not mix well in his opinion, and if he was anything at all, it was a good judge of color.

"Mr. Potter." The man rose from where he had been sitting in Grimmauld Place's large formal sitting room. "Sorry to drop on you without owling first."

The polite thing to say would be 'don't worry about it.' But he was tired and heading straight towards a foul mood because of it.

"I'm sure you'll remember next time."

Was his voice normally that cold? It sounded chilly even to his own ears. Behind him, he heard Kreacher let out a pleased gasp.

Dumbledore, however, was made of sterner stuff.

"Indeed I will. I've come to ask a favor of you, if you would be so kind as to oblige me."

Harry frowned.

What could he possibly do for Albus Dumbledore?

He walked towards the chair opposite of the older wizard, taking the time to kick his fuzzy mind into gear. How much of a coincidence was it that his cloak was returned to him from this man only a bare few weeks before he asked for a favor? Or had it nearly been a month now?

He had turned seventeen the week before, and received official notification that he was eligible to take both of his seats on the Wizengamot. He was now Lord Potter-Black, whether he wished it or not. He was eligible to learn to apparate, if he was able to properly visualize a destination, which he was not yet. He had thoughts on solving that conundrum; for instance, the distinctive patterns of Hogwarts that he had memorized so well should make enough of a target for him, if he was not afraid of risking splinching.

And yet, splinching developed from the wizard not properly visualizing
himself, not exactly his target. Harry knew his own pattern inside and out; he doubted he would splinch.

But the Ministry teachers had not been so easily persuaded of that fact, if too fearful to outright deny him. When he had went with Hermione to her own classes, their patterns had fluctuated radically whenever he happened to look at them. He could tell they wouldn't dare turn him away if he returned determined to get a license.

"A favor?" Harry finally echoed as he sat, the blue light copying his motion.

"Yes, my boy. During my time as Headmaster I've been searching for artifacts of the Hogwarts Founders to add to the collection within the school. As this was my last year, I thought it good luck when my research led me to the Black name. It appears that a valuable trinket might have been hidden within the Black vault or even in this very house. With your permission, of course, I would like to see if it is indeed here, and if so, I would be willing to offer you a substantial reimbursement to add it to the Hogwarts collection."

Harry's mind abruptly cleared from its tired fog at that thought.

He had been through both the vault and Grimmauld place with a fine tooth comb. Even the attic had been conquered in the last year, each fascinating object catalogued and either sold or placed in specific cabinets if found useful or interesting. If there had been anything of the Founders... but then again, he hadn't focused much attention on the Founders themselves during his stay at the school, preferring to study the castle instead. He probably wouldn't recognize any object of theirs.

"What does it look like?" Harry asked, and saw the blue light shift and pulse.

Dumbledore was uncomfortable.

"Ah." The wizard made a sound in his throat. "Well, it's a relatively small locket on a chain, silver in color, with a stylized letter S embossed on one side. Usually called Slytherin's Locket."
Harry froze; it couldn’t be.

And yet, it had to be. The same locket that Kreacher wore around his neck at that very moment. Hermione had said it was silver.

The question was, did Dumbledore know that the locket had once held a fragment of Voldemort? Had he truly come looking for a valuable artifact, or was he hunting down a soul?

And if it was the latter, did that mean he finally had access to someone who knew more about soul patterns than the average person? The thought made his heart race with excitement.

"I know what you are referring to." Harry said, keeping his voice soft with effort. "But I’m afraid it’s not mine to give. It belongs to my house-elf."

He heard the wizard gasp; saw his lights pound with the brightness of either surprise or exaltation. Perhaps both.

"Kreacher." Harry called, but the elf was already stomping across the floor from the doorway he had been eavesdropping in.

"Master gave its to Kreacher, it’s Kreacher’s!" The yellow light demanded hotly.

Dumbledore sputtered in surprise. "I... well, I... that is, I can pay…"

"No!" Kreacher spat. "Kreacher’s!"

Dumbledore fidgeted in his chair. "Can I just see it then? Confirm its authenticity?"

Before Kreacher could do more than stomp one small foot, Harry interceded.

"Let him see it. You’ve already said you won’t sell the thing, and this way he has no reason to come back."

"As longs as he doesn’t try to steals it. Sneaky wizard." The house-elf mumbled very audibly under his breath, before fumbling for the bright
pinpricks of metal about his neck, pulling it off to reluctantly place it in Dumbledore's glowing blue hands.

The wizard flipped it over in his hands, swinging the clasp open and closed. Minutes passed slowly even as the blue light weakened before his eyes with disappointment.

Dumbledore passed the locket back to Kreacher, who hastily swung the chain around his neck again, popping out of the room in the next breath before either wizard could change their minds.

"I'm afraid that locket must be a replica after all Mr. Potter. It was said the original was cursed with dark magic before it came into Black hands."

Harry sat up straighter in his chair, eyes fixed on Dumbledore's tall pillar of light.

"What kind of curse?"

The wizard shifted.

"A very dark one, I'm afraid, and quite illegal. I've come across one other replica already, and suspect that one must be as well, in the hopes to mislead anyone searching for the cursed original."

Even as Dumbledore made to rise, Harry looked at him, green light pressing blue into a human shape, old wrinkled skin, a long beard, smooth velvet robes. Harry focused on the man's face as he made his statement.

"There was a curse on the locket when I found it." The former Headmaster had stilled halfway from his chair at Harry's words; the old man's eyes locked on his own. "I… removed the dark magic of it before giving it to Kreacher as a memento from his former Master, Regulus Black."

Dumbledore sat, his face betraying shock, and Harry let his look fade away as he leaned back in his chair. It was answer enough; there was much more to this Locket than a simple artifact for the Hogwarts' collection.

"That should not be possible, Mr. Potter. The particular curse that
possessed it could only be destroyed with the destruction of the object. This is how I know that your elf's locket can not be the correct one. It makes me wonder, though, why such a thing would be a keepsake of Mr. Black."

Harry lifted a shoulder.

"Because Regulus could not remove the curse himself before he died, and Kreacher could not remove the curse or destroy the Locket either, though he tried very hard to do both. It seems Regulus thought the Locket was something very important of Voldemort's and needed to be eradicated. When I was informed of this, I was happy to do him a service."

Harry heard the man suck in a breath; his blue lights pulsing with growing power as it unconsciously rose in response to the wizard's unease.

"How did you remove the curse?"

Harry narrowed his eyes in response.

"What kind of curse did you think was on it?"

He had to know; had to know if Dumbledore knew it was a soul fragment, and if so, how Voldemort had broken his own soul and separated the pieces on purpose.

Maybe his own gift of soul manipulation was not as unique as he feared.

Dumbledore shifted in his chair, hands of light folding calmly in his lap as he finally spoke.

"A form of immortality. A curse that enabled Tom Riddle to reincarnate himself if he had possession of it."

_Not quite enough_, Harry thought.

"I've only heard of the philosopher's stone being able to create a form of eternal life, and it is not reincarnation. Everything I know points to the fact that once a person dies, their soul is irrevocably gone. Anything brought back to life at that point is an inferi or zombie, a dead husk."
"Ah." Dumbledore made a noise in his throat. "Well, you see then the conundrum and how it must be solved. To prevent the soul from leaving this realm, Riddle did very dark, evil acts to tie his soul here. This Locket was one such tie."

Harry let out his breath, his eyes halfway closing as the other wizard continued.

"But by its nature, once this tie is made, the object can not be retrieved whole. It must be destroyed. I confess, I was not going to donate this Locket when I found it, but have it destroyed the only way I know how. Something that can kill even the soul of a witch or wizard. Fiendfyre."

Harry narrowed his eyes at that. His fiendfyre had not destroyed the souls of the Death Eaters it consumed, though he could understand why wizards might think it could. That would also partly explain why it was considered such a dark spell.

"And all of this is why you could not possibly have destroyed it, Mr. Potter. That Locket remains whole. No doubt there was another curse of some sort on it that you dispelled. If you are willing, I would search your house and vault for the true Locket."

Harry slowly shook his head, a smile growing on his face.

"That was the true Locket. I saw the broken soul of Voldemort inside of it, just as I saw that same soul inside of the Voldemort and his snake when they attacked me in the graveyard, and again months ago in Surrey. All four were the same color and shade."

Dumbledore trembled; the light of him rocked like a candle flame blown about in the wind.

"But… I didn't… wait… a snake?"

The wizard's voice was frail, tired, one too many surprises in the span of an hour.

Harry frowned.
"Yes, there was a snake in the graveyard. I was forced to kill it, as there was a great deal of protection charms on it and capturing it seemed unnecessary. It seemed far more important to take Voldemort and Pettigrew back."

"I… see." Dumbledore ran a hand over his face, blue light swirling, red sparks gleaming in solid counterpart. The man's heart beat faster than ever. "I… you have no idea, Harry, how glad this makes me… if I can only make myself believe it."

Harry shifted in his chair, confused and far more eager to change the subject back to just how Voldemort had managed to manipulate his soul.

"I don't understand." Harry said, and frowned more when Dumbledore chuckled.

He hated it when older adults acted like they knew some grand secret he did not.

"I'm so unbelievably relieved, my boy. I always suspected there were seven parts of Riddle's soul scattered about; I managed to track down three myself, an old diary, and two items attached to Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. The Riddle of the graveyard and then Surrey accounted for two more, making five. I sought the Locket as the sixth, but I worried the seventh was… well, it doesn't matter any longer. A snake! To know my search is finally over. Tom Riddle laid to rest at last."

Harry rather thought most of Tom Riddle wasn't resting at all. He had been very thorough in ripping what soul remained to shreds on two occasions.

Harry leaned forward.

"But how did Voldemort do it? Manipulate his soul in such a way? Everything I've studied said soul magic hasn't been mastered since the time of the Ancient Egyptians, and what texts on such magic remained was destroyed to prevent another Herpo the Foul utilizing it to horrible degrees."

Dumbledore's voice was grave; or as grave as it could be in a wizard still
high on success.

And perhaps, because of that, the wizard was more willing to give information than normal.

"Dark wizards are always willing to do things good people are not. Many masters of the Dark Arts and the Defense against them know that certain acts of purposeful violence can crack and break a soul; murder, torture, the like. When such is done, it is merely a matter of the proper rituals to contain the broken fragment of soul in the intended object. There are downsides, of course; the soul inside only possessed the knowledge up until it was broken; and does not have as much magical or mental strength as the original. To do such over and over again, seven times… the VoldeMorts you encountered were nowhere near as sane or at the strength as Tom Riddle in his prime. Fortunate enough for us."

Harry blinked at that information. He knew well enough that souls could crack and break; and not merely the soul of the one doing the violence, but also the one who falls victim to it.

But...

"But what kind of ritual? Did it allow the dark wizard to see his own soul, in order to capture it? Was it some means of creating temporary mage sight?"

Dumbledore spoke, disapproval in his tone.

"You do not need to know such details in the creation of horcruxes, Mr. Potter. The ritual did not allow sight, but was more of a summons to the broken piece of soul. I won't say more."

He didn't have to. Harry wilted slightly in his chair. He had hoped, for a few moments, that he wasn't so unique after all; a ritual to recreate his own sight seemed plausible in his mind. And with his sight, every other advantage he had would also be gained; mainly the ability to permanently manipulate the patterns of an object or person.

Dumbledore continued, probing.
"How did you remove the soul? I would like to know. I could have saved the Diadem of Ravenclaw with that knowledge. It was priceless."

Harry could care less. He gave a tired sigh, waving one hand in dismissal.

"I took the pattern of Voldemort and removed it from the Locket's metal pattern. Then it was only a matter of killing the soul so it would not seek to possess anyone."

While the fact that dark wizards might have been able to see and manipulate souls by killing people was disturbing, he would have preferred that fact than to continue to be a wizarding oddity. A superpowered sorcerer who could not only kill at a glance, but destroy another's soul, which was far worse than death.

"Killing the soul?" Dumbledore's voice was idle in its curiosity. Harry looked down at the stone on his middle finger, the spark of dark light a reassuring gleam of shadow. He might be able to kill a soul, but he still couldn't change whatever the ring was.

"Yes." Harry answered, twisting the metal against his skin, black white on emerald green. "I made its light fade."

He had also shattered it, too many pieces to even return to what afterlife souls went to. Just like the Voldemort in Surrey had shattered on the pavement when he had torn it in two.

There was a point when a soul was so broken it was not a soul any longer, but merely fragments of wasted power and dying light. It made him wonder what happened to the pieces of Voldemort that had returned; where did all souls go and why?

"Fade."

The note in Dumbledore's voice brought Harry out of his reverie. His head whipped up, seeing blue light still seated before him. He had nearly forgotten the man was there, lost in his own thoughts.

Perhaps he shouldn't have been quite so frank. Hermione would thrash him if she was here.
"People are alive. I can see it." Harry said. That fact was nothing the man hadn't known already. "I also know what someone looks like when they are dead. It's a simple matter to know how to change one to the other."

"I hadn't credited much the rumors that you had a look that could kill. The media tends to make such exaggerated statements when the fervor takes them. But you are saying it's true."

Hermione was definitely going to kill him. Harry straightened, running one hand through his wild hair in frustration.

"It's not..." But it was true. "...The paper's don't..." But the papers were far more right than even they suspected. "...I don't understand why that is so important. It's no different than any spell capable of killing, or muggle means for that matter." But it was important. A spell took time and knowledge and even practice to cast; a gun, at least time to pull the trigger. All required some sort of aim.

He, if he wanted, need only Look. All he needed was the will to stop a patterned light.

And only himself, that he knew of, could harm the soul as well as the body.

"I understand, Mr. Potter. Though I suggest you keep the knowledge of such an ability to yourself regardless. Many do not believe what is written in the Daily Prophet, thank Merlin. But if you acknowledged such an ability, the fear you are experiencing now from the public would be tenfold. Even the Ministry might get involved, though I know not how. You are a celebrity, and a Lord twice over to boot. That gives you some protection at least. Still, better to avoid it."

"That's my plan." Harry returned. "I have no desire to make it well known."

"Good. Very good." The wizard let out a breath and slowly stood. "This has been a most enlightening day. Thank you."

Harry looked away from the blue light, back down at the ring.
"Anytime."

And when Dumbledore finally left, Harry trudged up the stairs to his room and fell onto the bed, dismantling the warded drawer and summoning the glowing shadowed pattern within to him, settling the Cloak back over his body with a flex of green power.

And he tried to convince himself he wasn't hiding before he fell back into dreamless sleep.

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Done. His task of over two decades was done.

There would be no more Dark Lord Voldemort. The prophecy was completed after all; Harry Potter, with the knowledge the dark lord knew not, had managed to destroy what horcruxes remained.

It was over.

Albus looked over his old family home in Godric's Hollow, a smile growing on his wrinkled face.

The Order of the Phoenix could be disbanded for the final time. No more searching, worrying, waiting, guessing. It was time for an old man to enjoy his retirement.

Time for the world to get along without Albus Dumbledore holding the reins.

Though, of course, he wasn't quite ready to retreat entirely. There was still some work a wizard his age could do.

With a grin, Albus sank into his chair by the fire, one hand absently going to the long slender wand on his forearm with a gentle touch.

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The pensieve came a week before term was to start, at the end of August.

The bowl gleamed with magic, spells layered so thick that the base pattern of purple stone underneath was hardly visible. There were red tints of
various charms, golden strands of protective wards, and a cobweb of purest white that could put a ghost's shade to shame.

Hermione held it in her blue-violet hands and babbled about how beautiful it was and how excited she was, placing it on the living room table, running fingers over runes only she could see and telling him in her cheerful voice how she had read of the spells to retrieve strands of memory.

He didn't even bother trying to tease her into waiting until after they had eaten the dinner Kreacher had prepared. He was excited too; so excited he felt himself trembling with it.

"You first. Like we agreed." He insisted, and Hermione huffed but held her wand to her head and withdrew silvery strands of memory.

When they rested in the bowl, they both leaned over the pensieve and together touched entwined fingers to the memory.

Harry felt it grab him; the magic in the basin rising to capture his mind, dragging green light down inside its web.

Then, abruptly, color came, and Harry felt like he was falling again into confusion.

It was flat. Everything was dull, lifeless. The entire world was dead except for a gleam of light flooding in from one side.

He stood in a dead world surrounded by colors that made no sense to him.

"Harry?" He heard Hermione's voice, saw movement. "This is my memory of the first time I saw Grimmauld Place's library. I… Harry?"

He backed away from the movement, shaking his head roughly, unable to speak.

She was brown; four shades of animal, cat upon horse upon otter upon dog, sheathed in the bright purple of hard granite stone that shouldn't be moving and it was all so flat.

"Harry." Her mouth, what had to be her mouth, he knew its shape, moved,
but all he could think was that her lips resembled twisted fire.

*But there was no life in it.*

Dead hands reached for him, and he shuddered at the sight, backing another step away, eyes rolling across the room in the frenzied hope to find something that made sense.

No patterns, only shapes, no life, only thin streams of light. He felt as if he stepped inside a visual representation of an apocalypse.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Her voice was pleading. Against his will, his eyes whipped back to where she stood.

Wrong. He thought hectically. *Twisted, ugly, wrong.*

And worse, the room that should have been familiar, that one part of his mind _knew_ was his own library, had no depth to it; he was not sure if he could take even a step and not slam into a painted wall. Nothing made sense; the colors were wrong, there was no movement, no flow of one object into another, no swirl of magic to guide him.

He had never seen the world so still and lifeless; even under his Cloak the pattern moved.

It was a nightmare he had never known he had; seeing his entire world destroyed and dead at his feet, tortured into colors and shapes not their own, and his Hermione, his light, transfigured into a dead mix of animals that moved in some macabre parody of life.

"I-I-I've got to leave." Harry stuttered, and with a frantic twist of power ripped the memory around him to shreds, Hermione's shout echoing in his ears.

Light flooded back into his mind; and he had never been so relieved to see it's wonderful chaos. He stumbled away from the table, knocking into a decorative podium and falling to the ground, the sound of shattering glass beside him as a lamp fell.

*"Harry!"*
He didn't want to look at her; didn't want to see the horrible still tan and brown, a tremor moving through him against his will.

Blue-violet light grasped his face and made him lift his head, filling his vision with Hermione's unique life. He saw it pulse in the beloved pattern, and wilted into her hold as she knelt in front of him, taking deep breaths as he tried to calm his pounding heart.

"What on earth happened?" She growled against his forehead, and he sucked in another breath before replying.

Science. He had to think of this rationally.

"Agnosia." He pushed out the word, latched onto it like a lifeline. He had read of it; in his studies years ago when he was trying to understand how and what he saw, before even entering the wizarding world to get his wand, he had come across the term.

"What?" Hermione asked, and Harry slowly pulled away, drawing himself to his feet, looking around with careful eyes, relieved that his world remained as he understood it.

"Agnosia. Inability to process some types of sensory information. In my case, in your memory, sight." Harry shook his head roughly, as if that might clear his mind, and felt a little foolish, embarrassment rising in his chest. "I couldn't handle it." He admitted finally, the words trying to stick in his throat.

Hermione wrapped comforting hands around him.

"Describe what you saw." Her question was familiar; clinical and calm, as if this was merely another one of their experiments in the lab.

He supposed it was. One that had just blown up in his face.

He felt another tremor go through him, and her arms tightened as he spoke. "You were dead." His voice cracked, and he felt his face heat. "Everything was dead. Everything was wrong. Shapes and colors and… like a transfiguration spell gone wrong. And you… you were the worst thing I've ever saw." He stopped, horrified, and tried to clarify. "I mean, that is…"
you looked like a mix of feline and equine with a little dusting of sea otter thrown in and it made no sense. You were wearing clothes made out of rock and your mouth was on fire…"

She began to tremble against him. He pulled away, worried he had hurt her feelings even worse than just calling her the worst thing he ever saw...

Hermione made a choked sound, and before he could reach out to touch her face and feel for tears, the sound turned to full-out laughter.

He watched her, flummoxed. "Why are you laughing?"

She sucked in choppy air, a hand swiping across her face as purple strands of hair whipped about her head.

"Oh, Harry. I w-was so worried you w-wouldn't like how I looked! And… and you…" She began to chuckle. "You think I'm the worst thing you've ever seen!" She howled with laughter, and Harry frowned. "What?"

"Why are you laughing?" He asked. Was she jinxed?

Hermione's hands caressed his arms, her light flickering as she shook her head, body still shaking with barely repressed laughter. "B-because. It was so silly! To worry about something like that, when you've never seen any woman before in the flesh. Of course you would think we all look like hybrid monsters. The colors are all wrong. And you see light as life, and I only see light coming from the sun or light fixtures. I can't believe I didn't consider that in all my time wasted worrying you wouldn't like how big my breasts are or how wild my hair is."

Harry looked down, and rather thought her breasts were the perfect size to fit his hands, from all the times he had been feeling them lately. He had spent a great deal of time with her and when alone thinking about them, how they felt, the soft skin and subtle scent of her.

But he hadn't even noticed them when the animal-Hermione had approached in the memory, too horrified to even look closer.
"You can stop looking at my chest now." Hermione's voice was droll, and Harry's eyes jumped up to meet hers. "Men, really." She sighed and leaned against him, but he felt her smile on his neck.

She wasn't angry at him. Thank Merlin.

"Well." Harry said finally. "I think it's going to take a lot of practice to get used to seeing that." He tried not to shudder again at the horrible thought.

Hermione began to tug him back towards the pensieve.

"In that case, let's look at one of your memories. I want to see something grand. Hogwarts, maybe, or the dragon in the Tournament."

Harry was so relieved she didn't want to try looking at another one of her memories that he didn't bother to say how doubtful he had been that she could view what he saw. After experiencing the pensieve himself, his mind had changed on that score anyway.

"The dragon, then. Hogwarts could be seen behind the stadium." Harry said, and withdrew the memory with a touch of his red phoenix staff after Hermione had removed her own memory from the bowl.

"Hold my hand." He said, and took her light in his own. Together, they reached for the silvery liquid, and were pulled down once more into overwhelming light.

Hermione was surprised that the light was not as bright as she imagined.

It gleamed, every color of the rainbow, some brighter than others, some nearly shadows. Most seemed to move, pulsing in gentle rhythms, while others only glowed steadily.

She saw the wards first; it was hard to miss the golden glow that made up the sky above them. As the crowd cheered in the memory, Hermione held Harry's hand tight in her own and looked from the gold sky to the purple castle, its shape familiar, but made up of millions of individual lights, like the small pixels of an older computer screen if you held your face centimeters from it.
There were too many different colors around her close by for her to make sense of them. The ground was both green and purple; like she stood on an alien world. It moved like a river, green running water around violet stones, making her sway in sudden dizziness, her mind expecting movement.

She turned to Harry and saw him as she normally did, black hair and white skin, not taking on the hues of his memory.

He pointed, and she followed its direction to see a hulking mass of orange light, stretching wings of color to the golden sky.

"The dragon." She breathed, and could see something of ridges along its back, a pattern like fish scales running over its hue. "It's beautiful."

It moved gracefully, crouched over smaller orange globes, its eggs.

"Where are you?" She asked Harry, and he turned them both.

She saw emerald green light, startlingly familiar approaching them. It was the shade his eyes gleamed with when he Looked at her; a Look that made her skin tingle with his energy and gave her the increasing desire to wrap him in her arms and feather kisses against his mouth.

She frowned suddenly as the green light drew closer. There was something out of place; a different color, deep red, like...

Blood.

Harry hissed beside her, his hand tightening like a vice around hers, and she felt his power rising, rippling the memory and threatening to shred it as he had her own.

"What's going on?" She asked him, turning away from the green vaguely human-shaped sphere to face him. His eyes were locked on himself as the green light passed them, following its progress to the dragon. They seemed to burn with intensity and anger. "What's wrong?"

"I've never seen myself before." He said, the words falling like stones. "I've never seen myself entirely. My hands, my legs... but not..." He waved
towards himself. "Not that. Not that."

"What?" She looked again, and her eyes snagged on the bloody-red color that crouched upon emerald light.

And she suddenly remembered their detailed notes, even as Harry answered her question.

"Voldemort."

~End of Part Three: To Be Continued~

~*~Review Please!~*~
*Chapter 17*: Like A Silver Kneazle

Angela’s Note: So begins Part Four of Blindness. Should I say I'm sorry for the long wait? I am. I can give you all a million reasons why it's taken so long, but anyone who reads my profile or follows my stories already knows. Part Four will be posted as its chapters are written, instead of all at once, because I would hate to make everyone wait that long. It will be a very, very long portion of this story, perhaps 150k words or more, with chapters of varying length. It will cover Harry and Hermione's life as they move into the future as they wish it to be. I hope you all find it as enjoyable to read as I find it to write.

We have also gone through the previous chapters to edit any mistakes found by readers, and to add in slightly more detail to certain scenes. Nothing that changes the plot; only a bit more flourish. This might be a good time to re-read previous chapters however, if you are so inclined.

GJMEGA’s Note: Hello, all. Please don't blame Angela for the delay, I bear a large portion of blame as well. I have recently added college to my list of obligations, which include work and a rather sizable amount of family interaction/obligations. Unlike Angela, who is a workhorse, seriously, how she does it is beyond me, I am less than capable of balancing real life issues with writing. I'll do my best to get better at it though. Thanks for your patience.

Harry took them from the memory; he stepped away from Hermione, raising a hand to his forehead, as if he could feel the poison that must be there.

"We just take it out." Her voice was calm. "Right? Just like with the Locket."

He ran his hand over his head to his neck and back, feeling the hair, the skin, the hard bone underneath both.

And underneath that there would rest broken red taint. Another soul,
another pattern, attached to his own like a tick, waiting to come alive.

"I have to see it to manipulate it." Harry said dully, one downside to his pattern transfiguration made horribly clear. "To remove it. Kill it. I've always had to see objects to change their pattern."

"B-but..." Hermione's stutter came back and was overcome with a harsh swallow. "But Dumbledore destroyed several, you told me so..."

"With fiendfyre." Harry knew his voice was harsh, but his thoughts were also harsh. "He thought they could only be destroyed with the destruction of the vessel they possessed."

"It hasn't hurt you yet." Her voice was desperate. "It hasn't affected you!"

"How would I know if I've had it for years?" He returned. "Since I was an infant?"

"You don't know how you got it." She was angry now. "We have time to figure this out. We'll remove it, Harry, and no nonsense about destroying vessels. There has to be a way to create a mirror you can actually see. Then we'll kill it. You can do anything if you only work out how."

Harry's head fell to his chest, eyes on the green floor under his feet. He twisted the ring on his finger, its metal warm from his skin.

There was some things even he couldn't do.

But that sure as hell didn't mean he wasn't going to try anyway.

He looked back up at her and lifted his chin.

"You're right. It hasn't caused me any harm at this point that I can tell. We can monitor any growth or abnormal activity through memories in the pensieve. This is just like any other impossibility magic has presented us with. Dumbledore called it a horcrux; we need to find all we can about them."

Hermione grasped his hand hard in hers, light jerking in a firm nod.
"Exactly. We have our problem, now we research, make hypotheses, and test them until we find what works. And we'll do it again and again until you're free."

"I know the scientific method by heart." Harry said softly, and let a small smile twist his mouth. "You don't have to remind me."

Hermione sniffed, but he could feel her relief at his subtle dig with the way she relaxed her rigid stance and leaned into him.

"Alright, then. Okay." Her voice was slightly lost. "I, um, really liked the dragon."

Harry pulled her warm light closer, breathing in her scent.

"Me too."

He couldn't let himself despair; he had Hermione, and they had broken the former rules of magic countless times. There would be more than one way to remove a horcrux; and he would find that way and do it. He was a scientist; he gathered information and used it to solve problems.

That's all this was, another problem.

Harry rested his head against Hermione's hair, looking out over the light of Grimmauld Place.

No matter how long it takes.

The rest of the day was spent going through Harry's memories, select scenes picked from his life, each one spent hand-in-hand as they observed Harry's light and the red stain upon it.

Hermione watched him grow; from a small toddling bundle of green light, hesitant in a Dursley house filled with shadows, to a young boy, more confident and sure, casting magic for the first time with purpose, changing blank darkness to streams of light.

She had never really understood before how many gaps there were in his
vision. It had sounded clinical, to hear him talk of synthetic fibers as empty spaces, plastics and vinyl nothing but shadow. But she could finally see it for herself, as a young Harry Potter began to transform his guardian's house, green shining lines of still light where she had only before seen plain brown planks. Harry made the house shine; it looked like a palace of sparkling, colored crystal.

And in every chronological scene, as Harry's own unique soul grew larger and older, the red taint upon his face remained, small and oblong, a slash across his face like the splatter of blood.

The memory changed again and again; Harry had placed inside the pensieve memories of himself in the Dursley house every January, keeping the variables to a minimum as they looked for any growth or change of the horcrux.

It didn't move from its placement, nor grow substantially in size, remaining across the face in every scene. She found herself only looking at it at the beginning of each change, before purposefully looking away, looking at anything but at the horrible stain, so vivid and horrendous, a pollution in her best friend and lover.

It didn't belong. It made her furious and scared at the same time. But logic told her it was not, yet, an immediate threat.

At the end of the last memory, taken only months before, Harry tugged her hand and pulled them free of the pensieve.

His face was blank and cold, green eyes staring straight ahead into nothing.

"No change. At this point, I theorize it is dormant, unable to think for itself. I can conclude that the sliver of a soul must have some form of ritual to activate it into either outright possession, or exorcism into a new body."

Hermione brightened a bit.

"Can we do that? Transfer it to a new body and then kill it?"

Harry's eyes did not move towards her voice, but his hand holding hers
began to slowly squeeze, running an absent finger against her palm.

"Maybe. I haven't studied necromancy from that angle yet."

Yet. Hermione had no doubt it was on his mental list, though, and had been ever since he began to realize the scope of his own abilities regarding possible resurrection.

She leaned closer, moving around the swirling pensieve to press her head into his shoulder, mumbling her thoughts against his shirt.

"Dormant. Okay. We can work with that."

The stutter in her voice annoyed her, but she pushed the emotion away. She felt Harry raise his arms to hold her close, his chest lifting in a long sigh.

"Yes. I plan to start occlumency practice right away, to make sure any mental connections, if any, are also dormant. From what I have read, most mental attacks take place in dreams, and I don't dream. I might not have noticed an effect of the scar because of that."

Hermione's brows furrowed in thought, then she pulled away slightly, looking up into his face, eyes unwillingly roving over the twisted scar she barely noticed anymore.

Pale, jagged lines crossed from one side of his face to the other, across both eyes and the bridge of his nose. A horizontal slash that was all too recognizable now to the bulk of the wizarding world.

Who had first claimed it resembled a lightning bolt? Dumbledore? Maybe, if one turned their head to the side and envisioned the devastation of electric light in a night sky. It certainly tore across his face like a burn, splitting his eyebrows in three places, deeply indenting the skin above his nose and the sides of his face.

But all this time, she had only thought it a symbol, a scar, a battle wound; horrible, yes, but nothing more. Now it seemed far more sinister.

Her eyes moved to his, still staring straight forward, looking at something
she now knew was a wall of purple and grey.

"If it has mental effects, it could be the reason you see the way you do." Hermione said softly, almost afraid to raise the possibility.

Harry dipped his head in a nod.

"I've considered the fact that removing it could leave me permanently blind in truth."

Hermione quickly refuted that. "Or, it could give you normal sight."

Harry shuddered around her, and the realization that he considered that worse than actual blindness brought a reluctant smile to her face.

"Nearly worth keeping the thing to prevent that." He grumbled. "Nearly."

Hermione rolled her eyes, despite knowing the gesture was lost on him. "It's not so bad, you know, being normal. We would be able to visit the Alley without starting a mob."

Harry smiled, his gaze dropping down to stare at her face, eyes moving across it with fond movements.

"Doubtful. You're far too beautiful to not start a riot."

At that idiocy, Hermione laughed, one fist raising to thump his shoulder.

"I think you're trying to get some with that comment."

He leaned closer, grinning.

"Is it working?"

She went for an insulted tone, loving that he was smiling again after hours of worry.

"Absolutely not!"

His hands ran down her side, one slipping under her shirt with quick movements.
"You sure?" He growled it in her ear, and Hermione squealed when he suddenly ducked and grabbed her behind the knees, lifting her up with a grunt.

"You're heavy!" He muttered, and Hermione smacked him again.

"Let me down, idiot!" She laughed it, unable to do more when he began to stumble towards the stairs. "You'll drop me on my head!"

"Never!" Harry declared, and she was forced to quickly lean in when the banister nearly struck her. "Well, most likely not!"

Hermione laughed again, her body shaking, as Harry's shoulder collided with the doorframe with a painful thump.

He groaned, but his arms didn't loosen until he tumbled her across his bed. He stood, Looking down at her, lips twisted into a triumphant grin.

Hermione raised a brow at him, shuddering at the energy that sparked as his magic moved across her skin.

"Just because you somehow managed to carry me up the stairs does not mean..."

She was cut off when he leaped upon her, mouth moving unerringly over hers.

When he pulled away, their breath heavy, he was still smiling.

"Viola."

At his word for her, Hermione melted inside. She reached up and ran a hand through his long messy hair.

"I love you, too."

The vibrant green light still lit his gaze as he Looked at her, face sly.

Then she felt his fingers creeping back underneath her shirt.
With a grin of her own, she pulled his face back down to hers, and let her own hands roam as well.

"I'm still not sure about this."

The words were a muted grumble, as Ron Weasley scowled down at his scuffed shoes. Beside him, Neville glanced uncomfortably at the muggles streaming by around them.

"This is the right address?" Neville shifted closer to Ron, elbowing him sharply when the redhead did not answer.

"Dad said it was." Ron huffed, squinting at the engraved number twelve marked in a bold brass plate next to a simple wooden door. "This is Grimmauld place."

Neville lifted his chin, straightening with brave effort. He supposed it made sense that Potter chose to live in a muggle neighborhood, but it still struck him as odd.

"Ready?" He asked, and Ron's tall form let out another low growling grumble of reluctance.

It was close to the full moon, but Neville hadn't wanted to wait once he convinced Ron that they should return the Map. After he had told his friends about the true owner of the invisibility cloak, they had all been on edge, wondering if there would be any form of retribution. But when none came right away, the others had been even more reluctant to part with the Marauder's Map.

They had all been close to Professor Lupin, and all felt some responsibility for the death of Sirius Black. They hadn't been able to save either wizard, and the Map was all that remained of them both.

But in the end, Neville had got them to give it up out of fear, if not respect. The possibility that Lord Potter might come for his father's map was enough to make them give it a fond farewell.

Then Ron had informed his dad that he had come into possession of what
he thought was a Potter Heirloom, and Arthur Weasley hadn't had much trouble digging through paperwork to find the address of the Wizengamot's newest member. Really, when he thought about it, it was far too easy to come about important information like that. The hard part had been convincing Mr. Weasley to let himself and Ron go alone to deliver it, instead of sending a polite owl, or better yet, letting a Ministry employee do the deed.

Ron hadn't told him his father's reaction outright, but it was obvious that the Ministry, like most of the public, found the Blind Sorcerer disconcerting at best, and terrifying at worst.

Neville himself wasn't certain how to feel. He only knew he wasn't keen on knocking on the door.

"You knock." He blurted the words, and Ron lifted his lips in a slight snarl, his teeth a bit sharper than was polite in human company.

"You knock. This was your bloody idea!"

Neville couldn't argue with that logic. And they were currently wasting time and managing to look quite odd. He saw a passing muggle give them a curious glance, and straightened his shoulders.

"Fine."

He stepped up to the wooden door, and without pausing to think through, again, the many reasons this might not be a good idea, rapped his knuckles harshly against the center panel.

Even as Ron stepped up beside him, the door began to open.

For a moment, he was confused; the hallway loomed beyond, empty, surprisingly well-lit and clean for a place he had, in his imagination, felt should be dark and gloomy. It was the lair of a very powerful blind wizard, after all. Shouldn't there be cobwebs and smoky torches or... something?

And it was empty. Neville frowned.

"What do you want?"
The raspy, confrontational tone made him jump in surprise. Ron, on the other hand, had seen what Neville hadn't. Or perhaps his heightened sense of smell had done the trick.

It was hard to surprise a werewolf.

A wizened house-elf glowered up at them, bulbous eyes narrowed with scorn. Neville saw its eyes flickering over their mismatched muggle clothes with distaste. This wasn't like the elves of Hogwarts, who were all smiles and helpful hands. Nor was it like the few personal house-elves he had met at the parties he was forced to attend at his Grandmother's side. Cowering, timid little things.

This elf looked like it might slam the door back in their face. And grin while it did so.

"We need to speak with Harry Potter, please." Ron broke the silence, a courteous smile attempting to form on his pale, freckled face.

Neville could tell that platitudes would not work on this creature. It only sniffed in disdain, as haughty as any pureblooded slytherin confronted with muggleborn riffraff.

"Is the Master expecting you?"

Neville hesitated slightly, exchanging a quick glance with Ron. This was not going as he planned.

Then again, he had been expecting what amounted to a dimly lit dungeon, with Lord Potter staring grimly out of it like he had stared out of the Daily Prophet's front page months ago. Not the bright hallway illuminated beyond, nor the extremely unhappy, but overall normal looking, house-elf.

"We have something for him. It's his dad's. Or, well, we think it's his dad's." Neville began. Ron nodded emphatically and repeated their mission. "We're almost positive it's his dad's."

The elf, wearing a spotless length of satin cloth, held out one wrinkled hand, palm up.
"Hand it over then. Kreacher will see it gets to the Master."

Neville lifted his chin.

"We would rather give it to him in person."

The house-elf smiled. It was a savage smile, far too similar to that of a goblin. It made a shiver go down the back of his spine.

"No one sees the Master without prior notification. No solicitations, no interviews, and no *speaking.*" Neville had never heard sarcasm from a house-elf. But he could swear the elf was taunting them as it continued. "Master is busy. Yous may leave names and letters by owl."

And damn if the elf didn't begin to close the door in their faces. Ron let out a growl and put one hand up flat against the door, halting its progress.

"Now you see here, you little beast, I *won't*…"

The house-elf's grin got wider. Neville took a step back, one hand going up to tug at his friends sleeve.

"Ron, come on, we can send a letter first…"

"The devil we *will!*" Ron's voice was rising in volume; Neville felt his face begin to flush. He knew how unstable Ron could be during the last few days before a Moon. Irrational barely began to cover it. "Just because this *pompous* thing refuses to…"

He saw the magic building the same time Ron did, the elf's hands beginning to glow with spell light. The werewolf jumped back in response as if scalded, shaking his hand furiously, his face reddening with rage.

"*It attacked me!*"

In response, the house-elf only slammed the door with a loud slap. Neville stared blankly ahead at where he had last seen its malevolent eyes, lit with evil delight.

"Okay. That was… not what I expected."
Harry frowned into the lit darkness of the Cloak, his meditation interrupted by the sound of the front door opening.

He had been trying to clear his mind. The first steps of Occlumency were frustrating at best, and Harry found that attempting to think of nothing was far harder than any other task he had yet attempted. He had too many thoughts; and when he wasn't thinking of his latest project, he was worrying over the horcrux; and when he wasn't doing that, he was thinking about Hermione. She had started her last year in London, and had already started an entire binder of notes on potential places to enroll in college and what she planned to study at each location.

He hated to limit her in any way, but the selfish part of him wanted her to stay nearby. Better yet, stay with him while she studied wherever she picked.

He lay still on the couch in the living room, jolted again from his continually roving thoughts by a raised shout.

He pulled the Cloak off himself, leaving it puddled on the cushions as he walked into the hallway, desperate for some distraction, and arriving just in time to see the yellow form of Kreacher slam green light right into the distinctive pattern of a werewolf with a loud crack.

He blinked, frowned.

_Werewolf._ A very familiar looking werewolf pattern, at that. _But why…?_

"Kreacher has taken care of it, Master." The house-elf sounded very pleased with himself.

"What did he want?"

Kreacher hesitated slightly, his yellow form bobbing.

"They says they have something of Master's. But Kreacher does not believe them. Little wizard boys lie, all the time. Especially _Weasleys._"

The surname was said with scorn. Harry sighed.
Kreacher might have accepted himself and Hermione, but some habits from his previous Family were ingrained deep, and snobbery was one of them.

"Let them in, please."

He heard his elf suck in a scandalized breath; but yellow light rotated and spun, reaching for the solid green door.

"As you wish, Master." The elf muttered, and by his tone Harry knew he was going to get his revenge.

There would no doubt be barely cooked beef for breakfast for at least a week.

It wasn't just Ron Weasley at his door. The rich green and deep brown tones of Neville Longbottom greeted him as well, and this time Harry knew the exact word for the shade of his pattern. Chrysochlorous.

Thanks to his and Hermione's pensieve expeditions, his vocabulary of colors had expanded from mere hundreds to thousands, and he was much more certain he was correct at labeling them. And while chrysochlorous might be a mouthful, it labeled Longbottom perfectly.

Green fading to an almost golden brown. Like living leaves touched by the first hint of decay.

"So, um. We have something that's yours. Or, we think you might want it."

Harry blinked, and realized that the color he was scrutinizing was shifting uncomfortably. He also realized he was probably looking straight at the man's chest.

Right.

"This way." Harry turned and moved back into the living room, gesturing to a seat as he absently gathered his Cloak and placed it aside.

He heard one of the boy's gasp; probably Weasley, from the tone and
direction of it. Before he could question what might be wrong, Longbottom
spoke again.

"It's a long story, but... we've had this map, of Hogwarts. But it wasn't ours
at first... Ron?"

The fawn colored pattern startled at the sound of his name, and Harry
swore he saw the lupine overtone become more predominant for a
second. He now could see why he had not been certain of it at first; the
fur-like texture of werewolf was much stronger than he remembered it
being three years ago. Was it the age of the disease? The proximity to the
full moon?

"It was my brothers first. And they stole it from Filch, from the box of
confiscated things in his office. And, well, it had these signatures on it. The
Marauders, they called themselves. My brother's idolized them, but they
gave us the map in third year, after this series of break-ins in Gryffindor
tower, because mum wouldn't let me go to Hogsmeade and..."

"Marauders. My father." Harry broke in when he sensed the story was
about to degenerate into a topic not relevant to the conversation.

He had heard that term before. He had paid attention when Hermione read
to him the interviews given in the Prophet about his father and their friends,
about the Marauder's Tragedy. The twisted tale of betrayal and lies that
had surrounded them all, and how in the end Sirius Black and Remus Lupin
had paid the greatest price for that deceit and the previous Minister's
pride.

But they were all dead now. He himself had seen Peter Pettigrew killed by
the Ministry when they finally got the right traitor.

"Yeah." Neville's voice was muted, emotion he could not discern coloring it.
"Padfoot, Prongs, Moony, Wormtail. We figured, really, it should be yours.
You're... the only family left to claim it."

Harry glanced between the two patterns, men now more than the boys
they had been before.

"May I see it?"
Pale brown light flickered, moving aside green wrappings to pull free a gleaming cylinder, unraveling it slowly, smoothing out what must be crinkled edges based on the sound.

"You activate it by touching a wand to the surface and saying 'I solemnly swear I'm up to no good.' Then deactivate it with 'Mischief Managed'. That was my brother's favorite part. It's, ah, activated now."

His voice was both fond and sad. Harry stared down at the green parchment, uncertain how to feel himself.

His blood father had made it. James Potter, a man he did not remember and knew scarcely anything about. He had no stories about the man, other than the few mentions from his aunt. The sporadic letters she retained from his mother that spoke of an annoying boy growing to be a handsome man. A bully who became a defender. Their wedding invitation, which contained a single picture.

His aunt had described him as tall, wild black hair, brown eyes full of bad intentions. She said he resembled him, sometimes. Harry knew she really meant that he resembled him if he did not have the grotesque scars splitting his face in two.

He had his mother's eyes, only his own were at once both less useful and far better.

But if Harry had any father now it was Vernon Dursley, as gruff as the man could be, and the Map in front of him was nothing but sparkling verdant light, obviously enchanted but completely useless at fulfilling its purpose for him. The only fascinating thing about it was the odd spark of different hues scattered across it, hinting at the reflections of soul patterns.

"It shows all the secret corridors of Hogwarts, or at least the ones they discovered. And it shows where everyone is in the school. Great for avoiding teachers after curfew." The last was said as an aside, a flicker of light casually nudging the boy next to him in remembrance of some escapade. "It's a brilliant piece of spellwork. Professor Lupin said it took them years to perfect it, only it got taken by Filch in their last year. They
didn't recreate it 'cause, well... it just wasn't that important anymore."

Weasley finished lamely, and Harry did not have to see him to know the man was choking on some emotion.

The Daily Prophet hadn't spoken much of the relationship Lupin and Black might have had with the Heroes of Hogwarts. But he had no doubt, as short as it had been, it had been important, for the boys to be willing to confront the Ministry so very publicly over the two wizards.

"What were they like? Lupin and Black."

He saw their lights flicker in surprise; and darken again with sorrow.

"Professor Lupin was brilliant. The best Defense professor we've ever had. And we've had plenty!" Neville laughed, softly, but it was the laughter of a man who had to choose between humor and anger. "He knew just what to say, just how to teach something. Snape hated him on sight, but Lupin said it was old history. He told us Snape made his Wolfsbane potion, and I found it hard he would be willing to drink it. Poison, and all that. We all hated Snape, though, so there's that."

"He makes my potion now." Ron murmured. "Couldn't afford it, otherwise. I still hate him though."

Neville picked up the story with the ease of friends well used to telling one. "Dumbledore said he feels guilty he didn't get there in time to stop Moony. The werewolf. He saw what was happening on the Map that night, it was on Professor Lupin's desk, when he went to deliver the potion... but it was chaos. There were four of us running around like rabbits. He saved three of us."

Ron laughed harshly. "Four. He saved me, too. I'm not dead."

"Sorry, mate." Neville muttered. "You know what I meant."

The brown light flickered again in what might have been a dismissive gesture. "I know. Professor Lupin, though, he was great. Really calm all the time, so calm I can't imagine how he held the wolf at bay. You could tell he was poor, and no wonder with how hard it is to get a job with our
disease. Dressed shabbily. And pale, sickly. It's really surprising that we didn't put together his monthly sick leaves, but no one did. Or at least, no one said anything about it."

"He tried to teach us the Patronus charm." Neville's tone was forced cheerfulness. "The dementors were around that year, and I had a… bad reaction to them. We were able to make a silvery mist, before… before Christmas."

"And Black?" Harry asked, when the silence grew between them. He ran one hand absently across the soft cloak in his lap, dark light flickering from another thing that had once been his father's.

Gold and green lengthened, shifted, sighed as Neville spoke.

"We didn't get to meet him, not really, not for more than a few minutes. It all happened so fast, too fast. I guess you read about it in the papers." When Harry nodded, he continued. "We told them everything, even what Dumbledore wanted to keep quiet, all except Snape's involvement. We felt they were owed that, after Sirius had been incarcerated so long. Sirius broke into the tower, and when he took Ron we all followed him out. Dean and Seamus got stunned, but I revived them. I had been hiding under the… ah, this cloak. Just in case. Then the professor arrived, and Sirius told us the entire story, about Ron's rat, the truth. We believed him when we saw Peter. And in the thick of it, they forgot about the Moon. Sirius yelled at us to run, then Snape was there, and the two of them got into a duel."

"I remember when he began to transform. It was like watching a human body explode, fur sprouting every which way, and the screams…" Ron's voice faded, and it was sympathy and not horror in his voice. The man was very familiar now with the reason for those screams.

"Lupin went for us. Padfoot, Sirius's animagus form, blocked him at first. But a dog ain't anything for a werewolf. It did give Snape enough time to send us all scampering back to the castle wards. We had been in the Shrieking Shack, you see, outside the main body of the wards. There was a passageway there through the Whomping Willow, but we couldn't get back into the passage. We had to run across the hill or to the forest."
"My leg was broken, though." Ron's voice was calm, rote. He had told this story many times before. "I couldn't run. Snape had me on a stretcher, but the locomotor spell is slow. Moony got to me and... it wasn't pretty. Snape didn't let him kill me, but it was damn close anyway. When I woke up in the hospital wing, they told me Sirius and the professor were dead. Kissed by the dementors. The only news worse than that was that I was a werewolf, and even that just felt like... one more bad thing. Just one more horrible, bad thing, on top of all the other horrible things."

"Like a nightmare." Neville agreed, then sighed. "And the reporters kept coming, sniffing for a story, and misprinting half of everything we said. The Ministry was there, trying to shut us up at the same time. Fudge himself gave us a 'talk' which included a few illegal spells, and Dumbledore banned him from school grounds. Finally we called a press conference and that was that. Everyone knew the truth."

The silence grew again, and Harry couldn't help but think that if karma was a true magical force, it had well and truly punished the boys for laughing Hermione into the doomed bathroom during her first year.

"We should have given you the Map then." His voice hesitant, Ron made a slow gesture with his hands that Harry could follow. "But we didn't know where you where. Back then, some people were skeptical you even existed. The professor was sad about that, you know. He missed your father, and he always talked about all the stories he would have liked to share with you. They were all Gryffindors, and he rather thought you would have been too."

Neville spoke when Ron wound to a stop. "Then, in fourth year, we thought it would be useful for the Tournament, and Hermione was so angry... and I guess we were too, at ourselves as much as her. Too little, too late, all around. And when it was over, there were the executions, and you disappeared again. I guess we just let it slide."

"But here it is." Ron's voice was abruptly harsh as he shoved the Map toward Harry, interrupting his friend. "It's yours."

Harry looked at the Map again. A part of him would have liked to study just how his father long ago had managed to copy soul patterns onto a map.
And no doubt Hermione would be thrilled as well, no matter how much she disliked Hogwarts itself.

But he wasn't callous, and though James Potter was his father, he wasn't his dad. He could tell by the way the boys spoke that they felt far more attachment for the piece of parchment than he himself ever could. He couldn't even use it, after all.

"You have one more year of school left, correct? Your seventh term."

"Yes?" Neville spoke the answer like it was a question. Harry gestured down to the map.

"Keep it for your last term. I can't use it here anyway. I would like to study it, eventually, but I have other projects currently taking up my time."

Ron didn't hesitate to begin rolling the Map back up, stuffing it back into one large green pocket. Neville wasn't so certain.

"Are you sure? It was your dad's…"

"I don't remember him, and I have many things of his from the Potter Vault. I won't miss this one."

He had the Cloak, too, and it was more than enough. It was more than the total sum of everything else his father had owned. He pressed a hand into its surface and smiled slightly.

Neville's pattern twisted, and it took Harry a moment to realize he was bowing.

Pureblood wizards were odd like that, even the Light affiliated ones.

"Thank you. This means a lot to us. All of us, Dean and Seamus too. They, ah, thought you would be angry."

Harry stood, shrugged. He was not sure how to explain the way he felt. His father was dead. Harry did not miss him, not even the way Neville and Ron obviously mourned Lupin's passing.
He had a family, he was loved. He had his aunt and uncle, Dudley and Hermione, the Grangers.

He didn't need the Marauders Map to feel a connection with a father he had never known.

"What was he like?" Dean asked, lounging back lazily into the large sofa that graced the Weasley home. Seamus, on the other hand, sat forward, eyes riveted on Ron.

Ron looked at Neville, and saw the same conflict in his friend's eyes.

"Rational. Very, very rational." Neville finally said.

"Calm." Ron clarified quietly. It was the day after the Moon, and he was exhausted. And as was their habit during the summer, his friends had come to distract him. "Like a kneazle. A very large, intimidating kneazle."

And he hated kneazles. Mostly because they hated him on sight. He had yet to find one that didn't arch its spine and glare at him when he got close.

"He was quiet. He just listened to us, mostly. Asked some questions. He looked really normal, except, well, his face."

"Those scars are as bad up close as the ones across my chest where the wolf got me." Ron added.

Neville frowned."I was thinking more of his eyes. They didn't glow like the papers claimed, but they never looked right at me. Just stared."

Dean rolled his eyes. "He's blind, dolt. Of course he didn't look at you."

Seamus shook his head. "But he can see. Everyone says so!"

Dean looked at Seamus like he was a pitiful crup. "If someone is blind, they can't see. That's what blind means."

"I'm not an idiot! I know what blind means!"
Seamus lunged for him, and the two boys fell to the floor in a heap, Dean taunting the smaller freckled teen.

Ron sighed, unable to raise the energy to join in. Neville moved closer, voice raised to be heard over their friends.

"It bothered me that he didn't want the Map. I would kill to have something like that of my fathers. I do have some stuff, of course, but… I wouldn't give up anything. Not a single piece of what I have."

Ron knew Neville's father wasn't dead. Neither was his mother. But they might as well be.

"I wasn't going to argue with him. I like keeping it a little longer. Wish we hadn't lost the cloak. But he seemed attached to it, at least. Did you see how he held it? I swear he ran his hands across it at least five times while we were talking."

"Like he was petting a kneazle." Neville agreed, with a smirk. Ron managed a smile.

"Yeah. Just like that."

And what Ron didn't say was that he could have sworn he'd seen the silver invisibility cloak move from beside the blind man into his lap, just like an idle kneazle.

And just like a kneazle, he could have sworn he'd seen it arch into the hand that caressed it.

Harry had to find quiet to meditate, and darkness. He sought both underneath the Cloak on the days Hermione did not come over.

Occlumency. From the latin occludere, to shut up, and mens, the mind.

It took an incredible amount of willpower to shut up one's mind. There was simply too many things to think about.

He started by focusing on one single thing. Technically, advanced
Occlumency was just that; not thinking about things one wanted hidden, so that an invading mind could not find them. Therefore, one thought only about the things one did not want hidden.

He thought about the Cloak. He focused every iota of his mind on it, on deciphering light from darkness when there was no true barrier between them. On counting the stars that were at times pinpricks of light, at other times pools of darkness. Moving, *alive*, and at times he swore there was sentience in its pattern.

When a thought from outside began to intrude, he forced it out. When he thought of the horcrux, he made himself focus only harder on the cones and prisms of the pattern around him. When he thought of Hermione's skin under his fingers, he instead ran his hand across the silk of darkness made into light.

He made his mind retain and reflect the impossible invisibility cloak, the unchangeable pattern, the unmakeable one. He fell asleep to it's light and woke to it's darkness.

And after a month of nightly practice, he sat in the middle of the living room of Grimmauld Place, the Cloak spread on the floor in front of him, thoughts and colors and sounds and smells pressing onto him from all angles, and without the soft silk around him brought its pattern up in his mind and made himself look *inside*.

And he thought of absolutely nothing until Hermione's heavy footsteps echoed down the hallway to interrupt his silence.

With a smile, he jumped to his feet to celebrate his success in the best way he knew how.

"Can you really see inside your own mind?" Hermione asked softly, as they lay together in front of the fire, the smell of wood smoke lingering in the air.

The rug was scratchy under his bare skin, but Harry didn't feel like moving yet. It was too nice to have Hermione against him, warm and sated, her hands idly running down his side.
"It's not like seeing as you or I know it." He murmured thoughtfully. "It's like feeling. Like knowing where I begin and end inside myself. Like exploring the edges with my fingers to find the true shape of a thing. It's like learning the pattern of a soul by touch alone."

"Your soul, then." Her breath was against his neck, and for a moment he was distracted. "Do you know where yours ends and the horcrux begins?"

Harry looked into the fire, a scarlet monster devouring its defenseless prey one centimeter at a time.

"I know that it is only me inside of me. Occlumency protects the mind from exterior influences, it would not be useful against something that was inside that sphere. But there is a… convergence. It lies against one side, like one river running into another. Something of what is in it has tainted some part of me."

"Possession?" The word was whispered, hardly more than a breath, but Harry sensed the fear more in her bodies stillness than in her voice.

"No. It's like a scar, a mental one as deep as the physical one I bear. It probably happened when the horcrux first attached itself to me. I believe, based on my own research into souls, that that scar will remain even once the soul is removed. If anything, it will be more noticeable once it is gone."

"Underneath the red."

He nodded at her statement, gently running his fingers through her hair.

"I suppose that makes my soul more fragile. I've seen cracks, scars, on other souls. I've seen some so close to shattering that recovery seems impossible." He thought of Hermione's cousin, her beautiful pattern once nearly broken over a year before. He thought of the last time he had seen her weeks ago, how those cracks had closed and melded together, leaving nothing but the faintest spiderweb of scars across its surface.

Would it be easier for such a soul to break, if put under stress? Or did those scars make one stronger?

Hermione spoke, and the parallel of her thoughts and his own dazzled him.
"I don't think so. I think it makes you stronger, not more fragile. Scars are a sign of strength. That you've overcome something horrible."

Harry's hand moved through her hair again, his fingers finding the scars that lay on her own skin, hidden but present. Six years ago something terrible had happened to her, too.

"I love you." A simple statement, but meaning so many things. It frustrated him, sometimes, just how little the three words could portray what he felt. But he had no better words.

He felt her smile, saw her blue-violet light shine brilliantly.

Sometimes, the words were enough.

"Then removing it won't hurt you. What damage is done won't change or become worse."

Harry smiled, and this time his fingers flickered down her spine.

"Yes. If only I could remove the blasted thing."

She nodded in agreement. Harry saw yellow light flicker into the room, and just as quickly flicker out, leaving behind only the increased warmth of a freshly stoked fire.

Kreacher wouldn't let them freeze, even when they were foolish enough to lay naked in the large living room in the beginning of winter, a room heated only by a single wide fireplace.

Hermione sighed, lax and warm. Harry glanced towards the Cloak, spread out where he had left it hours before. With hardly a thought about what he wanted to do he called to it, opening himself just as he had when he looked inside his soul, mirroring a pattern, one brother to another.

The stone on his middle finger heated comfortably, just enough to make its presence known. It, too, was darkness and light.

Then the Cloak settled over them both, and Hermione relaxed even further. She wouldn't like that Kreacher had seen her naked. And he rather liked to
keep the sight to himself, as well.

"Your blasted invisibility cloak. I suppose we now look like two heads rolled off a wall onto the floor." Her voice was low, drowsy, amused.

If she didn't leave soon, she would be late getting home again. And even though she apparated now and no longer relied on public transportation, her parents would worry. He couldn't let her fall asleep, though he desperately wanted to. Wanted to lay beside her every night and wake up to her every morning.

"Probably."

When she began to doze, he looked at her, running his magic across her face to see her closed eyes, their lashes long and delicate. Her nose, her mouth, her chin.

At the touch of his energy, her eyes blinked open. He felt the shiver run through her, from her head down to her toes, her feet flexing against his own.

"I have to go." She yawned it, and he reluctantly let her loose as she rose to gather her scattered clothes. "Classes come early tomorrow morning."

When she left, taking her beautiful light with her, Harry gathered the Cloak around himself and stood, walking slowly up to his bedroom to fall onto his cold bed, and considered what age would be appropriate to ask a girl to move in with him.

Or at least, what age would make a father like John Granger not try to wring his neck.

~*~To Be Continued in: A Plum Robe~*~

Was this a trick, or a treat? :P HAPPY HALLOWEEN!
"Kreacher!"

With a swirl of yellow the house-elf appeared inside his room, the pop of transportation muffled to nearly inaudible efficiency.

He had tested that phenomenon the year before. The louder the pop, the farther the elf had traveled. It was practically a gunshot when he had sent Kreacher to France and back. No wonder wizards seldom traveled far by house-elf.

"Yes, Master?"

Harry sighed, refocusing on his current problem.

His closet.

"Can you get me the plum robes? They all bloody look the same to me."

There was a reason he stuck to basic black robes. They worked with everything. Whoever had decided that all Wizengamot members had to wear a specific shade of plum during session was obviously insane.

Hermione theorized it was because that shade of plum had once been devilishly expensive, and it was therefore one more way of keeping the poorer Lords and Ladies from taking their rightful seats.

"Here it is, Master."

Yellow light pressed green fabric gently into his hands. Harry smiled and twisted, shrugging the heavy garment on.

At least it was cold. He could hardly imagine wearing them during the summer. Then again, that's what cooling charms were apparently for.

"Thank you. I'm eating dinner with my family tonight, so you have the House to yourself today." Harry hesitated briefly. "If you could go on vacation, where would you go?"
The was a moment of incredulous silence.

"Vacation?"

"Yeah, for a break. To get away."

The elf sniffed. "Kreacher does not need a break."

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"I know you don't need one. I'm saying, if you wanted to, where would you go?"

More silence. At least the elf was thinking about it. The last few times Harry had questioned him over topics relating to things he had never had because of his contract, he had been obstinate.

"Kreacher supposes… Kreacher may like to visit a garden. Black Manor used to have gardens, when Kreacher is a young elf. The gardens were… good."

It was more than Harry expected to get. He smiled.

"In that case, go visit a garden if you want today. If you have to have some task, then buy some flowers for Hermione. She loves them."

"Yes, Master Harry, sir."

With another swirl of light the elf left, slightly faster than was polite.

*He probably thinks I'm going to force him to take wages next, Harry mused. Which is exactly what is going to happen.*

With the letter that had given him the information required to take up his seats had come a portkey that activated an hour before every quarterly meeting, a fact Harry was extremely grateful for.

Actually *getting* to the Ministry might have been difficult without one, at least while he was wearing what Muggles would no doubt think was a
ridiculous nightgown. He hadn't wanted to ask Hermione to apparate him in, either, or she would have had to take a day from her classes.

Of course, portkeys were horrible in their own very nauseous way.

When the wildly swirling colors came to rest, Harry took a deep steadying breath, leaning a bit heavily on his staff for balance.

"Step forward, clear the area for the next traveler."

A male voice intoned with obvious boredom. Harry began to walk forward, and ignored when said bored pattern flickered with shock.

He also ignored it when the other colors moved out of his path, some knocking rudely into one another.

Most of all, he ignored the people who seemed think he was deaf as well as blind as they whispered to one another about his presence, and wearing the standard getup of a Wizengamot member.

No doubt there would be a special edition of the Daily Prophet.

He stepped onto the lifts and waited to descend, not in the least surprised that the only fellow riders brave enough to share the box with him were aurors whose patterns he found familiar enough. Two of the guards who used to rotate on Potter duty.

"Do you need help getting to your seat, Lord Potter?"

The words were courteous, and not in the least condescending. Harry couldn't have asked for a better coincidence.

"I know it's on level two, but an escort would not be turned down. I've only ever been to the auror offices."

It would be nice to not find himself in the wrong room. He certainly couldn't read any signs. His plan had been to follow the most colors, and hopefully spot a familiar pattern or two that he knew were on the council.

"Of course. I'm auror Fallon, this is auror Vaughn."
Grey-green and blue-green. Or, more specifically, amazon and bangladesh, as he had called them in his mind. Two of his previously more common guards, though not the ones on duty the night Voldemort attacked. If he was not mistaken, the two often worked as a pair, and had a fondness for muggle sweets, based on their frequent stops at one particular vendor on his walk to school.

"It is nice to meet two of the aurors who used to watch me. Where you told to wait in the Atrium for me to arrive?"

Light flashed in surprise; a quickened heartbeat, blood thrumming in their veins. But just as quickly, it settled.

"No, sir." It was Vaughn who spoke this time. "We did think, maybe, you might take up your seats this session."

"And we all know the Ministry is a rat-warren. It's hard for any bloke to find their way around the first few times." Fallon finished for his partner.

And he obviously was not just any bloke. These two would know that better than even the general public. And neither one was reacting with the paranoia or fear he had come to expect.

"Thank you. It would be appreciated if you might find your path coinciding with my own at the next meeting, as well."

"Our pleasure."

The voice announced their arrival at level two, and Vaughn stepped out first, beginning to lead the way, Fallon falling into step behind him.

The Wizengamot was about as dull as he expected. Four dragging hours of bureaucracy, an issue being announced by one member then discussed by the masses.

Perhaps three-fourths of the seats were full. A third of those seats were appointed by the current Minister. It seemed most of the inherited Lords had better things to do than sit and calmly, or not so calmly, fight about the current state of Knockturn Alley, the new regulations on St. Mungo's
infectious ward, and the potential construction of a wizarding zoo in the heart of a rural muggle community.

Harry remained silent, not unaware that his presence had caused a stir. No one in this room, at least, had expected him to actually turn up. Even Dumbledore's familiar pattern had displayed the telltale flicker.

But by the passing of the first hour, he had nearly been forgotten. By the fourth, he might as well be invisible. That worked for him; he was able to observe the various waves of power in the room.

Dumbledore, the Chief Warlock, seemed mostly impartial, only gently steering the occasional tangent to more peaceable terminology, and ending the discussion when he saw it degenerating.

The Minister and his under-secretary presided over one side of the court, the more conservative viewpoints. Amelia Bones, her pattern a pretty light blue cyan, headed the more liberal side along with Griselda Marchbanks old and deep midnight blue. The witch must be older than even Dumbledore by the slow movements of her pattern.

And scattered between them, around and alongside where he himself sat, were what he had begun to think of as the swing votes. The stubborn, the contrary, and the simply undecided. No doubt most had some bone to pick with either side but had no wish to be affiliated with the opposite side either.

Oddly enough, however, there were no official parties. And both Bones and Scrimgeour agreed amicably enough on the matter of restructuring Knockturn Alley and implementing stricter regulations at St. Mungo's. The zoo, however, was another story, and one he was quite tired of hearing about, with no doubt the majority of the rest of the wizengamot.

It was a relief when Dumbledore ended the argument with a polite request for more information to be presented at the next meeting.

"Are there any more issues to be raised before the Wizengamot?"

His strong voice echoed around the chamber, and various members began murmuring to one another. None stepped forward, however.
Harry braced himself. *Now or never.*

He stood, purposefully leaving the staff propped against his seat. There was a wave of movement, a rainbow of colors turning as one. Silence fell without prompting.

"Yes, Lord Potter?" Dumbledore asked calmly, and Harry lifted his chin. He wanted to Look, to judge reactions by facial expressions; but Vaughn had told him the room was, while lit well, still dim enough among the seats that no doubt glowing eyes would be noticed.

He had no wish to intimidate. At least, not yet.

"I wish to open discussion of the inhumane contracts binding sentient creatures into service. In particular, the degrading actions by the House-Elf Registry Office, where house-elves are bred and enslaved without their consent, and left purposefully uneducated in order to brainwash them into believing that said contracts are to their benefit."

There was a moment of complete silence. Harry waited for the outcry, and when none came, continued.

"These contracts have no stipulation for compensation of any kind, require elves to dress in pillowcases that are often soiled, and bind them unto death with no exit clause. It allows them to be abused by anyone who holds their contract, and leaves them unable to defend themselves or their families. It is a despicable black stain on the wizarding world that we have allowed creatures capable of higher thought and emotion to be treated in such a way."

At that, the murmurs started. A shade of green called out. "But they want to serve us. They *have to.*" The tone fell just short of chiding.

Harry raised his chin. "It is true that house-elf magic is symbiotic to wizarding kind. Without that relationship, they would be unable to practice it. By serving a wizard, an elf is stronger, lives longer, and *should* be happier. However, they are not required to be beaten when disobedient, or worse, made to punish themselves in horrible ways. One such contract at
the Registry states that an elf who refuses to comply with any order must iron his fingers on the very first offense, break them on the second, and have one digit removed from each on continuous offenses. House-elves, who are a matriarchal and monogamous species, should not be required to have children outside of their choice, and then have those children taken from them and sold for profit. A house-elf should not have to work for nothing but that symbiotic relationship, receiving no wages, no vacation time, no choice. A house-elf whose Master is abusive should have the ability to leave that Master and seek another. No witch or wizard would suffer such treatment. No witch or wizard would allow their familiar to suffer it. I doubt many would allow even their livestock to suffer it."

He lifted one hand and cut it across the air in front of him for emphasis. "It is well time that the Wizengamot looks again at any contract that binds and abuses sentient creatures. It is time to discuss the rights all beings should have."

Harry sat, then. He had said his piece, and now it was time to see if a seventeen year old could have any influence at all on his first session of the Wizengamot.

Amelia Bones called out, her words sharp. "I have long thought the House-Elf Registry was a cruel entity. I support this discussion."

Minister Scrimgeour was only a heartbeat behind. "Any being with sentience has the ability to be both law-abiding, and law-breaking. But no laws should be purposefully used to enslave a species. We have never, that I know, discussed the rights of beings not classified as 'dark'. I support the discussion."

Dumbledore clapped his hands together.

"Topic announced and supported. Let the discussion into creature rights begin."

And for the next two hours, Harry found that he did have an influence after all.
Auror Vaughn met him at the door as he left.

"The Minister would like a word, Lord Potter."

Harry only nodded his head, feeling far more tired than he thought he would be.

Six hours of bureaucracy would do that to anyone.

He leaned on his staff as he followed the blue-green pattern into the lifts, stopping occasionally when one member or another came up to speak to him, speaking in carefully composed words of their support for his 'cause'.

No one dared disagree with him face-to-face. Those that had spoken out most against new laws regulating house-elf employment had purposefully left by another door.

He had no doubt that he was being pandered to, that half of the so-called 'supporters' only wanted to make sure the Blind Sorcerer did not turn a Look at them.

"We're going down." Auror Vaughn said at last, and blocked anyone else from entering before the doors closed on the lift.

Harry said nothing. He stared ahead into white and purple magic, the elaborate spellwork that ran the lifts, and slipped easily into calming meditation.

He wished he had brought his Cloak. Next time he would, despite the plum dress code. He looked down at the Stone on his finger, a prism of black and white.

He thought of nothing until the lift doors opened.

Then he followed the bangladesh hue until they met the chartreuse Minister in his office of varying shades of verdant green, waiting calmly behind golden wards.

When he sat, Harry let out a sigh. He somehow was not surprised when Vaughn closed the door but remained inside the room.
"I see you've decided to take my advice."

The Minister's words were both congratulatory and chiding at the same time.

Harry's lips lifted in a half smile. "You said I could influence the world. So I have."

The man laughed. "And I suppose you know how these things really work. Networking, lobbying…"

"Bribes and favors." Harry finished. "Everyone wants my favor, and no one wants my ire. The public still loves me. This cause is one I predict all of the muggleborn demographic will support. Once I have a sample of the Registry's current contract published on the front page of the Daily Prophet, the free-thinking contingent will easily raise an uproar. If I get a good reporter to compare house-elves and human servants, all the better."

"The House-Elf Registry is well-funded. Several families make a good deal of money in that business."

"There is always going to be money behind evil practices. The muggle world is not that different from the wizarding one in that respect."

The Minister ruffled papers on his desk.

"They might pay off the Daily Prophet. They will stage protests of any new laws."

"Then I'll pay the Prophet more. And I'll go to their protests personally and see how many will look me in the eye."

Scrimgeour hissed between his teeth. "I do not support intimidation tactics, Mr. Potter."

"Isn't that what a protest is?" Harry returned. "Showing the boss that the employees outnumber him a hundred to one?"

"Why this? Why did you choose this to be your grand entrance into government?"
Harry narrowed his eyes. "Because I have a house-elf. An old one, loyal. He has his own personality, his own views independent of my own. He has feelings. He wears a pillowcase proudly because to him it's a mark of his pride. A pillowcase! Because he has wanted to see a garden since he was a child, Minister. And if I hadn't asked him, hadn't given him the time, he would never see a garden again in his life."

The silence grew. Harry looked away, into wooden walls of swirling green, the outlines of metal picture frames standing in purple relief.

"I see." Scrimgeour tapped his desk. "Well, then. I support you in this instance. I have no doubt that when a vote is raised at the December quarter you will be successful. But this won't stop with house-elves. Next it will be goblins, veelas, werewolves. Then the vampires and the merpeople and the centaurs, dwarfs and giants. There are many sentient beings, Mr. Potter, and not all of them are kind."

"Not all house-elves are kind, either. We've merely beaten them nearly to extinction. There is a reason they are so expensive to buy. Give them their freedom, and no doubt some rogue house-elves will arrive. But that does not mean their species do not deserve that freedom."

"Will you raise that same argument for werewolves then? Or what about when a vampire wants his freedom to kill?"

Harry shook his head. "One species' freedom does not trump another's. No sentient species should be free to kill another sentient species. Vampires can sustain life without killing. Werewolves can take precautions and are completely safe on all but one night. We should not punish them based on their capability for destruction. Wizarding kind is by far the most dangerous of them all."

"And you are the most dangerous of wizarding kind?" The Minister questioned softly. "That's what the papers think. If I was my predecessor, I would punish you for that, and no doubt goad you into just such destruction. I only want you to be prepared for the arguments you will face. You have spearheaded this debate. Do not disappear once you have won your house-elves their rights."
"I take responsibility." Harry said simply.

"Good. In that respect, so do I. Which is why I suggest you accept a guard, if not hire your own security, for any subsequent trips to the Ministry. You won't keep the public's favor for long when you start lobbying for the rights of a werewolf who might gobble up their children."

"If you think it's necessary for appearances."

"I do." Scrimgeour said forcefully. "And not just for appearances. You can't be on your guard every hour of every day. And you will soon learn that being in the public eye does not put just yourself in danger. Who watches your family, Mr. Potter, when you are not there?"

Harry felt a cold shiver run down his back.

"Exactly." The Minister nodded. "Wards work, but only to dissuade. Any truly determined party can find their way through them eventually. Think on what I've said."

Harry stood, hearing the dismissal. "Thank you, Minister. You've been... kind."

Scrimgeour rose, a tall yellow-green pattern, as regal as a lion. "I'll ask you a favor, one day. Perhaps sooner than you think. I am not always kind."

"Neither am I." Harry murmured, thinking of souls and their destruction. "Sometimes you can't be."

"Exactly, Mr. Potter. That's exactly right."

Harry followed Vaughn out, paused at the lifts.

"I suppose you are ready for guard detail once again?"

The man mashed a purple prick of light, spoke musingly

"I've been considering a move to private security. I've heard rumors the benefits are far superior."
"Is that so?" Harry said softly. "They might just be."

Hermione read the paper aloud to her parents over breakfast.

She couldn't keep the pride from her voice. She had been told most of it by Harry, but it was somehow more official to see it printed. And overwhelming to see how much support the cause was already raising.

"Well done." Her dad mumbled over his toast. "Well said."

"We should make him something. Throw a party!" Her mother declared, her answer to most important events. Good grades? Eat! Birthday? Eat! Lost a tooth? Eat! Of course, being a dentist, any desert was always sugar-free. That made the cakes and cookies a little less spectacular.

Mrs. Dursley, on the other hand, used real everything.

"I'll talk to Petunia." She continued, and Hermione laughed.

"It was just opening comments, mum. They won't vote until December."

"It was your boyfriend's first public speech in government. That's a cause for celebration."

"Seventeen-year olds don't belong in government." Her dad muttered. "But I guess it is."

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Her dad had been vocal enough about how backwards wizarding government was, to her and Harry both. And while she did agree with him, she saw no reason to not use it to her advantage anyway.

"Oh, hush with you." Her mum laughed, then reached for the phone.

Hermione smiled. She wouldn't argue.

Harry stood in his laboratory, listening to the snake in fascination.
"It smells like meat. It smells like meat. Feed me! Feed me meat!"

The small garden snake circled again and again in its glass cage, repeating its running commentary on events.

"It's dark, it's time for hunting, it smells, it smells like meat. I'm hungry. I'm hungry, feed me!"

In another cage, a small brown mouse squeaked in alarm. It could hear the hissing.

"You're hungry?" Harry questioned, and the snake paused. Its coloring was typical for a non magical snake. Orange fading into blue, a combination that made a murky brown from far away, similar to many other animals. Reptiles in general tended to be shades of orange, while amphibians tended to lean towards blue. Snakes of some species were more orange, others more blue.

This one was predominantly dull orange. No where near the magical brilliance of a dragon, but a very inferior, and distant, cousin.

"Another snake! Food! My food, I smell it, I'm hungry, it's mine!"

Well, that answered that. It wasn't just magical varieties of snakes he could hear, but nonmagical ones as well. And both were able to understand him as they could any other snake.

Unfortunately, the parseltongue ability did not seem very useful. Snakes talked about little other than food, mating, and sleep. Nonmagical's especially. He could not imagine having one as a pet and be forced to listen to a constant litany of food-food-food-sex-sleep-food-food-sleep.

How had Voldemort been able to stand it? Or had the snakes he kept been what had driven him over the edge of sanity?

"I smell meat!"

He could believe it.

With a sigh, Harry stood, exiting his lab with a grimace. Outside the door,
Kreacher waited patiently.

"Return them to the bestiary, with my thanks."

"Does Master wish another breed?" Kreacher questioned, and Harry waved him away.

"No, thanks. Not right now. Tomorrow I'd like to try another magical breed. Whatever the man thinks is most intelligent."

The yellow light bended and then swirled, a bow turning into transportation. Harry turned into the living room, falling gracelessly onto the couch.

A week of careful experimentation. The only concrete gift he found in common with the soul attached to his own was parseltongue, and arguably that could have been inherited from some distant ancestor. All the old bloodlines were intermarried, and many magical gifts had been known to skip entire generations.

The dark lord had also been known to have a specialty in necromancy, of course, and a talent for dark magic. But never had Harry found any reference to the kind of sight he himself had, and he did not consider himself to have a talent for dark magic.

He wasn't sure he even agreed on the classification of some magic as dark.

Necromancy, on the other hand, was definitely a specialty of his, whether he acknowledged it or not.

Harry ran a finger across his face, fingers exploring the groves across his cheeks and nose and eyes. Worse across the bridge of his nose, cutting right into the cartilage. It was entirely possible he had limited olfactory senses, though no doctor had ever mentioned it. Splitting the hair of his eyebrows in three places, marking the high points of his cheekbones. Spiderweb thin lines he could barely feel by touch making jagged lines down to his eyes from the deeper grooves above and below.

A horcrux scar. It had to be the reason for his sight, somehow, someway. It had most certainly blinded him. The muggle doctors had proven his eyes
did not react to stimuli. The pupils had no reaction to true light, did not track movement correctly. Harry could move them; but he also knew he did not have to. He could focus his eyes directly ahead and still look to the side, though the focus required gave him a headache.

His eyes were as ruined as the skin around them. Removing the horcrux would not change that.

And after his studies in Occlumency, he did not think removing the horcrux would change his sight, either. His sight was mental; and the horcrux, while leaving an effect on his mind, was not actively influencing it in any way. It was no more manipulating his thoughts and memories than it was allowing him to see.

And even if the parseltongue was not an inherited ability, but another effect of the horcrux, it too would not be lost. What damage had been done to his mind would stay, as he had mentioned to Hermione.

Now he just needed to bring up the new language he had discovered to her.

"It's hard to imagine how a language can be inherited." Hermione said, and he heard the tap of her ink pen against the paper. "Can it be written, as well?"

"Snakes inherit the ability to speak it. I doubt it can be written, though. How can snakes write?"

"How can people hiss like snakes?" Hermione countered. "And when you speak it, I notice certain repeated syllables. I think it can be learned just like any other language, or at least understood and translated. The speaking part would be difficult, as parts of the sound registers do not seem possible with human tongues. But I bet if you repeated a particular phrase enough, I could learn what you mean when you speak."

Harry glanced at the boomslang that currently graced his lab.

It wasn't as inane as the garden snake had been, or as dull and one-minded as the ashwinder. It also didn't argue constantly as the runespoor
It simply lay curled up, a small dark orange sliver of light. Highly venomous, dangerous enough it had come in a double layered cage of glass and metal both. Harvested from breeders who raised them exclusively for various expensive potions.

"Are you going to say anything?" Harry asked it, and was rewarded only with silence.

Was it possible for snakes to be deaf?

Hermione sighed. "You're right, though. Not much use to talk to snakes unless you have one as a pet, or are raising them for money. I'd rather be able to talk to, say, dragons. Or fish. Imagine what a fish could tell you!"

"Where the best ponds are? How comfortable the water is?" Harry teased, and saw blue-violet light ripple in response.

"How about, 'where is that undiscovered shipwreck holding hundred of pounds of gold?'. Or 'help me find this guy lost at sea'?"

"You could ask a snake to find you a kid lost in the woods."

Hermione huffed. "Better yet, the ability to talk to dogs. They can find a kid in the woods a lot faster than a slithering snake. And they are soft, furry, and lovable."

"They also probably talk about food and sex as much as the snakes do. Which is all the time. I would hate to be able to hear animals talk. It would drive me mad."

Hermione laughed, the sound echoing in the laboratory like happy rays of light. "Except this one. It doesn't talk at all."

Harry glanced at the boomslang. "Silent but deadly. I'm betting it's twice as intelligent as the ashwinder. I swear that snake was so desperate to procreate before it died it was about to try breeding with me."

"You slipped into parseltongue again. Its trigger is sight."
Harry shrugged apologetically. "Sorry. I guess I'm done here. Nothing new to learn."

"Yeah." Hermione stood. "Lunch? It's Saturday."

Harry nodded, taking hold of his staff.

"I'll get Kreacher to take the snake back."

Hermione hesitated at the door.

"If you have to have a pet snake now, please don't settle on the boomslang just because it's quiet. I'd find you dead one day from a bite."

"Not a chance. I think I prefer to guess what any animals I own are thinking." But he did look back at the boomslang one more time.

There was one more use he could see a wizard or witch having for parseltongue. Snakes would make excellent assassins.

But he didn't need one of those. Quite the opposite.

Harry visited the Daily Prophet's offices three times the month of October.

The first was to hand over a sample contract. The second was to give an interview about his views on sentient creatures.

The third was in response to what was amping up to be a slur campaign against him funded by the House-Elf Registry's financial backers.

And on that third visit, Harry took Matthew Vaughn with him, the ex-Auror now proudly the head of his new security team of two. Fergus Fallon had only been a second behind his partner in taking a position.

Harry doubted the Minister was happy that he had recruited two of his aurors out from under his nose. But he also had no doubt that the Minister had orchestrated it, either. There was no such thing as coincidence with Rufus Scrimgeour.
"Is it true, Lord Potter, that you practice illegal dark magic?"

The female reporter's voice wobbled. The purple of her pattern seemed to be trying to make itself as small as possible.

"That is a ridiculous question." Harry replied calmly. "No one who did such a thing would admit it where they could be charged with a crime. You should ask the Registry, instead, how they would feel if their children got their fingers broken every time they disobeyed a command to clean their room."

She coughed, cleared her throat.

"Yes, well. Mr. Burke, who owns several shops and a majority share in the Registry, thinks house-elves should not be compared to children, or any of humankind. He said, and I quote, 'House-elves are an unintelligent species that relies on wizarding kind to fulfill their basic needs. They should be happy we are so accommodating as to welcome them into our homes'. He also said 'Many families rely on the cheap and discreet labor provided by house-elves, and to restructure their contracts would cost the shopkeepers of Diagon Alley alone thousands of galleons in cleaning costs.'"

"First." Harry began. "Children rely on their parents to fulfill their basic needs. Young children are far less intelligent than adult house-elves, as they can not speak, feed themselves, or change their own soiled diapers. Perhaps Mr. Burke thinks his own children are blessed to be welcomed into his home as babies."

Purple light shifted, flickered as she wrote quickly. Harry had specified no Quick Quotes Quills.

"Second. House-elves are not cheap. While they may cost nothing if they are inherited, to buy a new one is exorbitant. Diagon Alley shopkeepers collectively own what is referred to, by them, as a stable of elves. These elves were bought generations ago and bred over time, with the children not allowed to move on to other employment or sold for increased profit and forced to leave their parents and family. These elves are forced to clean the Alley and shops of anyone who pays rent for the stable's
services. The Diagon Alley shopkeepers have therefore been making money from the backs of what amounts to slave labor. The elves in this stable have no rights to food, wages, or entertainment of any kind. They are not allowed to learn to read or write. They are given just enough to keep them alive and their magic functioning."

Harry paused, waiting for the reporter to catch up. Then he looked at her, saw her face flinch slightly, her fingers tighten on her quill.

Quietly, he continued, looking into eyes that were now green from his own energy.

"And, madam, when these elves grow too old to work, when the beatings no longer spur them to clean, when their magic is wasted from decades of labor, they are killed. This is done with an executioner hired from the Ministry for the purpose. The old elves are taken from their family group and magically beheaded. These heads are then offered back to the family, who are commanded to put them in so-called places of honor as a reminder of their service. Of their slavery. They are told it is an honor. And they believe it because they do not know anything else."

"I-I-I understand, my Lord." Her voice trembled. Harry let his Look fade as she began to quickly write, her natural light flickering madly.

"No more questions, Lord Potter." This came from a male voice, significantly calmer than the woman. It was the reporter who had run the first interview after the Wizengamot session. "I believe that will cover it."

Harry stood slowly. "I would appreciate that any pieces that directly attack myself with criminal accusations be brought to Ministry attention. Defamation of a Wizengamot member is illegal unless said accusations have been proven by trial."

"You can't stop free speech." The wizard said. "Everyone has their opinion."

"As long as they label them as opinions and not fact." Harry warned. "Or is this paper nothing more than a gossip rag?"
The woman sucked in a scandalized breath.

"The Daily Prophet is the most respected and widely read paper in wizarding Britain. We do not lie."

Harry gestured to the green parchment she had been writing on.

"Every thing I have told you is fact. You can research it yourself. I encourage you to. Find out just what is happening to these creatures, not just in the Alley, but everywhere. I guarantee that a bloodthirsty public would buy your papers until none are left to read it."

He turned and left, the green of Vaughn following close behind.

"That man looks fit to murder you, my Lord." The guard murmured as they entered the Alley.

Harry snorted. "They lie constantly. Or they truly are idiotic enough to believe everything they are told and reprint it without due diligence. It's about time someone confronted them about it or they will never change. And call me Harry. I get enough pandering from the public."

"Harry. It's not wise to make enemies of the media."

"There is more than one paper in wizarding Britain, and I haven't made an enemy of any of them. They need me to sell their papers. If I stop giving them interviews and go to the competition, it will drastically hurt their profits. They know it, and so do I."

And as the sea of people parted to let them through, Harry heard the occasional shout from either side.

'Free the house-elves!' 'Wages!' 'Lord Potter! It's the Blind Sorcerer!' 'House-elves are people too!'

October was a success.

"Viola is going to write a paper." Hermione declared, thumping one hand upon the book in her lap. "She's well-respected in academic circles. It
would not be out of the realm of possibility that she would comment on recent events. I'll use magical theory to prove my point."

She watched as Harry lifted his head, blinked at her, his long black hair wild and spiky from laying against the couch cushions.

"Okay." He said simply.

Hermione bit the side of her lip, thoughts tumbling one over another.

"On a magical level, what is so different? On a physical level, even. House-elves even live longer than the average witch or wizard! They have their own culture, their own traditions. I'm going to write a paper on house-elves."

Harry leaned back down, nodded.

"That's a good idea."

"I'm going to keep it as scientific as possible. I'll try to keep emotions out of it." Harry scoffed, but she continued speaking. "I will! I've done it before. I can do this. And it won't just be about house-elves, either. It will be about the basic rights of any sentient being. What is so special about witches and wizards that they are the only ones allowed to have the freedom of choosing their own jobs, the place they live, the ability to use a wand?"

Harry's eyes stared straight ahead, but Hermione felt the touch of his energy like a caress.

"You're brilliant. It's a good thing no one knows who Viola is, though, or we would be hiring another guard."

Hermione flexed her fingers, idly ran one over her wand harness.

"I thought you were overreacting, until I heard about the near riot at the elf stables yesterday. They had to call the aurors. Someone is going to get hurt."

"Worse, the contract holders can command the elves to hurt anyone who might try to free them. The Ministry has not yet seemed to consider that
house-elvess can make a ready-made army."

Hermione bared her teeth.

"Maybe I should let them know."

Harry smiled.

"Oh, Viola. You do love to stir the pot, don't you?"

Hermione set the book aside, picked up her pen. Stared at the blank paper like it was a canvas and she the artist waiting to create a masterpiece.

"Only for a good cause."

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*House-Elves; Beasts of Burden, Loyal Servants, or Potential Weapons?*

*by Viola James*

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It was genius, really. The kind of brilliance only Hermione Granger could translate onto paper. She made house-elvess into family units; she made them *people*. She gave them wants and dreams, nightmares and horrors.

Viola gave them all the proof she could gather. She talked of a species so similar to human kind that they bore most of the same body parts, had brains, held memories. She described elf magic, their molecular transportation an echo of apparition. How they worked wandless cleaning and repairing charms in the same manner as any witch or wizard would with a wand. She detailed an attempt to teach one elf transfiguration, and the success that was achieved.

Then she laid out the future as she saw it. The horrible potential of taking an intelligent and magically powerful race and making them slaves. Making them suffer, making them cry. Taking their children away, their spouses, their parents.

She descried what might happen one day when house-elvess decided they
would no longer be bound. It would only take one, she theorized. One elf who lost everything. One elf who slipped through the contract. One elf who hated wizards instead of worshiped them. One elf to lead a populations of thousands into revolt against overlords who thought them nothing but pesky, stupid, weak, invisible servants.

Or worse, so much worse, one witch who promised elves everything they did not have if they would only follow her. One witch who would give them their freedom if they would help her overthrow a government.

A thousand elves capable of wandless magic, who had no reason to trust or love wizarding kind.

No population of slaves remained so forever, Viola wrote. History tells us it is so. Don't create your own downfall.

House-elves once worked by their own choice. Give it back to them.

Vote For Elf Freedom.

"Vote for elf freedom!"

The words rallied, chanted.

The first week of November, Viola wrote her paper. That weekend, the first VFEF posters had been found posted to the door of every shop in Diagon Alley.

The second week, five pureblood families came forward and demanded the ability to rewrite the contracts for their own elves.

The third week, one house-elf defied his mistress to give an interview to the press, detailing the punishments he went through even as he systematically was forced to break each and every one of his fingers. The Prophet ran the story with a picture of the elf, labeled as 'Graphic, Children Beware'. The elf declared he wanted three knuts in wages a month, socks for clothing, and one day of vacation a year. The reporter emotionally quoted that the elf declared those three things were worth the extraordinary price of pain that he was going through throughout the
The fourth week, vandals attacked the House-Elf Registry, breaking every window and spelling VFEF in bold letters across the storefront. On the cobblestone pavement a drawing was spelled of a sobbing elf being beheaded by a grinning executioner. Bloody letters spelled out MURDERERS.

By December, while Hermione was taking her fall semester’s final exams, the supporters of the Registry were lobbying for Ministry protection. They feared for their lives. The sole protest staged on their behalf had nearly turned into a riot until the Blind Sorcerer himself appeared, a single house-elf at his side, and told the people to let the Ministry give the elves justice first.

"Let the Wizengamot vote."

It took only four months for a population that dismissed house-elves to begin to champion them instead.

"Do you think people would be this agitated, if it would have been someone other than you to suggest it?" Hermione asked.

They sat in the dining room, the plates cleared and gone, a single candle burning between them in brilliant scarlet flecks of light.

"Yes. Eventually." Harry rolled the ring on his finger, the soft metal purple and warm. "Most people don't even know what situation the house-elves are in. Most people don't own house-elves. And the elves are not asking for freedom not to work. They want to! They merely want to also have a family, and live a life devoid of pain. Most people can see that, believe in it, support it. The only ones who would be hurt by new legislation are those abusing their house-elves, and those who profit from the sale of them. And by the numbers, those are the far, far minority of witches and wizards. And with the freedom to have wages, also comes the freedom to refuse them."

Hermione sighed.
"Kreacher?"

Harry smiled. "He won't ever take wages. I daresay most house-elves won't. The one in the prophet was a wild card. Perhaps just the kind of wildcard that might have snapped like Viola's paper predicted."

"Dobby." Hermione's light jerked in a nod. "They found out which family owned him. The Malfoys. If the legislation passes, Narcissa Malfoy could be in trouble with the Ministry for his treatment. It was... gruesome. That interview."

Harry shook his head. "I read more that came out this morning. She went to the Prophet. The punishment was stipulated by the former Lord, not Lady, Malfoy, and he's already in prison. She can not rewrite his contract as it stands, until it is voided by the Ministry."

"Easy way out." Hermione muttered. "Malfoy's like loopholes and backdoors."

"Most people won't be affected by the change. In a way, this is the easiest case of rights to get updated. Despite your paper, it's hard for most wizards to think of elves as dangerous, and much easier to look at them with pity. It will be much harder for any other species."

"Like goblins." Hermione mused. "And werewolves. It seems like this is just the beginning."

Harry leaned back in his chair, watching red consume the brown wax. "Maybe. I, for one, will be glad to take a few weeks vacation from it all after the meeting and exams."

"Your classes?" Hermione asked, guiltily. "I haven't even asked, with everything else going on."

He waved a hand. "Nothing important to say. I'm working for a degree so that people will take me seriously when I talk about what I know. Even the muggle world has hoops one has to jump through."

"Alright." She stood, coming around the table to slip into the chair beside him. "I guess you didn't think you would get this involved in politics."
"I don't want to be. I wouldn't be good at it, either, except for my reputation. People are forced to listen to me."

Hermione took his hands, her skin soft, stilling the continuous movement of the ring around his finger.

"Will you still go to the Wizengamot meetings, once they vote on this?"

Harry squeezed her hand. "I was told by the Minister to not disappear. I think he's right. But I'm not a politician. I'm a scientist."

She leaned her face into his, and he felt her smile against his lips.

"My scientist. Good to know you are still you."

"Always." He whispered the promise into her mouth.

That night after Hermione had left, Harry sat alone in his lab, his various works in progress scattered about on tables, green notes piles on shelves in brown binders.

He knew as much about horcruxes as he could find. What was in the Black library, along with what books could be found in Knockturn Alley.

He knew about souls. He knew how to destroy them and how to split them. He could guess how to make one of his own. And he even figured he could make a horcrux for another person, if he needed to.

He just needed to know how to get rid of one that he could not see. He had never felt so blind as when he realized he had to rely on a pensieve to observe his own self.

A mirror. A mirror for the soul.

He leaned back in his chair, absently flinging the Cloak over his face, and relaxed into the spiderweb of light.

"Where is he?"
Vaughn's strident voice roused him. Harry stood up and groaned, stiff as a board from a night spent sleeping in a chair that was comfortable enough for sitting, but not so much for *sleeping*.

"Master Potter is in the laboratory."

Kreacher's voice came from the open doorway. Harry pulled the Cloak off his head and blinked groggily over as bangladesh green came into sight.

"Wha' time ist?"

"Early. There has been an incident regarding the House-Elf Registry. Head Auror Robards and the Minister wish to speak with you."

Harry felt some of the fuzziness fall away as he dragged himself to his feet.

"Incident?"

Vaughn cleared his throat. "I wasn't told the details, as I'm no longer on the force. But Mr. Burke's dead. Murdered."

Harry's gaze sharpened into a Look, and he saw the creases of his guard's face settled into grim lines.

"Let me get dressed. Kreacher?"

Yellow grasped his hand and took him to his room without hesitation, before scurrying to the closet to drag out fresh robes as he undressed.

"Yous didn't *do* anything, Master Potter. They can't blame anything on you!"

Harry remembered, clearly, the Minister's tone of voice when he spoke of *favors*.

"I don't think they would be asking politely for a visit if they thought I did it. This is something else."

"Kreacher doesn't like it, this murder business."
"Who does?" Harry said, before turning for the stairs, his voice echoing behind him.

"It's not very nice."

~*~ To Be Continued in: Schemes of Green ~*~

Review Please!
*Chapter 19*: Schemes of Green

**Angela's Note:** Okay, I get it. You guys don't like cliffhangers. I'll never do it again! ...

...Unless I just can't help myself.

Vaughn apparated him directly into Diagon Alley. The swirls of magic and color coalesced around them, lighting the sky with golden wards and the buildings with layers of purple, white, yellow and blue.

Under his feet, the purple stone gleamed in mismatched patterns. Harry focused on it a moment, gathering his boundaries from the chaos of apparition.

Vaughn, accustomed now to his employers habit, waited exactly thirty seconds before gesturing them forward.

"They're this way."

*It must be very, very early morning.* Harry mused. *There is no one here.*

No one, that is, except the aurors.

Harry saw the Minister's pattern, and alongside him the salmon pattern of Gawain Robard, who had taken over as Head Auror when Scrimgeour was elected. The two men stood slightly apart from the aurors around them, at least a dozen witches and wizards, half of which were waiting in obvious guarding poses.

Harry knew where he was. He had been here four times before.

The House-Elf Registry.

"Lord Potter. Glad you could join us at such short notice."

Scrimgeour's voice was strained politeness. Robard had none.
"If you would excuse us, Vaughn. I'm putting up a privacy ward."

Harry appreciated that Vaughn waited for Harry's acknowledgement before the man stepped back.

A golden ward shot through with deep red rose about them at once, masking the surroundings completely from his sight, and blocking any sound that might have echoed down the empty streets. Harry could only smell the signature mix of magic and owls and potions to remind him that he was still in the Alley at all.

"Lord Potter." Scrimgeour began. "We are under a very strict time limit, or I would not have contacted your security. The Ministry would like to ask you for a favor."

"A compensated one." Robard interrupted. "One thousand galleons for successful retrieval if there is no loss of life."

Harry frowned. "Maybe you should explain the circumstances, first."

The Minister waved one yellow-green hand. "We have nearly lost our time window. The Hit Wizards have Mr. Burke's stronghold in Knockturn surrounded, but the wards would require at least four more hours to dismantle. We have good information that the entire building is wired to detonate, some new form of magical explosive, in exactly two hours. In one hour, the wizard we believe killed Mr. Burke has an emergency international portkey to take him from the country, the kind that must have a preset activation time. He is a wanted criminal for at least five other murders on our shores, and multiple counts of smuggling illegal substances in and out of Britain and France."

"Will Dagel is arrogant. He thinks to thumb his nose at us when he leaves, no doubt taking valuable information and goods with him. We do not have time to implement enough multiple anti-portkey wards to stop him from leaving, because of both the specialized wards already in effect on the building, and the uncertainty of his exact location within a large multi-plex space." Robard added. "Our informant was certain this was planned so that the body would be found to give the Ministry just enough time to attempt and fail at capturing Dagel."
"Why kill Mr. Burke?" Harry asked numbly, feeling as if the two men were speaking a different language. *What was going on?*

"Mr. Burke was up to his neck in various illegal practices. We have been building a solid case against him for years, and were nearly ready to make a move. Someone tipped him off and he was about to rabbit. The threat to the Elf Registry was apparently the last straw. But the people he works with do not tolerate failure. They had a potential liability removed, and used an assassin the Ministry is familiar with."

"I don't understand any of this."

Scrimgeour stepped close, his voice lowering.

"Forty-eight minutes, Potter, before this man escapes. I do not have the time to spell it out for you now."

"What do you think I can do?" Harry asked, feeling impossibly out of his depth. He was no auror or Hit Wizard. He was not even a graduate of a magical school.

"We want you to do the impossible." Robard answered. "Rumor is you're good at it."

Harry glanced between the two of them, thoughts rapidly spiraling through his brain. His eyes flickered down to the stone on his finger. *The impossible.*

"Forty-five minutes." Scrimgeour said grimly. "Get our team through his wards."

Harry looked between chartreuse and salmon, two pillars of yellow-green and orange-red.

"I'll do my best."

"You can't be serious, sir! A civilian, here?! While my team works?!"

A wizard argued ferociously with Robard, his voice barely below a yell.
Ranged in front of Borgin and Burke's, three patterns knelt, wands alight with power as wide golden green wards were being slowly dismantled, strand by shining strand.

"There is a dangerous criminal inside! Along with who-knows what else!"

"I hope you know what you are doing." Vaughn's voice was low behind him.

"Me too." Harry answered, looking around the wards complicated strands. It was a pale comparison to the wide wards of Hogwarts and Gringotts. Those would probably take a team of three more than a decade to dismantle.

But he could easily see why these might take three experts four hours.

Harry turned back to Robard, interrupting the warding captain's diatribe.

"What happens when the ward falls?"

Robard waved his captain to silence, his soul a firm steady pulse of alert power. "The team is on stand-by. They enter from the storefront and alley exits, secure the building room by room using the blueprints they have been studying since we became aware of the situation. When the target is found, Dagel is captured, preferably alive. Any traps are disarmed."

"And as I've been telling you, sir, there is no way these main wards are it. There has to be at least three interior wards. It is structured like a fucking onion, layer over layer, which is why it is taking so fucking long." The captain hissed, his accent not quite British. "Even if your little miracle worker here can take down the outer wards, there is no way to take them all down in only forty minutes. These wards aren't even normal. They are highly specialized, a unique, maddening combination that I've never experienced, never heard of, before. They, and the ones inside, are even interfering with other wards in the area, including the implementation of anti-portkey and apparition wards."

Harry turned back to the building, running his sight over the expanded dome of multicolored light, and thought fleetingly of Hermione.
She was going to be *furious*.

"I'll need to go in with the team, then. Tell me when you are ready."

The captain hissed in disgust. Robard's light whirled, commands barking from his voice.

Vaughn edged closer.

"I can promise you won't come out of this without a new scar or two."

At least the man didn't try to talk him out of it. Nice to have confidence from an ex-auror, and one who had not even seen him destroy a hundred inferi.

"What makes you think you can do what my people can not? Trained specialists?" The captain's light appeared beside him.

"I'm not going to dismantle the ward. I wouldn't know how." Harry said simply. "I'm going to transfigure it."

"That's *impossible.*" The wizard returned immediately.

"Exactly why we summoned him, Captain Matthews." Robard said, moving closer. "The team is ready. Mr. Potter, you will be with the storefront squad. Hit Wizards Andrews, Gillian, Patrick, and Coltrain."

Harry looked carefully at each in turn, filing away patterns and colors. Andrews spoke quietly.

"Thirty-four minutes, sir."

Robard's light jerked in a nod. Lights swirled as formations began to form, Vaughn and the warding team backing out of the immediate street, aurors moving in for backup.

Time seemed to be moving too fast, things happening far more suddenly than they should. Harry's heart raced as he turned to face the wards.

"On your signal, Lord Potter." Andrews voice at his back. "What should we
So bloody fast. Less than an hour ago he had been fast asleep in his laboratory chair. Now he was about to risk his neck for a bloody favor and the potential to do some measure of good.

_Hermione was going to kill him!_

"It's going to rain. That's your signal."

Harry curled his right hand around his scarlet and emerald staff, the stone on his middle finger a reminder of his own limits.

"Thirty-two minutes."

Harry took a breath, and began to raise the magic within himself, the air growing heavy, the electric smell of raw magic infiltrating the Alley. His staff began to heat, and clear as day he heard a phoenix begin to sing.

"Thirty-one minutes."

Harry looked into golden green wards, and remembered turning white flame into soft blue rain on another night only several months ago.

"Thirty minutes."

With a twist of emerald magic and phoenix song, Harry made gold prisms into blue crystals, and felt the first droplets of rain patter against his cheek, the overwhelming dampness of a fresh rainstorm flooding the Alley.

"Go, go, go!"

The Hit Wizards, two by two, streamed around him for the door. Harry, without pausing to consider any more repercussions, followed a step behind.

Captain Matthews had not been wrong. There were multiple wards, offensive jinxes, and several elaborate uses of transfiguration.
Every barrier was transfigured into droplets of water, running harmlessly onto the floor.

Room, by room, by room. Through rows of ancient artifacts and expensive jewelry, cursed items scattered beside useless junk. Behind a counter and into a storeroom, where the second group of four had gathered in front of stairs cursed to buckle beneath any weight, and a cellar door whose handle threatened to bite the hand from any who touched it.

Harry made the entire door into water, and the second team descended. The remaining Hit Wizards levitated up the staircase, Harry following at a slower pace.

Another door. A bedroom, another bedroom, a bathroom. The Hit Wizards communicated with signals Harry could not comprehend, and did not pause to translate for him.

Another ward, another fall of rain. Another cursed doorknob that became blue teardrops of crystal. A section of floor that might have dropped Patrick and Coltrain into shadow changed to become solid purple stone that he would later realize had been a diamond's pattern.

But in the moment, he only went with instinct. His heart pounded in his ears, and the lights of the wizards he was with flickered with wild adrenaline no matter how steady they moved.

Another bedroom.

Inside it rested a table that was not a table. A pattern of wood that did not bear the green color of aged oak but instead brown streaked through with black.

Patrick began to move past it. Coltrain cast the standard transmuting reversal spell upon the entire room.

The table pattern became a wizard-pattern, and red light rose from a green wand to tear into Patrick's legs like a serpent swallowing a mouse whole. The Hit Wizard shrieked in horrific pain, and Harry's ears rang like a bell.
Too fast. Too fast. Too fast.

More red light, more black shadows. Coltrain deflected a spell that was deflected again in turn by Gillian. Andrews propelled the screaming Patrick against the wall and out of the line of fire before red light struck his back and down his spine, sending him to the floor with an eerie gargled howl of agony.

The room was a chaos of spelllight and sound and evil intent.

Dagel laughed. "I'll take you all down with me!"

Harry shook off his shock, reached out, and made the pulsing brown-black light stop.

The laughter cut off, the sound of the two downed Hit Wizard's screaming and whimpering taking its place, as Dagel slumped to the floor as bonelessly as Andrews had.

"It's the cruciatus. He'll be fine." Gillian stated, kneeling beside Andrews even as Coltrain moved to secure the target wizard. "He's dead! You bloody killed him, you bastard! It's all for nothing!"

Harry slowly leaned against the wall, trying to focus, trying to clear the haze from his vision from all the bright flashes of light. "He's not dead."

"He's dead! I know when a wizard is dead!" Coltrain barked back. Gillian interrupted them both. "I need help over here! Patrick's severed both legs. Where the fuck is the backup!?"

Andrews, obviously still shaking off the aftereffects of a nasty bout with the cruciatus, rose from the floor to stomp towards the door in response to her urgency.

Coltrain and Gillian both were beside Patrick now, murmuring in low soothing tones as the man sucked in ragged breaths, screams muffled by rapidly increasing exhaustion and blood loss.

Harry knew the look of blood. He knew the splashes of fluorescent blue light upon the floor were from Patrick, his life slowing down with each loss
of color.

Steps pounded down the stairs, Andrews reaching the first level. The air was heavy with cooper and electricity and a new scent he could only describe as dark.

Harry found himself kneeling beside Patrick, one emerald hand placed against hot torn flesh that flickered in blue agony, its pattern broken, rended by scarlet magic that still hissed and spit.

Harry focused on that pattern, made himself see where the blue fractured and split, then wrenched it back together. He poured his own emerald life into it and sped Patrick's life back up to normal speed, separating it from death with every beat of his own healthy heart.

"Merlin." Gillian whispered, and Harry glanced up, his hands wet with colorful life.

Then he looked to where the wizard who he had killed sat slumped, his life as still as stone, the color beginning to fade to white as the light of his soul began to leave him.

Harry stood and stepped away, and with another wrench of will took that life and made it beat again.

The wizard stirred, sucked in one angry breath.

Then Coltrain cursed and green power rose to disarm the man and bind him in one elegant swoop.

Harry stood, at a loss of what to do. Patrick's voice rose, thin and trembling.

"I'm alright, I'm okay. I think I can stand. Did we get him?"

Gillian answered, her voice satisfied.

"Yeah. We got 'em."

Harry supposed they had, but he didn't feel successful. He felt like it wasn't
over yet.

"Evacuate! Bomb detected, basement level!" A woman's voice yelled up the stairs. "Get out now, now, now!"

Coltrain cursed again, but he was already moving for the door at a run, the bound wizard levitated behind him. Gillian's light melded with Patrick's, the first obviously supporting the second. Harry held up the rear, staff held tight in hands stained blue with Patrick's blood, moving as fast as he could to navigate the steps, knowing that was still too slow.

At the base of the stairs, Robard's light seemed to coalesce from the wall, grabbing his own, pulling him into a stumbling run for the exit.

Harry saw the wave of light beginning to rise under his feet, and knew why backup hadn't arrived to help.

It seemed the informant had been off about exactly what time the bomb was to detonate.

Ahead, a voice yelled in warning.

"Thirty seconds! Run!"

Robard pulled him into a bearhug, and Harry felt the man's light swallow him whole and jerk him forward into a rapid sideways levitation he had not known was even possible.

For several wild seconds the world streamed by in flashes of light too chaotic to comprehend, his stomach rolling in violent protest.

Then they hit a wall with a painful jerk, their forward motion becoming a fall cushioned by a wash of familiar chartreuse magic, a painful second before the rising bubble of light behind them ruptured in an explosion of ferocious white heat that followed him right down into unconsciousness.

"Wake up. Wake up!" Pain landed against one cheek. Color bloomed inside his mind.
He heard yelling, heard the crackle of flame, heard orders being given. He smelled the fire and felt its heat.

He saw red and orange consuming the bones of what was once a two story row of buildings.

Another painful slap, another flash of yellow and green.

"Open your eyes, damn it! Potter!"

Harry remembered to open his eyes. The Minister rocked back, rough strong hands dragging him to his feet.

"Stay awake, Lord Potter. You no doubt have a concussion from the knock you took."

"Robard?" Harry croaked, and degenerated into coughing. Scrimgeour slapped his back.

"You cushioned his fall, but he saved you both with that maneuver. It's always spectacular to see partial apparition." The Minister sounded far too elated to be standing next to a demolished building. "He's trying to save the other buildings. I'm afraid a small chunk of Knockturn just got demolished."

So that's what he had felt. Harry had never heard of partial apparition. Only splinching.

He shuddered, then coughed again. "V-vaughn?"

"Conscripted. He's currently working to evacuate any civilians who hadn't already hit the hills hours ago at the sight of an auror taskforce."

Harry nodded slowly, then looked down and around.

His staff lay on the ground a foot away. With a breath Harry called to it, stretching out a hand to catch it with a thump. He leaned against it immediately, relieved to see it was undamaged.

"Should you be here?" Harry wondered aloud, wincing at the myriad streams of light as Aurors swarmed like ants, random spellfire shooting
like lasers, his stomach turning over again with nausea.

"My under-secretary will not like it, but he can't stop me. I have been after Dagel for years, and the situation is under control."

Harry doubted the public would be happy to lose their Minister to a random spell, though. But he couldn't much bring himself to care at that moment.

"Can I go home?" Harry asked wearily, and Scrimgeour laughed.

"You, Lord Potter, are going to St. Mungo's. When they say you can leave, you can."

He didn't have the energy to argue. He just looked at the flames.

"Does this count as successful retrieval?"

Scrimgeour didn't hesitate.

"Without a doubt. We have Dagel in custody, and your team fared fairly well. A job well done. Congratulations on your first field assignment."

"You say that like there will be more." Harry murmured, suddenly more thirsty than he could remember being in his life.

"We'll debrief when you've had a decent looking-over." The Minister waved to one column of light, and a harried pattern rushed towards them. "He goes to Mungo's, private ward. No need to give the papers more fodder."

The pattern jerked in what had to be a nod.

Harry didn't get to say goodbye before he was once again pulled into apparition.

That final apparition was one too many. Upon arrival, Harry collapsed to the floor and lost what remained of his stomach, his entire body trembling in reaction.

Gentle hands held his back, cleansing peach spelllight washing away both
the sick and the blue blood that coated his skin and clothes.

"There, now. Take it easy." The feminine voice belonged to the peach-colored pattern that pulled him gently onto a bed, a thick green blanket draped over him.

For a long moment Harry just lay there, shivering, trying not to see anything at all as the Healer ran her scans.

Four purple and green walls, all coated with spiderwebs of white sterilization charms. It smelled as strongly as any muggle hospital, but with the scent of lemon rather than chemicals.

He heard no one but the Healer, and could only assume the walls also held privacy charms underneath the tangle of wards.

"You'll be just fine, Lord Potter. You had a few bruises and a rather nasty bump on the head, as well as symptoms of mild shock. I've taken care of the bump and bruises. The nausea and weakness should begin to lessen at any time. I wouldn't recommend eating or drinking anything until they do." She bustled about, a gentle peach light. "Now I would like to keep you here for observation, but if you have someone at home who can keep an eye on you that is your decision."

Harry licked dry lips, shook his head.

"I have a house-elf. I would rather go home."

She hummed in disapproval, but did not argue with him.

"Well, then. Call it up and I'll give it the relevant information."

Harry took another slow breath before calling for Kreacher.

He really, really wanted to go home.

Healer Lesley, as she called herself, gave Kreacher several leaves of parchment and a stern lecture. Harry was slightly intimidated by the way Kreacher spoke firmly of his dedication to 'take care of the Master'.
He might have been better off in St. Mungo's.

But when Kreacher gently took them back to Grimmauld Place with a muffled pop, Vaughn and Robard were already stepping from the fireplace.

Harry hadn't even fallen into a living room chair before Robard began.

"I was told they were releasing you. If you can give me an abbreviated version of events for the record, that will do for now."

Harry wanted to ask some of the questions that had been plaguing him since his very early summons. But he swore the lights around him were going loose and hazy, a phenomenon he had never experienced before.

He really hoped they stopped doing that after he got a very, very long nap.

"I got rid of the wards, we entered the building, I got rid of more wards and a few curses, then we found Dagel in an upstairs bedroom. He had transfigured himself into a table."

Robard jerked in a nod, and Harry was suddenly aware that Kreacher was hovering over his shoulder like a yellow guard. He spared the house-elf one weary glance before continuing.

"Patrick then Andrews were cursed, before Dagel was… taken down. Andrews went to find backup, I fixed Patrick, then we heard someone telling us to evacuate, which we did. I believe you helped me with that somehow."

Robard's rough voice held a trace of humor.

"I've never heard a brief before that managed to avoid mentioning just how anything was accomplished."

Harry placed his staff aside, leaning back farther into the cushions. If he wasn't mistaken, he was beginning to have a delayed reaction to manipulating so many patterns on barely a couple hours of sleep.

"You said abbreviated."
Robard stood.

"Mr. Potter, we shall schedule a meeting by owl soon to answer any questions you no doubt have, and to gather a more thorough version of events."

Harry merely waved a heavy hand in acknowledgement.

He really did not feel well at all.

The last thing he saw before sleep took him was the fire flaring white with magic as the Head Auror left.

Hermione trotted up the steps at a quick jog, her mother and Petunia only a step behind.

She had read the morning paper, about Mr. Burke's murder and a Ministry sting in Knockturn that resulted in a significant amount of damage, and no mention of Harry's name had been brought up.

Instead, she had received a letter from Vaughn that the wizard was unable to shadow her and her mother on their scheduled trip into London because he was currently helping monitor Harry, who apparently was unconscious for a reason the guard did not explain.

Fallon had arrived instead, delivering said letter, and dropped the information that Harry, her Harry, had joined a group of Hit Wizards to take down a mass murderer who killed Mr. Burke. He said this right in front of her mother and Petunia, who had planned to go with them on said London trip.

He thought they knew. They most certainly had not.

Which was why Hermione, Harry's aunt, and her mother were all descending on Grimmauld Place like the wrath of a blizzard, Fallon trotting behind with a grimace.

Vaughn met them at the door, his eyes hard before recognition lightened them.
The younger of the two guards was short, but lean, his black hair kept shaved nearly to baldness, his skin a rich brown that spoke of a mixed heritage. He was also normally well-spoken and tended to flirt, even with Petunia Dursley and Jane Granger.

He didn't bother with niceties this time, however.

"Lord Potter's in bed. Sleeping."

Jane pushed her frozen daughter further inside, as Fallon closed the door with a soft snick behind them all.

"What happened, then?" Petunia inquired, her cultured voice slightly higher than normal.

Vaughn ran one hand across his head, turning to move into the kitchen where he sat in front of a still steaming cup.

"You can go, Fergus. I know it's your day off."

The older wizard smiled faintly. "Shelley won't mind. I would like to hear some details myself."

"Might as well sit, then." Vaughn gestured to the table, even as Kreacher appeared with a tray full of more cups and tea. "I don't know everything either, exactly. I was contacted by Gawain Robard, the current serving Head Auror. Our former boss." He waved a hand between himself and Fallon. "They've been keeping track of the movements of one of the international criminal organizations, Luxe Sombre, a nasty one that mostly deals in smuggling. Part of their sideline dealt with house-elves, many run through the Registry store. Mr. Burke was involved, but we could never prove how."

Vaughn blew the steam wafting off of his cup, hands wrapped around the porcelain. "It seemed Mr. Burke was about to become a liability. He was murdered by one of our top ten Most Wanted's, an american wizard by the name of Will Dagel. At this point, after the fact, it seems the discovery of the body and the trail into Knockturn was laid as a trap. It is well known our current Minister has a personal bone to pick with Dagel. Nearly the entire street was rigged to blow, with Dagel as the bait. But at the time…"
well. What we thought was a valid informant was not."

"How does Harry come into all this?" Hermione demanded, Petunia nodding firm counterpart.

Her mother reached out to take her hand.

Vaughn sighed.

"Robard asked Lord Potter for a favor, taking down the wards guarding the place."

"What made them think Harry could take down a ward?" Hermione narrowed her eyes so fiercely that Vaughn held up his hands.

"I don't know. But he agreed to do it. There was some discussion that more wards might be inside, and Lord Potter accompanied a team of four Hit Wizards inside. I do not know what happened then, other than that Dagel was captured alive. A second team found the magical explosives, a new form of potion, and determined it would reach a catalyst hours sooner than expected. The building was evacuated seconds before it blew."

"He's not hurt." Petunia stated, her cup rattling slightly in its saucer. "Your letter said."

Vaughn nodded quickly. "He was looked over by a healer at St. Mungo's..." Hermione and Petunia flinched as one. "...treated and released. He supposed to rest and attempt to eat liquids when he wakes."

"What was he treated for, then?" Hermione demanded.

At that, Kreacher stepped forward, thin fingers twisting a towel between pale hands.

"Kreacher was told the Master had a few cuts and bruises, and some wizarding malady called 'shock'. He's to lay down and rest. Kreacher has a paper about it."

"I want to see it." Hermione quickly murmured, standing as the house-elf scampered out of the kitchen.
Petunia sighed, her face weary. "Now I know how Mrs. Robin feels with her two copper sons."

"Yes." Jane agreed. "Horrid. Is there anything we can do?"

Vaughn shook his head. "Let him sleep."

"I'm staying here until he's better." Hermione declared mutinously.

"Of course, dear." Jane patted her arm, standing. "Petunia and I will go without you. We'll stop back by on our way to check in."

Hermione nodded firmly, before sitting herself down at the kitchen table with a hard sigh.

"Okay. G-good."

When Harry woke, she was there, her light shining as his own personal sun.

The sun's purpose, after all, was to warm and illuminate and bring life to the world.

"Hey."

His voice was soft in the room, and he saw her slumbering light flicker and jerk, turning towards him to run soft hands across his face.

"Harry. I'm going to be very, very angry tomorrow. Just to warn you."

He smiled against her hand, watching the steady pulse of blue-violet light swirl.

"And today?"

"Tonight." She said quietly, and he felt the bed dip as she lay down beside him. "Tonight, I'm just going to be here."

Harry turned into her, wrapping his arms about her, breathing in the scent of tea and parchment that clung to her clothes, the sweet flowers of her
hair, the vanilla of her skin.

"I'm sor..." He began, only to feel her touch his lips.

"I know you did what you needed to do." She said firmly, and Harry reached up to pull her hand away, gently kissing her fingers before pressing them against his shoulder.

"Not for that." He murmured. "For making you worry."

She pressed closer into him, and for a long moment they lay there together, Harry listening as she breathed, watching her heart beat even as he felt it against his chest.

Then she sighed, deep and long.

"I'll always forgive you." He felt her smile. "Just don't take advantage."

"Never." Harry said the word into her hair, meaning it down to his heart.

And when she fell asleep in his arms, he spent a long hour staring up into the purple and green lights of his bedroom, thinking of the science of magic and love.

Harry attended his classes the next day, despite Hermione and his aunts concern.

He was fine, more than normal in fact. He was ready to get back to work.

And after a morning and afternoon of mundane college, he left his books piled on a table in the Black library and headed for the floo.

It was time to get some answers.

Vaughn met him in the Atrium, steady light falling into step beside him as they headed toward the lifts.

Most Ministry employees were beginning their exodus, a shifting rainbow of color that caused a slight headache to begin building behind his eyes.
On the Minister's level, the various tones of green welcomed him like a soothing balm, and he sighed.

"Alright?" Vaughn asked, and Harry realized he had come to a stop in front of the wide wooden secretary's desk.

Harry glanced into the man's pattern, observing its strong living color, no creeping sickness, no broken cracks.

"I've never asked about your family." Harry said simply, and the pattern wavered. Did one hand move to run across a hairless head?

"My parents and sister are well. I live alone."

He could hear the puzzlement in the guard's tone. Harry only shook his head and began to walk, frowning.

He hadn't thought to ask about the ex-aurors personal life, anymore than he had thought to ask Hermione for a description of the man.

But he had asked him and Fallon both to be his guards, on what amounted to a reliance on the strength and quality of their patterns. Their souls. Because he had liked the way they looked.

He had no science for the character traits of the different colors of souls. He could not yet understand why some people were green and others red, why some people gleamed bronze and others a dull grey.

Maybe he just liked shades of green because his own hue was green. Maybe it was simple coincidence that the Minister's office was made up of material that was almost entirely schemes of green.

He couldn't fathom how to possibly test a theory relating to the amount of good and bad intent in a person based on the color of their soul. Or, even more extreme, their competence at whatever their intention was.

After all, he had seen children whose color was bolder than many adults, innocent souls who could not possibly be evil. But surely some would grow to do bad things.
Harry stepped into the Minister's office, not surprised to see Robard's salmon light also present.

He was surprised when Vaughn closed the door behind him, leaving himself alone with the two older men.

Apparently, what was to be discussed was not for his guards ears.

"Lord Potter. I trust you are ready for the vote next week."

Harry slowly sat, leaning his staff against the desk in front of him, a slash of red in a sea of green and gold.

"There hasn't been a motion to vote on yet."

Scrimgeour tapped one yellow-green hand against his desk.

"There will be. Lady Bones will present it, Lady Longbottom will second it, and a vote will be cast. Before the session is up, a committee will be selected to create a new set of regulations protecting your house-elves. Without a doubt in March those regulations will be approved. Congratulations are in order."

Harry felt the wood pressing hard against his back, Robard silent at his side as the Minister laid out his prediction of the future.

No, his guarantee.

"How can you be certain?" Harry questioned. "You don't control the entire Wizengamot."

Scrimgeour's chair shifted against wooden floors, wood legs on wood boards on wooden bones. Soft pine over steady oak over hints of steadfast cedar, all unique and all part of one very large family.

"Because you did me a favor, and I find this an easy one to repay, and one well worth doing. Amelia and I may not agree on everything, but the forced servitude of a race is one we do. And those that did support Burke are losing power rapidly with the news of his assassination. The ranks tend to fall apart when the leader is dead. Add in yourself, and few would publicly
naysay such a resolution."

Harry closed his eyes, though nothing he saw changed. He did not even see the skin of his own eyelids; another obvious sign that his sight was not the least bit related to the actual eyes. But it was a comforting motion nonetheless.

"Just what was Burke involved in?"

Even to his own ears, he sounded tired. Perhaps he should have waited another day after all.

"He was one arm of a very prolific wizarding criminal organization. One that, if our sources are correct, originated in France or Switzerland. They specialize in smuggling illegal goods, books, dark magic, the like. Elves under blood contracts being one such, as British law did make it illegal to force house-elves to kill themselves or others." Harry heard the scorn in his voice. "Potion ingredients, poisons, eternal love spells. Burke was involved with them all. He also ran at least two known safe houses in Knockturn for hiding goods and people. He had, and probably still has, spies within the Ministry and the aurors. They always seemed one step ahead of us when there was a raid. Even the Hit Wizards had problems, and they are all under contracted oath. It seemed their bloody specialized wards always gave them time to escape. There are simply too many magical ways into and out of the country, too many holes, too many unregulated means of travel."

"Then he was killed because of the media attention into his Registry." Harry supposed, and Robard finally spoke.

"We were very close to having him. We had legal reasons to look into the contracts, to count the elves in his stable. Within a month or two it all could have been exposed. Dagel was sent in to prevent that, embarrass us, and possibly manage to kill the British Minister with his little explosion."

Harry imagined he could feel the coldness emanating from Robard with that last statement, even as Scrimgeour waved one hand in dismissal at the subtle reprimand.
Robard continued, voice harsher. "And he might have succeeded at all of them if Rufus hadn't remembered your ability to... unravel dementors. It was worth a try to duplicate the phenomenon on those wards. It was a relief to us all when it paid off."

Harry opened his eyes, expanded his sight to include the entirety of the office, a realization pressing in on him.

The golden wards had been moved. Instead of a simple dome about two feet from the desk, one that had been linked to at least three objects on its surface, it seemed targeted only on the wooden surface itself, extending back around the Minister in a triangular pattern.

"You've changed your security."

The Minister laughed, slapping his desk with a reverberating sound. "I told you, Gawain! He’s perfect."

"Perfection remains to be seen." The man responded dourly under his breath. Harry glanced between the two patterns, gathering the nuances of data that were given him.

He was not sure he liked the theory he came to.

"I'm not interested in auror work or being a Ministry employee." He finally said into the air. "I have other plans."

Scrimgeour began to speak, but Robard cut him off.

"I wouldn't want you for an auror, Potter. Quite simply, the men and women would be either too in awe of you to work properly, or would be trying to show off and garner your attention. You attract the media like erlkings to children. The department doesn't need your name or your... Look. We just want your talent."

Harry raised one brow.

"I don't see how you get one without the other."

Robard's light twisted in a turn, the wizard's power flexing like a cat as he
gestured with one hand.

"I and my best team train you for field conditions. We give you a disguise and a new name, which is not unusual among Unspeakables or Hit Wizards who wish to remain anonymous for their families sake. When a special situation arises that could use your expertise, you are called in just like any other contracted witch or wizard specialist. Then you leave when your job is done, no paperwork, no trail. No one will know."

Harry shook his head.

"I don't see why I would want to do that. I came three days ago out of curiosity and because it sounded like lives might be at stake. You have other ward-breakers, use them."

"Can you train them, then?" Robard returned. "What about the next time we try to raid a warehouse that may contain illegal, dangerous, substances? You can keep saving lives if that is what drives you. You saved at least one wizard already from losing his limbs, perhaps his life. Reattaching limbs severed by dark magic is another shortcoming of wizarding healers. They can never quite get it right."

Harry sat, silent, and the Minister began to speak next, his gravelly voice not quite cajoling, not quite honest.

"Or do you trade in favors? Do you have more legislation you might want to pass? Work like this opens doors, opens ears. The Ministry will be in debt to you for what services you can provide helping us catch these people."

Harry felt a sinking sensation in his stomach, even as he saw the reality of it.

He knew the science of politics. He had read enough books to understand the psychology of men who held power, and the forces that spun the wheels of government. He knew, clinically, that favors were given and received, bribes, deals. He knew that not all who did such things had bad intentions, even as most did not have purely good ones.
But most of all, he could see how he could profit from just such favors.

He had contemplated how to get any magical research into muggle inventions without tipping off covert Ministry employees who had infiltrated mundane government offices. Any synthetic potions, or derivative magical ingredients, could set off a red flag that got the Ministry, and by proxy, the ICW involved. His and Hermione's dreams of improving non-magical lives could be dashed before they even started. Before they could get powerful enough economically and politically to challenge the ICW's Statute of Secrecy and survive it without penalty and sanctions.

Having the Ministry of Magic owe one favors would certainly go a long way. Having certain documents conveniently passed along, certain confundus spells on government drones overlooked. All it would take was for him to go on a few missions, take down some wards, perhaps heal a few patterns. The Ministry wasn't yet aware of just what he was capable of.

It was tempting. Too bloody tempting. And just like the animal testing, it all seemed so practical. He had to know, in one case. Had to know what he could do so that he knew how he could act.

Now, he had to act, so that in the future he could do.

Perhaps his moral compass was more skewed than he had realized, because after the initial reaction to the prospect of bribery, he found himself perfectly willing to make a deal.

After all, everyone else did it. It was for the greater good in the end.

Which was exactly why he needed to speak to Hermione. Her compass was much more balanced than his own.

Harry stood, gathering his staff in one hand.

"I'll send an owl with my decision."

Then without a backwards look at their patterns, he stomped for the door.
~*~ To Be Continued in: The Blue Called Resolution ~*~

(It's Thanksgiving Day in the U.S.A! So thank your writers before they perish from eating too much food!)
Hermione listened patiently, watching Harry's gaze as it remained locked directly ahead, not flickering, not moving at all.

More and more his eyes did not move to track movement, more and more his head no longer turned towards her own. But she knew he saw her, just as she knew he saw nearly everything around him.

At that very moment she could swear she felt his energy casting about him like a curious dog sniffing the wind and what way it might turn.

But for all his sight, he would never be able to grasp the nuances of facial expressions. He might be able to describe the way a heart beat faster in emotion, but he could only guess whether that emotion was fear, or excitement, or joy. He might be able to Look and see a smile, but he would never notice the way a person's eyes gave away the truth of it.

Right now, as he explained what the Minister was offering, and at what cost, he was desperate to know how she was taking it. She could see the tension in his face.

Hermione reached out and took one of his hands, running her fingers across its surface, linking them together with a squeeze as he spoke.

"I think we should do it. I should do it. I think this might present the opportunity we need when we attempt to enter the muggle markets with new inventions. If we are to successfully present hybrid magical-mundane tech we will need to go around certain obstacles. Most of the mundane world won't know it's magic, and the magical world will assume it's as fantastical as any other muggle technology. But someone, somewhere, will
figure it out. In the medical field alone, if we tried to present a potion in pill form, certain officials will have to be spelled to pass…"

"I understand, Harry." Hermione interrupted his rushed words. "I figured we might have to get creative to pass drug trials. The results will be honest, and so is the science. But we'll be using plants and animal parts that no one on that side of things know exists."

His shoulders slumped in relief. "Then you agree?"

Hermione raised her chin. "Not just because of that. I'd also rather have the Ministry courting you than trying to contain you. If they figure you are working for them to capture dark wizards, they won't be so worried you are going to be the next dark lord."

Harry's face twisted. "I hadn't considered that angle."

Hermione grinned, standing to pull him to his feet as well, moving in to wrap her arms around him.

"You are more intimidating than you realise. And if the Ministry ever does figure out the extent of your ability with death and resurrection, having a good history with them will improve the fallout. Better make an ally now than an enemy later."

Harry hesitated a second, before pressing his cheek down against hers, his voice low in her ear.

"It's still bribery. Government really shouldn't work that way. I thought you would be angry."

She let out a long breath. "I am angry, because it's not fair to all the normal citizens who try to do things the legal way. But if I got angry at everything that's not fair in the world no one would want to be around me. I'll work to change what I can, and improve others. Who knows?" She leaned back, smiled up into green eyes that did not meet her own. "Maybe you can be Minister in a few dozen years and fix them, too."

Harry laughed. "I think I'll be too busy for a very, very long time to ever attempt that. And honestly, I don't care enough. If anyone should try it, it
will be you. I'll be your *under*-secretary."

His voice was suggestive at the last, his smile disappearing from sight as he leaned down to kiss her, missing her mouth to land on her right cheek.

He corrected his mistake lazily, nuzzling into her skin as much like a cat as a lover.

Hermione laughed, pushing him away.

"Go on with you. Your aunt will be here any minute."

Harry lunged, and she let him catch her, enjoying his joy as much as her own.

When his aunt appeared at the doorway several moments later, Hermione felt her cheeks burn. But Petunia was smiling fondly, the wrinkles around her warm brown eyes crinkled in response as the woman moved back without interrupting, sending one swift wink towards Hermione where she sat across Harry's lap, her turn to be the contented cat.

And Hermione realized she needed to show that memory to Harry, because he *did* miss the nuances.

Everyone should be able to see just how much they are loved.

The fourth quarter Wizengamot session went just as the Minister had predicted. There were reporters waiting outside the large council room, and in the Atrium protesters had swarmed, among them at least a dozen house-elves.

Vaughn told him the elves looked as confused as the witches and wizards looked righteous. Harry had no doubt that educating the house-elves on their new rights would be a far more difficult task than getting the laws themselves changed.

Albus Dumbledore opened the session and went directly to the topic of house-elf regulation, and Amelia Bones stood tall to speak her mind. Lady Longbottom agreed with her.
Within an hour a committee was formed, to be headed by Lady Marchbanks and Lord Ogden. A basic draft for HER, House-Elf Rights, was presented, to be passed to said committee for refinement. It was announced that a vote would be called on HER in the first quarter session of the next year.

And without more than a murmur of protest, the topic was closed.

Harry sat back in his chair, closing his eyes as a rabid argument began to spark about the magical zoo. Across the room, Dumbledore’s blue soul gleamed brighter than many around him, his light steady and sure, and a sudden reminder that the former Headmaster had given him the name of the broken soul pieces only a few months ago, instead of the years it had seemed.

He hadn't forgotten about the horcrux. Maybe, now, he could focus on that particular problem again.

Hermione had scoured the entire Black library, every book's title and subject catalogued into one master list. She had added many of her own books to it, as well as the myriad volumes Harry had accumulated. She told Kreacher about her organization technique, and how to put away any books left scattered about the library by Harry with the exception of the ones in his laboratory.

She loved books. Loved the knowledge they could give her. She took care of them, and bought more of them at any chance. The various bookstores of Diagon Alley knew both her and the sight of her owl.

But none of her books, and none that she could find at those bookstores, spoke of any sort of soul mirror.

There were spirit potions, concoctions meant to give the drinker waking dreams to discover something about themselves. There were spells to help find one's animagus form, which were undoubtedly related in some form to soul magic. There was even various artifacts that were reported to reveal one's worst fear, or greatest dream.
Hermione wasn't sure how Harry would react to any of them. And perhaps any artifact that reflected a portion of information garnered from the soul would also show him himself. But all of the artifacts were either in the Ministry collection, which everyone knew meant they were locked up for research, or in Gringotts Vaults owned by various pureblood families. Tracking them down and viewing them would be a difficult process.

But it was her only lead so far. And one of the artifacts, the Mirror of Erised, was an actual mirror. She would track it down herself.

If nothing else, they could gather valuable data.

Christmas came and with it the family descended upon the Dursley home like a pack of rowdy dogs.

Some of them literal dogs, as in the case of aunt Marge's highly annoying bulldog Ripper that had, more than once, taken a bite of flesh from any hand that came too close. Uncle Vernon's sister had gotten in a large row with Petunia over one such incident years ago that had left Harry up a tree and Dudley with a bleeding hand. After that, the beasts were banished to the back yard and a chain.

The Grangers came bringing gifts, and food that they had been told specifically not to bring but did anyway, as had happened the last three times the Dursleys hosted the holidays.

It was loud and chaotic and perfect. Harry sat on the overlarge sofa, one hand looped around Hermione's shoulders as he watched the patterns flicker by, hands gesturing, voices laughing, all alive and moving and happy.

"I just don't see it, Vernon, I don't see it! Why can't Dudley go to the college you attended? It was good enough for you!"

Except Aunt Marge. She was not happy. Then again, he had learned she seemed most content when she had something to complain about.

His uncle began speaking, his tone conciliatory. "Because he has a scholarship with the boxing team and..."
Marge cut off her brother with a squeak.

"A scholarship?! Our little Duddykins!"

The older woman pounced upon Dudley's pattern with a swiftness he hadn't known the woman possessed. Dudley’s blubbered protests went unheeded as congratulations abounded.

Hermione moved under his arm, wisps of her violet hair tickling his skin.

"Has he decided on a major?"

Her voice was just loud enough to be heard over the many voices.

"Law enforcement. I think his girlfriend's dad talked him into it. The Inspector."

She hummed in acknowledgement.

Nearby, Aunt Marge finally let go of Dudley long enough for the teenager to take a breath. Harry felt the woman focus on him like the touch of a sweaty hand and resisted the urge to fidget. She had made him nervous ever since he could remember.

"What about you, boy? How is your performance in your college classes?"

"Acceptable." Harry muttered, studying the green pattern under his feet.

Over his shoulder, Petunia spoke up, and he couldn't mistake the pride in her voice, nor the strong tone of bragging.

It was the same words she had spoken to Mrs. Jones in her front lawn, Mrs. Lewis in the grocery mart, and Ms. Welling at the Surrey Expo. His aunt did like to brag, to the point of excess.

"We have two very bright boys in this house. No mother could ask for better."

"I absolutely agree, sweet." Vernon's light leaped in some gesture as he spoke.
Harry smiled, surrounded by the scent of food and the evergreen air freshener his aunt preferred.

Dudley laughed. "I bet you didn't think so five years ago!"

As his aunt began to scold her son, Hermione leaned into him, and he felt her lips move into a grin.

"I'll show you this memory, too. Marge looks like she's about to sneak a swig of her liquor flask again."

Harry didn't bother to argue about how much he hated viewing images in the pensieve, conglomerations of unrecognizable patterns and dead colors that still made him nauseous. Hermione insisted on showing him snapshots of all the things she thought he missed, and he saw no point in dissuading her from doing something she found so satisfying.

But he didn't need her memories. He had his own, and could hear the love of his family more easily in the tone of their voices than in the flat colors and lines she showed him.

He held her closer, eyes closed in relaxation, watching as Marge slipped purple metal back into the brown folds of her bulky skirt.

"What about you, dear?"

Hermione paused, hands soapy as she leaned over the sink. Petunia Dursley stood nearby, half of her attention on the baking pie.

"Pardon?"

Petunia turned more to face her, thin face smiling.

"Have you decided on a college yet? Harry is completely mum on the subject. Surely you do plan on more schooling?"

She didn't sound completely certain. Hermione didn't doubt the older woman had some fear that she would get married and skip getting a degree, as Petunia herself had done. The woman had said she regretted
nothing, but had also mentioned more than once that she would have liked to experience college life.

"I do. I'm actually considering some form of medical school. Or a year for the prerequisites, at least."

Petunia blinked, surprise bowing her mouth.

"For… your kind? Or, ah…"

Hermione smiled.

"Normal college, for now. I'm also considering taking on a potions apprenticeship part-time, but there are tests to be taken by the Ministry first."

She actually had a very strict timeline for herself. Hermione knew exactly what she wanted to accomplish.

But she doubted Petunia would understand or accept that Hermione planned to learn enough about mundane medicine and wizarding potions to create her own hybrids that could pass muggle scrutiny and revolutionize the world. That was years, even decades away, of course. And she would need Harry's help.

But she knew it would be her own research that would create acceptable cures to mundane diseases that killed millions. And therefore her own responsibility to figure out how to also feed and house a population that no longer died from such illnesses.

It would take a miracle of magic and technology to accomplish both.

She did revel in a good challenge.

"That sounds nice, dear." Harry's aunt nodded firmly. "Very nice. I'm sure your mother is proud."

"I most certainly am!" Jane Granger declared, entering the kitchen. "Now let me do something for you, Petunia, before I go crazy. Vernon is telling his golf jokes again."
Both women groaned in unison, and Hermione grinned down into the sink, pulling a dirty dish free of the soapy water to rinse it clean.

The new year was born quietly in the still darkness, as Harry looked into the crackling red light of the fireplace, Hermione dozing on the couch, the scattered rectangles of green about her all he could see of the notes she had been perusing.

"It's midnight, sir." Kreacher whispered, the old elf's voice rougher with his low tone.

Harry nodded slightly, his right hand raising in the universal gesture of acknowledgement.

On the middle finger, the impossible ring gleamed blackly white, prisms within cones, all its angles defined only by the point he happened to fix on first, changing the second he looked away.

"Thank you." Harry murmured, opening his eyes and rising to gently touch his girlfriend's shoulder. Light shifted, stretched, sighed.

"I don't know what's wrong with me. A minute past eleven and I'm dead to the world."

He smiled, grasping a raised hand to pull her to her feet. "Probably because you are working so hard and waking up at ungodly hours of the day."

She snorted. "Not everyone can sleep in until noon, Lord Potter."

He laughed. "I wake up early for classes."

"Only when it suits you to do so." She quipped, before leaning into an embrace. "Happy New Year, Harry." Blue-violet light rose towards him, and he dipped his chin to accept her brief kiss.

"Good luck, Viola." He whispered, as he had the year before, and the year before that, holding her tight, wishing she didn't have to go, even knowing he would see her the very next day.
Hermione hummed, swaying slightly in his arms, the beginning of a slow dance.

He let her lead him in the steps, colors swirling around them, the red fire in its purple stone mouth, the brown walls and green floor, the yellow spark in a wide doorway. He held light in his arms and held it tightly, feeling an odd tightness in his throat.

A part of his mind categorized all the medical problems that could cause such a symptom, anaphylactic shock, tonsillitis, mononucleosis, long words for many problems, and all of them a distraction from the real reason.

He loved her, in every small moment like this one, more and more each day. He could blame it on dopamine and the brain's reward centers all he liked, it didn't negate the very physical and emotional reactions he had to being with her, and being without her.

Humankind did love to attach itself to one another, for reasons science and magic still couldn't completely explain.

"This is nice." Her words were soft against the fabric of his shirt, and Harry breathed in her scent, fixing the memory in his mind along with all the others he had of her, every nuance of her soul that he had seen, every flicker of her pattern and sound of her voice. He knew her better than he did any other.

"It is." Harry agreed, stilling their dance, lowering his head to hers for another slow, soft brush of lips.

*It really, really is.*

1998

Harry was not sure what he had been expecting when Head Auror Robard summoned him for his first training session.

He was sure he had expected to be tested, magically, physically. Certain he would be forced to prove some level of spell accuracy and defensive
capabilities. He would be expected to work with Hit Wizards, after all. As far as he was aware, the closest muggle alternative to such a force was a rapid response team, and the members of such were always the most trained and efficient at their job.

Instead, Harry found himself sitting on a purple chair in a small conference room down from the main Auror Office, the walls white with enough layered wards to trap a dragon.

Across from him, Robard's salmon pattern flipped through thin rectangles of parchment.

"You should have at least five grade O N.E.W.T's, but you've never taken any Ministry competency tests. You should have an apparition license. You should have graduated from a magical school, in the least. The Ministry has only rumor and suspicion of what you can and can not do, besides what has been observed during the Tournament and several instances after."

Harry wondered if the word *instances* referred only to the disposal of the inferi, or to the multiple lives he had taken in his own self defense. He waited for the man to get to his point. If any of that had mattered to the Ministry, he wouldn't be where he was.

Robard sighed. "You do not appreciate how respected, admired, and envied the members who make the level of Hit Wizard are. Many aurors at least try to pass the extra tests, for the salary if nothing else. The ones who don't try are the ones who realize that each wizard on the squads has a bed reserved at St. Mungo's for their own use. It is dangerous, often thankless work."

"I'm not going to be a Hit Wizard, and if you are trying to talk me out of working with them, feel free."

At Harry's comment, Robard's light tensed and straightened.

"No, you won't be. You'll be a civilian specialist. But I'll be *damned* if you get any of my men killed because they risked their neck saving yours."
Harry remembered the chaos of the building in Knockturn Alley vividly, the too-fast flashes of magical color.

"Anything can happen. I could die saving them, as well."

At the thought of his own death, he felt the invisibility cloak rustle around his shoulders where it was tied and inactive. Harry frowned at the sensation, distracted when Robard began to speak.

"Yes. Which is why the purpose of future training will be to prevent dying at all costs. Nearly any magical malady can be reversed, limbs and bone regrown, blood restored. You will be taught how to stay alive when people are trying to kill you, as part of a team."

Harry ran his gaze over the walls, spiderweb-thin strands of wards of every kind and color until they melded together into one pearlescent wave of white.

"Are you going to teach me, or lecture me?"

Robard stood, and with a sharp gesture a door opened, two pillars of light stepping through.

There must be a window, Harry realized, and at the same time knew he was in what amounted to an interrogation room.

Abruptly, the walls began to twist and bend, moving away, their lights glowing bright with magical power.

Built in expansion charms. Not just an interrogation room, then, but a training one as well. The wonders of magic never ceased.

One of the strangers was a compact pattern of deep blue, a hue often called resolution, the other a pale purple shade of lavender. They didn't introduce themselves.

Robard moved away, his voice unmistakably smug.

"Neither, Mr. Potter. Prepare yourself."
The two patterns bent in what might have been a bow, twin wands of brown and red in their right hands.

A duel? He supposed it was a compliment that it was two on one, but he wasn't sure what the man hoped to prove.

There was a long moment of silence. Harry waited for movement, a spell, anything. He expanded his sight around him, closing his eyes for focus, finding it easier to look in every direction when his brain was not telling him he should be seeing only ahead.

Nothing.

Harry frowned.

Robard growled. "Are you even going to stand up, fool? You won't last an hour in the field!"

He resisted the urge to reply that he had lasted at least fifteen minutes the month before, which was something. He also didn't mention that he found standing superfluous. He couldn't dodge well or move fast, and would be relying completely on his magic anyway. Being seated would change very little.

Harry slowly stood, his staff in one hand, debating for a second whether he would be better served to Look and see his surroundings outlined, or retain his color vision to manipulate any spells.

He decided on the latter, just as the blue pattern spoke a casual spell in a feminine voice.

"Expelliarmus."

It was green intent wrapped with the blue of the caster's magic. It moved slower than a bullet, perhaps even slower than a ball kicked across the floor, but fast enough that Harry had little time to think through a course of action, only respond.

He turned it to water. He liked the way water looked, simple blue crystals that fell beautifully to the floor in a small shower of pattering sounds.
There was a moment of silence; either surprise, or simple expectation.

Blue spoke again, this time moving two paces to the right, even as Lavender also cast, moving left, a male voice.

"Expelliarmus." "Impedimenta."

These two were obviously a team.

Harry blinked, and again water fell. There was no pause this time. The two burst into movement, rolling, spinning, their patterns swift and nearly silent, almost like they danced to music he could not hear, spells moving from their wand in elegant spirals, some spoken, some silent, all tinted green with offensive intent.

Harry figured the floor was getting very wet, when Blue paused her attack to vanish traces of blue liquid from the floor. He decided to change his own methods.

The next spell, from Lavender, was made into fire. It roared red and bright, blocking his vision for a moment, a mistake that let Blue's next spell get much closer than he would like.

His hand tightened on his staff, and in a moment of annoyance he cast the golden tones of protego maxima.

It rolled out like a wave of its own to form a solid gold dome overhead, even reaching below the floor under his feet. He saw nothing but the golden magic of the shield, now blind to the position of his opponents.

That might have also been a mistake.

Harry sighed, listening, hearing them pace and move, seeing random splashes test the strength of his shield at sharp angles.

Protego could be seen through by normal people. And he doubted they were aware that he, however, could not see through it. Still, they did not give away exactly where they were by the position of their spells. They were clever, trained, and worked as a unit.
And, if they had really been enemies, he would not have wasted any time transfiguring their spells, or casting a protection charm. He would have just stopped their light.

Harry looked, his magic whipping out from him in a ripple to highlight the physical presences of the room, its four walls, the now distinct outline of a door and window, Robard standing on one side, arms crossed, the witch and wizard who fought him circling like sharks with wands held ready.

Harry dropped the shield, and left himself open for their magic to come for him, locking his gaze on the witch his mind dubbed Blue, her entire form now green with his power, dressed in long flowing robes, her hair tightly braided against her head.

He wasn't an expert by any means on ethnicity, but he figured she might have Asian descent. A thought; was the color of a soul influenced by race? It didn't seem to fluctuate based on gender.

The woman stood frozen, wand uplifted, eyes narrowed. Harry knew seconds had passed, and wondered what the two were waiting for. Lavender stood to the side, the man's wand lowered, posture guarded.

Robard's voice seemed to echo in the large room.

"Is this a trap, or merely an intimidation tactic?"

Harry frowned at the question, but did not look away from the two aurors to face their Head.

"What?"

Robard snorted. "Take him down already."

Harry blinked as the witch and wizard gathered themselves, exchanging brief glances.

This feels pointless.

"What do you want from me?" He called out, withdrawing his energy, the world returning to its unique pulsing colors. No answer came, and the next
few spells to approach him were turned to mist.

Frustration rose. "Just tell me!" Harry demanded, gesturing sharply as he turned his back on Blue and Lavender, facing the Head Auror. He saw their colors swirling to strike, and did not waste any mental capacity bothering to wonder how it was possible to see behind one's own head. He heard the splash of water as Lavender approached rapidly.

Robard's pattern, gleaming with an orange and red tint, was silent.

A hand of pale purple reached out for his shoulders, wand poised to press into his lower back, the classic restraining move of any auror, where any spell cast would have instant effect.

Harry took the human pattern of the wizard's hands and turned it to stone. The wand clattered to the floor as the man fell, arms suddenly too heavy to lift, curses spilling from his mouth.

He did not scream with pain, however. Stone has no nerve endings after all.

Harry stepped away from the wizard, Blue hurrying over to wash her partner's hands with deep blue light.

"Well?" Harry repeated. "Do you want me to be proven weak? Are you testing my ability to defend myself? Or do you want to find out how far I will go?"

Suspicion lay under the surface. The Ministry would surely love to confirm the rumors from the Prophet.

Robard's voice was soft. "How far you will go, Mr. Potter? Not how far you can?"

Harry tried not to hiss his mounting frustration.

"If I could be easily disabled I would be dead three times over already. That is not what this is about."

"No, I suppose it's not." Robard straightened, walking closer, salmon light
flickering with life. "A wizard who could survive attack by several dark wizards has little to prove to me. But your team will not really trust you unless they prove your mettle themselves."

Harry turned from glaring fiercely at the Head Auror's light when Blue spoke, her voice authoritative.

"I am H.W. Aethonan of the Winged Horse. My partner is H.W. Granian of the same."

Robard's light dipped in a nod.

"The auror department divides several of its more... politically delicate Hit Wizard squads into groups, all of which are given a common symbol. Squads who do work that might lead to retaliation, or can better work under anonymity. Winged Horse is usually a quartet, until two of the members were killed in an ambush three months ago. The names are inherited positions, true identities kept under wraps for their, and their families, protection. We are not as good at it as the Unspeakables however. Mistakes happen."

Blue's, Aethonan's, voice was firm.

"We do not take unbreakable vows either, sir. We have free choice to leave."

The wizard made some motion Harry could not follow in response.

"Some question the intelligence of that. I have, on occasion. But I do not force my workers into lifetime servitude. There are some oaths of loyalty, of course, for Hit Wizards. I would require them of every auror as well if the Wizengamot had not ruled centuries ago that they were undignified." The disgust in the man's voice was palpable. "No doubt to keep their ears and eyes in my department."

Harry shifted his weight, looking between the two, making his own conclusions.

"You want me to join Winged Horse."
The witch scoffed. Robard made a negative movement.

"No. Two replacement members have already been chosen and are completing their training now. If they agree, you will work with them all, here, until you understand their style of action. When your presence is required, they will enter any situation with you."

Aethonan answered the implied question.

"I'm convinced he won't get us killed. We will work with him." She paused, continued. "But I need you to be honest with us, Mr. Potter, regarding your capabilities. We need to know your weaknesses and your strengths, or else we, or you, might make an avoidable mistake."

Harry did not speak right away, and the witch continued.

"We need to know the extent of any visual impairment you have, and how quickly you tire from magical exhaustion. We need to know if your transfiguration abilities are the only way you can defend yourself, or if you have knowledge of advanced defensive and offensive spells. It would also be nice if you could fix Granian's arms."

Harry twisted the pattern back to human with a glance, watching the lines and angles reform in a single blink. The wizard sighed, moving to his feet.

"Thanks." His voice only held relief, no undertone of authority or anger like the woman's. If anything, the man sounded tired.

"Trust is imperative." Aethonan repeated.

Harry didn't doubt it was. Unfortunately, he did not trust the Ministry or anyone who worked for it.

But he did have to work with them, and some token of trust would have to be given.

"Prolonged use of fiendfyre can be tiring." Harry spoke slowly. "As are large transfigurations, ones more than five by five meters, especially if I give them any semblance of life."
"Like the dragon." Aethonan stated. "I saw it from what remained of the stands."

Harry nodded, debating what else to share. "I know many spells. I have listened to many books on spell theory and development in my own studies. I am confident I can replicate most if needed, and recognize many by… sight." He hesitated to use the word.

The witch caught the pause. "How well do you see?"

"Well enough." Harry returned, and ignored her slight sound of annoyance. "I won't hurt one of you by mistake."

"So noted." Granian muttered.

Robard spoke into the silence that fell. "It is settled then. You will be given a portkey to attend regular training sessions until Aethonan and myself are confident in your abilities."

Harry wondered just how often regular was. "You said no one would know my identity. How do you plan on hiding it?"

Granian moved closer. "A standard uniform. It is not unusual for Hit Wizards to chose to wear armor over their faces, and one would cover those scars of yours nicely. Dragonhide or, better, Graphorn skin to cover any areas prone to be targets, which can also change your body's general shape. We will give you a name. Nothing fancy. That staff will have to go, it's too noticeable. How necessary is it?"

Unbidden, his hand tightened around the wood. Harry had not had it out of his presence for years.

But the man was right.

"I can use another staff." He reluctantly spoke, and lavender light jerked in a decisive nod.

"Get one made."

Harry looked between the three pillars of light, each distinct and unique,
and felt abruptly out of his depth.

*Just what in Merlin's name had he gotten himself into.*

It seemed *regular* meant *daily*.

Harry was more aggravated to be missing valuable research time than having to use a portkey, but he could acknowledge that he was at least learning something.

The worst part, however, was that he hadn't been able to see Hermione. They both attended classes in the morning; and hers went on into the afternoon, when Harry was already gone for the Auror Department.

He knew the training was only to last until he was deemed appropriately ready; but it was hard to remember that when he found himself sitting in yet another chair in another interrogation room, being drilled for hours on spell combinations, typical containment techniques, and the long lists of regulations and laws.

He was lucky his memory was perfect. He listened every night to the multiple books he had been given on the policies of the Auror Department and the Hit Wizard division, laying under his cloak to stare into nothing as a generic voice read lists of rights and penalties for violating them.

The first week passed in a routine of paperwork, questions, and study.

That Saturday morning he escaped to the Grangers to bask in blue-violet light for the first time in days, much to Hermione's amusement. She chided him as he lay across her bed, staring over at her.

"I'm fine. I do have my own work too, you know. I think I'm close to something."

It annoyed him that he did not even know what her current research problem was. In previous years they had done everything together.

But she hadn't wanted to share, and Harry, remembering his own experiments into souls and how he had longed to keep them secret, did not
push. She would have a good reason for keeping whatever it was to herself; and he trusted she would come to him if she needed his input.

Then he had the entire day of Sunday to himself at Grimmauld place, Hermione off with her mother and aunt to attend the pre-wedding festivities of a cousin.

He spent that time locked in his laboratory, pacing, stewing on the odd event of death.

Death was what truly released a soul. Harry could change one, could kill one. But he relied entirely on sight. He could not transfigure something he could not see.

*Death.* Souls went somewhere after death. They faded but did not disintegrate. He knew in his gut that they traveled, somehow, out of the physical realm.

Dementors could destroy souls. They sucked them free and dismantled them, using the essence of consciousness to form their own bodies to go on stealing more, leaving trails of empty husks to slowly die and decay.

It was too bad that the foul creatures would take his own soul along with whatever remained of Voldemort.

He liked problems. Better, he liked solving them. Having no good hypothesis on removing what was inside him nagged under his skin like a disease. Having no concrete avenue of research to follow, no theory to pursue.

Perhaps it was good that he had the Ministry training to keep him busy.

He needed to move on. Perhaps he should delve into research dealing with restoring optical function, or begin developing his plans to form a private company to begin funding medical research, one that would eventually host Hermione’s own endeavors. It would have to be legitimate.

Better yet, perhaps buy one already established in the muggle world.

Harry sat, staring blankly at the rows of metal tables, their surfaces clear
of debris. If he knew Hermione, the medical field would only be the start.
She had a fire burning in her to fix the world's problems. He loved her for it.

Harry only wanted to discover what made things work the way they did, and if she wanted to use that knowledge to help both worlds, it was fine by him.

He leaned back, observing the wooden crates of notebooks and glass containers, potion ingredients both magical and mundane, all stored neatly under his tables and waiting for use, and suddenly thought of his old advisor from the London school.

"What do you want to do, Harry? With your life?"

He had money, enough he never had to work. He had abilities that could save many people, if they would believe him when he diagnosed problems, if he could make a few million copies of himself. He could heal people, he could bring the recently deceased back to life.

He could kill people who needed killing. He could potentially kill hundreds at a time.

He could break wards and repair them. He could transfigure any pattern to any other pattern save the Impossible one. The Ministry had plans for him, to do that and who knew what else.

But the only thing he enjoyed doing was experimenting and inventing. Just because he could do something, did that mean he had to?

Harry sighed, the world seemed too bright, too close all of a sudden. There was no escape from the constant moving light except in sleep, and under the Cloak. More and more he relied on the silken cloth to hide from his own reality. He was certain his psychology books would love the analogy, a man with too much power hiding under a sheet to avoid responsibility.

But he pulled the Cloak off his shoulders anyway and draped the black light over his face, falling into its pattern with relief.

Here, something he could not change. Another challenge, like the horcrux,
that had no easy answer.

*But.*

Who made the Cloak? Who made the Stone?

New purpose welled inside him. If he could not solve the horcrux dilemma right away, perhaps he could research more into the history of the items he now had. Surely they were special, for he had seen nothing like them anywhere. There might be rumors or information about such artifacts in the circles that dealt in such things.

Harry abruptly pulled the cloak free and stood, sudden purpose filling him.

*He might just go into Diagon Alley today.*

Hermione stomped one foot on the dirty stone.

"*I'm going down there.*"

Fergus Fallon, the second ex-Auror whom Harry had hired as personal security, glared back at her. The Irish wizard was just old enough to be her grandfather, and treated her much the same. The fact that the man had often mentioned the exploits of his five children and seven rowdy grandchildren probably gave him the right to, most of the time.

*But not now.* Fallon had agreed to help her in her search for the Mirror of Erised, and even agreed to keep their search secret from Harry. She wanted it to be a surprise.

"*No.*" His voice was firm, and betrayed barely a hint of his heritage. Blue eyes didn't falter at her mutinous expression. "Knockturn Alley is no place for you."

Hermione lifted her chin.

"*We've already been to every store in Diagon that sells artifacts of that caliber. They all mostly know of it, but not who has it. It's not a particularly useful thing, just odd, so no one seems to care where it is, either. My only*"
conclusion is that it's either sitting dusty in someone's manor or vault, or that it's been sold illegally. The only way to discover that is down there."

She pointed down the dark entrance to Knockturn, ignoring the eyes watching them from both Alleys.

She hadn't liked the fact that she was treated nearly as much like a celebrity as Harry was, simply because the two of them were often seen together. While Witch Weekly hadn't yet labeled them a couple, it was well-known that she was his best friend. As such, she wasn't as invisible as she liked to be, and no doubt some gossiping witch was currently reporting her whereabouts to the Harry Potter watchline that the popular wizarding rag had running.

Good thing Harry couldn't read.

Fallon folded his arms. He didn't look his age; but then again, wizards typically lived twice as long as their mundane counterparts. His hair was as black as Harry's, and nearly as wild, white only just beginning to creep into the long strands.

"Listen here, missy. It's my job to keep you out of trouble, and that's what I'm doing."

"Ha!" Hermione exclaimed. "It most certainly is not! It's your job to keep some criminal from trying to kidnap me to get at Harry!"

He threw his hands up in the air.

"Exactly what I'm doing!"

"It is not!"

"Hermione?"

For a moment, the sound of her name didn't register. Only the very, very recognizable voice.

She turned, dread beginning to roll in her stomach, to see Harry.
What was Harry doing in Diagon Alley?

He stood, dressed in simple black trousers and a green button-down shirt his aunt had given him for Christmas the month before, though she doubted he was even aware of that fact. The silvery fabric of the inactive invisibility cloak lay draped back from his shoulders like a fancy cloak, no doubt making him stand out even more from all the others in the Alley with their dark robes.

 Vaughn stood just behind him, eyes narrowed at Fallon.

"Good." The older wizard said firmly. "You can talk some sense into her. I am done."

Hermione fumed at Fallon's quick betrayal.

"Traitor." She hissed, shifting uncomfortably as she looked at Harry's face, trying to read his expression.

His eyes weren't looking at her. They seemed to be peering into the Alley beyond her. He was frowning, mouth strung.

"I thought you were with your mum." His voice was not accusing, and that somehow made her feel worse.

"The shower was just this morning." She mumbled, stepping closer to him.

"Oh." He said simply. "I didn't know that."

He didn't know because she hadn't told him, that was obvious.

As the silence grew, Vaughn coughed slightly.

"How about I, ah... just wait over there." The man gestured behind him, and Fallon followed his partner, casting her a slightly sympathetic look.

But only slightly. He was still annoyed.

Hermione rolled her eyes, then shook her head and closed the distance between them, giving her friend a quick kiss, one hand reaching to twine
with his own.

"This is supposed to be secret." She stated, and saw his lips twist in a smile.

"I concluded that."

Hermione bit her lip.

"I would kind of still like it to be a secret."

Harry raised a brow. "Kind of?"

"Yes. I would."

"Alright." He said, and she couldn't miss the sound of his amusement.

She narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

"Just like that?"

He shrugged, causing the cloak at his shoulders to gleam in the rare late afternoon sun that had struck the Alley.

"Can you tell me why you need to go into Knockturn? I'm assuming that's why Fallon was agitated."

She sniffed.

"I need to speak to some of the proprietors. About something."

"Can it be done by owl?"

Hermione frowned. Then she sighed.

"I guess so. I think I would get more information in person, though. I've been told money talks better down there than words."

"That, and intimidation." Harry said simply. "Use my name in your correspondence. I doubt there is a wizard or witch in Britain who wouldn't know it by this point, as well as the fact that the Potter family is loaded."
"Oh." Hermione brightened immediately. "Yes, that's perfect."

Harry lifted lips in a smile, one hand coming up to carefully brush her cheek, his eyes brightening with energy as he looked at her. She shivered with the touch of his magic against her, before leaning into a proper kiss.

She saw the flash of a camera, and knew that Witch Weekly would be updating the relationship status of its most sought-after bachelor sooner than they realized.

Harry either didn't notice the attention, or wasn't concerned, as he pulled away, gesturing slightly towards Vaughn and Fallon.

"I can see you tonight after all, then? A late dinner?"

Hermione nodded quickly, then frowned as he began to move away, as if he was actually going to leave her there in Diagon with Fallon.

"Wait! Why are you here?"

His head did not turn back to her, but she felt his gaze like a caress nonetheless. His voice echoed back over his shoulder, amused.

"It's a secret."

She sucked in a breath; then released it with reluctant laughter, watching him wander off down the Alley, Vaughn at his side, the guards posture alert.

"I deserved that." She said, smiling, and Fallon grunted agreement.

"A cloak, you say?" The proprietor of the third magical artifact shop Harry had stopped in spoke softly to himself, frowning into the distance.

The man was blind. Harry knew this not because he could see it, but because the man's great grandson had whispered it to him when bringing him into the back office.

"If anyone knows if something exists, it's great-grandda. He might be
The younger man had assumed Harry was looking for an indestructable invisibility cloak, not in possession of one, just as the last two owners had assumed.

Invisibility cloaks, it seemed, were notoriously short lived, and very fragile. No one who knew anything at all would believe different. But it was easier to speak of looking for the origin of an impossible invisibility cloak than looking for a black octahedron stone set in a ring that may or may not do anything at all.

"Yes. An invisibility cloak, but one that is indestructible."

The older wizard's pattern showed its age; the light was slower, moving to a different beat. But its color, a vibrant yellow hue nearly as golden as a defensive ward, was as beautiful as that of a newborn child's, pure and strong.

"I see. Are you a glory-seeker, then?"

His voice was hoarse, reedy thin, tired.

Harry frowned.

"I'm sorry?"

Yellow light moved in the air, making a gesture he could not follow.

"It's only a legend, boy." There was kindness in his tone. "You will never find the Cloak of Invisibility. Many have searched, none have found it. There is more truth to the stories of its more powerful brother, the Death Stick, and even it has been lost for decades. And, if I knew where the Cloak was I would never tell you, but keep it for myself and my own children. Alas, it is lost, if it ever was. A simple story for little children."

Harry leaned forward, taking in the words, filing them carefully away. *Death."

"Brother?"
The wizard laughed, coughed, sighed, the sounds each following one another like the inevitable flow of a conversation without words, one both familiar and tolerated.

"Don't tell me you haven't heard the story? What has the world come to, that mothers no longer tell their children of the Deathly Hallows? I grew up pretending to be Ignutus, hiding under my father's ragged brown robe and pretending Death was my friend."

Deathly. Death.

Excitement drummed in his veins.

"Tell me the story, then."

"Why would you come to me asking for the Cloak, if you do not know the story?"

It was a very, very good question. Harry wasn't sure how to answer at first.

The wizard's light pulsed its slow beat in the silence that passed, as Harry tried to work the logic through his mind.

"I am very old, you know." The old man mused. "I dare say Death is my friend, now. It's given me nearly two centuries to watch my family grow. I've told the story to my great-great-grandchildren when they sat on my knees, and my youngest asked me which Hallow I thought the most important. My older brothers, they wanted the Wand, of course. Every witch and wizard wants it, because it makes them powerful. But everyone knows that those who possess it find Death far sooner than they would like."

He coughed again, and Harry saw his light flicker ominously. "No, I wanted the Cloak. I searched for it everywhere. I delved every nook and cranny I could of Godric's Hallow. I spent money traveling the country, tracking the bloodline of the Peverells. I met my wife in Scotland on such a trip, she could trace her family line right back to his second daughter. But they too just thought it a legend. I would give my life to touch it just once."
He sighed, and in the sound Harry heard a lifetime of dreams. "I was not the first to look, nor the last. The Dark Lord Grindelwald himself wore the symbol of the Hallows on his breast. It was rumored for some time he had possession of the Wand, until he was defeated by Albus Dumbledore. It must have been false, for the owner of the Wand can not be defeated in battle, only by trickery."

The man's thoughts were circular, winding, telling his own story as he told the bones of another.

"Few care about the Cloak, but I did. The power to defeat any foe, that is something. The power to bring back the dead, even that horrible thought is valuable to some. But a mere invisibility cloak? Even one that is indestructible? Not worth the bother."

*Power to bring back the dead.*

Harry's breath hitched, and the wizard heard it.

"Why do you search for the Cloak?"

Harry watched the beat of the old man's heart, and began to draw the Cloak from his shoulders, its soft surface sliding through his fingers.

"I don't."

The wizard sighed, long and heavy, yellow hands reaching out as if the man could see what Harry held.

Maybe he could. Maybe a person knew when something they had searched for an entire lifetime was nearby.

*Hallow.* Holy, sacred, revered. It seemed an apt description of the white shadows and black stars that made up the elegant pattern of cones and prisms, angles made of darkness and light.

Hallow fit better even than *impossible*, better than *indestructible*.

Harry laid the Cloak gently in the man's arms, and repeated his previous request.
"Please tell me the story."

The wizard laughed, pure joy in his voice, frail beams of yellow tracing along the folds of silk in his hands.

"I'll tell it as my mother did, then." His voice was triumphant, lacking it's previous weakness. "I'll give you her warning, too."

Harry smiled, feeling the rapid excitement of discovery at his fingertips, the answer to a question, the testing of a theory.

"My son." The old man began, warmth and warning and acceptance. "Death is jealous and cunning, and comes for all men. Make no mistake..."

A dramatic pause, and Harry could imagine a mother holding a squirming son on her knee, eyes loving, tone chiding, gathering his attention with the silence of an indrawn breath and pure expectation.

"If you try to trick Death, it will only come for you sooner and in more vicious ways..."

~*~ To Be Continued in: White Shadows Among Dark Stars ~*~

Merry Christmas everyone! Hope you all enjoyed this present. :)
Harry stood looking at himself observing himself. It was a tricky thing, to view a memory inside a pensieve of himself viewing a memory inside a pensieve; like peeking through the layers of an onion.

He hadn't tried until that afternoon; the last time he had checked himself over for outside influences had been with Hermione beside him, looking year-by-year for any sign the horcrux had tainted him.

This was different. This was, somehow, worse.

Harry watched as his own green soul stood on a street, fire burning still on the edges of the memory, the inferi scattered about upon the ground like fragments of broken triangles.

He watched himself watch himself kneel, fingers of light reaching for what he now knew was the Resurrection Stone. Saw his fingers gently pick it up, turn it over, place it in his pocket. Nothing changed, yet.

The memory flickered again. Harry was alone, in Grimmauld Place, sitting in a wooden chair, pulling the ring out, trying to change it, trying to explain its impossibility to himself.

Harry looked at himself in the memory within a memory, then looked at himself looking at that memory. It was as close to a mirror as he had ever come; and in this way he could see far more clearly if anything changed.

His past self placed the ring upon his finger, and Harry watched it happen,
so slight he never would have seen it without observing his two self’s side-by-side.

A slight shift in the humanity of his pattern; a sphere angling slightly into a cone here; a box becoming more of a prism there. Such a little change, a slight angle in his pattern, nothing he ever would have noticed.

The growing chill in his stomach deepened, hardened. Harry changed the memory again, as he had four times before now, because he could see that that slight change was nothing. *Nothing* compared to what he saw when he examined himself three years ago to himself now.

Harry watched himself unwrap the package that was around the Cloak of Invisibility. Saw that the pattern upon the Stone shifted in either agitation or excitement; saw his own pattern shift with it, so very excited at finding another pattern he could not explain.

Then the memory-self flung the pattern of stars and shadows around him and vanished into its light with a laugh he hadn't realized he had uttered.

When the Cloak was pulled away, the damage was done. It wasn't so slight, now. More cones and prisms, the green of his own soul and the human pattern of his body both changed irrevocably. As if what made him human was becoming more like what made the Stone and the Cloak, sharp angles and sloping curves.

And scattered about his color dark green shadows glimmered, mirrored by lighter pinpricks of palest green darkness.

Which made no sense, that shadows could shine and light could cast such darkness.

He hadn't seen it, but then again, he hadn't viewed many memories of his current self. Hermione would not notice the difference in his light, overwhelmed as she was by all the other portions of his sight. They had both focused too much on his face, on the bloody horcrux, to see the smallest changes being wrought elsewhere.

More memories flickered by, all that he could remember of himself actually
wearing the Cloak, the Stone a constant presence on his finger.

Every time another angle sharpened, though the effect was not as dramatic as the first initial experience. Every time there was another prism here, another cone there, more contrast in his color, more stars and shadows, such tiny little things even he would only notice on close observation over a long period of time. And with each change, he saw his own pattern responding to the activity in the Stone and Cloak; or perhaps they merely were responding to him.

When he grew excited, their patterns shifted. When he was angry, they flickered. When he was deep in thought, they pulsed in contrast to his own shifting light like pets eager for attention.

He saw that he had responded unconsciously. That he did indeed, as Hermione teased, run his fingers constantly over the Cloak in absent motions. That he did twirl the ring on his finger.

He was constantly touching them. Like the nervous habit of a smoker, reaching to make sure his next fix was in his pocket.

Harry left the pensieve with a slight stumble, falling into the nearest chair.

The story had been a magnificent blend of legend, warning, and fact.

He couldn't say it was all a fabrication; he could see with his own sight that the Cloak and the Stone were very, very real items. He knew they were special. He knew they were changing him. Perhaps just one of the Hallows could not manage it; the Stone alone had done very little.

But it made him wonder about the truth of possessing all three, and what together they might manage to do to the human who held them. *The Master of Death*.

Immortality? In body, or soul? Conscious reincarnation? The ability to summon the dead or bring back life? Or would he die, instead, becoming some shadowy figure who ushered others into the realm beyond, holding a large sickle?

Such a fanciful, non-scientific thought. Harry ran a hand over his face,
sighed. Mentally stepped back from the problem, trying to separate his emotions and think rationally.

Scientifically.

He possessed two artifacts, centuries old at least. Two of three objects created, no doubt, by genius wizards for purposes only they would fully understand. Objects that were indestructible.

He needed copies of the original legend, the oldest he could find. He needed to experiment with the Stone. He needed to decide if he should lock both Cloak and Stone away and see if their influence could be reversed.

He needed to tell Hermione, bask in her comforting light, let her make sense of the entire thing.

But underneath the shock, underneath the sense of betrayal at having his own pattern altered against his consent, Harry felt another emotion, one rising in strength as every moment passed.

Fascination. Sheer excitement at discovering something rare, something mysterious, something no one else had experimented on to his knowledge. An entire new realm that might be opened to him with the Stone.

Despite himself, a smile began to twist his lips, and he looked down at his right hand, at the finger that still carried the ring that held impossibility.

"Wonderful." Harry murmured, looking into its depths, and seeing the growing shadowy light inside his own skin flicker with the sentiment.

"A story for children." Hermione said flatly, looking down at the invisibility cloak pooled in Harry's lap, its soft silvery folds spilling across his legs. "It's not unusual for myths and legends to grow out of fact. Look at the mundane stories of Merlin and Arthur, and all we learned that was true and false when we entered the wizarding world. But this; this."

She wasn't sure what to say, how to form the words. The Invisibility Cloak itself, even if indestructible, did not seem so strange. There were many
spells that would do the same, ones far more convenient than carrying around a large length of fabric.

But the Stone was another matter entirely. If the stories were true, it could possibly do much more than Harry himself was capable of with his sight when it came to bringing people back to life.

"You haven't tested it yet?" Hermione asked, even though she knew the answer before he shook his head. "Okay. Alright." She paused again, mind racing.

Should they even test it at all?

*Who would they summon first?*

"I wish I knew how they created them. If we summon anyone, it should be the Peverell's. Best to get our answers from the source itself."

Hermione felt the stirring of excitement all the way down to her bones as the possibilities began to form.

"*We could talk to anyone. We could talk to Einstein! Tesla! Merlin! Anyone!*"

Harry grinned at her, his black hair too-long and wild, in dire need of the cut his aunt despaired getting him still enough to finish.

"I *know.*"

"But why did Voldemort have it? And how? And your father, how did he have the Cloak?"

Harry’s eyes looked down at his lap, green orbs focused better on its form than they ever seemed to focus on anything else. She would be jealous, if she wasn't so fascinated herself.

"The story states Ignotus passed the Cloak down to his son. Antioch's Wand was stolen after his murder. No doubt, the other brother had children who claimed his property. I was told that many people have researched their bloodline, looking for the Hallows. My dad and Voldemort could have
been descendants, or themselves or some ancestor claimed them in some way from a descendant."

Hermione's hands clasped together, as she looked carefully into Harry's face, looking for emotion.

"You could ask him. Your father. Your mother. You could… talk to them."

She saw the surprise bloom; and wondered that she felt a bit sad that he hadn't yet considered that himself.

"I guess I could." There was wonder in his voice. "It still hasn't sunk in."

"If it works, of course." Hermione quickly said, telling herself not to expect too much. After all, the story has also claimed that those returned were not… well, alive. Who knew exactly what the Stone would bring back? She couldn't help but remember a story she had read long ago, about three wishes on a monkey's paw.

The second wish had been used to bring a son back to life. A son that had been dead more than a week in a horrible accident.

The last wish had been to send him back.

"Death." Harry's voice was both contemplative and confused. "In the story, it's an actual person."

"Unlikely." Hermione spoke, brows drawing together. "More likely it's a simple way of making the story more exciting for children."

"And yet, all the objects deal with death in some way. One to bring death, one to reverse it, and one to prevent it. I think calling the antagonist Death is no accident. The Peverell brothers must have researched death, and by proxy, soul magic, very thoroughly. One might have even had my form of sight, the ability to see that souls go somewhere. They might have solved the mystery of it."

His voice rose, and Hermione couldn't help but see that his hands moved over the invisibility cloak reflexively, just as her own father would pet his cat.
"Such a thing could topple religions." Hermione murmured. "And why not publish their work? Where is a book with their discoveries?" She leaned forward, wishing she could meet his gaze even as she knew that he saw her better than anyone else. "And why did none of them become this 'Master of Death'? Because if they did, they should still be alive now, right? And if one of them never possessed all three artifacts, then no one has, and therefore no one can know that anything special at all happens by having all three."

Harry leaned back into his seat, eyes closing as he spoke his thoughts aloud. "Unless the very legend I was told was created on purpose, maybe by Ignotus himself, as he is supposedly the one to live the longest. A warning just in case anyone ever was able to accomplish the feat. Adding enough flourish to make the legend survive the years, enough fact to be helpful when the right person asks the right questions. It would be a brilliant strategy."

"Easier to just write it down." Hermione muttered. "In a book for everyone to read."

"And have everyone creating Resurrection Stones?" He returned, and she folded her arms, stance rigid.

"Ignotus wouldn't have to say how he created it, just that he did. Even if he wanted to avoid public notoriety, surely he would have at least left notes for his descendents. Why hide that fact, why make up some legend instead?"

Harry's mouth drooped into a frown. He hated losing an argument.

So did she, for that matter. It made conversations between them interesting at times. It also made them frustrating for others to listen in on what sometimes appeared to be the drawn out battle of two stubborn minds.

"He could have been ashamed of what he had done. Or scared. Notes could have put his family in danger."

Hermione groaned at that logic.
"We can speculate all night, Harry, and dinner is no doubt cold. Are we going to test out this Stone or not? All our answers could be waiting right inside that little black rock."

He grinned, eyes opening to fix somewhere on the region of her chest.

"I'm not hungry."

She couldn't help but smile in response.

"Me either. Let's try it."

He stood without waiting, laying the cloak aside to hold a hand out to her, warm skin meeting her own as he tugged her to her feet, pulling her into an impromptu hug.

"Have I told you today I love you? Do you have your notepad on you?"

She laughed at the two very different questions.

"Yes, and yes."

His lips twisted in a universal picture of excited mischief.

"Then away to the laboratory, my Lady."

"Right away, my Lord." She returned in faux solemnity, her hand squeezing his.

In the hallway, Kreacher rolled his bulbous eyes and turned away.

Warming charms were not standard in a house-elf's repertoire for nothing.

"Cadmus Peverell was the one to create, or receive, the Resurrection Stone." Harry began, as they stood in the plain stone experimentation room, Hermione's lighting charms illuminating the empty space. "He tried to bring back his fiance, but it was told that when she returned, she was not dead but also, not alive. He killed himself in his grief. She may also have felt some pain or trauma at being returned to life."
Hermione watched him as he stood, the Stone in his hand removed from its setting within the ring. A simple octahedron, dull black in color. She could have sworn, a time or two, she had seen something inside its depths glowing dimly out at her. But she hadn't studied it as thoroughly as Harry had.

She simply hadn't been that fascinated with it.

"Really, we must go into this with no expectations. Any part of the legend could be misleading. The story says to turn it three times. So here we go."

Harry slowly began to rotate the stone, fingers delicately maneuvering the octahedron as he spoke a name.

"Cadmus Peverell."

Hermione saw something change, and spoke softly as the magical quill on the table beside them automatically documented every word they said.

"There is a symbol flashing inside the stone. Silver lines, a line within a circle, the circle within a triangle. It's the Deathly Hallows symbol. Make note, this leads me to believe the items were indeed created around the same time, or at least Cadmus was aware of his brothers own inventions."

Harry finished turning the stone the third time, and Hermione sucked in a breath.

Silver mist was coalescing before them, twisting, turning.

Fading away into nothing.

"...Harry?" Hermione questioned softly.

"I saw the Hallow pattern expand and ripple, then splinter apart."

"I saw silver mist, like the substance of a ghost, then it faded."

Harry raised his chin.

"Let's try again."
Harry went through the motions of experimentation with thorough, unyielding patience.

They tried rotating the stone in different amounts and different directions, and only the three clockwise turns from their first try yielded any results.

They tried chanting Peverell's name versus merely thinking it, only to get the same result as when it was simply stated.

They debated letting Hermione try the summons, and decided against it. While she was eager to experiment herself, neither one wanted to risk her own pattern getting twisted as his had from the Hallow's influence. Harry wasn't certain yet whether it was a benign taint or something with much darker implications.

"We need to try another name. Who is next on the list?" He heard the rustle of paper, her voice a solid strength.

"The other Peverell brothers. Then you said Flamel. Why Flamel? Nicolas Flamel, the alchemist?"

Harry lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

"He made the only other magical gem that has gained as much notoriety as the Resurrection Stone, and it too deals with death, in a fashion."

"Logical." Hermione murmured. "Is it possible that souls that died a great deal of time ago can not be summoned? Only the recently deceased?"

Harry absently ran his fingers across the angles of the small stone in his hand, its size barely more than a pebble.

"Just as much as it's possible only magical souls can be summoned, or only unbroken ones that have not gone through trauma of some sort."

"More tests." He could hear the smile in her voice, and answered it with his own.

"More tests."
Which is why they spent another hour attempting to contact each Peverell brother, a methodical process as each potential factor was again tested.

Rotation, incantation, rotation, incantation, rotation, incantation.

His stomach rumbled, an annoying break in the routine.

"Nicolas Flamel." Harry finally said, thinking of what he knew of the man.

Another possible conundrum. Surely there had been more than one Nicolas Flamel, and surely multiple Peverell descendents had been named after their famous ancestors. How would the Stone's magic know to pick the right one?

Hermione gasped, and Harry, his fingers finishing the turn of the stone, saw the black stars expand and billow and bleed away into bright, stark color.

It was pure, unblemished, solid scarlet red, a soul of beautiful light. There was no humanity to it; no angles for him to read, no pattern that governed its form. It had the shape of a man; a man in clothes, even, though the clothing held only the pure soul’s light.

He would say the soul was alive; but there was no flicker of life to it. Nothing that could be killed, or resurrected.

It simply was.

"You make a grave mistake, young ones. Necromancy is no art to trifle with."

The red light spoke to them; Harry was struck dumb with amazement. He realized suddenly that the scientific part of him, while thrilled at the possibilities, had not truly been expecting many results.

Hermione cleared her throat, and he saw her light bend into a metal chair, her breath quick.

"N-nicolas Flamel?" She whispered hesitantly.

"I confess, I did not expect there to be further adventures after death. I
was quite counting on it being the end. I had already... forgotten, what it feels like to be angry. But I am angry now."

The voice was male, strong, cultured with an unmistakable french accent. It was not old; neither was it young.

This was not a ghost or a spirit. It was not simply a soul with no body, it was a soul that needed no body. It existed beyond the physical realm, in some other place. It was not alive, and it was not dead. It did not exist, but it was here in front of him.

No wonder Cadmus Peverell had been driven mad.

"What is it like?" Harry found his voice, surprised at its strength. He felt like sitting down much as Hermione had, his legs weak. "Death?"

"That is what you choose to ask me first, dark wizard?"

He saw no point in arguing labels. "Yes."

The spirit was still, no sound of breathing, no rustle of clothing. As silent as a statue, a parody of a man.

"I do not have to answer you." There was a hint of surprise in Flamel's voice. "What magic have you wrought here?"

Harry felt his hand tighten around the Stone in his palm.

"We will trade information, then. You tell me about Death, and I'll tell you how you are here."

"And you will send me back." Flamel said. "I find it uncomfortable to be here."

"Alright." Harry agreed, glancing in Hermione's direction. He saw her light jerk in a nod, her voice gaining strength as she answered his unspoken question.

"Okay."
The pure scarlet tones moved, pacing, and Harry hoped Hermione was memorizing everything she saw. Was it a man? Was he young, or old? Was he dressed in modern clothing, or clothing from his time period?

"I will choose to take your word on that." The spirit paused in its movement, and Harry felt its focus fall on him like a cold touch.

"Death is nothing I can put into mundane words. I find it hard to verbalize, in any language I know, the scope of it. It is healing. It is... life. Another life, but in reverse. An unwinding of everything that this life is. I had begun to forget pain, and distrust, and hunger. Only in fleeting moments do I remember agony and sorrow. They are concepts; they are the opposite of what I was becoming. It was going to take a very, very long time for me. But I had lived a very, very long time. I will be dead for centuries before I return as something new."

"Return." Harry breathed, thoughts spinning in a whirlwind, soaking in the information like a desert in the rain.

"Nothing is infinite. Nothing remains in stasis forever." Flamel mused aloud. "Death is not a place you can enter. It has no doors, no walls, no ground below you or sky above you. It is a state of being, a time. I lived for a time, and then I died for a time. Now I am here, where you have summoned me."

"Reincarnation." Harry began. "You are saying that the souls unwind and are reborn."

Flamel hummed and lectured, perhaps as he had lectured many times in his life. "No, and yes. It is hard to understand something that is happening to you while it is happening. I understood this better when I first died; but already I have forgotten many of my years. I talked with others who explained some of it to me, and much I observed myself. Perhaps, as long as you live is as long as you will die. Those taken in their infancy will spend the least time in the other state, because their souls are already pure and innocent and unbroken."

"Unbroken." Harry latched onto the word. "What happens to the broken souls?"
The spirits voice was sad, an elderly grandfather with the voice of a middle-aged man.

"Some make it through, scarred, and are made anew. Others can not; they return as ghosts, if they have enough strength. The rest… are no longer. They have no more time left."

So many questions answered, and yet a thousand more he was eager to ask.

"Is there a limit? To the amount of times one can be reborn? Could I not summon older souls because they have become other people? Living people?"

A flash of scarlet; a raised hand, or a dismissive one?

"I answered your question. Answer mine. I would know what dark path a bright mind like yours has begun to tread."

Frustration rose and was quelled. Harry opened his palm and held out the Resurrection Stone.

"I do not understand how it works, only that it does. The Resurrection Stone, one of the Deathly Hallows. I had hoped to speak to Cadmus Peverell, but the summons failed us. I wanted to know how it was created. I wanted to know how it is indestructible, and why it has begun to manipulate my own soul. I wanted to know if there really is a Master of Death, and what that would mean."

"So many questions. So young, to hold such an old thing. I know of the Hallows, but have never held one." Light reached for the Stone, and pressed against his own, a cold pressure that he could feel but not truly touch, and then it fell away. "And I still can not. This is not life you have given me, but I'm sure you know that as well. What do you hope to gain?"

Harry lowered his head, looking down into white shadows with their scattering of dark stars, all held inside the small form of a gemstone.

"You said it yourself. I want answers to my questions."
"Some things are not meant to be known." Flamel said gently. "Some things are better left a mystery, lost in time."

"Like the Philosopher's Stone?" Harry countered, looking into the spirits solid, pure light. "You never shared its secret."

"I never will, just as I imagine the Peverell brothers never intended to share their own. Those who create things that shame them always seek to cover up that shame, one way or another. If I have learned anything in death, it is that death is a wonderful, necessary thing. I would not seek to escape it again. I only pity those who run from it, who cower in fear from it. We are meant to die, just as we are meant to be born. No one can stop time."

"Is that what the Peverell brothers were doing? They had to create the Hallows together. And the pattern of them... it is like nothing I have ever seen. There is no time, to the Hallows. They are as unchanging as yourself at this moment. They are a solid essence of... something. Something that is trying to make me a mirror of it. I need to know what that something is."

Flamel sighed. "What was left of the Peverell brothers were reborn long before I died. If I ever met them in some other time, I have no memory of it. We all unwind with different speed, but the unwinding itself is inevitable. Those that are old in their death are also very, very young. We lose the recent things first. Impressions, then memories. The feelings are the last to go; I think something is left in us that will always remember the ones we loved, and the ones we hated. As I have said, it is hard to put into words. Everything I have told you is truth; but it is also a very pretty lie."

"It is light and darkness at once." Harry said softly, and was not relieved when the spirit jerked with surprised agreement.

"Yes, exactly! It is the dawn of understanding intertwined with the dark recesses of incomprehension. How do you describe color to the blind? Pain to the insensitive? Sound to the deaf? How do you explain death to the living?"

Blue-violet light rose, coming around the spirit to stand beside him, one warm hand slipping into his own.
"Mr. Flamel. Is it alright if we call for you again? If we wish to speak to you once we have processed... all of this?"

Harry leaned into her solid strength, grateful that she had understood how much the information had sent him reeling.

"When I am here, I remember some of what I have forgotten. It is hard to be here. It is hard to both long to go, and long to stay. You may summon me again; I can not stop you. But I would ask it be brief. I'm not sure what else you could gain from me. I will not give you the formula to my Stone. I am more determined in death to conceal it than I was in life, and that determination was formidable."

"We understand." Hermione soothed. "I am sorry we caused you discomfort."

"I have comfort, my dear, in knowing I won't remember it for much longer."

Harry clenched his own Stone, focused on the spirit in front of them, and spoke softly.

He hadn't been sure going into it how exactly a spirit, if one was summoned, could be dispelled. But he found the answer was simple.

"Goodbye, Nicolas Flamel." And so saying, turned the stone counterclockwise.

The presence did not fade away; it collapsed in on itself, an implosion of spirit, until nothing remained.

"Harry." Hermione said softly, her lips turning to speak in one ear. "Let's eat."

He smiled despite himself when his stomach rumbled.

It said something about life, that one could discover proof of reincarnation, and still be hungry afterwards.

"Yeah. Let's eat."
And with her hand in his, moved towards the door.

"I'm disappointed. Isn't that silly? Everything I have learned, all the new answers and questions. So much more than we could have hoped for. And yet, I'm disappointed."

Hermione ran a hand through Harry's hair gently as he whispered. She lay with her back on the sofa, Harry's body draped over her legs, his head in her lap as they watched the fire burn behind its grate.

"I really did like the idea of talking with Merlin." Hermione agreed, pinpointing with the accuracy of a like mind just what exactly was bothering her friend.

"All the scholars who are long dead. Or even the ones who died little less than a century ago, lost. It was like I had them within my grasp, only for them to slip away. All that knowledge."

She hummed in agreement, gently untangling his wild hair with her fingers, drawing her nails down his scalp until he sighed with pleasure.

"It probably would have been too easy. I pictured us in a room filled with all the dead geniuses of the modern age, solving world hunger and world peace and immortality."

"And warp drive engines and space travel." Harry added, the corners of his lips rising with a smile.

"We can test just how long ago the dead had to die before they have lost their memories." She hesitated, then took a chance. "You might still be able to speak to your parents. They've only been gone a little under two decades."

"I know. I want to, and time is running against me if I wait too long. But... not now. Not yet."

She nodded briskly, and let the subject subside. "Meanwhile, it's time to research everything we can about reincarnation. If I had to pick a world religion to be on the mark about death, Hinduism would not have been my
"first choice."

"It makes me wonder about other things." Harry turned in her arms, green eyes looking up into her face.

Vibrant, beautiful green eyes. Hermione smiled into them, not the least bothered that they were focused firmly on her nose.

"Like what?" She prodded.

"Dementors, for one. Is it possible they were created for a purpose? To find and consume those broken, fragmented souls that manage to avoid death? Maybe even a way to... recycle ghosts?"

Hermione laughed, the mental picture of a garbage truck pulled by ghastly floating dementors flashing through her mind. But she couldn't discard the logic of it.

"If they were, it was a creation that did not stick to its appointed task. I've never heard of dementors going for ghosts, only perfectly normal human beings. They cause unimaginable suffering, as well, even when they do not kill. Seems superfluous."

He let out a sigh, absently rubbing his cheek against her palm.

"Just as likely they were a failed experiment into soul magic. I wouldn't mind destroying them all either way. I hate them."

Hermione knew there were few things Harry truly hated with a passion. She leaned down to place a quick kiss onto his lips.

"We'll add it to the list." She grinned. "Things to accomplish in the next ten years."

"Five years." He scoffed. "Let's be realistic."

They laughed together, and Hermione felt warm and comfortable and content.

She could almost let herself forget the Deathly Hallows completely.
When his light left, Harry wandered back into the now silent, empty living room. He felt as if some of the life of the place went with her, though the happy echo of her presence remained.

"Master? Do yous need anything?" Kreacher questioned softly, and Harry turned to regard the elf with a quick Look.

"No, thank you." The elf, short and spindly, drew away at his words with a slight bow, leaving without question.

He was still a very formal, self-important house-elf, even after the years he had spent with Harry as his master.

Harry sat with a sigh, twisting the ring that had retaken its place on his middle finger, the Stone a black incandescent eye upon the twisted band of gold. He wasn't surprised to feel the presence of the invisibility cloak at his back, the fabric sliding across his shoulders and glimmering like a slice of the night sky.

He didn't remember putting it on from where it had been left in a puddle on the cushion hours earlier, and he was too tired to worry overmuch about it. It was simply there when he wanted it, like the unquestionable force of gravity. One did not have to understand to believe.

"Still a mystery." Harry whispered into the quiet room, the fire dying in its cage, its fuel expended. "My two impossibilities."

And despite himself, he wondered just where the third Hallow was and who bore it, and if that same pulling force of gravity would strive to bring the three items together once again, a complete unit.

He wouldn't look for it. He had other questions that needed answers, other projects to devote his time to. There was the Ministry, and Hermione, and the horcrux.

But he was no longer certain if, faced with the third Hallow, he would be able to turn away and not reach out and take it.

He was just too bloody curious for his own good.
The March meeting of the Wizengamot was pathetically routine. Harry spent the majority of it trying to care about cauldrons, property lines, and proposed fines in lieu of incarceration. The only highlight was when the new house-elf regulations, or more appropriately, the lack of them was presented.

House-elves would no longer be slaves. They would have a choice of when and where to work, a choice to leave if they were not satisfied. They would not be forced to take compensation, but their Master's \textit{would} be forced to offer free time and wages. A family group of elves could not be forcibly separated, and no elf could be made to take a mate and have young against their will.

And best of all, in his opinion, were the new penalties for commanding corporeal punishment for refused commands. No longer would a house-elf have to beat themselves or others for their Master's twisted pleasure.

Vaughn told him that when the vote was called, most heads swiveled in his direction. Only five members refrained from voting. The rest followed him when he raised his hand to signal his positive vote.

Hermione met him outside the doors, her light pulsing with emotion. She flung her arms around him with a giddy laugh.

"We did it! \textit{We did it}!"

He laughed in return, swinging her around in an clumsy embrace that sent them both stumbling.

He heard the pop of cameras and ignored them.

The reporters would take their pictures, but none would approach him. His reputation did have the occasional positive effect.

"We should move on. There's a crowd gathering." Vaughn murmured in their ear, and Harry nodded, walking briskly towards the lifts, Hermione's hand held tight in his own.

He couldn't quite keep the smile from his face.
Hermione stomped through Diagon Alley, the rain a constant angry downpour around her, Fallon splashing along behind through the wet streets.

This time, when they reached the entrance to Knockturn, they didn't pause. She descended the crooked steps rapidly, one hand on her wand, eyes vigilant as she looked for the one store that had answered her owls with something other than nonsense or flat-out rebuttal when she asked after the Mirror of Erised.

She found the store, it's dingy sign only saying Crup, above the symbol of it's namesake, the devilish tail of the magical canine circling across the wood in an exaggerated serpentine motion.

Hermione ignored Fallon's soft curses as she pulled open the door. She had sworn this would be the only stop, a simple in-and-out trip that would be kept under a half-hour. She had also sworn she would never enter this particular Alley again, a promise she doubted she could keep forever.

But she had been sincere when she promised him, at least.

The store was dark, dank, and exactly what she expected. Scuffed wooden floors, with cluttered shelves of dubious artifacts resting precariously upon them. The only window was boarded over, not even the palest ray of the late afternoon sun shining through. The storefront was instead lit by a few sparse candles in ornate gold and one pitted silver candelabra that rested beside a equally pitted silver dining set.

The young man behind the counter, however, did not look like the Mr. Brendon she expected to find manning a desk that looked in need of at least a hundred repairing spells.

She never understood how a world that had cleaning and repairing charms at the flick of a wrist could still be dirty and semi-demolished.

"May I help you?" The man's eyes weren't focused on her, but on Fallon, his accent foreign. He was bald, so smoothly shaven a hair removal potion must have been used.
That would also explain the disturbing lack of eyebrows. Perhaps the potion had been *accidental*.

Hermione stepped into his line of sight.

She was on a time limit, after all. No time for niceties.

*As if this place warranted it.*

"I'm looking for Mr. Brendon."

Eyes that looked black in the low light fixed on her, the iris' indistinguishable from the pupils. The man was pale; *too* pale. And his face had deep shadows in the candlelight.

"I'm Mr. Brendon."

Cultured, idle tones, perhaps even bored.

*He's a bloody vampire,* Hermione realized in fascination, the facts pieced together into one unquestionable conclusion. *I'm talking to a vampire!* *Harry would kill to be here!*

At that thought, she felt a pang of guilt. Harry *wasn't* here, because she wanted to go alone. She wanted to do this for him. If she could only find the blasted *Mirror.*

"Okay." Hermione answered, and could practically *feel* Fallon's disapproval at her back. The ex-auror hadn't known they would be talking to a vampire, either. While the beings were not exactly *required* to register with the Ministry, they were usually monitored anyway. If Fallon hadn't know Mr. Brendon was a dark creature, it was because the man was either new to the Alley, or had managed to successfully avoid Ministry employees.

Considering any known Ministry employee walking into Knockturn Alley alone was an instant target for every ghoul, hag, and criminal, she was leaning towards the later.

"You sent me a reply about the Mirror of Erised. You said you had information."
The man smiled, and she didn't known whether she actually saw the hint of pointed canines or if her mind was playing tricks on her. He reclined slightly in his chair, the movement all liquid grace. "We do indeed. For a price of course. Nothing, as they say, is free."

Hermione nodded briskly, fishing out the leather drawstring bag from her damp cloak. It clanked with coins when she tossed it onto the counter.

"Nothing worthwhile is free." She agreed, projecting as much confidence as she could muster. While twenty-five galleons was not a large sum, it was also not in any way small. She could buy several large magical books for that, easily. It should be more than enough for a simple conversation about an artifact no one, it seemed, wanted.

It was also nearly all the magical coin she had on hand without visiting the bank and touching her savings, then converting the mundane money through the goblins. She really didn't like the way they sneered at her when she did so.

She didn't see the bag being taken; but one second it was there, the next, gone. For the first time, she felt a shiver of fear go down her spine.

The man's polite smile didn't falter, but she swore she saw his eyes gleam brighter. Was it true that vampires could smell fear?

"How lovely." He spoke, gaze swinging between herself and Fallon. "You did not bring Lord Potter?"

Hermione lifted her chin. "The Mirror of Erised." She stated pointedly.

This time, when he grinned, she knew she saw teeth that were just slightly too sharp.

"Yes, of course. We do not remember her exact name, they tend to run together after the years pass by." He tapped long fingers on the wood in front of him. "But she was a charms professor, of Hogwarts. White hair, and carried it so very beautifully. We appreciate those who age with grace."

He had an odd way of speaking, nosism if she wasn't mistaken. She did
not know if that was something inherent in Vampires, unique to him, or maybe it wasn't nosism at all, and more than one person ran the store. Fallon mumbled something behind her that she didn't quite catch; but Mr. Brendon, apparently, did, for his constant smile temporarily disappeared.

"She bought the mirror to study at her school, and as far as our knowledge goes, it still remains there. We heard of an attempted sale a decade later of the enchanted mirror by the current Headmaster, but the Ministry labeled the artifact dangerous due to a couple… unfortunate accidents. No one in the community who possessed the valid permits to acquire it cared to do so. It simply wasn't interesting enough to warrant the hassle or the expense." Another quick smile, another hint of fang. "The Ministry does love to take its share of the profits of any class three and higher objects. Raises the price."

_Hogwarts_. Finally a lead! She glanced at Fallon, to see the wizard staring grimly at the vampire with severe focus.

Did he actually expect an attack? Vampires, in reality, rarely attacked anyone, mostly because they would receive no defense or second chance from the Ministry. The first offense landed the attacker shoved outside in solid daylight, no more questions asked. They instead paid, and paid well, to feed from any willing witch or wizard who needed some quick cash in exchange for a pint of their blood.

"Thank you, Mr. Brendon."

She began to turn, and paused when the vampire spoke.

"We are most interested in Lord Potter's future plans. This business with the house-elves… it makes us ask ourselves. If creatures such as those are blessed with his defense against Ministry regulations, what about the rest of us?"

It was spoken in the same idle, bored tone, but she caught the hint of true interest behind it.

Hermione squared her shoulders, made herself smile and meet his black eyes.
"Everybody deserves to be treated fairly."

His smile was wide, pale thin lips parting to reveal the monster inside.

"We agree, Hermione Granger. Let it be so."

She shivered when she stepped aside; only just realizing how over-warm the *Crup* had been. The rain still poured down the Alley, running in rivers now across its cobblestones. Fallon shuffled up beside her.

"Quickly, now. We've been here too long."

"Not even half an hour." She protested, but was silenced by his dark look.

"An hour, maybe more. Time moves… differently, with those monsters."

She couldn't believe it, until she realized that the Alley was darker now because the sun had finally set, the gloom that crepted in every crevice a more natural darkness.

"How?" She hadn't read of that phenomenon in her books. Surely it would have been documented.

She matched her guard step for step as they trotted through the narrow streets, splashing through puddles that contained grime whose substance she didn't want to consider too hard.

"Not always, not a lot most times. But with the old ones, and in one of their lairs… they decide how quickly things pass. It is not they who move quickly, but their magic that is able to slow down your own responses. A short range, moderate stasis charm, in effect."

"When he took the coins." Hermione guessed, and saw his head jerk in a nod underneath his cloak.

"And at other times."

"I didn't notice." Hermione mumbled, disconcerted. She was proud of her skills of observation.
"Most don’t. They are regulated for a reason, missy. They’re dangerous."

"Everyone has the capacity for violence." Hermione retorted, wishing they were anywhere else for this conversation than in a dark alley that she now knew was home to at least one vampire.

"Not everyone lives off human blood." Fallon had her there.

She saw the entrance to Diagon up ahead, and began to relax.

Which was, of course, when her luck finally ran out.

Fergus Fallon had not spent forty years with the Aurors without encountering dark creatures of nearly every kind. Not a few of those encounters had been in Knockturn Alley, which was notorious for its denizens bad habit of robbing, threatening, raping, and even killing those hapless enough to pass through without proper precautions.

Every few years or so, one Minister or another would decide to "clean" the Alley. They would arrest several dozen, wound a few more dozen, and for a few weeks, even months, the place would be habitable. But inevitably the criminals of the wizarding world trickled back into their old haunts, and the illegal dealings ramped up again.

Fergus expected trouble. He expected trouble anytime he accompanied either his employer or Miss Granger. It was a trait that made for a good bodyguard. Whether the expectation was warranted or not, it was a given. And with a high profile wizard like Harry Potter, he had not doubted for a moment that it was only a matter of time before someone got it into their head to seek revenge, or notoriety, by threatening or even attacking him.

He hadn't expected it so soon. Lord Potter had a reputation, one that leaned towards inspiring fear in the general populace.

But Hermione Granger was not the Blind Sorcerer. And they had been in the Alley long enough for word to spread of their presence.

The spell came from ahead and to the right. Another from behind. Miss Granger was no slouch in the wand work department, and he gave her
credit for raising a relatively strong shield charm at the oncoming jinx. He whirled to protect their rear, hating the narrow Alley and all of its nooks and crannys that could hold an army of potential enemies.

"Keep moving, like we've discussed." He stated calmly, and she began to walk steadily forward, her shield moving with her.

More spellfire. He catalogued the color and shape of each one, standard binding spells and borderline-dark magic, nothing fatal. They were either being warned, lead into a trap, or only targeted for a robbery or kidnapping rather than assassination.

With the din of the storm, he could not hear the intonation of their curses, nor see clearly enough to pinpoint their location. They would simply shield until they reached the safety of Diagon and its crowds.

"Fallon." Her voice was calm, steady, but a warning nonetheless. He glanced ahead, and saw the dark robed figure blocking their path as their progress forward stopped.

_Bloody hell._ Lord Potter would fire him for certain.

"Look who we have here." It was a woman's voice, cheerful. "Two birdies who don't belong. Wouldn't the two of you look nice with my collection? Yes?"

A voice behind them agreed with the same cheerful tone. "Yes!"

The robed woman laughed. "And what a royal bird! How would the so-called Sorcerer feel when we take his little bird? Would he come pay us a visit, you think?"

"Oh yes!" The other agreed. Fallon calculated his chances of disarming them. Only two of them, that he could see.

"Would he pay us? Threaten us? Does he care for you, little bird? Does he like his little mudblood _whore_?"

Miss Granger stiffened, her shield lighting the Alley with soft gold light. Her voice, when she spoke, was cold with finality.
"He would just kill you."

The women shifted in silence for a moment. Fallon felt that silence down to his bones, and wondered if Granger was trying to scare them into scattering, or simply stating the truth. He wondered for the hundredth time just who exactly Vaughn had talked him into working for. He was getting too old for this.

The pay sure had been great while it lasted, though.

The woman ahead laughed, but it was not as cheerful as before.

"He wouldn't have the bollocks! Little spoiled brat who thinks he's a Lord."

There was a hiss; Fergus felt it more than heard it.

It was dark, liquid, happy. The sigh of a predator whose teeth had sank into meat fresh and warm and thrashing with life.

He knew that sound, had seen the aftermath of its carnage.

"Run!" Fergus demanded, pushing the surprised girl ahead of him into a stumbling run, even as the robed woman ahead let out a scream of rage.

"Julia!"

Her spells, when they came, were not aimed at Fergus and Miss Granger. Fergus did not look back as they passed her by, Diagon Alley steps away.

He heard her scream cut off; heard that hissing sigh of pleasure once again.

Miss Granger jumped the last steps into the other Alley, the throngs of passing wizards giving them only a brisk glance.

A voice came to them from the shadows of Knockturn, soft and cajoling.

"One favor for another. Let it be so."

Miss Granger began to turn back, and Fergus took her elbow in an iron
grip, pulling her with him towards the crowds and the light and the humanity that was far less likely to kill them, one way or another, growling curses into the night.

"Bloody, cursed, despicable monsters."

Harry paused at the end of the driveway leading up to Privet Drive, a habit formed years ago before he even understood and questioned what it was he saw.

Before, when he was young, the wards over the Dursley's house had been thin bands of strong emerald light, a cage-like grid that was easily seen through to the greater shadowy sky above. They had always been there; and when he questioned why his own home and a few select others bore such domes, there had been no easy answer found. He had speculated about natural rhythms of energy, or even some sort of gas leak.

Later, in his teenage years, he had known it must have been some sort of ward created by his wizarding mother, to protect the only family she had left. It was good, then, that the Dursley's had never moved.

But such a thin, fragile ward whose exact purpose the ward-makers had been unable to define would not suit his family now. He had needed wards strong enough to hold several wizards at bay for a long enough time that his family could seek help. He had paid dearly for those wards to be created, and considered the investment more than worth it.

Harry had taken the Minister's warning seriously. He was a celebrity in the wizarding world; and more now, a wealthy member of the government. There would be those who would want to harm him and his family, including even the Granger's, with multiple different motivations.

So now, the wards that Number Four Privet Drive blazed with golden light influenced by the fading emerald sheen of his mother's previous wards. A place that would always be his home in some form, as long as his family lived there.

And he would protect that home any way he knew how.
Which was why he spent a moment to look over those wards carefully, looking for any outside influence or chink in its armor, before he moved on, approaching the house with methodical steps, his staff held loosely in one hand.

He saw the bright souls of the privately hired guards underneath a thin veil of magical power, meant to cloak them from normal sight. They stood off to the side, one angled toward the street, the other away.

Harry ignored their presence as he had on his other routine visits back to his Aunt and Uncle's house for dinner, approaching the door which swung wide open before he could raise a hand to knock.

"Harry! Come in!" And so saying, his aunt grabbed one arm and yanked him inside, in a manner he was very unaccustomed to.

Harry stumbled into the hall, gaping in surprise as his normally prim and proper aunt slammed the door closed behind them with a satisfied grunt.

"Harry."

A fervent whisper. Harry leaned forward, frowning, as his aunt's soul flickered with emotion.

"Now, Harry. I am not one to complain. Especially since you insist on paying for all the… security measures, and such."

His aunt and uncle had not been happy with his insistence. Both of the necessity of it, and of the fact that he wanted to pay for it out of the Potter Vault. But as far as Harry was concerned, the Dursleys were at risk because of him, so it was his responsibility to pay to prevent that risk.

"But these wizards… well, they just… they act like Mrs. Hutchinson before her husband left her."

Mrs. Hutchinson. If Harry remembered her correctly, the older woman had lived two doors down and been the community fashion-watcher. About as snooty as the upper middle class could possibly be, and part of the reason his aunt had been so concerned that Harry always be dressed to perfection when he stepped outside the door.
Heaven forbid his clothes be mismatched. His aunt would have a telephone call before he even reached the playground.

"How so, exactly?" Harry asked hesitantly, speaking in a low tone in natural mimicry of his aunt's fervent one.

She whispered back, hands of jam purple wringing together absently with flexes of color.

"Well… it's nothing specific. Just... a tone. I've tried to ignore it, Harry. But I keep getting the feeling that we're being treated like particularly intelligent animals."

Harry froze, a tremor of anger running through his blood. He knew the guards were purebloods. It had been hard enough to find trained security at all outside of the auror force, and of those few knew anything at all about the muggle world.

The current rotation between the Granger and Dursley households had been one of his last options, and the only ones willing to 'babysit' a group of muggles. Better than nothing, but he hadn't imagined they would be so transparent about how they felt about their guard duty.

After all, they were getting paid, and paid well. The least they could do was be professional.

"I'll see what I can do."

Petunia sniffed at his answer, then patted him quickly on the shoulder.

"I can handle some uppity men. I just thought you should be aware if I lose my temper."

His aunt losing her temper could mean several things, none of which would be good if targeted at a prejudiced magical user. Harry's frown deepened, but he allowed himself to be lead into the dining room, where the smell of food greeted him before he was even pushed down into a chair.

"Dudley not coming home this weekend?"
His aunt returned from the kitchen, then jumped with a startled shriek as a
loud pop echoed through the room, right on the heels of a vibrant yellow
swirl of color.

"Kreacher apologizes to Master's family." The house-elf began with swift
formality, a bow performed with rote perfection. "Master, Miss Hermione
and Mr. Fallon wait at Grimmauld Place. There is an altercation, though no
harm is done."

Harry stood as swiftly as he had sat, already holding out one hand as he
sent his aunt an apologetic smile.

"I'm packing you a portion." She warned, a hand waving him away. "So you
best come back and tell me what happened when you get it."

"Of course." Harry smiled, though worry was growing in his stomach at the
thought of what Kreacher would classify as an 'altercation'.

A bony hand grasped his own, and yellow magic rose to squeeze him
away.

"My fault, sir."

Amazon green light, blazing out of a figure that stood tall and proud in the
center of the Grimmauld Place living room.

"No, it's *m-mine.*" Blue-violet light demanded in return. "I'm the one who
wanted to go down there. I'm the one who didn't know about vampire's
time-manipulative abilities, or I would have left as soon as I realized."

Harry wondered if there was something wrong with him, that he felt a pang
at having missed out on that experience. Was it truly manipulating time, or
simply slowing down the life force of another person? Could vampires
affect life force, as he could? What did a vampire's pattern *look* like? The
dark beings were few and far between, and nearly impossible to find.
While it was illegal to actually *kill* them, that was about as far as the
Ministry would go, and the punishment for breaking the rules only an
extravagant fine.
"It's my fault, sir." Fallon stated firmly again.

Or perhaps it was an aura vampires put out, part of their own magical force, that would weaken or slow the physiological and neurological responses of potential prey. Did that mean, to vampires, that the entire world moved at a slower rate?

No, time for them would still move at the same speed. He could only conclude that, when they used this aura, it only seemed like the other people moved very, very slowly.

That would get boring. No wonder there were not any documented cases. If used sparingly, it would only seem that vampires moved extremely fast, not that the observers themselves moved slow.

"If you insist it's your fault, then that means us getting out of that situation is also your fault. We're equal in that case, and you don't have to be ridiculous about taking responsibility for it."

Hermione, logical as always, stomped one foot with a solid thump for emphasis. Deep green light let out a weary sigh.

Harry figured they had probably already argued this same conversation the entire wait at Grimmauld Place.

"I allowed us to get into a situation that was manipulated by a half-human creature. No doubt, this Mr. Brendon kept us longer on purpose, just so he could appear to rescue us, putting us in his debt. A debt he no doubt intends to collect not from either of us, but from Lord Potter...."

"Harry." Harry protested. He hated being called a Lord by people he considered friends, even if one of them was, technically, an employee.

Fallon continued, unheeded. "...so that he can push the vampiric agenda into the light of the Wizengamot once more. This is just the sort of thing I was hired to prevent."

Hermione paced, her light flashing in agitation.

"And maybe it should be! It is horrible that the only rules protecting
vampires, and werewolves too far that matter, are simple lines of legal rigmarole saying *don't kill them, but if you do, we'll forgive you!*"

Harry stood, holding a hand out to gain their attention, waiting what he thought an appropriate time for their eyes to come to him.

"Fallon. I don't blame you for this, so get that out of your mind. You did exactly what I hired you to do. Not every situation is in your ability alone to manipulate. Hermione. You didn't know there was a vampire there. You didn't, and still don't, know his motives. So both of you, stop fighting about who did what when. I'm just glad you got out in one piece."

And he was glad. Very, very much so.

Hermione moved to him, one soft blue-violet hand taking his own. "I found what I was looking for. I'm going to try to get it tomorrow, then I'll tell you everything."

"As long as it's not in Knockturn." Harry said with a grin.

"I promise." She said vehemently. "I don't want to ever go there again unless it's very important."

Fallon let out a sound of extreme annoyance. Harry laughed.

It was times when he wished to pass unnoticed that he most regretted his inability to use invisibility charms, or even use the Cloak for its true purpose.

He hadn't yet figured out how to see beyond magical barriers as he could now, to some extent, see beyond physical ones. They still blinded his sight with their own magical pattern, which rendered him blind in truth.

So, in the interest of passing as unnoticed as possible, Harry wore a dark hood low over his face, and entered Knockturn Alley at the witching hour of three o'clock in the morning, when few if any wizards still lurked in Diagon to speculate at his presence.

He still had his phoenix staff, but it at least he could cloak with charms. He
hadn't yet spent the time to go to Ollivanders to commission a new one for the Ministry assignments.

"This is a mistake." Vaughn murmured at his back, as he had several times before.

Depending on the way one looked at it, it could be a mistake. Harry preferred to label it a risky field experiment. He simply couldn't wait to meet a vampire and draw his own conclusions.

Did they truly have no soul, as the books speculate? Werewolves possessed one, as did Veela and every other semi-human creature. House-elves, while not holding obvious uniquely colored souls that faded at death, did seem to have a different sort of pattern unique to them as an individual, something he attributed to them being an entirely different species that could not reproduce with human-kind.

He had a theory that the house-elf form of magical reproduction passed along their soul-pattern onto any offspring, a type of purposeful DNA encoding that might even allow memories or experiences to be inherited. It was fascinating, really.

But vampires. Details were sketchy about them in the books he had read. Several wizards had lived among them at times throughout history; one even calling himself a blood-brother. Vampires were able to mate with human-kind, as evidenced by the documented half-human Lorcan.

No one would specifically say whether pureblooded vampires were created or born. Harry hoped to discover something of that when he finally saw one.

After all, it was obvious that werewolves were humans first, their original patterns tainted with lupine scars.

Would he see something similar in vampires?

He had to know. He couldn't stop himself from questioning, and when questioning, seeking answers. Even if those answers lay down Knockturn Alley, which was in no way as uninhabited as Diagon Alley at that late, or
perhaps early, hour.

Colors streamed by in rivers of light. He recognized werewolves and hags and goblins, half-humans by the score, witches and wizards with broken patterns scattered about like desecrated altars to dark magic. None seemed to pause at his presence; doubtless, as Vaughn had reluctantly attested, he simply looked like yet another denizen of the Alley.

No one would enter Knockturn Alley at this hour by accident. No one sane would enter who did not have relative assurance of their ability to handle themselves.

"Here it is." Vaughn murmured, and Harry saw only another wooden building among a dozen others, its purple bones speaking to a strong stone foundation. Wards glimmered on its eaves and doors and windows, nothing more grand or special than a dozen others they had passed.

His guard led the way, bangladesh green that seemed somehow purer among the other wizards they passed, if only because it was unbroken. The air inside the store Hermione had visited the day before was oddly warm and dry, carrying a scent he attributed to dusty bookstores. Old things lay inside here, he could tell, even if all he saw where colors and patterns in unrecognizable shapes, many imbued with strong magic.

A person was inside, an orange color that was streaked through with black along jagged breaks in his or her pattern.

This was someone who was, no doubt, addicted to magic that required acts of extreme cruelty or violence. Acts that made a person into a monster.

But this monster was human.

Vaughn was a solid blue-green shield between him and the other, who flickered along the shelves with questing hands, the guard stiff, his colors vibrating with intensity.

"May we be of service?"

The voice drifted to them from the depths of the store, cultured tones
oddly melodic.

The orange-black soul jerked, tensed, and muttered a negative response in nearly unintelligible words that he could not identify as male or female, before moving towards the door in an awkward shuffle.

Harry watched the broken pattern leave, even as he scanned for the origin of the voice.

When Vaughn did not move, Harry stepped around him, heading deeper into the store.

When Vaughn did not follow him, he knew something was wrong.

"What did you do to him?" Harry asked into the warm empty air, feeling it swirl and move against his skin as something entered.

Something. Some thing. For a moment, he stared, equally repulsed and fascinated.

It bore a human pattern. It even bore a soul-color, though not a shade he had ever seen among humans.

Black, as black as the shadow-light in the Deathly Hallows, so black it made the exact angles of what made it live hard to distinguish by itself. It was only visible against the green light of wood behind and below it, a living shadow. And threaded through it, as repulsive as any dementor, ran the chaotic multicolored hues of another being's life force.

A dementor was muddy brown with the life it took; a vampire, it seemed, was black. One ate souls, another ate life. He was no longer sure where the line between monster and man was.

"Nothing to harm him." The man's voice was young, but normal. Nothing but his soul spoke to him being anything more than a person. His scent, what Harry could gather of it, was not even abnormal. Lavender, perhaps. Some flower. Not even a hint of the coppery taint of blood.

Harry observed Vaughn's presence; and saw, unmistakably, how the life that had been flickering with adrenaline was now beating slowly, so slowly
he would think at first glance Vaughn had fallen asleep.

Maybe he was. Maybe Vampires simply had the power to put their enemies into waking dreams.

"You want to speak to me." Harry said his conclusion with careful words. He had deduced the vampire had no desire to harm him, and considered it already proven correct. If Mr. Brendon wanted him dead, he could have killed him already.

"We do." Black drew closer, close enough that Harry saw that it was mainly purple and blue tones that ran through his soul, two distinct patterns that the vampire must have fed from recently. "We wish representation."

Harry had expected as much; had been warned of that fact by Scrimgeour months before. He had rather thought werewolves might approach him first, though. Public opinion was less horrified by a once-a-month monster than a daily one, not to mention that there were probably a hundred times more werewolves than vampires.

"You think you can get that from me?"

The vampire hissed; it was a laugh, maybe, and the first inhuman sound the being had made. Harry saw abruptly that the vampire had no hair; no spikes of color dancing over the forehead as most people he saw had. Did their bodies not grow it? If so, did they have no nails, either? Or was it merely part of vampire culture? Or simply this particular vampires preference?

"Yesss. If the Blind Sorcerer speaks for us, the wizards will listen."

"They might not act, however." Harry returned.

"Maybe not, maybe so. We wish to live unhunted. We wish to be free."

"It's a crime to kill vampires."

"It's a crime only when it's enforced." The man spat. "We have lost children to the fire."
Harry felt the vampire’s energy press upon him, warm dry heat. He would have thought vampires would be cold.

"People fear what they do not understand. Your species hides, barely any information has been published. Enough to recognize you, enough to… guard against you."

Garlic, for one, was highly allergic to them. He was curious why.

"For our own protection. We hide ourselves as all magicals hide from the muggles. To prevent conflict. But we are tired of hiding."

Harry could understand both sentiments. And in this one, he happened to agree with the vampires.

His mind raced, even as he looked again over the pattern across from him, representing so many unanswered questions.

"Can you see the life-force in another person?" Harry asked abruptly. "Is that how you can slow down a target?"

Mr. Brendon hesitated, made the sound of a tongue clicking against teeth.

"No. We feel it, like the sensation of rain against the skin. Some people storm more than others. We… can calm that storm."

"Fascinating." Harry breathed. "Is it unpleasant? To feel this?"

"Sometimes. Crowded areas, the very young, the very powerful."

"What about me?" Harry asked again, both surprised at the quick answers and more than willing to take advantage of them.

"You rumble with thunder. We would know to taste you would be to feel the burn of your life like the strike of lightning. It would be horrible, and wonderful. We could live a year off your strength."

Harry supposed, from a vampire, that was a compliment.

"So the most benefit comes from drinking those who are most unpleasant"
to taste." He concluded with a nod.

"If one is old enough, stubborn enough, to withstand the pain." Mr. Brendon acknowledged.

The silence grew, and Harry looked back at Vaughn, before staring into the black.

"I won't represent vampires until I know I'm not advocating for a species that has a genetic predilection for mutilation or killing. I will need to know why you are what you are, and how you live. I studied house-elves for years before I approached the Wizengamot on their behalf, and they do not have the reputation vampires do."

Another hiss; this one pleased.

"We will do this thing. We have already agreed."

Harry felt a thrill of excitement mingled with dread.

"Why do you always speak in plural?"

Harry felt the air shift, saw a black hand rise towards him, its veins highlighted with another patterns life.

"We live off of others. We are never alone, never... singular. We are always made of someone else."

So many questions. Harry could spend a month simply asking them. But there was not yet time.

"I have to get other things in order before I can begin. Will you wait? Another year, maybe?"

Harry heard the smile in the pleased hiss that echoed in the store.

"We are made of waiting."

Harry smiled at that statement; both an answer, and a warning. All waiting must, eventually, come to an end.
Then, with a beat of his heart, he took Vaughn's life and awakened it, the wizard not faltering even a second as his light began to vibrate once more with tension.

Much like a thunderstorm, Harry could see now. The physical tension in the air similar indeed to the sensation of building electricity.

Muggles still did not know *exactly* where and when lightning would strike. They could hypothesize; they could even be *certain*. Fulminology could speak of electric discharges and stripped electrons, the dozens of types of strikes, the triggers, the particles.

But no one could say for certain where and when it would strike. Unpleasant indeed.

The vampire hissed again, moving a distance from them both, footsteps falling softly, and Harry turned his back on the being and moved to the door.

Perhaps the ability to slow life was also developed in self-defense, not merely as a way to trap prey.

Vaughn opened the door, the man's wand a slash of red phoenix in his hand.

Harry made sure his hood was pulled low as he stepped out into the street.

He now had yet another thing to add to his ever-growing list of goals.

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~ To Be Continued in: A Maroon Mix of Metal and Magic~

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~*~Review Please!~*~
It did not occur to her until she was halfway up the steps leading into Hogwarts that it was the week for the magical school’s exams.

It was such an odd, random thought. Her own exams were not for another month, and she had never taken exams at Hogwarts, but she remembered clearly reading her first class schedule of her first year, the week of exams highlighted in bold underscore.

She had been excited, especially then, at the thought of proving herself. She loved exams, loved the mental test of them, the tenacity it took to come out on top. Each exam was proof of her own self-worth; proof that she deserved the gifts she had been born with.

That fervor had faded, a little, in the last years. She had other things in her life that built her confidence. She did not have to see a high score to know she was brilliant.

But she hadn’t forgotten. If things had been different, this week would have been the week she took her N.E.W.T.s. She would be graduating from Hogwarts with her peers, prepared to move onto a job or apprenticeship of her choosing.

Instead, she was preparing to enter a medical program at a mundane college, while taking select N.E.W.T.s at the Ministry-given exams to gain entrance into a basic Healer or Potion apprenticeship.

She never would have imagined the life she lead would have been hers. Not when she entered Hogwarts bright-eyed for the Sorting, and not when she left it broken and battered from the troll.
Hermione turned towards the Headmistress' office, the empty halls echoing with her footsteps. She was alone; knowing she would be apparating straight to the edge of the warded grounds, she had seen little purpose to bringing Fallon along with her. It felt odd, being alone. Even the students were gone, in one class or another.

*Who took over transfiguration classes when McGonagall took the Headmistress position?*

Hermione paused at the entrance to the Head Office, the large gargoyles that guarded the entrance raised back in mid-flight, the passageway open.

Headmaster Dumbledore never left the passageway open. It appeared McGonagall didn't feel the same way.

She jogged up the stairs, coming to the simple wooden door, where she knocked briskly.

When she opened the door, she expected surprise. She hadn't owled ahead, after all, too impatient to wait a day longer for the post to arrive.

She should have known better. No one could enter Hogwarts' grounds now without an alarm somewhere being raised.

Hogwarts was not the same school as it had been when she resided there. She was a much more guarded fortress under McGonagall's lion eyes.

"Miss Granger. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

The witch's gaze was a mixture of kindness and curiosity. Hermione had always respected the Head of her House.

"I hope I'm not bothering you."

The witch waved a hand in dismissal. "I find I have more time at this job than I ever did as a Head and professor. Most tasks are delegated."

Hermione nodded, and sat when prompted, her hands winding together as she went over the rehearsed question in her mind.
"Headmistress. I'm looking for a particular artifact, one that was said to reside here at Hogwarts. The Mirror of Erised. Have you heard of it?"

The woman's face dropped into a frown.

"I have. It's kept hidden, for the student's safety. What need do you have for it?"

Hermione leaned back in her chair, prepared. "I'm researching the longevity of various spelled inanimate objects. How any ward structures or charms might fragment or fade over time, especially as the object travels and interacts with multiple people. The Mirror of Erised is unique, and yet also fairly benign. I figure it would make a good test subject for a brief period of time."

The Headmistress raised a brow.

"Fairly benign? It's been responsible for more than a couple deaths, and several suicide attempts. You do know what it does?"

Hermione nodded briskly.

"I have read what information has been written on it. It shows a person's greatest desire, regardless of the possibility of ever possessing it. There will be safeguards in place to protect me and anyone else who looks into the Mirror."

McGonagall looked down, idly rearranging the objects on her desk as she spoke.

"I do not see why the Mirror can not be studied, but I would feel better if the Mirror remained on Hogwarts grounds, and any use of it monitored by a member of my staff. Is this acceptable?"

Hermione bit her lip, thoughts spinning. This might be the only mirror in existence charmed to reflect some portion of a person's hopes, and if Harry's greatest desire was to see the horcrux reflected so he could remove it...

Harry would know, with one look, whether it would be helpful. And if it was,
Harry could be done in a matter of moments.

It might leave a confusing situation to explain to whomever was observing them, but it would be worth it to be rid of the horcrux once and for all.

"Yes, thank you very much, Headmistress McGonagall."

"Not at all, Miss Granger. Hogwarts owes you very much, more than we can repay. Owl me when you would like to schedule your visit."

"The day after tomorrow, if possible." Hermione quickly said. "On Sunday afternoon."

The witch smiled.

"Very well. Please consider staying for the evening meal. We would be delighted to hear about your future plans. You were one of my best students, for a time."

Hermione kept her own smile through pure force of will.

*For a time.*

"I'll think about it."

*Not in this lifetime.*

Harry moved as swiftly as he was capable, sweat slicking his skin with uncomfortable warmth.

He detested the Ministry training for many reasons, not the least of which was the simple physical training. He was expected to be physically fit, and that meant he was expected to lift weights, to run on the wizard's version of a treadmill, and to go through a series of self-defense movements.

It was nothing fancy, or even advanced. Wizards relied heavily on their magical ability to solve their problems. But there were some creatures whose magic resistance necessitated a certain level of creativity to be able to defeat them, and getting out of breath during a duel was a quick way to
"Stamina, Gryff." Aethonan called testily, her voice stern. "It doesn't matter how strong your magic is if you have no energy to cast the most basic of spells."

Four months of their training. They had stopped trying to trick him with book work and complex facts. Duels were swift and rote, mere practice to learn how Winged Horse worked as a team. Instead, Aethonan, the captain of the quartet, had found the one chink in his armor.

He was physically weak. In his defense, he had never needed to be particularly strong in that arena.

Aethonan had wanted to give him the codename Unicorn. She had thought it hilarious to name him after a pretty, delicate creature. Granian had voted for Hippogriff, a winged creature that was half horse and half eagle. The slender man had liked the irony.

"They're testy, too, quite Lord-like. Always insisting people bow and scrape to them."

The name had stuck and become official. Harry didn't bother to argue the finer points of his disguise, just as he hadn't bothered arguing when he purchased the standard uniform of armored Graphorn skin, a thick heavy garment that had to weigh at least a solid stone and gleamed with radiant purple-brown light. Everything but his eyes were covered when he wore it; it was a stifling hot uniform that made him bless the existence of cooling charms.

He had only baulked at getting a new staff, but even in that he had given in to logic. Ollivander had not been fazed at his request, and provided a plain staff of solid oak with a single dragon heartstring core, both ends of the wood capped with strands of purple metal.

It wasn't as powerful as his phoenix staff, nor as attuned to him, but it would suffice as a focus.

"Enough. You're hopeless." Aethonan spoke, but her voice held a tremor of
amusement. Harry only cast one glance into her blue light before he let himself crumple to the floor.

"You need to stretch, partner. Little pain now, less pain later." The words came from one of the two new members of Winged Horse, a large man with a deep mahogany light who claimed the title of Abraxan. He had a thick accent, his words spoken in carefully tutored English.

Harry liked Abraxan. The man was not as rigidly aggressive as Aethonan was, nor as distantly polite as Granian. The two veterans did not open their hands eagerly to embrace new friendships.

Knowing what he did of their previous partners, he understood. It would not be easy to call new faces by old, loved names.

"Leave him alone, Axe. Let fools suffer." The feminine voice was overly cheerful, her approach a clumsy stumble that sent her to land as a heap on the floor beside him. "I gladly plan to do so myself, thank you very much for asking."

The title of Thestral did not suit her at face value. She was as far from drab and depressing as a soul could come. Her light was bright orange, her attitude playful. She was not scary or intimidating, but so friendly it almost hurt to not be able to learn who she was and why she had chosen a Hit Wizard squad and their rigid, secretive discipline.

But on a closer look, the name Thestral worked very well. The skeletal horses were, after all, invisible to anyone who had not seen death. And the young woman whose soul was so bright had a pattern of only loose humanity, its angles not quite solid, what should be square more often circular.

A metamorphmagus. When he had first been introduced to her, Harry had been tempted to kidnap the girl to run a battery of tests on the rare phenomenon. He was still planning a sufficient bribe to lure her to his laboratory.

He just couldn't figure out how much of her personality was genuine, and how much of it was a mask just as the form she had chosen to take that
day was another kind of disguise.

"Look at you three, cuddling on the floor. Is it bonding time?"

Aethonan's voice was like a sharp flick of a whip. Abraxan and Thestral sprang to their feet in quick response.

Harry rose more slowly, taking his time. He was more glad than ever that he was only a civilian specialist. He could get away with just about anything but incompetence.

"Hippogriff. Come with me."

He saw the two souls next to him relax minutely; only to jump again when Granian barked for their attention.

He left to the sounds of their mutual groans.

"They've guessed who you are, you know." Aethonan spoke calmly as she poured liquid into a glass that she placed in front of him, before walking around to sit behind the desk in her cramped office.

"Hard to hide it." Harry returned, reaching for the glass. A quick sniff told him it was firewhiskey, and he frowned at the choice.

It was early for hard liquor.

"Don't frown. I deserve it, after working with trainees all morning."

Speaking, she took a long swallow, Harry observing how the liquid pattern of light blues was consumed by her own deeper blue light.

It was beautiful, in its own way.

"You'll make a girl blush, Lord Potter, when you stare so." Her voice was amused again, and Harry warded off his own flush of embarrassment with the ease of practice.

Aethonan liked getting a rise out of him, one way or another. If he showed
any weakness, she would only take advantage of it.

"What did you want to speak with me about?"

The woman's light rolled in a casual stretch.

"You should know that we are satisfied. Granian agrees that you are ready for field assignments, when they come."

Harry laughed softly at the statement. "I doubt the Ministry was waiting for me to be ready. They simply have nothing for me yet."

"I've seen you in a duel. Both Gray and I have heard the rumors about the Knockturn explosion. You have a lot of raw talent. But I still do not understand what is so special about you. It is a political risk to bring any Lord into battle."

Harry wondered if he could even explain the complicated dance between himself and the Minister if he wanted to. A dance of rumor, speculation, and hints of deadly potential.

"I'm a specialist." He finally said, and she snorted.

"You still do not trust us. I've seen you break wards. It's a spectacular thing. I've seen you complete transfigurations at impossible speeds. You would be an asset, yes. But other wizards can transfigure fast as well, even multiple human transfigurations at once. We have whole teams of ward-breakers. Hit Wizard teams rarely require a dedicated ward-breaker, as the standard practice is to send in the ward-breakers first. You, Potter, simply are not necessary. You're a luxury, a... a golden kneazle when a plain one would suffice."

"A golden kneazle?" Harry grinned, and one blue hand waved in dismissal.

"Forget that. I'm trying to say that I'm not an idiot. Robard wanted you for a reason. The Ministry wants something from you, and you are getting something in return. I do not like feeling used, or feeling blind. Pardon the analogy."

It was Harry's turn to wave away any offense. "I'm not sensitive about
blindness, and I don't think you are an idiot. You are right. There is mutual benefit for us both."

She leaned forward, and he could feel the focus of her power with the increased pressure in the air.

"Give me something. You are on *my* team, *my* responsibility."

Harry hesitated, before frowning down at his hands.

"You already know more than most people. I can't tell you exactly what the Minister wants from me." As she began to speak, he interrupted her. "I don't know myself. *But*... I can tell you that I am here as a gesture of good faith. My willingness to obey the rules, if you will. People are afraid of me. Some of those people are in the Ministry."

"So, this is you trying to pretend you're harmless?" Her voice was sceptical. "Because I don't see it."

"No, only that I'm a tame creature of power, not the next Dark Lord." He said it with a smile, but saw the pulse of adrenaline that flickered through her light as he spoke.

She was silent a long moment, leaning back into her chair.

"If you can really kill with only a glance, why would you waste my time training you so hard to stay alive?"

A question he had asked himself most fervently from time to time in the last few months, when the physical training was particularly gruelling. But he had his reasons that made the effort worth it. He needed to *learn*; and no one method was perfect. There might come a time when his own personal abilities were useless, or hampered. He couldn't solve every problem by killing or destroying the object or person in his path. He was driven to discover alternative ways to use magical force.

That, and the Ministry itself. He had to show he could play well with others.

"This is my gesture of good faith." Harry gently reminded her, an acknowledgement without an answer.
Aethonan sighed, light flickering as she tapped her fingers against her crossed arms, adrenaline spiking with rapid beats of her heart.

But her voice was firm and strong, iron control in verbal form.

"If my men are in serious danger during a mission, Lord Potter, I expect to see a line of corpses. No questions asked, no thought of repercussions. I don't care about politics and statements and gestures when lives are at risk. Do you understand?"

"I do." Harry didn't smile, but looked at her, saw a small woman of solid strength, hair braided into long ropes, eyes almond-shaped and unwavering. "I won't let them die."

He remembered Flamel's words, describing death as such a wonderful place.

But the spirit had been right. The living would not want to understand the necessity of losing the ones they love. Even he did not want to understand it.

"I doubt even you could prevent it completely. But I expect you to try." Aethonan gestured to his untouched glass. "Don't let me drink alone."

Harry reached for the purple crystalline pattern, felt the burn in his throat as he slowly swallowed pale blue liquid.

He didn't disabuse her notion. It was enough that she knew he could kill so easily. There was no need to bring resurrection into it.

"So." Hermione began, twisting her hands in a sudden bout of nerves. "So. My secret."

Harry smiled up at her, his hair still wild from sleeping, a loose robe tossed carelessly over his shoulders as he sat at the small table in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place.

He must have been up late again, to only now be downstairs for breakfast. It was nearly noon.
"Did you find what you were looking for?" His words were husky, and even as he finished Kreacher moved in front of him to set down a plate filled with over-cooked sausage and eggs.

She wrinkled her nose. The sausage looked like black bricks. How could he stand to eat them that way?

"Yes. I did." Hermione took a seat as Harry began to eat, eyes closed, fingers deftly handling his silver fork. "Do you have plans this afternoon?"

Harry's eyes opened, gaze darting to where Kreacher stood. She noticed now that the house-elf was standing stiffly, shoulders squared.

"I did think about going into Diagon Alley, checking out the new Elven Work company. It opened its doors last week."

Kreacher sniffed, and the pots and pans he had set to cleaning clanged loudly against one another.

"Oh." Hermione hesitated, then lifted her chin. "We can do that too then. This shouldn't take more than an hour."

She felt his power brush her skin with a soft touch, his eyes gleaming suddenly with inner light.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?" His lips were lifted in a grin.

Hermione bit her lip and scooted closer, one hand reaching to squeeze his knee.

"Hogwarts. I've found out that they have an artifact called the Mirror of Erised."

She saw the wheels turning, the sleepy haze fading away in favor of rising excitement.

"Desire?"

"I didn't want to get your hopes up. I wasn't sure it still existed, at first, and then wasn't sure if I could find it. I still don't know if it will be effective. But
it's supposed to show a person's greatest desire. It can be dangerous, because…"

She didn't get to finish as he turned, pulling her into a hard embrace, his voice muffled against her neck as he spoke.

"Oh, Viola. I love you. This is... wondrous. When do we go?"

Hermione's smile grew. "How about as soon as you're decent?"

He looked puzzled a moment, then laughed, standing, leaving his half-eaten plate behind as he moved to the doorway.

"Do *not* let him bring home a female." The harsh voice startled her. She turned to see Kreacher bearing down on her, one spindly hand grasping a greasy spatula like a sword. "Under any circumstances. Kreacher refuses to be misplaced in Kreacher's own House."

Hermione blinked, trying to comprehend. "Why don't you go with us? You can veto any selection..."

"Kreacher is a dignified, distinguished elf!"

With that statement, he whirled and stomped back towards the sink. Hermione sighed.

House-elves were matriarchal. It did make sense the older elf would be dissatisfied with any elf that might try to order him around.

Still. A little competition might do him good.

"I'm ready!" Harry bellowed as he stomped down the stairs, and she jumped to her feet with a grin.

Time to go.

Hogwarts lay crouched as it had the last time in his memory, a sleeping purple behemoth of power.
He felt the warmth of the sun on his skin, a rare day of sunny weather in the scottish hills. But he saw only the dark shadows of the wide sky behind the strong golden domes that made up the wards of Hogwarts.

Those wards were a thing of beauty, a million strands of light connected to a being that breathed in days and slept through centuries, each pulse of its heart a season's passing.

He saw that single rising pulse as they walked up the stone steps, climbing down the throat of a stone golem that welcomed them into herself with the open arms of a mother to her long-lost children.

Hogwarts' magic brushed against his own, one creature to another, and Harry smiled at her fleeting touch.

The world was alive, so bright and so detailed, every statue they passed imbued with it, every portrait an echo of souls once living.

Portraits that discussed their passing in eager whispers.

"Welcome Miss Granger, Mr. Potter." Professor McGonagall, Headmistress now of Hogwarts greeted them in the interior hallway with polite words. Her light brown soul with its feline echo held a new tint now, a slim golden connection to the wards that had opened for their passage into the school.

New security. Considering the events of years previous, it was a reasonable move.

"Headmistress. Thank you again." Hermione said with the same distant politeness of the older woman.

*Who was trying to impress whom?*

"We've set the Mirror in one of the unused classrooms. I will monitor your study myself."

Hermione had told him, in the time it took them to walk up the steep slope from the apparition point, that the Mirror tended to bring out suicidal tendencies in the less stable portion of humanity. He thought the
supervision was more like spying, however, than protection.

But it wasn't their Mirror.

When they stepped into the simple square room, Harry saw a length of green cloth draped over a rectangular item of such power it shone through the fabric in waves of red light.

Cherry red, bright charms that overlapped one another in vibrant hues. He felt a sense of eagerness when that light touched him, a hint of longing and hope.

Perhaps it was not merely weak people who gave into the mirror, but also those susceptible to outside influences.

McGonagall stepped to the Mirror, pulling the green cloth free so that the Mirror shone freely. It was large; at least seven feet tall, perhaps eight, and wide enough for three men to stand in front of it and see themselves reflected. He could see the purple metal that made its frame underneath the red of charms, darkening the outer edges to maroon.

Hermione stepped forward first, her blue-violet light meeting the red charms she could not see shining down onto her, highlighting her like a beam of brightest sunlight in a dark room.

She gasped; he saw her light flicker in reaction, her light jerking as she tried to both step forward and back at the same time.

Then she froze, breathing steadily. He saw nothing but that red light, the angle he was at keeping him from the influence of the Mirror.

Hermione spoke, clinically, as if this was no more than a mere study.

A show for the professor's benefit, no doubt.

She described a silver mirror, elegant. She described the inscription across the top, one that matched the one she had found in her own research of the item. She told him there were runes and carvings worked into the mirror, and that its reflective surface was crystal clear, no hint of grime or deterioration.
She cast spells, advanced diagnostic charms, testing the strength of the red light and its properties.

Then she stepped back, and turned to face him, and Harry sucked in a breath.

"I have enough data for now. You want to see it, Harry, before we go?" Her voice, so casual, only the rapid beat of her heart telling him how eager she really was.

Hermione played subterfuge quite well. He doubted the Headmistress suspected a thing.

"Why not?" He murmured, stepping into that red light even as she left it, facing the Mirror of Erised and looking into its depths as it looked into his own.

He felt that cherry red magic moving into him, testing his mettle, tempting his power. It was warmth and somehow loving, a vibration of comfort.

Then, in the reflective surface of the maroon mixture of metal and magic, he saw his soul form.

He wasn't sure what he had expected to see. He couldn't remember any more.

His soul was his soul, but different. There was no horcrux across his face. The emerald green of himself was bright and powerful and shone with dark stars, so many pinpricks of shadow, far more than he had seen in the penseive weeks before. The blue-violet of Viola stood beside him, as equals, her light as pure and radiant as it always was, a strict contrast to the changed pattern of his own dark light.

The Cloak was draped across his shoulders, a length of black cones and white silk. The Stone shone from his finger with inner darkness, brighter than ever it had been before, triangular prisms of power.

And in one green-black hand he held another impossibility, so much more powerful than the Cloak or the Stone, the lynchpin of the triad, the sharpened point of a dagger.
A Wand, the likes of which he had never seen. It's black wood with its white core, an infinite twisting, roiling, winding thing that breathed and snarled and schemed. He felt as if eyes looked out at him and judged him, hating him and loving him, wanting to be his killer and wanting to be his creator.

I will kill you, it whispered. I will give you time.

And he wanted it. He longed for it like he had longed for nothing else in his life. He hadn't known how much he wanted it until that moment. Just to hold it. Just to possess it for a moment.

He reached out one hand and touched cold metal, smooth to the touch, a barrier between himself and his desire.

"Harry?"

Perhaps if he only waited a moment, that barrier would fall away. Another minute, another hour, another day. He might wait forever for just a moment of possession.

"Mr. Potter."

The stern voice was like a slap, a cold flood upon heated skin. Harry closed his eyes but the vision did not fade, would not fade.

He made himself turn and walk from the room with rapid steps, the purple light of Hogwarts soothing the sight of the combined Deathly Hallows from his mind.

He heard their steps behind him as he rested the hand that had touched the Mirror upon one stone wall, the solid strength of the school a pillar to hold him upright.

"It is a very powerful object. You were right to keep it locked away." Harry said softly, turning finally to look into brown light. "I am fine, now."

Hermione reached his side, one hand gently squeezing his arm.

"I admit, I had a reaction as well, but not as strong as your own. What did
you see?"

He heard the hope in her voice that she couldn't hide. He shook his head, and saw her shoulders droop.

Harry made himself smile, prepared to answer this question before other listening ears. "My family, all together, all alive."

He heard the Headmistress make a soft noise of sadness, and knew his guess was correct. He let sadness show, wrapping one arm around Hermione.

"Did you get the information you needed?"

She nodded, thanking the Headmistress, giving their excuses for why they could not stay for dinner.

And for once, Harry was glad to leave Hogwarts and the secrets she held behind.

"I saw us behind a podium." Hermione spoke softly, glancing quickly into Harry's lowered face as they walked towards the edge of the wards. "I was giving a speech about magic to the world. So many people were there, mundane and magical alike. Kreacher was there! You, my parents... it was like viewing a memory. A memory that hasn't happened yet. I kept having this thought, as I ran those tests, that maybe, if I just kept watching, I would figure out how to make it happen. I found a compulsion charm on the thing, subtle but powerfully effective. Whomever created the object had a dark streak of humor in them, to not only show you what you want most, but to make you want to keep looking at it forever."

Harry faltered, stumbling slightly on a loose stone. He steadied himself with his staff, coming to a stop to face her.

"I'm torn between stealing the thing, and destroying it." His voice held a ragged edge.

Hermione glanced around them, at the bright sunlight and the green forest, a light breeze ruffling their hair. A beautiful day, one she had so hoped
would turn out differently.

"What did you see?"

She hated that her voice sounded so small.

Harry reached out, touching her cheek, a genuine smile on his face this time.

"I knew this was a possibility. My greatest desire being the horcrux gone, not just being able to see it. It makes logical sense. In the Mirror, the horcrux was no longer there. You were, though. As beautiful as ever."

She felt herself flush, but remained silent. She knew there was more.

His hand fell away, eyes unfocused.

"I'll show you in the pensieve. It is... startling. I held the Hallows. All of them. The Wand was... spectacular. Whether I was shown the real pattern, or merely my mind's idea of it, I don't know. But it... it was alive. Or not so much alive, as aware of me. I felt like I was seeing myself hold the answers to every question I've ever asked. Or at least all the answers that would ever matter. It was... invigorating. And I wanted it. I wanted to hold it. That might have been partially the compulsion. Now that I'm away from the Mirror, I no longer feel that overwhelming urge to search for the blasted thing. But a part of me still remembers that feeling. Or maybe I've always had it and have been ignoring it."


Harry roughly expelled a breath, running a hand through his hair, further mussing its strands.

"Yes. That's what the story and history would lead us to believe, anyway." He hesitated, then continued. "In the Mirror, the wand spoke. It told me it would kill me, then told me it would give me time."

Hermione stepped closer, fingers entwining with his. "That sounds like something Flamel said. About time."
"Yeah." He shook his head with a rueful smile. "Conflicting ideas. Paradoxes. That's what the Hallows are. Two opposite sides of a coin that somehow both show at the same time. I honestly can't tell the truth from the lies."

"It's a good thing we don't have to, then. The Wand hasn't been sighted in decades, centuries even. It's lost."

"Yes." He sounded both relieved at that fact and sorrowful. "We move on."

"I'll find another way to remove the horcrux." Hermione said firmly. "I just have to learn more about healing."

Harry grinned. "You study healing to find answers, and I study necromancy. What a pair we make."

Hermione laughed, tugging him into movement.

"We were meant for each other, obviously."

Elven Work was a squat, humble building of strong green wood and glimmering protection wards.

Inside, a wizard and a house-elf sat behind a desk, playing what looked to be a game of Exploding Snap.

Hermione cleared her throat, a noise that caused a jerk that caused an explosion, followed by a round of curses from the wizard.

The wizarding world was always full of explosions of one sort or another.

"Can Dobby helps you, Miss?"

Yellow light bobbed and flowed around the desk, then jerked to an abrupt halt.

"My Lord." The elf breathed. "My Lord. Oh my! Oh my!"

Yellow light began to bounce, hopping from one skinny leg to another, a
dance of surprised delight.

"Dobby. Control yourself, please." The voice was cultured and polite, the tone bored aristocracy. "Lord Potter, what can we do for you in this establishment?"

Hermione sucked in a breath. "Draco Malfoy?!" She sounded a bit like the house-elf, her voice a wheeze of shock.

"Miss Granger. A pleasure." His voice implied it was anything but. His soul, a light grey, shone brightly through spider-thin cracks of shadow.

He knew of the Malfoys. This man’s father was rotting in Azkaban for life, their entire family pariahs for their known association with dark magics and their sudden financial misfortune. They were not poor, but they were not wealthy, either, as they had been for centuries, a fate that could be placed squarely on Lucius Malfoy's shoulders.

Whatever the younger Malfoy had been through had almost broken him. Almost.

Harry smiled. He knew a strong soul when he was confronted with one.

"We need another house-elf, as our own is no longer able to handle the needs of an entire household."

"Oh! Oh!" Dobby was still dancing. Hermione was mumbling something under her breath, the words masked in the commotion.

Malfoy gestured with one elegant grey hand. "Right this way. We have a quick survey to assess your needs, which we will match with the requirements of our available house-elves."

Harry followed, a quick gesture to Hermione bringing her into step behind him.

He could feel her growing ire like a thunderstorm brewing on the horizon. She was not happy, to say the least, with the proprietor's identity. He preferred to make his own first impressions.
Bouncing yellow light sprang into the small office with a sharp pop of sound, rectangles of parchment thrust towards him.

"Here is the survey, Lord Potter Sorcerer Sir!"

The elf didn't take a single breath in his quick sentence. Harry passed the questionnaire over to Hermione, fixing his own gaze on the grey soul that had sat down behind another desk.

"Dobby, please, man the desk in reception. We might have more customers."

The house-elf vanished in an instant of giddy yellow noise.

Draco Malfoy let out a sigh. "I apologize. He gets overexcited sometimes."

"I've never heard you apologize before." Hermione's voice was sickly sweet.

He had never seen this side of her before. Sarcastic vitriol was not her style.

"Not surprising, considering you only knew me for two months seven years ago."

Hermione's mouth shut with a click, her teeth grinding. Harry didn't let his amusement show.

She was his girlfriend, after all. He would regret it later if he did.

"What made you decide to open this place?" Harry asked with genuine interest. He would not have thought a pureblood Lord would be the first one to comply with the new Ministry regulations, and especially not the first to start an elven workstation under the new laws.

"Dobby saved my life." The words were frank, with no hint of softness to them. "You could say I was raised by house-elves. Once I... saw the truth of that, I also saw an opportunity. I've been planning this since last December. After I took my N.E.W.T.s early, I left school and invested my trust fund in this business."
"Business?" Hermione's one word was acid.

"One has to eat." Malfoy's polite tone was somehow worse than a fuming retort. "The house-elves are happy with the work, and I gain a portion of their wages. It is not lucrative, but it will do."

"Like a temp agency." Harry spoke before Hermione could explode. "You find them jobs that suit them and are compensated. How many elves have signed up?"

Malfoy relaxed infinitesimally. "Most of the former stable elves. They have never worked in a true permanent house, and most wish to be placed with families. Then there are those who have been set free by the aurors over the last two months. Many have been abused by previous owners. Some are physically disfigured. They are ashamed to work and prefer to rent themselves out to businesses and factories on a temporary basis. We have started running an elven cleaning service, and soon plan to add landscaping and seasonal decoration services."

"We?" Hermione's voice was strangled, and Harry knew her well enough to know she was fighting against her own logic. It was hard to break bad impressions nearly a decade old.

"Dobby and I. He is my partner."

Hermione's light went through a series of gymnastic flips. He hoped she wasn't about to faint.

Harry smiled at Draco. "This is good work you have started here. I'm glad somebody is taking charge. There was a gap left when the House-Elf Registry was dismantled. I was worried many house-elves would be stuck in bad situations with nowhere safe to go."

"Yes." His voice was stiff, uncomfortable with the praise. "It works financially, of course."

"Of course." Hermione muttered, but there was no heat behind it any longer. She slid the parchment back across the desk. "Here."

Malfoy stood.
"If you would wait in the foyer a moment, I will consult with Dobby."

"I still don't like him. He's arrogant." Hermione was mutinous. "A slytherin. A liar. I can't help but think this is all some manipulative scheme."

Harry raised one eyebrow. "I didn't know you had an irrational streak. Is that prejudice I hear?"

She elbowed him, hard.

"You didn't know him back then. He would strut around, using words like mudblood. He was practically the ringleader of the slytherins in my year."

"That was a long time ago, Hermione. A lot has happened. He was just a child."

She drooped. "I just find it so hard to believe. It's a radical change."

"Having your father arrested and your fortune seized is a radical event." Draco's cold voice said, and Hermione let out a soft yelp of surprise.

"I-I'm sorry." She said quickly. "I…"

Malfoy cut her off. "I have heard the same words every day for the last few years of my life. It is as hard to believe a Malfoy can be honest as it is to believe a Potter could become a Dark Lord."

Biting innuendo, some of the politeness gone from the other Lord's voice. Harry bowed slightly, searching his memory for the correct words to say. He was not as practiced on his etiquette as he probably should be with his current station.

"Forgive us. We meant no offense."

"I know you did not." Grey light spun away, the matter dismissed as casually as a fly swatted away. "Many of our elves would be willing to work for you, considering who you are and what you put into motion. You are something of a hero."
Malfoy spoke directly to Harry, ignoring Hermione's presence. "But Dobby agrees that only two would be really happy there. One is female, Dolly. She is ninety-one, but still has many years ahead of her. She used to work for the Crawlen family, but left of her own volition so that her daughter could take over management. She is well versed in cleaning and dispelling pests. The second is Ug." There was a note of anger in Malfoy's voice now. "Short for Ugly. Male, thinks he is in his thirties, which makes him still a child by elven standards. He was taken at birth and raised roughly as a cleaning slave for a vendor in Knockturn. He refuses to change his name. He is afraid of crowds and very timid. He would do well in a house with a steady routine and an older elf to monitor him, and one with no children to frighten him. He knows most cleaning charms, and is also trained in defensive spells."

"Defensive?" Harry asked, surprised.

"It is not uncommon in certain circles. The shopkeeper was not afraid of the law or of his browbeaten slave turning against him. Ugly was used as a guard and as a distraction. Bait. He would take the brunt of any attack, and has done so several times. Hence what is no doubt an unfortunate nickname that the elf has claimed as his own."

"I see." Harry said softly, and didn't have to ask Hermione to know her opinion.

After all, Kreacher has specifically said no females. That left only one choice.

"What else do we need to know about him?"

Malfoy's light brightened, though Harry had no doubt the man's face showed nothing of his emotions.

"He will be loyal in the extreme. He refuses to take wages, and considers service to be a privilege you give him. Time off is considered a punishment, but Dobby has learned the elf is interested in greenery of any kind, a fairly common longing for many elves who spend the majority of their time indoors and in cities. You will have to be creative in giving him time to himself to enjoy such things without upsetting him. He will try to punish
himself, and your contract will no longer allow you to command obedience in any way, even for his own good."

"I see." Harry nodded.

"Our set fee for matching long-term employment to an employer is one thousand galleons, half of which will be refunded if you or the elf can not work together in one year's time." Harry raised a brow at the price, but didn't interrupt. It converted to about five thousand pounds, and for a lifetime servant that asked for little or no wages, the amount was laughably little. "Elven Work also requires that all employers set aside an additional five thousand galleons over a five year period for all long-term elves to be given upon their retirement. This is non-negotiable."

That was more like it.

"What is official retirement age?"

Hermione's voice was meek as she asked her question.

"We set it at thirty years after employment. Due to an elf's long life span, averaging between one hundred and fifty and two hundred years, it will be possible for an elf to renew their long term position at the end of that thirty years if they wish, but each time they will sign the same contract, with the same galleon value, adjusted for inflation."

"You've put a lot of thought into this." Harry said, impressed. If an elf started in their twenties and took only three long-term contracts, they would retire with more money than most wizards set aside for their old age.

Malfoy's light dipped in a slight nod.

"Room and board are to be offered by the employer. The quarters are to meet the new Ministry standards. No elf can be asked to work more than fourteen hours a day, and more than six days a week. Due to elf nature, however, you are not required to force them to not work, as this can be considered an inhumane punishment. A copy of all regulations and our company policy will be in your paperwork. There will be a trial period of
thirty days, after which Elven Work will interview the elf and determine if
the situation is still amenable."

"I'm familiar with the regulations." Harry stated, remembering very well
how it had felt to vote on them in a sea of colored souls, power locked on
him like he was the main act in a circus performance. Lord Malfoy had
been there too, he realized. He must have been, after taking the seat from
his incarcerated father. "You've done well here, that I can see."

"Thank you, Lord Potter." There was both pride and acknowledgement in
the other Lord's voice. "Are you ready to sign the contracts?"

"Yes."

Hermione took his hand, pausing him.

"Wait." She stepped toward Malfoy. "I'm sorry, I really am. I should have
known better than to assume. It's just... I'm sensitive, when it comes to the
elves. They've been abused as a race for so long."

Grey light flickered.

"We can agree on that fact. Apology accepted."

She let out a sigh.

"Thank you."

Ugly waited for them in the foyer.

His yellow light was somehow diminutive, stunted. If he was human, Harry
had no doubt his pattern would be cracked open like a fallen egg. Instead
the yellow was dim, crouched in upon itself in unconscious defense.

Hermione gasped, an indrawn breath of horror that only made the elf wilt
farther, the slow beat of its life weary and downtrodden.

Ugly expected horror and dislike, but it still obviously hurt him.
Harry stepped away from Hermione, approaching the yellow hue to crouch down to his level, before letting his power expand and Look at the new house-elf.

The being shivered, long skinny limbs still too bony to be healthy. Feet that were overlarge and stuffed into leather shoes, knobby knees, a long flowing garment covering his slight frame. Hands with broken fingers, skin littered with pockmarks and lines of scar tissue.

Bulbous eyes in an angular face, a nose that had been crushed. A mouth with few teeth, a missing ear, the other ear half gone.

Someone with a very, very ugly soul had let this happen to an innocent creature.

"Hello. I'm Harry Potter."

"Master." The elf whimpered in response.

Harry kept Looking at him, taking in every detail, every scar. Refusing to flinch away, refusing to show any sign of disgust.

"I have scars as well. Am I ugly?"

The elf's remaining ear drooped farther against his skull.

"No, Master."

"Neither are you. I can replace your ear, and your teeth. Maybe fix your nose and fingers. In return, will you pick a better name for yourself?"

"Yes, Master." The elf breathed in a mere whisper.

"Good." Harry stood, let his power disperse, turning back to smile at Hermione.

"Ready when you are, darling. Take us home."

Every elf that had come through the doors of Elven Work had been
thoroughly checked over by a professional healer. Draco had insisted on it, and paid for much of the cost himself, his funds a poor trickle that felt the strain of yet another burden.

He hadn't liked to see their suffering. Hadn't liked to see despair and shame in large, familiar eyes.

Dobby had never shown that despair. There had been shame aplenty. And pain, and horror. But never despair; the elf had a core of solid steel, as likely to undermine the threat in some way than to simply give in to it. Draco had resented that at first, as a child; resented that nothing he did, no petty punishment or order could reduce the elf's spirit as his own spirit had been reduced in other, more subtle ways.

But not all elves were so fortunate. Ugly hadn't been. The elf had been a mangled wretch when the aurors dropped him off, barely alive enough to care that his Master had allowed him to be tortured for money before the aurors could take him away.

Apparently the man had wanted to recoup some of his investment in the creature before it was taken. The shopkeeper had not counted on being held accountable for the act.

The Ministry wouldn't do so, obviously. The shopkeeper had been careful, sly enough to make sure any transaction took place before the laws had officially changed. He had bragged about it, when Draco plied him with whiskey at the dingy bar on the edge of Knockturn. Bragged about how the sum he had gotten far exceeded any fine the Ministry might eventually charge.

He had not bragged for much longer. Draco was still his father's son, would always be the blood and bone of a murderer. Draco knew the ways of the Dark, knew more the darkness of Knockturn and what lurked there.

One drunken wizard stood little chance against those evils. Draco had not needed to even raise his wand.

He had only watched, and remembered how Ugly had cried silent tears from eyes gone blank, in a face too mangled to show emotion.
Ugly, who mourned not the actions of his Master, but the lack of one. As if a Master was his sole reason for existence, his only reason to live. It was enough to make Draco sick, to see such misplaced devotion.

Draco watched as Harry Potter knelt on the floor of his building, in front of that same elf, and promised him healing. As if professionals had not done all that could already be done. The damage was too deeply rooted, the human healers too unfamiliar with house-elf physiology. He watched as that same devotion kindled and began to burn again in response. Already, the elf made a promise of something he had refused to do for weeks on end.

Magical power licked at his senses, wafting off the blind man like steam from a cauldron. Malfoys were drawn to power; could sense it as a dog senses prey. They wanted it; an addiction in their blood, to possess and serve the deeper tides of magic. His father had taught him their history well.

Draco merely refused to give into it. Refused to follow a lineage that served instead of mastered. That stole instead of earned. But the power tempted him all the same, and reminded him of times and places he would much rather forget.

Harry Potter stood, and that power faded away, tucked safely away somewhere it no longer called to him. The Lord was just a wizard again, if one whose physical features were horrifying enough. The scars truly were hideous when one stood face to face with him in the bright light of day.

"Goodbye, My Lord Sir!" Dobby called cheerfully to the trio as they made their exit, the elf bouncing from foot to foot in exuberance.

It pleased him, to see the elf so happy. Every day, that happiness reminded him that the world was not an evil place. It reminded him that one could survive the experience of being the abandoned property of Lucius Malfoy, that time when all the old acquaintances came in the dark of night to plunder and take what the Ministry had left behind.

There hadn't been much. Just a witch and her son, and one single house-elf, in a house filled with portraits of the dead.
There was a reason he no longer lived in Malfoy Manor, under painted eyes that could testify to the horrors they had seen.

"To be the elf of House Potter!" Dobby breathed, and jolted Draco from his reverie. "What an honor!"

Draco sighed, ran a hand down his robe to straighten any wrinkled silk.

"Without a doubt. Another game?"

And as the elf bounced to the desk, setting up the cards once again with a snap of his fingers, Draco found in himself a smile.

He had made his choice years ago, in a single night of pain, when he first played a game of Exploding Snap with the victorious house-elf who had just saved his life. He chose to be happy.

"This is Kreacher, the house-elf of House Black and Potter. Kreacher, this is our new elf. He hasn't decided what he will be called yet."

Kreacher ran speculative eyes over the youngling.

He had been beaten, badly. A harsh former Master. But for all his broken appearance, there were strong bones underneath. It took a formidable elf to withstand a life with no House and no true Master, no link to magic and power.

Kreacher knew the signs. Kreacher had seen them before. This was an elf who had not known the life of a true house-elf.

That would be fine. Kreacher could work with a blank slate. Kreacher would teach the youngling everything he would need to be a proper elf the House could be proud of.

"Welcome to Grimmauld Place, our House." Kreacher ended his welcome with a stiff bow, the movement echoed by the timid form peeking out from behind the Master.

Good. Manners are the foundation of propriety.
"Thanks you." The elf whispered in a broken sentence, the customary identifying name absent.

Kreacher stalked forward.

"Kreacher will give a tour of the House."

The Master hesitated, green eyes glowing in a quick Look that sent shivers of power through Kreacher's limbs.

Kreacher held himself stiffly erect.

Master had been the one to change his contract. Master had been the one to eradicate the standard bonds of servitude. Kreacher could have ideas of his own, now.

Kreacher rather liked that. It was only proper, that house-elves would know what was best for the House; it was their duty.

"Alright."

The Master turned to his Hermione, their hands linking out of habit as they wandered down the hallway.

The youngling followed the Master's retreating form with a gleam Kreacher recognized well.

Adoration.

That would do very, very well indeed.

"This Kreacher's great-uncle, Kellen. Kellen died drinking poisoned wine. This Kreacher's favorite uncle Pickler, not related by blood but adopted into House when rescued then-Master's second son Orion. Pickler died of old age at two hundred and thirty six when Kreacher was but a young elf. And this Kreacher's first cousin thrice removed, Kelly. Kelly died killing an ashwinder that was sent into House to harm Mistress."

Kreacher pointed at the last severed head, the items proudly displaced on
the sloped ceiling of part of the attic, where the Master had designated Kreacher's space.

The young elf nodded, wide eyes a smoky brown with longing.

"Do not know family." The elf admitted. "Do not know a House."

Kreacher sniffed.

"Grimmauld Place is House, now. Pick a name."

The elf was confused. Kreacher gestured again to the long row of heads.

"Names belong to House. Kreacher will offer House name to Master's new house-elf."

Tears began to fall, sobs shaking the spindly form like a tree in a storm. Kreacher waited patiently for them to subside.

Younglings. Always so emotional.

The elf sniffled, beginning to move down the lines again, pausing often until he came to the end.

Then he faced Kreacher, shoulders straight.

"Kraken."

Kreacher nodded once. His great-grandfather had been a formidable elf, whose face bore many of the same scars the youngling had. Scars of battle, from a time when a house-elf was also a companion-elf, and would follow their Master into any duel, feeding their own strength from the strength of their Master.

"Kraken, of Grimmauld Place, House Black and Potter." Kreacher said solemnly, seeing the elf puff out with sudden pride.

Kreacher rubbed his hands together, a smile breaking across his face. "Now, Kreacher and Kraken will clean. Kraken must learn how the Master likes his House."
And two house-elves, one very old and one very young, shared grins of purest delight at the thought.

That night, it took Harry half an hour to do what recovery he could on Kraken's broken features.

He mimicked much of the pattern after Kreacher's own, duplicating it to make ears that were slightly too small, a nose slightly too large for Kraken's face.

But they were whole, and the elf cried so many tears of gratitude that Harry wondered if he might become dehydrated.

The fingers and feet were harder, the damage such a slight twist of pattern he could hardly notice it. But he was certain that at least Kraken would feel no phantom pain from the previously injured limbs.

It was the best he could do, working with patterns. Healing was not an art he was well practiced at, and manipulating patterns in such a way was like using a blunt knife for surgery. Wounds that were old only made things more difficult to distinguish between uninjured bones and badly healed ones.

"You did the best you could." Hermione said softly, sitting across from him at the kitchen table, a steaming cup of tea between them. "He looks worlds better. Not so... shocking."

"I want to go back to that office and find out what shopkeeper did that to him. I want to give that elf some form of retribution."

Hermione's light pulsed, her voice soft. "I already asked, while you were talking with Kraken in the foyer."

Harry's power rose as he Looked at her, focusing entirely on the lines of stress upon her face.

"Who?"

Hermione's lips moved in a rueful smile, his magic outlining the motion with
green color.

"Draco Malfoy might be reformed, but he's still a slytherin. When he told me he took care of it, I imagine he did far worse in far more creative ways than we could come up with."

Harry let his Look fade, leaning back in his chair with a reluctant, satisfied smile.

"Good."

She shifted, light wavering from side to side.

"I don't understand why he decided to champion house-elves. How someone can change so much, fall so far away from the family reputation. He still seems so cold, so… pureblooded. You heard the way he spoke. He was dressed in robes that probably cost a fortune. And we caught him playing Exploding Snap with a house-elf of all beings."

Harry frowned down at the table, following the green pattern of the long dormant wood as he thought.

"He has been through a great deal of trauma. He looks like… like a window that came close to shattering. An entire spiderweb of cracks running along the seams of his pattern. Not broken, but battered. The kind of beating that takes place over years of stress, years of psychological torment. If it had been one single thing, the damage would look different, more central, like with your cousin. He said Dobby saved his life. He might not have meant physically. If house-elves were the only ones to show him kindness, his behavior makes a great deal more sense. Until now, with the reforms, he might just have not had an outlet. I doubt his father would ever have allowed him to show any kind of weakness, and to a dark wizard, caring about 'inferior' beings and people is weak."

Hermione groaned. "I feel like I need to apologize all over again. I've never acted so irrationally. You would think I had been faced with Ronald Weasley. It wasn't even Draco himself I wanted to tear apart, but everything I thought he stood for. I don't like being wrong."
Harry straightened, beginning to smile.

"Can I make you feel better?"

Hermione let out a short laugh, rising herself.

"We don't have time!"

"Who says?" Harry took one step to the side, a motion she mirrored in the opposite direction.

His eyes narrowed at the challenge.

"My parents?" Hermione replied, but he heard the humor in her voice. "The ones who set a curfew so they wouldn't stay up and worry? A very, very reasonable curfew of midnight?"

Harry nodded his head slowly, saw her light begin to relax.

Then he set one hand upon the wooden table and sprang over it, rejoicing in the newfound flexibility the Ministry training had given him.

He caught her startled form in a bear hug, pressing her back against the kitchen cabinet, laughing into her mouth.

"We have time." Harry panted, pulling back from a kiss. "Consider it an experiment in expediency. Economy of motion? Bedroom science?"

She laughed, her hands slipping underneath his shirt.

"Harry James Potter. Who taught you to be so convincing?"

"My greatest teacher, of course. She seduced me first you know. Dragged me off to bed, wouldn't take no for an answer."

Hermione giggled, her blue-violet light alive with joyful life.

And together, they stumbled into the hallway and towards the stairs, unaware of the two sets of elven eyes that watched them go.

"The Master does this often." Kreacher said with the practiced calm of a
servant who had seen everything at least a dozen times in his long service. "Simply gather any loose clothing and set it, folded, inside the Master's chamber. Be silent and discreet."

"Kraken will." The younger elf replied solemnly.

With that said, the two walked into the kitchen, and purposefully ignored the sounds above of a sudden crash followed by wild, buoyant laughter.

"We have taken the first step, wizards and witches of Britain. We have given one race their freedom.

But why stop now?"

"Why stop now, indeed." Albus Dumbledore said to himself with a smile. "I think I would like to meet this woman."

He flipped the page over, the title of the venerated and mysterious Transfiguration and Magical Theorist's newest paper written in bold.

**We All Have Souls; Magic Tells Us So**

by Viola James

"A very good thing no one knows who you are, Ms. James. The Ministry would very much like to get their hands on you right about now."

The former Headmaster smiled into his fire, the phoenix resting on it's perch singing a gentle song, thinking upon the carefully worded paragraphs, a masterpiece of hints and threats and sophisticated genius.

"If the only thing that sets humankind above the other magical species is a soul, then we have been greatly mislead. Are not werewolves first human? Can veela, goblins, vampires, giants and trolls not have offspring with humankind? There is no such thing as being born with half a soul; one has one, or one does not. A soul is a magical person's greatest treasure. Who would say that a human soul is worth more than any other magical beings? Has not magic itself shown us that each and
So I ask myself this question. I ask you this question.

Why do we treat, as a nation, certain citizens as inferior to ourselves, if underneath the skin and bone and blood, we all bear the same, equally powerful, soul?

"Gryff! Long time, no see!" Thestral called out, all cheerful surprise.

"It's only been a week." Harry grinned. "Was having the sole attention of your captain that gruesome?"

"Absolutely." The woman clapped one hand on his shoulder, her light bouncing with energy. "Axe and I were surprised when we heard you wouldn't be joining us every day anymore. They figure you've been whipped into shape?"

"Something like that." Harry glanced around the empty training room. "Just once a week now for review."

"We went on our first assignment as a group yesterday." Thestral leaned forward, her voice an excited hiss. "Had to tackle an illegal potions dealer outside this small rural village. The man had monster blast-ended skrewts. Granian got second-degree burns all over his face when one of those things freaking exploded. Man had them set up like an alarm ward. He would have made it out if we hadn't put up the standard anti-portkey ward."

"What kind of potions?" Harry asked, and she let out a sigh.

"Bad stuff. Some of it was standard dark fare, pain-givers and skin-boilers, that type of thing. Some nasty poisons made to be painful, others meant to kill covertly. But the worst was the rows of amortentia, with a particularly sick twist. It was flavored like candy, dried and put in these bright colored muggle tubes."

It didn't take Harry more than a second to figure out why someone would
want to take a powerful love potion and make it attractive for young children. He felt sick at the thought.

"Bastards." He grunted, and Thestral agreed with a curse of her own before continuing.

"Our guy didn't make them, though. He was just a dealer. The aurors are going to try and crack him wide open, figure out the source. It's a nest of vipers in the underground black market, but children… well, some are out for money, and some are out for power. Not many trade in flesh, not in Britain. We'll find them."

Harry observed her orange soul, its color a bright mix between the shade of tangelo and pantone. She was bubbling with adrenaline just talking about the day before.

"Why did you decide to become a Hit Wizard instead of an auror?"

He wanted to take the question back as soon as he asked it, knowing that secrecy was important, especially in their own branch of law enforcement.

But Thestral only shrugged.

"I wanted to help people, and metamorphmagus' are rare. I had a choice between the two, and they would have been glad to take me either way. But with the people we deal with, pureblood supremacists and dark wizards, having any half-blood or muggle ancestry can be dangerous. Not just for you, but for your family. I liked the idea of not having to worry about work following me home." She laughed, but the sound was also sad. "The pay is better, too."

"I understand." Harry agreed, pausing for a moment before deciding to forge ahead. "You know who I am."

The woman went still, her voice hesitant.

"I've seen your picture in the paper. Your looks are… unique. To say the least."

"Yes. Well, I've been contemplating how to protect my own family. I've
hired guards for private security, and I've warded their homes. But guards can only go so far, and wards as well for that matter. How much do you know about muggle weaponry?"

"My father's a muggle-born, his dad was in muggle law enforcement. I don't know much about it though." It was more personal information that Harry expected to gain. He nodded.

"I've been considering ways to merge self-defense spells into an item that can be used by non-magical people. Like bullets in a muggle gun, but with spells instead. A way for them to protect themselves until help can be summoned."

"It sounds brilliant." She began, waving one hand as she spoke. Thestral always seemed to be in motion. "And like political suicide. The Ministry is not going to let you put magic in the hands of muggles. There is the Statute to consider."

Her tone was a warning. Harry smiled politely.

"Family members are already exempted from the Statute. They can have floos and portkeys and magical books, can even have a subscription to the Daily Prophet. What difference would it be for them to have, say, a wand pre-loaded with petrificus totalus?"

She sucked in a breath, then laughed. "You are a real fox, Gryff. I'd like to see you argue that line of logic in the Wizengamot when you're on trial."

"I'll make sure you're present." Harry returned, sharing her laughter.

When Granian and Abraxan entered, the subject was dropped.

But when the training session was over, Thestral whispered in his ear as he made to leave.

"I know some people who might be able to help with your little idea. Inventors, like. You want me to feel them out?"

Harry's smile couldn't be contained.
Inventors. He echoed her own word from their previous conversation, giving it the same fervent lilt.

"Absolutely."

To Be Continued In: A Tapestry of Bronze and Copper

~*~Review Please!~*~
"Here, Gryff."

Thestral's bright orange pattern pulsed with excitement as she pressed green parchment into his hand the next week.

"It's their store. What we talked about. You didn't hear about them from me."

Harry grinned at the Hit Wizard, pushing the scrap into his robe.

"Thanks."

He saw her loose pattern morph and change, growing taller and thinner, more thickly masculine.

Then she sighed.

"It doesn't have the same punch, when you can't see the effect. Nothing? Nothing at all?"

Harry ran his eyes over her, or should it be his?, soul. Thestral's unique light gleamed as bright as ever, a solid shade in a changing pattern of humanity.

He took an educated guess.
"You're male now?"

She groaned, her voice deeper when she spoke.

"I'm your twin, Merlin, how can you manage to get around on your own?"

There was both teasing and open curiosity in her tone. He shrugged.

"I see no difference between female and male people, besides what can be assumed from their general size and shapes. The tone of voice gives more away, with lower masculine registers and higher feminine ones."

He paused. "You don't talk like me."

Thestral's pattern shifted again, reverting to the almost petite form she seemed to prefer for Hit Wizard training.

"Got to practice inflection and the like; accents, personality. Getting the same voice box doesn't make you sound the same automatically."

"Polyjuice works the same, which is why auror's are taught observation techniques." Aethonan approached, her vibrant blue light a forceful beacon. "Speech patterns are the only definite way to recognize someone under polyjuice. That, and interrogation while waiting out the potion."

Harry nodded, filing away the information beside his own observations.

Metamorphmagus' seemed to manipulate the humanity alone of their patterns, while what little he had seen of Crouch Jr. told him that polyjuice was effective on a deeper level, to the point of assimilation and mimicking portions of a person's soul.

Perhaps it was because of the hair inside the potion. A type of genetic imprinting?

But if that was true, would that mean that a soul stamped part of its signature color on the body it inhabited, and if so, why did the body fade to white when the soul left it?

Why did blood carry the color of its body's soul, when the body seemed independent of the soul, capable of dying while the soul, nearly-immortal,
faded away to resurrection?

"Hippogriff, stop daydreaming."

Aethonan said, very much unamused with his distraction.

He shook off the constant questions, faced his captain, and nodded.

It was time for another morning of practice.

"The Weasley's are a big, but poor, pureblood family."

Vaughn began musingly, bangladesh green reclining on the large couch in Grimmauld Place.

"Always have been, for as long as I'm aware. Not a lot of money to spare between them all. A couple tend to go into government every generation. The patriarch, Arthur Weasley, is the current Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department. One son works in the Minister's Office, trying to muscle in on a assistant position. Probably will succeed, seems driven enough. Another son, the eldest, works for Gringotts, and another on a dragon reservation in the Mediterranean. Rumor abounds that the youngest son just got refused a position in the Auror Academy."

"Ron." Harry murmured softly. "The werewolf."

Green shifted, sighed. "It's the law, no matter who you are."

"It seems to matter very much who you are." Harry countered, then waved a hand in dismissal. "You know a lot about them."

"I got around as an auror, worked under Mr. Weasley myself for a couple months. I still go to the same pub as most of my old buddies, I hear the talk. Many weren't happy they turned away a Hero of Hogwarts."

"And Fred and George?" Harry gestured to the green parchment, the one that mentioned a new store that had opened in Diagon Alley, one that had grown very popular, very quickly.
Vaughn lifted a cup to his mouth, sipped the hot liquid.

"Hogwarts drop-outs."

Harry coughed out a laugh. "What?"

Vaughn chuckled, but the humor was muted. "Left in the middle of their seventh year, only months before graduation. Some say the death of their little sister a few years back messed them up. They had always liked playing jokes, but in the time since the tragedy those jokes started having a more… malevolent edge. They got warned by Lord Dumbledore, and next thing Weasley knows, his sons are showing up on his doorstep with all of their things. The entire Department was aflutter with the gossip when it happened. Weasley has a reputation as a mild, congenial man. Those two twins, though, rumor is they got their mother's Prewitt temper. Smart as a sphinx, passed their N.E.W.T.s during the Ministry's quarterly tests, got apprenticeships in Diagon and ran a side owl-post business for their inventions until they started up their own storefront joke shop a year ago. It's been an unrivaled success."

"Weasley's Wizard Wheezes." Harry quoted.

"That's the one." A cool mix of blue and green waved toward the parchment Harry had lain on the small table before restarting the conversation. "Why the sudden interest? Thinking of making an investment? I've heard rumors they are open to a silent partner."

"Of a sort." Harry filed that information aside, as well. "We're going there tomorrow morning. I would like to speak with one, or both, of them."

"I'll be ready, my Lord." A subtle dig. The guard knew Harry disliked the title.

It was a common... discussion between them.

"Harry."

"What did you call me?" Vaughn's faux-offended tone made him laugh.

"I'm sorry, that's right." Harry paused, letting his teeth show in a wide
smile. "Hermione told me you're bald. My apologies. Didn't mean to point out your lack of follicle capability."

A moment of silence; then the guard barked out a laugh of his own, light jerking with a shake of his head.

"I'm not bald! I shave."

"It's alright." Harry began, unable to hide his grin. "You don't have to defend yourself to me. I understand disabilities."

With that last pedantic word, the ex-auror rose to his feet.

"Those are dueling words, my Lord." Amused violence.

Thrilled, Harry rose to his own feet.

But before he could even begin to reach for his power, another voice spoke, this one decidedly not thrilled.

"The Master will not duel in the living room of the House!" Yellow light, short and angry.

Harry wilted at his house-elves words.

Kreacher had not spoken to him for days after the last incident that had broken several priceless Black trinkets and rended two family portraits into pieces.

All repairable damage, thankfully, or his head elf might have mutinied.

"Some other time." Harry said meekly, a sentiment echoed by an equally repentant Vaughn.

After all, the guard was not Master nor family of the House. He had suffered a cup of tea laced with a particularly embarrassing substance that put him out of work for two days.

Just where and how Kreacher had obtained a Fungiface potion he had never discovered.
But no one could claim house-elves were not resourceful, or imaginative.

Harry had seen twins before. Years ago he had catalogued the differences between fraternal and identical ones, and made his own conclusions.

Fraternal twins appeared to be two completely separate individuals. Identical twins tended to display soul colors only a shade different from one another, a subtle difference that hinted at close personalities and bonds but still two very unique individuals all the same.

But he hadn't seen magical twins yet, not close enough to make observations.

So it took him a moment to recognize what he was seeing, as he faced the counter of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, where two patterns stood side by side, helping a short wizarding child of pale grey as he made his purchases.

Two souls, their human patterns identical, their colors threaded through with one another in a tapestry of bronze and copper.

Together they were a marvelous work of art, a wild tangle of brown and orange color that was both beautiful and mesmerizing, his eyes following the vibrant shades as they rippled with movement.

One bore the brunt of a copper soul, pale orange and brown, the other mostly bronze, a darker brown with its flecks of palest orange.

Or perhaps one was brown, the other orange, and the unique metallic color formed from the merging of the two souls at some point in their lives. Had magic done this to them? Did magic allow two souls to bond more completely inside a womb than any familiar bond he had seen? Or had something simply went wrong with the resurrection process, two souls confused into inhabiting two bodies together?

Could they communicate mentally? Share thoughts as they shared souls? Share magic and strength, and share pain and joy?

The moment he thought he understood the composition of souls, he
encountered something unique. It invigorated him.

A sharp poke in his back. Vaughn, bringing him back to himself.

The grey child had moved on, and it was his turn to approach.

Copper stepped away from bronze, held out one hand.

"Lord Potter. Right on time!"

Jovial words, though Harry did not miss the gleam of magic on the hand held towards him.

"I don't think it's safe to shake your hand." He murmured, and the hand withdrew with a laugh.

A laugh that held a dark edge.

"A simple prank. You don't miss much, do you?" A flicker of copper-bronze magic. "I'm Fred Weasley, this is…"

"George Weasley." The bronze light finished. "He'll take you to the back while I close the shop for lunch."

Dutifully Harry followed Fred, Vaughn stepping back without prompting to peruse the now-empty store.

When they sat, he felt himself being studied with the focus of two consciousnesses, not just the one in the room.

"So what does the Blind Sorcerer want with us? We didn't know what to make of your owl."

"It was quite the surprise." Bronze light entered the room, joined copper on the couch in what must be the break room lounge area.

"I was told you were inventors. I have an idea I want to pursue, one I do not yet have the time or skill to follow myself."

"We're all ears." They said together, their inflections the same, down to the last raised syllable.
Practice, or something more?

"Pre-loaded wands with defensive spells. The type than can be used by those unable to cast spells on their own in a hostile situation."

"Squibs? Or muggles?"

"Is there a difference?" Harry mused, saw the flicker of their hearts.

"The Ministry thinks so." Fred said, but there was no censure in his voice, only the rising excitement of the challenged.

Harry smiled.

"I'm sure such a wand could be used for anything, by anyone. Why would you be punished for creating something that another person misused of their own volition?"

George this time, brown with those threads of shining copper. "Historically the Ministry punishes both the creator and the user. But...

They hummed into the silence, Fred picking up the conversation after a moment. "A focus. A stone, perhaps, or a cube of wood, made to hold magical power. Select words that could trigger that magic's release..."

"Words to bind, or shield. Market it as a child's safety feature..."

George again, continuing on the thought, both brothers trading words. "A necklace even, decorative. Something a protective, loving parent might give their child. Why would the Ministry bother with such a thing?" "Won't hold much power." "Won't need to, if it's an emergency situation." "Enough time to escape." "Enough time to summon help." "Like a ward stone, runic type." "A knot of wood, woven of ash or holly." "Three to five spells, max. Recharge ability." "For a fee, of course."

Silence, and Harry was again their focus.

"We'll do it." They said together, more words unsaid in the air between them.
What else is in it for us?

"I'll send a thousand galleons up front in good faith for your effort. I'll pay for the hours it takes to make a prototype and finalize the product. In return, I'll expect a small percentage of any profits as a royalty, and a discount for my own purchases."

"Our business does well." Bronze and copper spoke. "If such investments are in your interest."

Vaughn was a credible source indeed. Perhaps Harry should pay for the man's drinks at the pub he frequented.

"They might be. I'm very interested in what you make of the protective necklaces."

He heard the smiles in their voices, felt their combined power like a heavy pressure in the room.

Here were two powerful souls indeed, the kind that a vampire might find painfully desirable.

"We're the best at what we do."

And as Harry turned to leave, his gaze still trained on where their souls entwined in layers of copper and bronze, he had the good feeling he would shortly agree with them.

="I'm so sorry."

Neville said the words softly into the silent kitchen.

It was early afternoon, the Weasley house oddly silent from its normal bustling activity.

When Ron asked for space, his eyes gleaming with golden intensity, he was given it. But before she left, Mrs. Weasley had contacted Neville through the floo with the morning's events.
Ron raised his head, hair a mess, face drawn into sorrowful lines. Any anger, it seemed, had already fled along with his family.

"I made O's. You know how much, how hard, I worked for them. Even made the old bat Snape let me into advanced potions. I got a tutor! I did everything. I didn't let how tired I was after the Moon stop me, didn't give up. Didn't let McGonagall talk me out of it. I wanted this. I wanted to help people, do the same things we did in Hogwarts when everything goes to hell. Fight. I would be a bloody good auror. And they turned me down. Me. A Hero of Hogwarts. Not even given a reason, as if I don't know why anyway. Of course I know. Should have listened to McGonagall after all."

Neville let the words flow, poison in every syllable. He didn't interrupt, didn't offer platitudes.

They had both known this was a possibility. But they had also both dared to hope that Ron's own reputation might give him special compensation.

But the Ministry would not suffer a werewolf to have any job at all with the public, and especially not one in law enforcement.

"One night a month. One single, bloody night, and it has ruined my life. What do I do now? Get a job as a janitor? Sweep the streets of Diagon now that house-elves are in short supply? My family will bankrupt themselves trying to afford wolfsbane."

Neville shifted, sitting down softly across from his friend, trying to think of the right words.

"Your brothers…"

"They've already offered. They don't have a high opinion of the Ministry, anyway. Their joke shop is doing well enough they can hire another employee. But they need a clerk, not a criminal who can only work after closing hours."

"You're not a criminal." Neville stated firmly.

Ron looked up from his study of his two scarred hands, brown eyes dull, the characteristic Weasley fire missing.
"I am. I'm being punished for the crime of being what I am. No one wants me around. No one wants to be tainted with my presence and what I represent. A mindless, murderous beast. That's what they see when they look at me. I can never be anything else."

Neville slammed one fist onto the table, the sound only louder for the silence around them.

He didn't get angry very often, but he was angry now.

"Snap out of it, mate. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Fight back. Challenge the laws."

"How?" Ron spat back. "I'm just one person. I don't even know enough other werewolves to try to get support."

Neville lifted his chin. "I know one person who would support you. You need to read an article that came out in last week's Daily Prophet. This witch, the same one who wrote those articles on house-elves, she put out another paper. She mentioned werewolves. You should write to her, explain. Maybe something can come of it. Someone needs to take a stand." Neville paused, eyes narrowed. "And maybe it's time I took up my own seat on the Wizengamot. If a Potter can lobby for house-elves, then a Longbottom can do the same for werewolves."

Ron's mouth opened, then snapped closed when he could think of nothing to say.

He just shook his head, and Neville began to smile.

He had managed to strike a Weasley speechless.

"I'm going to do it. At June's meeting. My grandmother told me she was getting tired of politics. She would be proud of me for taking a stand in this. She has never treated you differently for being a werewolf."

"Neville." Ron shook his head again, then laughed. "No one is going to want to associate with someone that, that, represents a dark creature. The Longbottoms are a Light family. Your family's reputation..."
"Is useless if you can't help family." Neville finished. "Now we've got two months to prepare. No need to waste time. Where does your mum keep the parchment?"

Ron sat for a long minute, judging the stubborn tilt of his best friend's face.

Then he began to rise, still incredulous.

"I'll get it."

"Master Potter, the floo." Kraken's young voice woke Harry from where he rested partially underneath the Cloak, sprawled across his laboratory floor on a nest of conjured pillows.

He had been meditating, testing his Occlumency skills, and found the silence and comfort of his own space convenient.

Until he had fallen asleep. Then, even with the pillows, it was quite uncomfortable.

Harry sat up, looking towards the door where Kraken stood, his skinny form beginning to put on weight until he no longer looked quite as skeletal as he had.

The elf bowed, one hand over his chest, the other behind, an elaborate, elegant gesture, one he had not yet seen the elf use.

Kreacher was taking his mentoring task very seriously.

"The Floo, Master Potter. The wizard says it be... says it is important."

Harry rose, withdrawing his power to let the natural light glimmer around him as he attempted half-heartedly to straighten the wrinkles from his clothing.

A wash of yellow light, and he could feel his clothing rustle with the distinct scent of lavender.

House-elf charms. *Perfect.*
"Thank you." Harry said, moving towards the door, receiving another slightly awkward bow in response.

Kraken took his learning seriously, as well. After the first week, Harry had stopped trying to influence either house-elf on matters of etiquette. If Kreacher wanted formal, Kreacher was going to get it.

When he reached the fire, it's normal red glow was shining with white light and shaped into a human pattern, one that spoke in Gerald Robard's voice.

"You're needed." No greeting, no explanation.

It seemed the Ministry had finally decided they could use him again.

"Yes sir." Harry watched the form collapse into fire's consuming flickers, and turned towards the stairs.

Time to put on the heavy Graphorn armor.

It was one article of clothing he had no trouble picking out on his own. The heavy material gleamed with purple and brown hues that denoted its magical properties, an inherent strength that rivaled any dragonhide and an imperviousness to many magical spells.

The standard armor, though of a higher quality than the average Ministry outfit, consisted of multiple layers of the thick skin over lightweight cotton fabric, surprisingly flexible for all of its bulky weight. There were trousers, a vest and sleeves, and a hood with a portion that came up to cover the nose, mouth and neck.

He had added a mask of the same cotton fabric, a thin mesh material to cover even his trademark eyes, and his identity was safe from any observer.

He had practiced many times in the armor, practiced in particular seeing through the mesh, consciously accepting that his sight was not optical, but mental, not limited to the ability of his eyes or his head or his body.
He simply saw out, as his mind thought out and not inward, and he knew it was only a matter of time before he learned to expand his sight farther away from himself.

And then, perhaps, even see himself. But he did not yet have that kind of control, and it had taken more than half a year to learn to see beyond even a fragile mesh barrier.

Harry picked up the simple oak staff, its dragon core a line of orange fire hidden inside the steady green, its length capped with purple metal.

With one last look down at himself, Harry turned, heading down the stairs at a brisk pace to stand before the fireplace.

After a quick message to Kreacher for Vaughn, if the guard arrived in the morning before he returned, Harry grasped the floo powder and prepared himself.

Then he threw it into the fire, and spoke his destination aloud.

He stood in a room with other souls, some familiar, some not. His own team was arrayed around him, familiar tides in a chaotic sea.

At the front, Robard's salmon light was bright with energy, his voice calm and clear as he gave the opening brief.

"We have intelligence that the two main potion masters for the british sect of Luxe Sombre, whose wares were confiscated last month, are residing in a large warehouse inside muggle London. The residence appears to house at least a dozen other witches and wizards, all veteran members of the group, whose activity drew us to the area. These are highly trained individuals, and will be ruthless in their defense of the building once alerted, and might have the ability to call in reinforcements via an illegal floo connection. Our warding team, under Captain Matthews, will slide a general anti-portkey and apparition ward into place as soon as the three designated Hit Wizard teams have entered. This will trap you, as much as it will corner them."

A pause, not a soul rustling in response. Harry remembered the assassin
who killed Mr. Burke, both of the men part of the same group.

A group that had not felt the least remorse for those killed and injured in the explosion that tore through Knockturn Alley the night of Burke's assassination.

"There is a possibility that some type of illegal items or slaves are being kept on the premises, though this is not confirmed. If slaves are present, it is entirely possible they are under the influence of some of the same type of potions we have seized, and may attack alongside their captors. Try to capture, and not kill, these slaves. We believe it will be easy to recognize them, as Luxe Sombre generally targets children and adolescents for trafficking over adults."

It was said so matter-of-factly. Harry saw the reaction building, a wave of emotion that made hearts beat faster, fists clench on wands.

"Captains, inform your members of their assignment. Teams Dragon, Winged Horse, and Owl will enter the warehouse. Teams under Andrews, Ferris, and Sawyer will maintain the perimeter. Captain Matthews has the warding team. Healer Xante has medical staff at the ready. Dismissed, reconvene in fifteen minutes."

Harry saw souls pivot and whirl, collapsing into circles of color and lowered, commanding voices.

Aethonan's blue was the center of his own half-circle, her voice strong.

"Winged Horse is assigned with retrieval of both the potions masters, alive if possible. All other members of Luxe are expendable. We go through the second rear exit, and take the stairs down to basement level. When we reach the lower floor, Abraxan leads center point, Thestral and Granian to either side, arrow formation, as we've practiced. I will take center and shield." Her magic pulsed in rapid beats, her life a furnace of azure power. "Hippogriff will take the rear, covering our backs as needed, rotating forward if any of the formation falls. This will be close quarters. Gryff is also with us to take down any wards that might be protecting the potion masters when we find them. Luxe is known for its complex warding systems."
Harry nodded when it was his name was mentioned, adrenaline racing through his veins.

This was not like his previous experience. This was much more planned and methodical, his knowledge of Hit Wizard tactics an asset.

"Time." Robard stalked to the front again, calling each captain by name, listening as they repeated their portion of the operation.

Then portkeys were distributed, last reminders given.

One by one, the teams vanished into white magic and nothingness, timed to absolute perfection.

And with his heart drumming in his ears, he heard Aethonan speak the word, and felt the tug and whirl of the portkey’s magic pull him away.

Into the still quiet of a muggle street, beside a building of purple metal and black shadows.

Owl took the top level, on brooms from above, entering through windows, a chink in the outer wards that had been carefully cultivated by Matthew's warding team.

From there, Dragon entered and stormed the second level and it's sole fireplace, dismantling any hope of escape through the floo network and crippling the core warding structure for the building. Harry learned later that two members of that team were injured, one critically, while six wizards of Luxe were killed and one captured.

With the wards loose and tattered, it was time for Winged Horse to enter the bottom level, and on the command they methodically swept the first floor, ignoring the sounds of spellfire above them, Abraxan taking down a soul of cracked beige, Granian another of pure moss green.

Harry broke the lower wards guarding the staircase down, and they descended one by one in complete silence.

He heard the voice first, tremulous, innocent, echoing up the stairway.
"Go away! Just go away!"

A choked sob, a small soul of deep violet. Young and strong and imperfect, the spiderweb of cracks marring the surface of what should have been beautiful innocence.

Violet light lunged at Abraxan, who took it down with swift practicality, the binding spell freezing the child into place.

Thesstral cursed, and Harry saw them, more souls, all small, all oddly fragile in the darkness of concrete and steel, faced with adult souls hardened to what must be done.

One by one they fell, some on top of each other, all levitated carefully to the sides as they passed by, Harry looking into each soul they passed, unable to stop his anger from growing with each crack he saw, some small creases, others jagged and already broken, as splintered as Luna Lovegood.

When they entered the basement, two adults attacked with spellfire, wicked red spells of evil intent that appeared from around the small children they used as their shields.

Abraxan hesitated, but Aethonan did not. Her shield countered those spells, even as Granian stunned first one child, then the next, the small terrified forms slumping to the ground amidst spell-light and curses.

One curse took Thesstral in the shoulder, another Luxe attacking from the right. Harry felt the sight of it all press in on him as he guarded their rear, a heavy weight as Aethonan countered spells, Granian dueling with practiced ease at her side, Abraxan covering Thesstral's collapsed form, her orange light thrashing in familiar pain as her voice rose in the agonized shrieks of the Cruciatus.

Both opposing sides were cornered now, one unable to flee, the other unwilling. Harry's fingers tightened on the plain green staff in his hand, and he let his carefully bound power rise and expand, looking out across the room into the souls of humans capable of brutalizing the innocent for wealth and pleasure.
Even as Aethonan's magic struck one, Harry took another horribly alluring shade of red and stopped its light, one last scream echoing into the room as red became white and vanished into Death.

Then he took another sage green hue into his grasp and halted the pulse of its life even as he splintered its brightness into shards of broken glass that faded to more pale white before his eyes, the witch gasping out a single choked, agonized scream before her life ended.

Harry left his position and stepped past Thestral and Abraxan, focused on the last light, a towering mustard yellow of power, as it faced off with Granian and Aethonan and held its own with elegant movements.

This wizard was an obvious leader of the Luxe, his skill evident, his speed and elegance making his movements into a macabre dance of murderous intent.

Harry heard a mocking masculine laugh from the man, heard his accented words a near whisper, intending to inflict as much damage as his spells.

"The little ones are so lovely, are they not? Perhaps you shall enjoy them as much as I have."

Another laugh, and he saw more small souls behind the duel caged in lines of white warded metal, huddled down, some crying, some screaming in anguished rage.

More children, more broken children.

The rage, the anger at such injustice, threatened to swallow him whole. He made himself stop and watch, waiting as he was trained, as Granian and Aethonan fought, light flashing in strobe-like flashes, until Granian fell with a pained grunt, red threatening to consume his heart in squeezing waves of light.

Then resolution blue stepped in front of her companion, one sentence spoken in a hateful voice.

"Look at him."
Such a seemingly innocent thing to say.

But Harry understood.

With a lunge of emerald green he held yellow life in his hands and squeezed, watching as the wizard faltered and stumbled to his knees, his breath harsh in the sudden silence, and Harry Looked at him, Looked into the robed form of a man who seemed normal and clean-shaven, a aristocratic face drawn into pained lines, teeth bared in a grimace.

Then he ended him, as his team watched in silence, as children cried into hands of splintered light.

Six children were found within the warehouse basement, locked in cages, the lucky ones that had not yet been dosed with Amortentia, their own minds turned against them.

The children who had been stunned on the stairs were not that lucky, and he saw the evidence of it written across their souls in the unique braille of brutality, as the healers descended to carry them away.

The potions masters were captured alive, the cowards hiding within tangled suffocating wards that he turned into soft rain to coat their skin with a delicate layer of blue crystal.

All of the members of Winged Horse were fine, each healed by their own healer Xanthe before the aurors arrived to take over the scene.

When they left, a mere hour after they entered, Aethonan rested a hand upon his shoulder, her slender form a pillar of strength.

"Drinks on me, everyone."

And with that command, Harry followed his captain, and learned the pleasure of getting drunk among comrades after a battle that scarred the mind more than the body.

Blue light pushed him into bangladesh green, slurred words that he could
not follow laughingly said.

He was warm, his throat burning and his mouth dry.

Hands held him upright until green bled into a yellow that cradled him in cool magic.

"It's not good, Master Potter." Gentle words, gentle hands. "To drink this way."

And abruptly white silk was rising over him, black stars shining so bright his eyes closed in helpless reaction, his head pounding with the effort it took to comprehend the iridescent shadows.

But the black light followed him into darkness, his world nothing but the changing pattern of Hallowed impossibility he wouldn't escape.

He awoke once, to yellow hands giving him water that shone with white magic.

He drank dutifully, trusting the cool liquid to ease the pain.

Then he looked up into that familiar hue and sighed.

"One more, Kreacher. I've destroyed one more. He didn't deserve Death. Those children."

He didn't hear a response to his last murmured words before sleep pulled him down again.

"You saw what I saw, right?" Granian's masculine voice, a husky edge in the near-dark of the Ministry's Hit Wizard headquarters before official hours. They lay side by side on the floor in the captain's tiny office, the space little more than a broom cupboard.

But she liked her broom cupboard a lot.

"I'm not nearly drunk enough anymore to be having this conversation."
Aethonan replied, eyes slitted against even the slight glow of the Lumos spell, her head thundering like trolls having a rock concert.

Granian sighed, sitting up, his robes rumpled from the op, the drinks afterwards, and the stumbling path that had taken him and his too-drunk-to-apparate friend to her office for a Sober Up.

"Those eyes. I might have been down on the ground at that point, but I still saw them. I saw what he did."

Aethonan groaned, rolling over to put her back to the wall, one hand cradling her sore head.

"Not drunk enough, remember?"

But her friend, it seemed, was in a rare talkative mood.

"It was like watching someone under the cruciatus, except he didn't scream. But his face, the sheer terror... it was somehow worse."

The other two had screamed. Aethonan had heard them, glimpsed one thrash wildly from the corner of her eye.

Granian continued, and she opened her eyes fully to see him staring blankly out the open doorway into the shadowed corridor beyond.

"I thought I saw the man die. The way he fell, the way his eyes went blank. Except, he wasn't dead yet. He lived long enough for Xanthe to take a look at him. What does that even mean?"

She made herself sit up, reaching out one hand to shove her partner, gritting her teeth through the pounding in her skull, the burning in her eyes.

"It means we've got fucking Merlin on our side, so shut up about it and piss off until I feel human again."

Harsh words, but Granian had known her long enough to only shove her in return, sending her to the floor with a pained groan.

"I'm not the one who literally got pissed afterwards, so don't pretend the
memory isn't burned in your mind either."

She had no response to that one, damn him.

But at least Granian seemed to have said his peace. With a sigh, he lay back down, hands twisted behind his head.

Aethonan mimicked the posture, and waited for the Sober Up to finish its job. She needed to go home and leave work and all its memories behind for a little while.

"Luxe Sombre. With this last successful operation, we have fractured their hold in Britain." Scrimgeour's grin was fierce.

"I'll praise the day that goes by without another mention of candied love potions." Robard spoke softly in response to his Minister's words.

"And no casualties."

"Our men are trained well." Robard said, eyes unwavering. "They were prepared."

"You won't acknowledge his influence on events?"

They both knew to whom the Minister referred.

"He was only a small portion."

"He removed wards that might have suffocated the two Luxe potion masters before Matthews could unravel them. He killed three members of the group." Scrimgeour returned. "Aethonan's report said he was pivotal."

"He killed them, yes. But one body lived for several minutes after he did so. Xanthe said it resembled the empty husks left behind after a Dementor's kiss."

"He is an asset." Scrimgeour pressed.

"He is what he wants to be, with all due respect." Gerald leaned back into
his chair, sighed. "Why aren't you more worried?"

A silence, then his friend and Minister spoke.

"Because every Dark Lord has been alone. They don't come from loving muggle households, don't have muggleborn friends. They don't have ties to humanity, they are not kind. I would be more worried if he was alone, drifting away from society. Not championing house-elves in the Wizengamot."

Gerald thought on that for a moment, testing the theory for holes.

"Not all Dark Lords lack friends or a noble purpose. It is their methods that distinguish them, not their goals."

"Then show me a method that has not been sanctioned as necessary."

A frustrated breath. "We have taught him to be even more dangerous. We have taught him how we operate. What if we are wrong?"

"You can not gain trust unless you give it as well." Rufus paused, resting one hand on the scar of an old injury that ached with the seasons. "Life is full of uncertainty."

"Yes." Robard paused, eyes dark. "And what happens when life takes one of those ties you say keeps him from falling into darkness? What happens when something, someone, hurts him?"

"I guess we will see." Final words to end an argument he could see no resolution to. "But I do not plan on my Ministry being that thing. I pity the ones who are."

And on that last statement, both could firmly agree.

"This shouldn't have happened." Firm words in a musical language. "Nothing has gone right in Britain for months, escalating from Dagel's capture."

A pause, as eyes watched the speaker, her form slender, her face sharp
angles and cold emotion.

One dared to speak.

"The current Minister is competent…"

A swift gesture, and the words stopped, to be replaced with chilling softness.

"The current Minister should be dead, and he is not. I want to know why, and I want to know what has changed. I do not want excuses, I do not want platitudes. I want to know how my wards failed to cover Dagel's escape. I want to know why my potion masters are not dead when they were captured, why my wards did not suffocate them as intended if a critical breach of the premises was underway. I want to know why my merchandise is not currently being sold, but under custody of the British Ministry."

So soft, her voice so elegant and deadly.

This time, no one spoke.

"When do you decide to let someone else give justice for a crime instead of yourself?"

Harry broke the silence that filled the living room, the silence that had fallen ever since his guard arrived late that afternoon to find him staring into the fireplace with grim contemplation.

"When you don't trust yourself to be impartial."

Blue tones of green, a calm soul with a calm voice.

"Impartiality. Being fair and just. Is justice not a punishment that fits the crime? One limb for another?" Harry couldn't erase from his memory the souls he had seen the night before, couldn't yet forget the experience of his power holding a soul in its grasp and squeezing, squeezing, squeezing.

"Historically, yes. But motives matter as well in a more civilized world."
Someone who kills to defend himself should not be killed in return."

"And the executioner? What about the person who punishes the true murderers with death? Is he guilty of murder as well?"

_Squeezing until cracks splintered along old, deep scars, scars so deep they had to be from the actions done to the very young, or by the very, very evil._

Vaughn shifted in his seat, legs stretched out to their full extent.

"Some would argue no person should be killed for any single crime. That to do so negates their ability to ever find atonement. Others argue that if such people are not punished in a horrific, final way, that others would be more likely to commit such crimes. An executioner is merely a tool, a weapon used to obey whatever morality is held at the time."

"If morality is flexible, and laws are only made by men with fluid morals, then how do you trust in the justice given by anyone but yourself?"

"How do you trust your own morals, if they can change based on your environment, your culture, your age and experience?" The guard returned, proving he had not simply been muscle on the auror force.

Harry closed useless eyes, watching flame as it consumed, and consumed, and consumed, its only purpose in life, its only desire to _burn_.

"If you can't trust yourself, who can you trust?"

_Splinters of yellow color, falling like the rain, shattered and broken, not fading away but ending, simply ending with nothing left of life or death or time._


And Harry thought he trusted this man enough to not completely filter the truth.

"I ended someone."
I beat of silence, a flicker of bangladesh green.

"You've killed before. I was told you killed three last night alone. Aethonan had her own kills, as did others from the teams. It is not unusual, with the way wizards duel, especially against targets bearing armor and using dark magic."

Perhaps talking to an auror who had fought in the battle of Azkaban Prison about the morality of killing evil was a poor choice. It was said that the aurors there had executed many of the defenseless prisoners during that one, bloody night, alongside their armed colleagues.

"But I had a choice. I could have simply incapacitated all three. They might have had valuable information. Instead, I allowed my own emotions to get the better of me. I judged them and punished them, and one of them will never get that chance at atonement."

There would be no more time for that towering, cruel yellow soul.

Confused silence; he could feel the other man trying to work through what he said, trying to read between the lines and find the unspoken truth.

"Did your punishment fit the crime, then?"

How many souls, young innocent souls, had the monsters of Luxe bruised and battered, how many had they cracked and broken into splintered pieces? How many had Luxe sold to others who would finish their wicked work?

How many of those souls had survived, how many had died, how many had simply ended, too broken and beaten by Life to find their solace in the healing unwinding of Death?

"Yes." Harry answered, positive on that one fact. "They deserved every portion of it, and perhaps more. I might have only broken them and let them live with the scars, if they were not scarred and broken already. Breaks that could only occur through doing great harm on another living being. Not the spiderweb cracks of a victim, but the jagged breaks of a monster inside unleashed upon the world."
His power flexed, an emerald storm with flashes of black light, and the Stone upon his finger rumbled with the thunder of it.

"I can't help you with the morality of this." Vaughn's statement was simple and honest. It, along with his unwavering loyalty, was the kind of thing that wasn't bought, but earned. "But I won't tell you that you did wrong, either. I don't really understand what it is you see in people, so how can I understand why you would react to that sight the way you did?"

Harry only looked into the fire, watching it burn, feeling its heat.

"You don't blame the fire for burning something precious. You blame the person who set it upon the precious thing. Am I the fire, or the hand holding it?"

Green light moved, coming closer, resting one warm hand on his shoulder.

"Sometimes you need fire to burn away the stench of rot and decay, to warm the cold air and light up the night. It does not have to burn everything in sight. It can be contained, manipulated, a tool humanity could not survive without."

Harry's lips twisted into a humorless grin.

"So, you're saying I need a fireplace for myself."

A squeeze in response, a muffled laugh.

"I think you already have one."

And turning, Harry saw precious light blazing in the doorway in tones of blue and violet.

One couldn't ask for a more beautiful place in which to be contained.

Hermione sat beside him, seeing the strain on his face in the tense line of his jaw, his eyes. His hair was wild and growing long, in need of another cut, his clothing still rumpled from sleep.
It was dark outside, and her Harry appeared to have just rolled from bed.

Vaughn left them with a small smile of acknowledgement, the wizard's brown eyes dark with thought.

She waited until she heard him speaking with Fallon outside to reach out and touch Harry's hand, the one that held his Cloak in a tight white fist.

He relaxed minutely, turning his body towards her, his hand releasing to grasp her own.

"I was told about last night. Or at least, as much as the elves know. I'd rather hear your version."

He let out a long breath, his head falling to the side to rest upon the couch, eyes staring blankly at her collarbone.

Then he told her, with the kind of detail she imagined he might put into an official report if one could understand the significance of colors and patterns.

She did not flinch at his mention of killing any more than she did at the notion of him ending a soul. He had done that once before already. She only held his hand and listened as he listed each child he had passed, their small hues, their quiet sobs, each one imprinted into his mind like a horrifying portrait.

"Then I let Aethonan drag me to a pub and drink I don't know how many shots of Firewhiskey, still decked out in full Graphorn armor, which is a difficult feat to pull off by the way. At some point Abraxan and Aethonan might have sung a drunken rendition of the Hogwarts school song, with Thestral passing through so many different forms it made even me dizzy. Or perhaps that was the alcohol by then. Granian didn't drink, just watched us make fools of ourselves. It's all still a little hazy after that."

"There're probably pictures." Hermione leaned into him, smiling. "If I've judged your team correctly from the stories you've told me of training."

He grinned, and her heart lightened at the gesture. "Probably."
He reached out, questing with his fingers until he found her chin, moving his palm down her neck to hold her lightly, green eyes tired as his smile faded.

"I'm more worried that I feel no remorse, than that I destroyed another soul. I'm worried about what I might become if I don't treat all souls, no matter how evil, as precious things. I'm worried that with the knowledge of reincarnation, I will no longer give life the same sanctity that I used to, knowing death is not the end. What will I be then? Who am I, to manipulate lives and deaths in such a manner? And when do I know I've gone too far?"

Hermione drew closer, sharing his heat as he shared his heart.

"When you harm something innocent, Harry. When you destroy something unbroken simply for expediency or your own gain. When you no longer care enough to ask the questions you just did. You're still human. You get angry, and you do things you wouldn't do normally. You can't expect to be coldly rational all the time. It would be inhuman to face someone who hurt children and feel nothing but calm calculation." She kissed him gently, a caress of mouths meant to soothe, not incite. "And you have me. I'm not afraid to knock you down a few pegs if you ever step out of line."

A laugh, choppy with emotion as he pressed his forehead against her own.

"You know I would do anything for you, right?"

She began to pull away, and grinned at his disappointment even as she tugged him to follow her.

"Perfect. Right now I want dinner. Kreacher told me you haven't eaten all day."

He groaned, rocking to his feet with exaggerated emotion.

"You ask too much from me. I simply can't do it."

"Too late." She tucked her arm through his, smiled up into his face. "You've already said you would do anything. Be glad I'm not asking for a night out. I've been told of this wonderful restaurant three blocks over..."
"Have mercy on me." He grumbled, then yelped as she poked him in the side.

But he was smiling when he walked into the kitchen, and both house-elves gave each other firm nods of congratulations.

Sometimes a House just needs a woman's touch to set it aright again.

Hermione left Harry asleep in the bed, hair tousled, limbs stretched out across the space like he owned it.

Which, technically, he did. His unconsciousness just hadn't learned how to share yet.

She smiled fondly at that thought, getting dressed before absently picking up the shining silver Cloak from the end of the bed and flinging it over his still form, watching the fabric settle around him like a second skin, rippling and reflecting the light for a moment, the Cloak's version of a lazy stretch.

Odd, how she had begun to take its presence for granted. Odder still that she often forgot just what it was.

She never forgot the potential of the Stone, nor how Flamel had looked, a middle aged man regal in his pose, anger in eyes that had fixed upon her with furious disappointment.

That disappointment had never quite faded away before he did.

With one last look at Harry's peaceful face, she turned away, closing the door as quietly as possible before descending the steps, meeting the two faces that had first appeared to her hours before, concerned with Harry's silent facade.

"He's fine. It was just a difficult assignment."

Kraken was willing to take those words at face value; Kreacher was a more canny being.

"What can Kreacher do to help the Master?"
Hermione lifted one hand, ran it through her hair and found the mass disheveled.

A quick spell removed that evidence of how she spent the last hours. No need to rub her independence in her father's face.

"Well, you can always reorganize the furniture."

It would be a simple, easy reminder that her lover was, indeed, human. A few stubbed toes and curses might go a long way towards easing his concern over his growing abilities.

For a second, she saw consternation on Kreacher's face. Then the wrinkled elf grinned, displaying teeth too reminiscent of a goblins for her own comfort.

"Kreacher has considered a thorough cleaning, perhaps replacing some old furnishings. The House must be kept to a certain standard."

"Of course." Hermione waved up the stairs. "Let me know how it goes, huh?"

And at the house-elf's pleased nod, apparated straight from the building into her room.

It was just as it was when she left after a quick word to her mum. Unopened mail spilled across her bed, the current project she had been putting off and had finally decided to undertake when the welcome intrusion of the house-elves occurred.

Her own personal fan mail.

Or, rather, Viola James' fanmail.

It wasn't all pleasant, of course. Not a few were ugly things filled with curses, some literal curses worked into parchment or ink. Others were requests for interviews or offers of funding for targeted research. Some, the more tempting offers, were from various boards or magazines who wanted her opinion on a particular topic.
Some of those she had replied to over the years, keeping her and Harry’s penname a presence in the wizarding world, one that had not faded into obscurity.

But after the successful campaign for house-elves, the bulk of the mail were what amounted to love letters. Fawning things of gratitude, platitudes, and obvious and not-so obvious invitations. Few contained anything useful.

But she still read each and every one, because amongst the fodder there would inevitably be a few gems to make her smile.

Awkwardly written letters from children, inspired into deeper interest in transfiguration. Sweet letters from elderly witches and wizards, grateful for their servants freedom, containing stories of decades of loyal service.

Those few made it worth it.

However, after thirty minutes of resuming her monotonous task, she glanced a name that made her calm shatter.

*Weasley.*

Her eyes jerked back to the letter half hidden under another, pulling it free to look closer at the thick envelope.

Her penname was written in an elegant hand, the forwarding address the standard dummy they had set up years before. But in the corner, block letters had carefully written out a name she still was uncomfortable reading.

*Ronald Weasley.*

Ron Weasley had written *Viola James.*

In the magical world it seemed pigs really could fly.

________________________________________

*Next Chapter: A Green Mother's Love*
~*~Review Please!~*~
*Chapter 24*: A Green Mother's Love

**Angela's Note:** I feel guilty for the long wait, so to make myself better, I'm going to explain WHY this is taking me so long, even though I know I don't have to explain myself. After all, I'm not getting paid. But here goes. I'm in the middle of training for running a half marathon, and in order to get long runs into a day, I have to wake up at 5 in the morning. Then I go to work at 7 (sunrise), and as we are preparing for the insanity of spring planting, I get to work until 7 at night, when the sun finally goes down. **Daylight=I'm working.** So by the time I get home, I have no energy to even check my email, let alone write, edit, and post anything. **On days it rains and I get to stay home, I sleep, sleep, sleep, and then play with my kid, who thinks I'm a ghost currently because he's asleep when I leave for the day and going to bed when I get back.**

Okay, rant over. Enjoy this hard-won chapter!

"It's just what the Minister said would happen." Harry murmured, as Hermione finished reading the letter from Ronald Weasley. "Not even a year, and two species have contacted us."

Hermione tapped the parchment against her palm, the words nearly memorized with the many times she had read it after her first startled viewing the night before.

"But this isn't like the vampire's situation. Werewolves are still human, were once completely normal, and nearly to a one turned against their will. There are so many avenues that could be taken to help them, and not that far to go. The only restrictions on them currently are the laws about where and how they can be employed."

Harry absently turned the ring on his finger, gaze staring blankly ahead. She could see the thoughts rippling across his face, his lips turned down in a frown, his jaw tense.

"The very fact that most are unwillingly turned is the very reason it will not
be easy. Werewolves are still around because they keep hurting other people. The disease drives its host into insanity once a month, and during that time they are forced to spread that disease in a violent, often fatal, manner. I'm not even sure it can be called a disease, as it changes the very pattern of its host irrevocably. It's a... mutation."

Hermione lifted her chin. "I will do more research, but I think the Ministry is approaching the issue wrong. The laws are not even a proper quarantine during infectious times, they make no sense. If we can open this issue with a potential solution to stopping the spread of lycanthropy, we might make more headway."

He smiled at her, a slight shake of his head.

"You're taking this one on, aren't you? Even with college about to start?"

Hermione lifted a hand, grinned.

"Just try and stop me."

It took some more discussion before they had the beginnings of a plan.

Viola James would respond to Weasley with her support, and a vow to research the regulations concerning lycanthropy and what might be done to overthrow them safely.

Hermione would find a volunteer to interview, and who might volunteer to let Harry observe his pattern in more depth in the hopes of discovering anything not already documented in the various wizarding texts on lycanthropy.

She didn't want to rush things, and starting mundane college would definitely take a great deal of her time.

Hermione looked at the list on her desk, a simple bullet-pointed thing, the page divided into four even quarters by thick inked lines.

*Medicine*. One year of basic college curriculum and pre-med courses, five years of medical school, four to six years training.
Pharmacology. Four years of MPharm, one year of registration training.

Potions. Two years apprenticeship, two to four years of journeyman training.

Healing. Four years apprenticeship, four to six years of journeyman training.

Hermione had known from the beginning she would have to choose. In order to realize her dream of melding the wizarding and mundane medical fields, she would need to know enough of all four to be competent, but she would not have enough time to be able to master them. They would have to assemble an entire team of individuals willing to work on the problem from both sides of the equation.

It would take the longest to become a doctor, and the regime was arduous. Healing was a close second, most Healers working for eight or more years to finally earn their title.

Conversely, attaining a potions apprenticeship with the few Masters willing to take on pupils was known to be a cutthroat race every summer. A student had to have either the best N.E.W.T.s, glowing recommendations from professors, or a lot of money. Preferably all three.

Pharmacology seemed the easiest field to enter, and the shortest certification to gain. But the amount of work and time one had to dedicate was just as arduous as any of the others.

It had taken her all summer to decide not only on her chosen fields, but also on where to go to get them.

Potions and Pharmacology it was. The two were made to compliment each other, the vast knowledge of ingredients and their reactions unavoidably attractive when considering her hopes for the future.

And while settling on a college in London and getting accepted had been easy, finding a potions master had not been. She had been sending out owls for weeks, and received nothing in return but polite, and not so polite, denials.
She did not have enough experience. She had not attended a wizarding school. She had no wizarding references other than her tutors, none of which were Potion Masters. She wasn't from an affluent wizarding family, had no ties to anyone they knew could further their careers.

The only thing they could not dismiss was her perfect O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s, both of which had been taken at the Ministry during their quarterly tests.

She supposed her relationship to Harry also wasn't known among the secluded circle of Potions Masters, many of which cared little for politics and modern events. That might have changed things.

But she didn't want to earn her apprenticeship because of who she was sleeping with anyway.

And now college was to start in only a few weeks, and she had few promising names left on her list. If she found no one before New Year's, she would have to write it off as a loss and begin looking into Healing apprenticeships.

But until then, she had a new problem to focus on, a new cause to fight for.

With a smile, she tucked her list into a drawer and opened up the large book that rested on her desk.

It was time for Viola to begin writing another paper, and to do so she needed all possible facts.

"I'm beginning to realize just how difficult it is for muggleborn witches and wizards to find a workable career path."

Hermione grumbled from across the table that night, while Harry sat back and listened to the spell read over Viola's first draft in low tones. She insisted he review every part of her three-part writing process. He figured if she was doing the bulk of the writing herself, he could at least work as a sounding board.

Harry glanced over, watching as blue-violet light tapped angry fingers on
the green kitchen table. Lounging across from them, Vaughn accepted a cup of tea from Kraken, murmuring something that made the elf's yellow light flicker with happiness.

Vaughn had been the only person they had told of their alternative identity. Harry had thought it necessary that one guard at least know of their other semi-celebrity persona, and he had come to trust the ex-auror far more than he ever expected.

"I mean, the entire apprenticeship system is skewed towards half-bloods and purebloods. It's antiquated at best, classism at worst." Hermione continued, and Harry flicked one tendral of power to discontinue the reading spell, focusing his entire attention on her disgruntled form. "And many of the higher paid careers still require a Master of that craft's approval to get certified by the Ministry."

Harry considered that information, frowned.

"Many fields of magic are highly specialized, with Hogwarts acting as general education until students know what path they want to pursue. It makes sense to learn something so complex from another person, one with experience. It might simply be a matter of time for muggleborn Masters to start taking on students."

Hermione snorted, and he didn't doubt she accompanied the sound with an eye-roll. He hated it when she did that when he happened to be Looking at her. Green cylindrical orbs rolling about in a skull was very disconcerting.

"You can't get muggleborn Masters without pureblood Masters taking them on as apprentices first. It would take years, if the rate is a slow trickle of one or two apprentices at a time. What do all of the muggleborn students do in the meantime? Ministry jobs start out menial, you barely make enough to afford to live, and most promotions favor established family connections. There are a few zoology training facilities, but those are among the most dangerous jobs in the wizarding world, and only take in a select few. So how do they find work, without training?"

Harry had no answer to that. He only shook his head, wondering belatedly if this was going to lead to yet another adventure into political
maneuverings.

Bangladesh green moved, boots of brown leather swinging up to prop themselves up solidly on the seat across from him. Vaughn could only get away with such an uncouth move when Kreacher and his foibles was not present.

"Well..." Vaughn began, hands made up of streaming light running absently over his smooth head. "They write letters to the Minister pleading injustice, put articles in the Daily Prophet that everyone ignores, and most recently, they started a job agency. It's doing about as well as the articles though, from what I’ve heard lately. It’s the training, like you said. No one hires people who are not Ministry certified or have been in business for at least fifty years and two generations."

Hermione sat bolt upright, her light pulsing with emotion.

"A job agency? For muggleborn?"

Vaughn lifted his shoulders in a casual shrug. "If you can even call it that. Noone's got a job yet that I know of. It's run by a decent enough bloke. Muggleborn, maybe in his late fifties. You don't see many muggleborns stick around until that age without having found a solid niche somewhere. Most leave after trying for a year or two. My parents did, muggleborns the both of them. Got good jobs on the outside. Still get to enjoy magical stuff in their home if they want, long as they follow the Statute guidelines."

Hermione was practically leaning over the table by now, listening. When Vaughn stopped, she tossed a wild tangle of blue-violet hair over one shoulder, nodding her head firmly.

"That might be it. I've got it."

So saying, she stood, marching around the table to seize him by one arm and proceeded to drag him from the room.

Harry cast a Look behind them, to see Vaughns mouth lifted in a crooked smile.
"I've been thinking, Harry. Brainstorming." Hermione marched a pace away and pivoted, marching back, hands gesturing as she spoke. "Years from now, where are we going to get people to work with us on our projects? We're going to need teams of trained people, both mundane and wizarding kind. And those people need to be willing to work together. If we are ever going to be able to mass produce anything those teams invent, we will need even more people. Muggleborns are struggling. There's not enough training or careers for them in the wizarding world. We could fix that, or at least help this other guy start fixing that. Meanwhile, we sow our own seeds, with what we will need in the future in mind. Recruitment, the like."

Her voice was eager, rambling.

Harry held up one hand. "We don't even know anything about this agency."

Hermione gestured again, stepping forward until he could feel the warmth flowing from her skin.

"Then we find out. And if they are not what we need, then maybe we find one that is, or start one ourselves. It will take longer, but..."

Harry smiled, finishing her sentence when she paused.

"But we're going to need more than just us if we want to change anything."

Hermione's lips pressed gently to his, and he could feel her own smile in the kiss.

"Exactly."

Harry looked into her brilliant light with his eyes closed, leaning so close to her that she was all that he could see, one pulsing, living hue of color. He caressed her cheek with his own, then nodded once.

"I'll go with Vaughn. Check this place out." When she began to protest, he shook his head. "You're busy enough with the werewolf research and your college classes about to begin. I can do reconnaissance, alright?"

She laughed.
"Reconnaissance? Are you a secret agent now?"

Harry grinned. "I don't think I look suave enough for that part. Nor secret enough. Everyone knows what I look like, after all."

"Too bad." Hermione gave him a swift hug, and he heard her continued smile in her voice when she spoke. "I'll get back to work then. You tell me what you learn as soon as you find out."

With that, she stepped back, and after one last teasing touch of her hand against his chest, apparated away.

Harry waited until the last swirl of magic was gone from his home to turn and slip back into the kitchen.

Vaughn sat in the same position he had been when Harry left.

"We're going to Diagon Alley tomorrow. Don't even ask where." Harry muttered, and the other wizard began to laugh.

The need to visit the muggleborn job agency was only the most recent excuse Harry needed to go to Diagon. He also needed desperately to escape his home. Kreacher and Kraken had, for some mysterious reason, decided the house needed to be taken apart and cleaned thoroughly, furniture moved haphazardly and scattered about. He had felt like he was in the middle of a war zone he could not navigate or understand.

Harry also knew Hermione had a plan to find a volunteer for the werewolf research. He had no doubt she would pursue books and articles for mention of names, then meticulously research them until she settled on the perfect candidate.

But Harry did not want to wait that long. If Hermione was going to get involved with werewolves, Harry wanted to know what they were in for before she took that irrevocable step.

Which was why he was taking his time on his way to where the job agency was, ambling through Diagon Alley and stopping in various shops, pretending to pursue wares and make purchases, all the while keeping an
He knew not all werewolves were broken. Ronald Weasley had not been, after all. But the brown man had also not lost his family or friends when infected, instead he had been hailed a Hero. He doubted the pressures of a fearful and hateful society would leave many werewolves unscarred in such a way.

It was with that thought, as he moved on once again, that he glanced down a small break in between shops and saw it.

He never would have seen the color if he had not been looking in places a werewolf might go to work and still be in compliance with Ministry law.

A hue of bright, cheerful cardinal red, wielding a wand of a deeper scarlet phoenix flame, singing a tune softly in a young feminine voice.

And woven into the humanity of that red was the lupine hint of fur, much deeper than even Weasley’s mutation, so ingrained it did not look like a mutation at all, but just a unique part of her pattern.

Harry gestured towards Vaughn, waiting until the guard stepped closer to point down the lane.

"What do you see?"

The wizard was silent a moment before he spoke, and in that silence the girl kept singing her wordless tune.

"Female in her early teens. Dressed in casual robes, not poor or high quality. Light brown skin, dark hair and light colored eyes. Signs of lycanthropy."

"What signs?" Harry asked softly.
"The full moon is tonight, which exaggerates the lupine features of the infected. Her skin color does not typically coincide with light eyes, and they appear to have the tell-tale amber tint though we are too far away to be certain. She is cleaning with an agility and grace few teenagers her age display. She uses a wand, which while not illegal, would suggest she must have received private tutelage. Her fingers look strange, too long around her wand."

Harry nodded. "Stay here."

Blue-green light jerked in what he hoped was a nod as Harry began to walk down the alley.

The girl's singing cut off sharply, red pivoting to face him, posture alert as her heart began to beat rapid counterpoint.

He had never seen someone become alert so quickly before. Had she heard or smelled him first?

"Hello." Harry began. "I was wondering if you would be willing to answer a few questions for me. I'm willing to compensate you for your time."

A hesitation, her life a rolling storm of adrenaline.

"Show me the money first." A response that spoke of experience. "And I might help you."

Harry smiled, reaching into his pocket, his movements slow as he saw her stiffen.

When he pulled out a bag of sickles, she heaved out a breath, holding one red palm up to receive it.

"Ask away, my Lord."

Kelly Valopolis had been a werewolf since she was three years old, in a revenge turning that also took the life of her mother. Her father, stricken with grief, had killed himself the very next day, leaving his only child to the mercy of the British Ministry of Magic.
But the Ministry of those times had not had any mercy to give.

It was instead a single shopkeeper in Diagon Alley who had fostered the child, a witch who had once been classmates with her mother.

That same witch had bought her a wand and taught her magic, and in return, Kelly worked to clean and stock the small shop.

"She's good to me. Built me a cage, ya know? For those nights. More than many weres get. Plus, room and board for just a few hours work each day. She's not married, got no kids to take care of but me. That's my life. I work, and I learn how to do things I would be able to use if I wasn't who I am. I exist."

Even as she said that practical summary, Kelly Valopolis' light shone, an unbroken flame.

"I have hope, you know? I'm going to inherit the shop. I can switch to owl-orders only, things that don't require personal contact. Or maybe hire somebody for the storefront. I've been thinking. Some people call me crazy, but I'm not going to give up and go feral."

Harry focused on that word, eyes narrow.

"Feral?"

A shrug. "People who get bit, just can't handle it. Either their mind goes from self-pity, or they get mean, or just stupid. They don't take precautions, kill or infect somebody and get hunted down. Those that don't kill or get caught skulk around Knockturn or the forests, acting more like animals than people. Me, I know what I am, know I gotta control me."

Harry observed the girl's pattern again, taking in the minute shifts of her base humanity.

"Do you dislike being locked up during the full moon?"

The girl shivered, her pulse jumping before it settled again.

"Who doesn't? It's horrible. There's this thing, this... thing. It's, like, inside
of us all, driving us. When you can't be driven, it crawls under your skin like bugs, stinging and pinching until you gnaw at yourself trying to dig it out. But you can never quite dig deep enough, past muscle and bone. I've heard wolfsbane takes away the itch, but I've never been able to try it. I think that's one thing that drives weres feral. An itch you can't scratch unless you wanna end up on the next wanted list for the aurors." A pause, another shiver, before cardinal red flexed and straightened. "But it ain't so bad other times. I'm a lot stronger than other kids my age. I can hear things, you wouldn't believe the things I hear sometimes in the Alley! Private stuff. And my eyesight's better than good, especially around now. I can handle the itch one night a month."

Harry considered that, questioned it.

"Is this itch simply to run, or to kill?"

She snorted, a self deprecating laugh spilling from her.

"What isn't it? It's a desire to do something. Like reaching for something glorious, something you know will be the most wonderful thing you've ever done, and then failing. I can't remember all of those times, it's a hazy cloud of sensation, but it always starts with this longing. Like... like a craving for sweets, but a hundred times stronger. Then, there is a sense of loss that turns to horrible, horrible anger. Anger at everything. I think anyone who feels that kind of anger would slaughter anything in its path."

"So you've never been free to find out just what the itch is for?"

Another laugh.

"I can guess! I'm a were, aren't I? Everyone knows we bite and we kill if we're free. It's why the Ministry keeps people safe from us."

Harry wasn't sure how many werewolves would hold that opinion.

"You don't hate the Ministry?"

Red light rippled in a restless movement.

"I'd like to be normal. But I'm not. I accept that. If I got careless only one
time, I could kill someone, or worse, make someone like me. The Ministry is just trying to protect people. Sure, I'd like more freedom during normal days. But where do you draw the line? I've heard the week before or after the moon a werewolf can still do partial infections if they draw blood or bite. It's best if people just stay away from us."

She spoke words by rote that she had obviously been told many times. Harry didn't doubt it was the witch who had taken her in who had said them first.

"I think that's all my questions." Harry said softly. "Thank you for your time."

"That's it?" She sounded doubtful. "Nothing else?"

Harry made himself smile. "For now."

He managed to find two more werewolves that morning in Diagon Alley, as he wound his way slowly from one end to the other, both older men who walked huddled together, their movements eerily alike.

They were nowhere near as complacent as Kelly had been, their light scarred and dim.

And they hated the Ministry with a passion bordering on insane rage.

"No jobs, no money, no potions. No place to go. We're dirt, that's what we are. Bugs, pests crawling in the muck. Waiting to be exterminated by the Ministry's aurors the minute we try to help ourselves." A low growling sound, bestial, rumbled from one man's throat, the lupine pattern in his body as deep as Kelly's had been. "They hate us, but they made us! They might not have sank fangs directly into our flesh, but they made the wolves hunt human streets, made them have no other recourse but pain and death. We kill ourselves, or we die killing others. We have no hope, we have nothing. We are nothing."

The other man, silent until now beside his raging partner, finally spoke, laying one calming hand on the firsts arm.
"We are moonstruck. We are pack, you and I. We won't seek death yet."
Calm words, but also final ones.

Yet. Death, to these two, was an inevitability. It was simply a matter of time.

"Moonstruck?" Harry asked hesitantly, unsure if he should continue with his questions.

The second man, a deep grey soul, nodded solemnly.

"The drive within us to hunt and feed, to sate the Moon's unending hunger. She strikes us with her whips, and we run for her, our own harsh Mistress."

Harry felt a fission of excitement, the beginnings of a theory.

"You have run free then?"

The first man cursed under his breath, murky brown light.

But the second man answered again, matter-of-factly.

"I haven't killed a human, which is why I am walking through Diagon Alley alive. But I have run, yes."

"What was it like?"

Silence for a long moment, before brown and grey both reached out, linking hands as grey light spoke in reverent remembrance.

"Rapture. It was wondrous rapture, so alive, so connected with energy and magic. A high the likes of which no wizarding drug can mimic. If you run with brothers, then that high is magnified even more. If you end your run with a kill, anything, even the smallest mouse, then there is an explosion of sensation until your mind leaves you entirely, your being nothing but life and magic, scents and colors. One mouse, and I was satisfied for an entire month, no pain, no headaches, no itch for more."

"I felt like I had transcended." Brown light, soft now without the underlying
rage. "I was there, I felt it too. It was like the part of me that was pain or sorrow had died, leaving nothing but pure elation behind. But then, the next month, I was locked up, and everything was the way it had been before. A low so deep, a hole you feel you can never crawl out of. I became nothing again, nothing but a problem for society, a walking threat."

Harry watched as the two men sagged, heads lowering, and spoke carefully into the depression that leaked from the men like a miasma of horrible pain.

"What about wolfsbane?"

Brown snarled.

"No pain, but nothing to replace it. Just sorrow, endless fucking sorrow. You would think the Ministry developed it to drive us all feral, drive us right into the streets where they could put us down like the dogs we are. I don't know why I haven't done so already. Maybe take a few of them down with me."

"Don't talk like that." Swift words. "We are brothers."

Harry looked between the two, quietly wondered to himself what could possibly be done to help.

Then realized his best option might be to just ask.

"What would make you happy?" He shook his head. "I mean, what is it that makes being a werewolf so horrible?"

Grey light sighed.

"We are creatures with no purpose, no home, no lives. Nobody wants us, but nobody gives us a place to go. We have no country of origin, no region of safety. There is nowhere a werewolf can go to get a job, have a family, be a person. We are made animals because we can not live like humans. The lucky ones manage to hide what they are, or have friends and family who support them. The rest of us drift, taking the scraps the wizarding world flings down for us, living day by day, moment by moment."
Finally, something he might be able to use.

"And if there was someplace safe to go?"

"Tell me where it is, wizard, and I will go there."

Harry was still frowning when he finally reached the tall thin building that housed Job Training and Placement. The place was a good two stories taller than its neighbors, but looked to be only half the width. It was also layered in multiple different wards, some of which were remote monitoring charms if he wasn't mistaken.

J.T.P was not taking any chances with their security, which might mean they had run into problems before. He wasn't sure what kind of problems a place like this might have, though, and said as much to Vaughn.

The man shrugged. "You got to know the bloke who runs it. Ran afoul of some young purebloods vandalizing the place a few months back, handled it himself instead of calling in the aurors. It got ugly with the parents, who did call in the aurors. Man's had some sort of training in the muggle world, and is no slouch with a wand, either. Eventually the matter was settled with a fine to Mr. Clifton for excessive use of magic on minors. But since then, this place has a nice target painted in invisible ink or something right on its pretty glass doors. Purebloods tend to get their noses bent out of shape when you mess with their Heirs, even when it's warranted. A fine wasn't enough punishment in their minds."

Harry squinted at the building, trying to establish the physical details underneath the multilayered magic.

"How does it look from the outside?"

Vaughn stood beside him, silent for a moment before he continued.

"It doesn't fit in with the rest of the Alley. It's all shiny, metal and glass. That's probably why the kids wanted to vandalize it so badly. It's like a sore thumb next to everyone else's brick, wood, and stone. It's spotless and fancy, and just too different."
Harry nodded, watching for a moment as the colorful sea of passing witches and wizards continued to flow past, few glancing towards the tall building.

"I've got a idea." Harry paused a moment, considering. "This is supposed to be a general employment agency, right? Matching the unemployed with employers? Facilitating training and such?"

One bangladesh green hand waved in the air in a universal sign of ignorance. "I guess so?"

Harry leaned against his staff, idly rubbing one finger against the Stone on his middle finger as he thought.

"I'm not satisfied with all the wizards currently on rotation guarding my family and the Granger's houses. I'd like to replace at least three of the five of them." Nothing but a simple head jerk of color from the other wizard, so Harry continued. "So that's why I'm here. I'll see how they operate, and judge from there."

"Sounds good enough. It's none of my business if you have an ulterior motive then?" Harry heard the grin in Vaughn's voice, as well as the subtle inflection of a question.

Harry smiled. "If I have one, it will be of no importance for a very long time."

"Are you a schemer, Lord Potter?"

Harry only raised one brow as he straightened and began to walk forward. "You tell me."

The process felt more like something he would encounter in the mundane world. There was a secretary, who gave him forms to fill out, sounding far too excited to help when he politely mentioned his inability to read or write.

She didn't recognize him, which meant she either didn't read the Daily Prophet, didn't listen to gossip, or she hadn't lived in the country the last few years.
She read aloud every single question on the two page application that was apparently provided to each prospective employer. The questions were routine, such as the type of work being given, any qualifications needed, and potential working hours and pay levels being offered. At each of his answers, her light would jerk with rapid nods as her hands flowed with constant motion, a mundane pen quickly jotting down his words.

There was no other soul inside the main foyer. No one waiting in the green wooden chairs with their lighter green cotton cushions. No workers passed through on some business, no hopefuls darted in to place applications. The place was as silent as a grave except for the witch's questions and Harry's answers.

It was made obvious by the secretary that having a prospective employer was a miraculous event. She did everything but roll out the red carpet, assuring him multiple times that they should have a list of applications meeting his requirements owled to him shortly.

Then, as Harry was beginning to think they would simply walk out and that would be that, heavy footsteps sounded from around one corner, and light blossomed with the blazing energy of a powerful magic user in the steady-beating prime of their life.

Which, in Harry's experience categorizing wizards, could be anywhere from their twenties to their sixties.

"Phillip Cliffton." The soul announced in a masculine voice as he approached, and began to hold out one hand that gleamed with a merlot mix of red and brown color. "I saw we had a..." A minute pause as Harry turned to face the wizard and he took in Harry's face. "...a visitor filling out forms. I hope we can help provide you with the people you are looking for."

"Thank you." Harry said, and accepted the handshake, another mundane gesture that hinted that this man had not left the muggle world very far behind. "I'll be waiting for your owl."

"Good, good. If we can not find a good fit right away, we have multiple training courses being undertaken right now in charms work, warding, and advanced transfiguration for construction."
The witch shifted, her voice a low murmur.

"He's looking for security guards to monitor muggle houses."

Mr. Cliffton did not miss a beat.

"We have several contacts that might be amenable to work of that kind, as well. I'll make sure their details are owled promptly."

"Thank you." Harry repeated, letting the quick flow of words wash over him. The man spoke with rapid words and sharp hand gestures, a forceful personality that made obvious that the man had no problems getting his point across clearly, and often.

The man was confident in his business, even if, as Vaughn told it, that business was sinking fast.

"We look forward to working with you, Lord Potter."

No doubt in his voice, nor any hesitation at using his name. Harry had to give him credit for confidence.

"Thank you." And with the third repetition of the evening, for lack of anything else to say, Harry turned to the exit, Vaughn a silent green shadow behind him.

"Werewolves are driven to hunt mammals of any shape, size, or species. Warm-blooded, magical or non-magical. Doing so causes an extended mental and perhaps magical high. When this drive is prevented, they will harm themselves or any they come into contact with, including other werewolves. If allowed freedom to roam, even if a kill is not completed, they will still have some sort of chemical reaction that causes extreme mental pleasure. The presence of other wolves heightens these reactions. Wolfsbane muffles both the drive to hunt, and the chemical reaction that rewards the hunting behavior. As a group, the infected fall into three main categories. The feral, who have given up any semblance of humanity. The moonstruck, who retain their desire to be human while still practicing the hunting drive of lycanthropy. Last is the, for lack of a better term, complacents. The ones who do not want to hunt or kill, and are most
willing to work and live within the law. Complacents are more likely to be
friendly toward the Ministry, and see themselves as monsters. Moonstruck
are more likely to hate and resent the Ministry and its regulations. Ferals
seem to hate everybody, including themselves. But even in these
categories, there are crossovers. Greyback was a well-known moonstruck
who was also quite feral."

Hermione listened to her boyfriend, trying not to feel annoyed.

Sometimes, he just drove her crazy. Worse, the information he had gained
without telling her was actually extremely useful.

So she couldn't even be angry! Which, of course, made her very annoyed.

And reluctantly pleased, because he had spent an entire morning in Diagon
Alley searching out werewolves to question for her.

Sometimes, her emotions made no sense whatsoever. Which, she
reminded herself, was why one learned to think rationally and not
emotionally.

"I can't find any mention of organization within the ranks of werewolves,
other than the occasional packs that sprout up lead by one disgruntled
werewolf or another. They do seem to congregate in pairs of two or three,
perhaps because of that reaction you talked about, or simply to be with
people who understand them." Hermione said calmly, her pen making quick
notes across the page of her notebook. "The are like the lepers of the dark
ages. A group of people ostracized for the contagion they bear."

Harry tilted his head, black hair falling across his face and waved away in
an absent motion, forehead wrinkled in thought.

"Lepers had colonies, didn't they? In some places."

She nodded. "There still are a few in other countries. They were once very
popular, before more was known about the disease. The social stigma
was very great for those infected, mostly because it was believed to be
highly contagious. Most colonies were supported by donations from
governments or religions, and located in remote areas to keep the
quarantine easy to manage. Life inside varied from horrid poverty to normal, healthy societies, depending on the time period, the country, and the management."

Harry began to pace, taking carefully measured steps across her bedroom and back.

"Why hasn't the wizarding world tried quarantine? It seems a sensible measure."

Hermione shook her head, feeling a bit bitter as she considered the history book she was currently working her way through.

"In Britain, extermination was the quarantine method. It even had some measure of success, managing to kill off entire families and decreasing attacks for years at a time. But werewolves immigrated, or brought back infections with them from travels off the island. Nothing completely prevented random outbreaks. Once extermination was outlawed, the current regulations were put into place, a sort of semi-quarantine. Not allowing werewolves to interact with uninfected people."

"But it fixes nothing. Werewolves still walk around, they just can't work." He stopped, green eyes unfocused, power a thick presence about him. "They have nowhere to go."

Hermione tapped her pen against her desk, brow furrowed in thought.

"The way I see it, there are several points of attack. This situation parallels leprosy in many different ways. First, we need to establish some sort of colony for those infected. A town, even. Someplace with homes, a school, markets. Establish trade and jobs within that colony. Do not present it as a quarantine as much as an optional refuge, a place they can go to escape bigotry. Perhaps even a place warded to contain them during the full moon, a wide enough area where they can follow the hunting drive in peace."

Another hard tap, the paper thudding dully underneath the attack.

"Second, research the hell out of lycanthropy and get the true facts out there. Most people seem to think a werewolf breathing on them will
transfer the disease. Or that all werewolves are hulking men out to eat their children. A lot of information is out there, and a lot of it seems contrary to colloquial knowledge. I bet, with a little incentive, a group of witches and wizards would be willing to work on that."

She smiled, the plan coming together neatly in her mind.

"And last, we get the Ministry to change their useless laws. If what I suspect is true, there is no way a werewolf could transfer the disease by teaching or cashiering or any office drone job. They would have to physically attack someone, which most normal sane individuals who want to make a living do not do. And for every crazy feral werewolf out there, there are a dozen crazy wackjob wizards going about killing people."

She turned, to see Harry grinning at her, eyes locked on her nose

"You are brilliant." He said, and any annoyance she might have still felt melted away like snow in the rain. "I think I'm Hermionestruck."

Laughter bubbled out of her as she rose, rolling her eyes in a gesture she knew was lost on him.

"That was incredibly corny." But she walked into his arms and settled there in a place as familiar and comfortable as home. "I'm almost sorry for you."

He laughed into the skin at her nape, pressing a kiss there. "You're my refuge, then."

She leaned back and poked his side, her smile wide with humor. "In the context of this conversation, that could also be construed as calling me a leper colony. Try again."

"Oh, Viola. Infect me with your contagious love, please."

He held his serious face a mere moment; then they both dissolved into helpless laughter.

"That was horrid. Absolutely horrid." She laughed the words into his skin, her arms tight around him. "Stop, please."
He growled with faux ferocity, fingers tight as they pulled her ever closer.

"I'll hunt you until I die."

She felt the ripple of power, her body shivering as energy passed through her, energy she knew as well as her own. She lifted her head, met eyes that glowed with emerald light.

Hermione grinned, leaning closer, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"Then chase me."

And as his eyes narrowed, she jerked free and sprinted for the door.

With a wild incredulous laugh, he ran after her, and she felt his power like a hand at her back.

Jane Granger watched first Hermione, then Harry, race for the front door, acting for all the world like pre-teens playing a game of tag.

"Don't slam the...!" She began, then only sighed as a loud bang echoed through the house, followed closely by a crash as, no doubt, one picture hanging fell to the floor.

At times like these she remembered the two were still only teenagers.

With a forbearing shake of her head she started for the hallway to set to rights whatever had, hopefully, not broken.

Harry caught her two blocks down, though only because she let him catch her.

When she apparated them both to Grimmauld Place, he only groaned his approval against her mouth.

Then there were no more words, only light and laughter and the wild sensation of skin on skin, heat and power intertwined for a moment into one single drive for completion.
And later, Harry could only think of one word to really describe the experience, a word he had heard earlier that day about a very different sort of hunt.

*Rapture.*

"I visited the J.T.P, as well." Harry murmured into the skin of her shoulder, one hand absently caressing the blue-violet light of her back where she lay on her stomach across his bed. "It all seemed very normal. Mundane."

She hummed, her voice muffled as she spoke into the green cotton pillow under her face.

"Good. I'd expect it to be, if it supports muggleborn."

Harry breathed in her scent, today's mix of sweet vanilla soap and ink, dipped his head with a nod that also served to brush his lips against her warmth.

"I asked for applications for muggleborn guards, for your parents and my aunt's houses. I know Aunt Petunia has been having some... issues, with some of the pureblood guards. Nothing horrible, but there is friction there. A lack of respect. I figure this is a solution that might solve more than one problem."

She turned, and he could see the surge of emotion in the way her steady light beat faster.

"Brilliant. Though I haven't noticed any problem at home, I barely even notice them to be honest."

Harry grinned.

"Kreacher would tell you that servants and guards both are supposed to be invisible. It's part of their job. And in the magical world, that's quite literal."

She shuddered, relaxed back into the sheets with a sigh.

"Invisible servants. Another mundane fairytale come into reality in the
wizarding world."

Her voice was drowsy, her light slowing again. Harry resumed his gentle caress, smiled as she dropped easily into sleep. She was exhausted, had probably been staying up too late and waking up too early, working on her research. His Viola tended to do that when she had her teeth in a new project.

He would let her rest now, for without a doubt, she would be up soon enough and eager to put his latest information onto paper.

Harry smiled and rested his head on her shoulder, listening to the sound of her breathing, watching the rise and fall of her light and committing every moment of it into memory, as the black-white Cloak rose to lay gently over them both with a rustle of silk.

_This is home._

The next day Viola James wrote out a final draft of her paper on the issue of lycanthropy, and owled one copy to Ronald Weasley for his opinion.

A week later she received what amounted to a plea to make her acquaintance.

It made Hermione wonder just what the redhead would think if he found out her true identity.

She said no, of course. She wasn't ready yet to reveal who she was to anyone else, and she certainly wouldn't pick a Weasley to be first if she were.

But she was very, very polite when she declined.

_Lycanthropy; What Is It Really, and Is The Ministry Responsible For Its Spread?_

_By Viola James_
Minerva McGonagall was purposefully ignoring the resignation of one Severus Snape when she picked up the current issue of the Daily Prophet.

It had been three days since the dour man had placed the document on her desk, and in three days she still hadn't wanted to accept it.

The man was a master at potions and defense. He was also horrible with young children.

But he would be a *nightmare* to replace.

The headline was nothing spectacular; another day, another wizard caught breaking the Statute. This man wasn't very original, enchanting pigs to fly over the countryside outside Norwich. It had apparently been a prank on relatives that escaped in a spectacularly public fashion.

The second page held various updates on issues within the Ministry. New bans on certain potions ingredients, updated restrictions on cauldron thickness. An article on lycanthropy.

Her eyes stopped short and snagged, caught by the name more than the title.

*Viola James.*

And just like that, she *knew.*

She must be going blind in her old age, to not have seen it sooner. It was her only excuse, the clues all there right in front of her eyes, paraded by like sparkling enchanted elephants.

She had followed the woman's work for years. Any person in the transfiguration community who developed new techniques was noteworthy; one who managed to prolong transfigurations by days even more so. In the years since that first big discovery, more had come, branching out to transmutation and magical theory.

She had been fascinated by the ideas, reading them in print, imagining meeting the brilliant witch, perhaps as old as herself. A recluse who preferred her peace and quiet to the nagging of the various research
Boards.

She had her own preconceived ideas about who the woman must be. Perhaps *that* is her excuse.

Because she had met Viola James already. Hadn't she allowed her into Hogwarts to scan the Mirror of Erised? Hadn't she talked, years ago, with Harry Potter about the nature of souls within transfiguration, then read a paper by Viola *James* about the very same topic less than a year later? How many times had she listened to Potter describing his unique vision, wondered at the potential, watched Hermione Granger taking careful notes on a muggle pad of paper with a muggle ink pen?

Hadn't she displayed her animagus form multiple times, and heard Harry Potter theorize that the reason she retained her human mind was because her soul did not transform, only her human body?

Minerva leaned back into her chair, suddenly overwhelmed.

The brilliant, revolutionary witch that no one knew was not a witch at all, but a witch and a wizard working together. Two *young* people, not even graduates of a magical school.

The Blind Sorcerer, whose name was still whispered about inside the halls of Hogwarts, whose stone dragon still lay crumbled in pieces where it had fell after the Tournament. She saw it nearly every day from her window, saw students clamber over it, posing for pictures. Remembered the sight of it, wings and claws of rock and stone, an impossibly powerful display of transfiguration.

How amazed she had been that the boy could even stay standing after such a feat.

How, in Merlin's name, has she not realized it sooner?

No wonder the two preferred anonymity, relying completely on their reputation as a scholar, not one's celebrity status.

Minerva shook her head, prepared to read the newest article, one in a series she saw as becoming increasingly political.
And she didn't have the least intention in revealing the newest knowledge she had gained. She rather liked keeping a secret.

It made her think fondly of the many ones her predecessor had carried.

Neville put down the paper, met his friends wide smile.

"She did it. Just like she promised."

Ron banged one fist on the table in a rapid drumbeat, a laugh bursting from him that sharply resembled a howl.

"A mix of sarcastic insult at the Ministry and the idiots who read the Prophet."

"We read the Prophet too." Neville pointed out, and was summarily ignored.

"I wish I could meet her. It'd be nice to know someone who supports werewolves for a change."

Neville raised a single brow, then shook his head with a sigh.

"What are your friends, then? Animals?"

"Dean and Seamus might as well be." A quick smile. "I'll let them know the change in their status."

A moment's silence, the rustle of newspaper as Neville moved it across the table.

"The Wizengamot meets in two weeks. Gran's on board, already notified the Ministry of her retirement. I'm going to present Viola's ideas, as soon as the floor opens. The one about research, and a refuge." Neville paused, raised his chin. "Gran's certain I'll get seconded, especially the motion for research. She even thinks Potter might be interested."

Ron sobered, shrugged, thought of the man they had last seen over a year
before.

"I owled the Map back, never got a response. No one ever sees him outside the Wizengamot and the occasional Witch Weekly stalker in Diagon."

"I don't blame him. He's stared at like a special zoological exhibit." Neville pointed out.

"Maybe one of a nundu." Ron mumbled, frowning. "But Dad says there's rumors he's working for the Ministry. You know how it is there, everyone gossiping. No one knows anything, of course. If he is it's kept secret."

"Doesn't matter." Neville pointed out. "He hasn't missed a meeting yet. With his support, we're guaranteed to make a statement."

"I won't turn down any allies, that's certain." Ron said, his smile beginning to return. "It's really happening. We're doing this."

"We are." Neville declared, and stood. "Now where does your dad keep the firewhiskey? I know he hides some around here somewhere. We should celebrate."

Ron grinned.

"At your service."

The start of her first year at college was anticlimactic.

Hermione found the first day dull. The first week tedious.

The work was methodical, and she had already read each text in preparation. She had credit for many of her general subjects because of the advanced high school she attended, so had skipped the equivalent of a year already.

But she was bored, and she did not like being bored.

"This professor is so tough." A girl nearby murmured to her partner. "Why
do we need chemistry three anyway? It's not like we'll be making drugs, just counting them."

_Idiot._ Hermione thought, purposefully turning away in her seat. _It's so you don't kill someone by accident if a doctor's prescription is wrong. Or if you have to make a recommendation._

_Or if you decide you want to mix muggle and magical ingredients together to invent new drug treatments._

Hermione smiled, straightened, remembered her plan.

Surely, once the introductory material was presented, things would become much more challenging.

The owl that arrived at Grimmauld Place was a large bulky creature of arctic blue, its feathers striated with the golden hue of magical protection charms.

J.T.P, it seemed, even protected their delivery owls with the highest protection.

Harry accepted the large envelope from the still creature when it elegantly extended one clawed foot, the strings that bound it to blue claws unraveling automatically at his touch.

With an abrupt rustle of wings the owl was airborne, taking flight from the railing that graced his doorway without prompting. Harry followed its light for a moment, then turned to step inside, Kreacher closing the door behind him with a grunt.

"Whoses owls won't deliver to a Master's elf?" Yellow light grumbled, and Harry smiled.

"One trained not to do so, obviously."

Kreacher sniffed at his answer.

"Breakfast is on the table." And with that, the elf stomped in the opposite
direction of the kitchen, steps heavy with offense.

Harry wandered over to sit at said table, placing the envelope that no doubt held resumes on the green wood.

He spent a moment simply sitting, thinking, organizing in his mind the many branches of research and discovery alongside the current projects they mirrored.

So many plans, and never a dull moment to spare.

With a smile, Harry reached for the purple fork, and began to eat.

It was late, the air quiet and still in his laboratory.

Hermione had left half an hour earlier, having spent the last few hours of their day going through resumes one by one, discussing skills and experience, before they settled on three candidates that seemed satisfactory.

Now, she was no doubt tucked in bed to sleep away another frustrating day of classes that Harry knew she found too rudimentary. She was used to being challenged, and not happy with basic classes once more.

He didn't doubt she would soon decide to test out of her current classes. She was simply too stubborn so far to do so, determined to make her way through college properly, afraid she might miss some opportunity, some information. She liked order, liked to follow a set process and plan.

Harry hadn't had that problem with his own courses. He jumped from one course path to another, gathering different college credits the way he imagined a child would gather wildflowers.

*This one looks pretty. This one looks interesting. This one looks useful.*

His college advisor had given up on him. The young professor merely signed him up for Harry's newest interest and wished him godspeed. When Harry lost interest or grew bored, he simply spoke to the teacher and dropped the class or tested out, either option satisfactory to him.
College was a fluid thing, a river with many potential paths. One only had to have the time and the money to swim its waters.

He thrilled in his many studies. Thrilled even more when he found some way to apply it to his chosen research projects. He never stopped questioning, never found his thirst for knowledge quenched.

He only kept finding new waters he wanted to taste.

Vampires. Werewolves. The souls they both bore. The places such souls went, after death.

Death and reincarnation. The spinning, turning, rotating wheel of time. How another reality existed on some other plane, a reality where people grew younger, where souls forgot memories.

Where the old and the broken were made young and new, made into pure colors once more, innocent, beautiful.

He had summoned more souls, with and without his Viola. He had talked twice more with Flamel, the young yet old man always forgetting the previous conversation, always suspicious, always stern and disapproving.

He had failed to summon a hundred times more people than he had successfully summoned. He had reached a tentative theory about that fact.

It took roughly a lifetime, depending on the person's life, to be reborn. But before they were reborn, they experienced a time of pure... peace.

"They simply float, every good thing, every wonderful thing a part of them. Some experience it together; people intertwined in Death as they were in life. Others solitary, but no less happy. Yet, happiness is not what they feel. To know one is happy, one must know what it is to be sad. They do not know happiness. They simply know... something. Something I myself do not yet know, or remember knowing."

Flamel's words, so enlightening, so confusing. Guesses in the dark, based on touch and not sight. A description of senses that Harry did not have the ability to process.
Perhaps that was what being the Master of Death would give him. The knowledge of something indefinable, something he could only think of as a perfect peace. The reward all souls had before they must go out into the world again for a time.

It made him wonder just how humanity had learned that there was a heaven. Had it been merely a guess? Or had some ancient person managed to return, managed to tell something of what they had been during their time dead?

Harry had talked to other dead wizarding scholars. Some had been as fascinated as him with the experience. Others had refused to speak of it; others hadn't been able to. Some were violently angry to be summoned. Some sank into a deep, depressed silence.

All of them asked to be returned, some right away, others after mere moments. The longest had lasted nearly half a day, speaking of her personal mysteries left unsolved, her research that had never been finished. That scholar had born a scar across her incorporeal light, one Harry had seen was in the process of being healed, the jagged edges of her soul knitting together and smoothing out.

Like ripples in a pond slowly settling into peaceful serenity.

It told him something, that only the broken souls seemed able to tolerate life for long periods of time.

And after all his time of experimenting, cataloguing, asking questions, he had not summoned his parents.

Now, sitting in the glow of his laboratory's green walls, he let himself consider it. Let himself think of what there was to gain, what there was to lose.

What would he say.

What would they say?

Hermione hadn't mentioned the option to him again after her first suggestion the year before. She didn't press him, knowing he knew as
much as she did that time was against him.

His parents would forget him. Might already have forgotten him. Despite Flamel's insistence that the dead did not forget the ones they loved, the old man had also said the recent memories were the first to go.

Would his mother and father remember a child they had had for such a short time? Loved for such a short time?

Did he want to know the answer to that question?

Harry lifted his hand, looking into the dark light that rested on his green palm.

The Stone glimmered there, and he felt as if it stared back into himself even as he looked into its changing pattern.

What was it Nietzsche had said?

*When you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.*

In this case, he looked possibilities in the eye, and could not decide whether they even existed.

But he was tired of asking questions without searching for an answer.

Harry turned the Stone, alone in the silent room, and spoke out their names.

"James and Lily Potter."

And he watched as dark shadows burst into light and split, until two souls waited before him.

One, shining green light only a shade paler than his own, stepped towards him, a feminine voice delicate and longing and full of sorrow and love, breaking the quiet as a wave breaks against the sand.

"*Oh, my boy. My baby boy.*"
A mother's love doesn't forget.

She tried to hold him. Her light pressed into his own, surrounding him for a heartbeat of time, a solid non-touch that was warm and cold at once, like the touch of ice so frozen it burned.

Then she cried, and he heard her tears even if he could not see them or feel them, and her voice could not seem to settle between utmost loss and utmost joy.

"I love you, my baby boy. I miss you. Oh, I missed you. It hurt so much when I had to go away."

Harry wanted to ask questions. The scientist in him, removed from emotion, wanted to ask *Do you remember how you died, do you remember why you went away.*

But Harry wasn't just a scientist, and this was the mother he could not remember, and he suddenly realized that he loved her anyway. That some part of him had never forgotten her, just as some part of her had not forgotten him.

"I love you too. It's alright."

And he reached out to her green light and the Stone still in his hand was pulsing wildly with color, the Cloak that rested upon his nearby chair echoing the emotion.

For a moment of time, something bent; reality, maybe, or time itself. His hand was no longer alive, but it was not dead; and he touched skin that was not cold fire but something else entirely.

*Peace.* Loving, loved *peace.*

Then it was gone, and he was himself again, his pattern all too human except for the dark green light and pale green shadows that the Hallows had created within him.

Lily laughed, the sound abruptly bright and unmarred by the pain of life's
experiences. She held out a hand to his father, who walked forward to grasp it, his deep red soul a striking contrast to their green hues.

"Son." James Potter said. "You are well. This makes us happy."

And Harry smiled at those words, so careful, confusion masked by simply joy.

He didn't doubt the man was wondering how he had a son, if he did not remember having one.

But the dead did not seem to question what they felt. They simply felt, as they simply existed, in Death so much more certain than in life.

"I just wanted to say goodbye. That I'm okay, I'm happy." Harry paused, the words coming unplanned, spilling from some place inside him he hadn't know was there. "I'll see you again. When it's time."

And Harry knew that that was true, too. His parents would be reborn. He might one day be walking down a street, decades from now, and see a child who laughed his mother's laugh, who bore her beautiful unique soul. He might meet his father when the man walked in another skin, another life, another time.

Perhaps, the two would recognize something in him then. Some inner sense of knowing, of belonging, of being connected across time.

And it was enough. It was more than enough.

After he let them go, Harry lay on his bed and let the Cloak move over him, settling across him like a gentle wave lapping over his body.

For a long time he wavered on the edge of sleep, locking the memory of their souls into his mind, the memory of that perfect peace, of touching something immortal and having it touch him back in a gentle, loving caress.

His mother and father, who still loved him. Would always love him, in some ways.
Sometimes, the abyss was not dark and evil. Sometimes it was a wonderful thing.

Sometimes you want it to look into you.

With a last sigh, Harry slipped into dreamless sleep, and when he woke would notice one single, defining thing.

The Stone no longer rested inside its ring setting. He had never put it back, never noticed what it had become when he reached through life into Death to touch his mother.

On his right palm, connected by threads of darkest light, the Stone rested inside and yet apart from his own pattern, as unchangeable as ever, and just as impossible.

He couldn't remove it, just as he couldn't change it, couldn't make it, couldn't understand it.

It simply was.

And now, it was part and not-part of himself.

Next Chapter: Ripples of Brown Light

Review Please!
*Chapter 25*: Ripples of Brown Light

**Angela’s Note:** It's rained a good few days, and I've had some time to write. And I hope everyone enjoys this latest chapter! But I've got one thing I want you to know. It's been my policy, and joy, of the last few years to personally answer every review. I love reviews, and especially the positive ones for obvious reasons, and I appreciate each and every person who takes the time to stop and let me know what they think. Some of you I recognize by username now because of the many messages I've been happy to receive. But in the last few months, I've realized that what now amounts to the cumulative hours I spend responding I could be spending writing instead. And thus I've fallen almost two chapters behind in answering reviews. SO, from here on out, I will only respond to outright questions. But please, don't stop giving me feedback. It means a great deal to me.

*Enjoy!*

Hermione held his hand in her own, tracing the raised scar ridges left by the Stone across his palm, her heart beating too fast, her emotions tethered just enough to keep her silent as she tried to think it through.

The octahedron stone was embedded deeply into the palm that carried it, long shining strands of metallic black spiraling out into vein and muscle, sinking down under skin until only a ghost of it was visible.

Within the stone, the symbol of the Deathly Hallows glowed out visibly, starkly white within the black angled surface.

"It doesn't hurt." Harry whispered, as if a soft voice would also soften the blow. "I… contemplated cutting it out, but at the thought of trying, the Stone responded. It grew these… roots. Its pattern wrapped up to the inside of my wrist. When I thought of amputating and regrowing my wrist, the roots grew again, to my elbow. I do not dare try to remove it at this point."
Hermione's breath sped up; she was almost panting with it now.

She rotated his hand within hers, staring at the unmarked skin of his wrist and elbow.

She could only see the marks on his palm. Obviously what Harry saw was under skin and into bone.

And Harry just kept whispering, words spilling into the silence.

"I've thought the Hallows were possibly sentient before. They must have established some sort of connection with my soul, can respond to my thoughts as well as my emotions. I've been able to summon the Cloak for some time, call it from across the room with a thought. I never... I didn't think what else that might mean."

He licked his lips; a nervous gesture that she couldn't yet find enough calm of her own to soothe.

And still he whispered, on and on.

"I tried a summoning, thinking that without the rotation its effects might be nullified. In our previous tests the three rotations had to be precise, remember? But it doesn't matter. The Stone is able to rotate its pattern within my skin at my command. It feels... it feels like another muscle, a new one I've never had before. It moved just like I would move my fingers, or my toes. Except there is no obvious way it can move, no muscles or bones or tendons. The pattern just moves, except the stone itself does not. As if its pattern is fluid within its physical shape. Like... like the metamorphmagus on my team. She is still human, but it's a flexible, fluid humanity. She..."

Hermione reached out, put her free hand against his mouth to stop the flood of rambling whispered words.

As he couldn't stop speaking, she couldn't start.

So she held his words in, and let the silence wash over them both.

Then she moved her hand away, and looked down at the dark scarred
stain on his palm, the living gemstone that had apparently chosen her boyfriend as its new host.

She refused to think about fictional aliens and what often happened to their hosts.

"Harry." Hermione cleared her dry throat, continued. "I want to view the memory. I want to ask you to forgo using the Stone again, at least until we... understand more. There are parasitic magical ailments out there, objects too. Hell, even humans can be parasitic, based on that stupid horcrux you wear on your head. We have to make sure this... this Stone is not going to hurt you. I... There must be something..."

She broke off, took a deep breath, looking into the familiar green eyes that stared into her soul with desperate trust. "There must be some information on dark objects and magic that can assimilate into human bodies. That's part of the classification of something as dark, being able to change and manipulate human bodies and personalities against their will. You will be fine."

She said the last as much for herself as for him. Harry sighed, and gently drew his hand out of hers, lifting his palm up towards his face.

"It doesn't feel foreign. It feels like a part of me. Not malevolent or dark, but like... family. I don't think it will hurt me, any more than I would hurt myself. Or rather, it wouldn't hurt me because that would be like hurting itself."

Hermione bit her lip, not soothed in the least by that statement.

"That's not normal, Harry. Objects do not just suddenly decide to adopt someone like they are homeless children. They do what they are created to do. We thought the Stones purpose was to bring back the dead, and when that failed, could be used to commune with them. Now I think we are missing something, something vital."

Harry's mouth twisted.

"The blasted story. We have a good guess that the objects were created
as a set. Maybe the Stone was even created last, as it is the only one we know of that bears the symbol. Perhaps what we are missing is the third part."

Hermione shook her head quickly, the motion almost violent.

"The last thing we need is yet another Hallow attaching itself to you. Whatever the Master of Death is, I don't think it's going to be some sort of super power. It might even change you into something neither of us recognizes or wants, and it probably won't give you a choice in the matter. I don't think we need to go looking for the Elder Wand as a way to solve this."

She saw his eyes flicker; wondered if he had already been looking.

And instead of just wondering, she asked.

"Have you been looking for it?"

His head jerked, then slowly shook.

"No. At least, not consciously. But a part of me... it's watching. Just watching. Waiting."

Hermione wove her fingers together, held them tightly, refusing to let them shake.

"What were the Peverell brothers really trying to achieve? Immortality? Each of their objects had a different purpose."

Harry lowered his palm, rested it against his leg gingerly, as if it bore an open wound.

"They wanted to defeat Death, in all its forms. Knowing what we do now, it seems like they wanted to somehow bypass the experience of death. They just went about it in different ways. The Wand was to make one strong enough you couldn't be killed. The Stone to bring back those already dead. The Cloak to... I assume defend you against death. It's not following the order in the story, but I can reach a few educated guesses in how this happened."
Harry stood, began to pace, and she saw the way his fingers moved across the Stone in his palm.

"The Wand is created. But while it prevents defeat in an outright duel, it also subverts its owner. It doesn't like preventing death. It is sentient enough to somehow, some way bring about death in another way. It seeks to kill the one who holds it even as it prevents them being killed. The conundrum that seems present in all of the Hallows."

He turned, walked past, turned again, steps even and measured.

"Then, perhaps using some of the same research, the Stone is created. They've failed to prevent death, so now they are going to reverse it. But while it can bring the dead back, it can't bring them to life. So it neither creates life, nor defeats death, but an in-between space. It is sentient as well, perhaps because of the very nature of its pattern. Then we have the Cloak."

Hermione watched as the silver folds of the invisibility cloak rippled in an unseen wind where it lay across the chair Harry had abandoned, like a faithful dog hearing its Master call its name.

Harry paused, and bent down to gather its folds into his arms before he resumed his pacing.

Maybe she was wrong about who was the Master and who was the faithful dog.

"The Cloak that hides its wearer from Death. It can't be damaged itself, can act as a type of armor so that no spell can harm the one who wears it. Perhaps not even an illness or malady. Except they would still age. Time still goes against them. So eventually, the Cloak gets passed to another bearer. Each object is a failure by itself."

Hermione spoke as he paused again.

"But the Stone bears the symbol of all three. It had to be made last."

Harry nodded slowly. "Or maybe the Stone and the Cloak were made at the same time, by the two surviving brothers. Maybe they even planned to
resurrect the first brother. I don't think we can ever know. But the Wand was lost with the death of the first. Maybe the second or third brother realized that only with all three could they obtain their true goal."

"Immortality." Hermione guessed.

Harry frowned, staring blankly into space.

"That's the obvious answer. It might even be the right one. But I don't trust it. Why call the person who holds all three the 'Master of Death', unless they gain mastery of more than just their own death? What if the mastery is not of their own death, but of the place of death? Immortality might be a side product of that. Perhaps, if that level of mastery was obtained, immortality could be a gift given to whomever they chose. One that could also be taken away. *Mastery.* Complete control. Who knows just what someone could accomplish with control over the afterlife of the entire world?"

Hermione shuddered, and this time could not contain her reaction to his words. Harry turned to face her, kneeling to put his face at her level where she sat in one of his armchairs.

"They failed. Their inventions didn't work separately, and they never found out if they worked together. How long has it been before two Hallows found themselves with the same Master? Chances are the Wand will never show up, if it's even still whole. It could have been destroyed."

"You don't believe that." Hermione pointed out, and Harry grimaced.

"It's not likely, no. Not with the substance that makes up its pattern. Something has to be part of our realm to decay or break down. But that doesn't mean the Wand isn't sitting in an underground cavern somewhere, or buried, or simply lost in the woods. It would take a miracle for it to appear. And if it does, we would know. Some undefeatable wizard roaming the world would make the news these days."

"And if that happens?" Hermione countered. "What then? I know you. You would have to go see it, at least. You might even decide to see if it really is unbeatable."
She saw his face twist, and knew she was right. At the lost look on his face, she sighed, reached out to wrap him in a loose hug.

"I'm not attacking you, Harry." She said softly. "I'm not saying you aren't right either. I'm just worried what it means. We ought to be prepared, is all."

"How do you prepare for something when you don't even know what you are preparing for?" Harry was whispering again, leaning into her hold.

Hermione pulled back, looking into his face.

"We do all we can to find out what to prepare for, of course. And meanwhile, we don't let a possibility ruin our lives. Just like we haven't let the horcrux ruin us either."

She saw it pass over his face then; an idea, a moment of clarity.

"The Hallows respond to my soul alone. They haven't touched or manipulated the horcrux in the least bit. Perhaps one will cancel out the other. If the horcrux in any way abruptly tries to damage my own soul or pattern, one of the Hallows will react. I'm certain of it."

Hermione wasn't so convinced. But she nodded anyway.

"Maybe. Now." She sucked in a stabilizing breath. "What are we going to do about the Stone? I'm not sure how we will explain its... new location."

Harry rotated his palm back and forth, then shrugged, his smile lopsided when it came.

"Magic, if it comes up. A simple glamor would suffice to keep it out of any photos. Otherwise, it's just a... unique tattoo?"

Hermione rolled her eyes in response to that one.

"You do know the Dark Lord Grindelwald practically worshipped the Hallows right? And now his symbol is actually glowing out of a stone embedded into your palm."
"It's glowing?" Harry asked, a note of excitement in his voice. "I wonder if that's fueled from the Hallow's magic, or my own? Does that mean it's active?" A pause. "How bright is it?"

Hermione slumped back and groaned.

The September meeting of the Wizengamot started out as it usually did; with a reading of a general itinerary.

Harry sat back in his chosen chair, both hands wrapped in light cotton gloves that covered his emerald hue with a lighter shade of verdant.

Better than wasting magic on a glamor that some of the wizards present might see through was to simply wear a physical covering. None would question the choice, or think twice about it for that matter. Just gloves, after all.

But Harry found he did not like the covering. The Stone itched under the fabric, unhappy to be hidden away. It wanted to shine; it wanted to see and be seen.

Even with no eyes it chafed under the blindfold that kept its pattern blind to the patterns around them. It had enjoyed being a ring; perhaps, if it got tired of its current form on his palm it would be willing to detach itself and return to being a simple Stone.

At that thought, Harry saw black light flicker up his wrist where the sleeve of his robe had fallen away. The Hallow pattern was not amused.

Lord Dumbledore raised one deep blue hand, drawing his attention back to the floor. The wizard made a wide gesture, cutting off the current argument on cauldrons that had been an on-going debate the entire year.

One member of the Wizengamot had even approached him last session to ask his own opinion on the motion to change standard thicknesses.

Harry had no opinion. He had heard both sides, and could only assume one side was using a few preventable accidents to push forward legislation that would harm one manufacturer of cauldrons, while boosting another
manufacturer's sales. It seemed a clear case of politics being used as a capitalist gun, aimed to shoot the competition where it hurt most.

But Harry, like the majority of the Wizengamot, was getting tired of being forced to listen to both sides loading their proverbial guns. Harry had no doubt that the members who argued the most fiercely were the ones gambling money on the legislation.

"Until Lord Nott can give conclusive evidence that these accidents were related to the thickness of these cauldrons and not the acidity of the ingredients themselves I see no reason to continue listening to this debate."

Bless Dumbledore. Harry could almost like the man at that moment. Grumbles sounded across the circular auditorium, a wave of sound and color and the smell of a hundred bodies forced into close quarters to argue.

A third of the Wizengamot was not even present. Not many expected much to happen this session, a year after Harry Potter had stood up to champion house-elves, and made no political moves since.

"Moving on. Are there any more motions to discuss?"

But a year ought to be celebrated with an anniversary motion, he rather thought. He had his next speech planned and ready, a subtle thing of elegance Hermione had helped him memorize, digging into werewolf legislation and the statistics that showed only an increase, not decrease, in registered infections in the years since the current legislation's implementation. A call to action, creating a safe haven for werewolves to go during the times they could not control themselves, removing them when they were most dangerous to civilization.

*Make it their own idea. Let them think how smart, how effective they will appear.*

But before Harry could stand, one familiar hue rose up from across the room, cleared his throat.
Chrysochlorous light. A tan hue with olive accents, giving it the appearance from far away of a nearly golden green. Harry knew the look of that soul, and knew right away that Lady Longbottom must have stepped down from her seat for one very specific reason.

To let her grandson grow up and face down a chosen challenge of his own.

"I have a discussion I wish to open." The wizard's voice was slightly too high; but it did not crack or waver. Harry doubted many would even hear the nerves that crawled underneath the surface.

"Go ahead Lord Longbottom." Dumbledore was gentle, a trace of fondness in the Chief Warlock's words. Everyone present would hear that fondness and make note of it. The waves of British wizarding politics could rise and fall on who had Lord Dumbledore's favor.

Neville cleared his throat.

"I believe the current legislation prohibiting werewolves from holding jobs in the government and public sectors is unnecessary and does nothing to fulfill its purpose of protecting the public."

Murmurs rising across the crowd, a low rumble of thunder. Longbottom continued unheeded, words coming faster as if he sensed the explosion about to erupt.

"I think we should reopen discussion into alternative methods to protect people from rogue werewolves, while also allowing the infected to work and provide for any families they should have."

"Werewolves shouldn't have families." One brown man murmured audibly nearby. Another voice echoed the sentiment. "They should all be rounded up and put out of their misery." From his other side Lady Gamp hissed in return, her old mauve soul a flare of rare colorful emotion. "That's despicable! Children get infected more often than not! Want to start exterminating children that get dragon pox next?!"

Lady Gamp rarely spoke at meetings, and neither did the purple-red sangria tones of Lord Brown who sat beside her, currently muttering his
agreement of her words. That two neutral members could feel so strongly over this issue did not bode well at all.

Neville was forced to speak louder, almost yelling over the rising voices all around them.

"Based on my studies, the current legislation has led to more infections than any other policy Britain has had in the past. Other countries have designated safe zones for anyone infected with lycanthropy..."

"Werewolves are monsters!" It was a rude exhalation in a feminine voice, a flash of canary yellow. "You want to protect them so they can kill more of our children?"

Neville's words stumbled to a halt. Into that pause the shouts began.

"Execution worked well enough in the past!"

"You want to let them work in the Ministry? Let them go crazy one day and infect us all?"

"No one would be safe!"

Lord Dumbledore was standing, his voice a boom augmented by a Sonorus Charm.

"Quiet! Lord Longbottom has the floor!"

But anti-werewolf sentiment ran deep. Fenrir Greyback's actions of only a decade ago were still recent memories to the members of the Wizengamot. The practice of infecting official's children a sour taste in their mouths.

Some of those children had not survived to become monsters.

"Werewolves do nothing but murder and spread their disease. They shouldn't be let free in public!"

A yell from a wave of blue and green embedded deep into the conservative left seats.
"They are already in public." Harry said in response, his voice lost to all but those near him, who became silent in their wake.

He saw their colors turn towards him, mauve and sangria, lime and cider, judging, considering. He sat in the neutral middle, had no ties to werewolf infected that was common knowledge.

Those sitting around Longbottom were finally rising to defend him, Amelia Bones' high pitched voice a cutting knife.

"Current legislation does nothing to protect the public, it only makes werewolves more poor and desperate! I second Lord Longbottom's motion. We should be trying to work on a solution to lycanthropy. It's been long enough."

A male spoke up from the opposing side, voice just as cunningly sharp as Lady Bones. He was a pillar of peacock vibrance, green and blue intertwined into a beautiful soul.

"I agree with Lady Bones. We should be changing the current useless laws and think about far stricter ones. I've long thought the beasts should be registered and locked up, for their own safety if not ours."

It took many a moment to gather what the peacock man had implied. Once it sunk in, there was unanimous agreement.

The laws should be changed. The only problem being that at least half of the room wanted those changes to be far more strict for werewolves than the current status quo.

He wondered just how Neville Longbottom was feeling about his first foray into government service.

After the session was finally adjourned, Dumbledore calling a halt to the constant bickering that had followed with no headway, colors began to swirl and group into clumps of like-minded individuals.

Harry thought it interesting that the hues were evenly mixed. No one color tone stood out, but all consisted of red and blues, greens and yellow,
purples and browns.

A few came towards him. Witch and wizards who wanted his own opinion on the proceedings, no doubt. He avoided them by simply turning his back and moving towards the right, where Longbottom was nestled in between the cyan of Lady Bones and the deep midnight blue of Lady Marchbanks.

He caught the tail end of the conversation as he approached.

"...we can't let them turn this into a rush to make things even worse! I'm trying to help them, not get them all thrown into Azkaban or worse!"

The man sounded caught between crying or screaming in frustration.

Lady Marchbanks spoke, her voice cracking with age, her light a pulse as slow as the old shopkeeper who had told him the story of the Deathly Hallows.

"Lord Tripe had his nephew turned twenty years ago. The family abandoned him to the Ministry, but the boy ran away and joined with Greyback a year later. Got killed by the aurors during the war, only nine years old. He blames the entire thing on werewolves, though the way I see it he only has himself to blame."

Harry came to a stop, saw the three turn to face them, their unique color highlighting the bulk of their features with pulsing life.

"I think it would have been easier to push for research and a sanctuary to be built first, before tackling and overturning the legislation itself. But at this point we will have no choice but to fight more legislation at the same time as overturning the old and getting a safe region set aside."

"...we?" Neville Longbottom asked hesitantly. Harry smiled.

"I agree with you that the laws do nothing to curb lycanthropy, and if anything exacerbate it. Proving that fact will help us a great deal."

"A good place to start." Lady Bones announced. "I have contacts in the department that oversees magical creatures. They might have those figures, or the ability to calculate them."
"Find out where the money goes." Harry added. "Find a way to make the Ministry save money, or at least spend less. That would also work in our favor."

"A sanctuary is not going to be cheap, Lord Potter." Marchbanks' gravelly voice responded. "I doubt you could convince a fourth, let alone over half, of the Wizengamot to confiscate private land to set aside as a werewolf stomping ground."

Neville's light brightened in a rush of emotion. "I'll donate it. My family is large, owns a lot of land. Might not be the most wealthy, but we do have land."

More color pressing in around them, more suggestions and comments. A core group of about ten witches and wizards pledging their support.

It wasn't many. But it wasn't a poor start, either.

"The press isn't too good." Hermione muttered, the sound of rapidly flicking pages echoing across the kitchen. "Some lady in the Improper Use of Magic Department, called Umbridge, is raising a stir about so-called half-breeds. Less than human. She's also a member of the Wizengamot, appointed to a seat by Fudge when he was in power. I would have thought our last paper made some impact, but some people refuse to listen to common sense."

"Anything pro-werewolf?" Harry asked, fork moving his eggs from one side of the plate to the other.

He just wasn't hungry. Hadn't had much of an appetite in the last week, really.

"Yesterday Amelia Bones did an interview. Talked over statistics on werewolf attacks and infection rates. Common sense stuff, easily verifiable. But not good press. Not like this Umbridge spouting off curses left and right."

"Hard to sugar-coat a ravenous beast." Harry muttered. "Neville sent me a letter yesterday. They've got a group of healers together from St. Mungo's
who are experts on the disease and the way it works. They are looking for a potions master willing to work with the healers from the standpoint of how the wolfsbane potion works and how it might be manipulated to potentially lessen infection if bites or scratches are given accidentally. He's trying to convince Severus Snape, from Hogwarts. The man is about to retire at the end of the school year. He used to make Weasley's potion when he was there."

Hermione's light flickered, her head jerking up as the paper in her hand drifted to land on the table.

"Severus Snape." She groaned, shaking her head. "I just had an insane thought. I hated the man in school. Had to be the worst teacher ever for young children, so biased it was laughable. But... he's retiring?"

Harry raised a brow. "If he was that bad, I'd think everyone would be happy he's getting out of the teaching profession."

Hermione stood, her chair scraping against the stone floor. "But he still has to make money, right? Surely he didn't make enough at Hogwarts to retire gracefully. The Snape's aren't a pureblood family, right? So no huge trust fund or something?"

"It's not only purebloods who are wealthy, but no. Not that I know of."

"He was never dressed like he had a lot of money. He probably will need to supplement his retirement somehow..." Hermione mused. "Oh, what am I doing. I'll just owl him."

Harry was lost.

"Owl him?"

She flung a blue-violet hand into the air.

"I haven't found a potions master to take me on yet. The wizarding world doesn't just have a school for potions students. I mean, not in Britain anyway. It's all set up through apprenticeships. And you only get the level of potions master when you invent a new potion, or an innovative new way of making an existing potion. Which is why there aren't many potions
master's around."

Harry sat back in his chair. "Why not find a journeyman potions person then, or whatever they are called. Someone who knows what they are doing but doesn't have the title to prove it yet."

"Because I refuse to give up." She declared. "And they are called potions journeymen once their potions master says they are no longer apprentices, however long that takes. Or just called a potioneer. But not all potioneers are journeymen, some masters prefer to be called potioneers or potion-brewers. In fact, the elite group of potions master's in Britain is the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers." She hesitated a moment, and Harry knew she had more she wanted to say. He grinned when she abruptly continued, the flood of information spilling out as it usually did. She simply couldn't resist giving out information that might prove useful to someone, somewhere, eventually. "It was founded by Hector Dagworth-Granger, the last spelled the same as my own last name. I don't think we are related, considering I'm muggleborn. Hector specialized in love elixirs, though he disagreed with calling them love elixirs, preferring to refer to them as strong infatuation creators."

Harry felt his amusement evaporate at the mention of love potions.

"Love is too kind of a word for what they can make people do." He muttered.

Hermione paused, came to stand close by his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, I forgot."

Harry shook his head, forced out a laugh.

"Don't mind me. Go owl Professor Snape."

Her hand squeezed his shoulder over his robe, a warm comforting weight. Then he saw her light lean closer, her soft lips pressing briefly to his forehead, then moving to run gently over the scars between his eyes.

"I'll see you tomorrow?" Reluctant words. Her eager desire to leave had apparently faded.
He stood, turned to bring her into a quick hug.

"Yes, tomorrow."

But when the door closed behind her and he turned to sit back down to his now-cold breakfast, Kraken was waiting, his slender yellow form dipping into a bow.

"Floo for you, Master."

He wasn't going to have to force the food down after all.

This time the Hit Wizard operation was routine, no surprises, no guards to take out.

It was a simple warehouse, packed full with illegal goods.

Winged Horse went in first, alone. Captain Matthews had reluctantly recommended the Department call Hippogriff in to deal with wards designed to destroy the contents within when disturbed.

The Captain had said he could deal with them, with time and experimentation. But he wasn't keen on wasting that time and needed resources on a warehouse that could be dismantled by Hippogriff in less than a minute.

So Winged Horse was sent, and Harry took down the advanced wards in a pathetically easy blink of time. Then the rest scouted out the interior, confirming no such nasty surprises lay in wait for the unwary.

With that done, the aurors came and seized the contraband, half of which were potions. Harry looked at the gleaming glass containers, stacked hundreds wide, magic sparking from inside in swirls of red liquid. He wondered how many were love elixirs, and how many were things intended to harm body and not soul.

Then he let Aethonan apparate him back to the Ministry, and put the thought from his mind.
Miss Granger,

No.

Severus Snape.

Miss Granger,

Despite your pathetic attempt at appealing to my sense of pride, the answer remains, No.

Severus Snape.

---

Miss Granger,

These repeated attempts mean absolutely nothing to me but an increased feeling of annoyance. You have nothing of value to offer me that would convince me to tolerate another child for any space of time.

No.

Severus Snape.

---

Miss Granger,

Prove it.

Severus Snape.

---

Miss Granger,

On sheer principle, I should say no.

My terms are inclosed.

Severus Snape
Hermione grinned fiercely down at the parchment in her hands, the note short and to the point.

The parchment rolled alongside it, however, was bulky. It contained words like 'fees', 'hours', and 'royalties'.

The potion master was a right bastard. But he was also one of the best potioneers in the country, his reputation only tarnished by his conviction as a Death Eater during the war. As a result, he was not a member of the Most Extraordinary Society. He was also not going to be quickly employed by any reputable apothecary.

He just wasn't trusted enough.

He could use more money. Hermione knew he wouldn't have many applications for potions apprentices. She might be the only one. But he had still turned her down, time and again.

He was a stubborn, solitary, abrasive wizard. He was going to demand the best from her and still say it wasn't enough.

He wouldn't be boring.

And he had challenged her to prove she was valuable.

So she had sent him a single bottled potion, the hardest she could create in only a week's brewing.

It had taken her the entire week to get it right, but the challenge of it had invigorated her. It had been perfect.

_The Draught of Living Death._

It had been as clear as crystal when completed; she had grinned like a loon at finally pulling it off.

And the man hadn't even told her well done. But he had done far better.

He had agreed.
So she would wait until June to start working with him. She would pay him whatever he wanted, give him any royalties he wanted on any potions she sold while working with him. She would treat him with respect even when she wanted to bite his head off.

She was going to make him very glad he chose Hermione Jane Granger as his apprentice.

In the month that followed Harry traded owls with Longbottom, passed through his classes with a modicum of effort, and gave his focus to the study of soul magic.

He had already read what was offered legally at the bookstores in Diagon.

Instead he delved into Knockturn Alley, relying on Vaughn to search out titles and guard his back both. The wizard wasn't happy with the situation, but was good enough not to say so too often.

It probably was a little weird for a former Ministry employee to be involved in purchasing banned books. It impressed him that the man was helping him at all.

But Harry didn't push Vaughn's sense of morality too far. Once he established a connection with select shopkeepers, he paid them well to owl him whenever they received a book they thought he might be interested in. Then he had Kraken teleport him directly to the store, the house-elf extremely valuable at giving advice on the authenticity of wares.

Kraken knew Knockturn Alley in a way Harry did not want to contemplate. And when one shopkeeper tried to touch his elf with a violent motion when the elf said one book was worthless, Harry had no qualms giving the man's tarnished purple light a hard whipping slash of emerald power.

The shopkeeper had screamed, so loud and piercing that Harry had slowed the man's life down to unconsciousness, the wizard falling with a loud thunk onto his cracked green wooden floor.

Harry would not allow anyone to hurt a member of his family, and both of his elves were family now.
Kraken had been thankful for the defense, but also claimed it unnecessary.

"Kraken can protect Kraken, Master Potter. Kraken a strong elf, has strong magic."

Harry didn't doubt that. The younger elf had taken over much of the day-to-day cleaning from Kreacher, leaving the cooking to Kreacher's strict standards.

Which was why Kreacher was currently the one hovering over him as he ate.

"Master should eat more." Kreacher reminded him again. Harry still had not regained his appetite, content with only two light meals a day. He had delved through medical textbooks until he was satisfied he wasn't about to perish from some muggle or magical disease.

Perhaps it was merely a phase.

Or perhaps the Stone's Hallowed pattern was influencing him.

Which was another reason why soul magic had pushed his experiments into magical uses for electricity aside.

The black-white of the Stone had warped portions of his human pattern, just as it had began to mutate his soul color. He had noted as much in the pensive, thoroughly studying his past and present selves.

But the mutations did not seem malevolent. They were subtle changes that he could not be sure would even change anything at all. His emerald soul now had light shadows and dark stars within it; and the sharp angles of his humanity was a bit more rounded, meshing together more like the swirling whirlpool of water crystals than the crisp edges of flesh and blood.

But he still felt the same. Except the odd lack of hunger, that is. He still bled blood, still felt pain and pleasure both. If he hadn't had the ability to see the Stone's pattern burrowing deeper under his skin he would have no idea anything was wrong.

So he studied the soul, everything wizarding kind had documented so far.
And one device that was written about had a great deal of merit. It had once been a means of execution, before the Dementors and their Kiss; it was said that one could hear the souls of the dead calling out from inside the artifact, beckoning any who heard to come closer, come closer, and partake of the wonders of Death.

No one ever returned from its embrace. It might be a door; it might be a labyrinth. It might be an entirely new world contained in rippling fabric.

The Veil, it was called. Beyond the Veil, the books warned in cryptic words, lies a mystery best left unsolved.

It was found somewhere in London, and was either moved, or built around and guarded. What was said of its existence was mostly rumor and speculation. Once, Harry would have thought those speculations to be greatly exaggerated rumors based on old religious lore.

But he had the Hallows, now. He had spoken to the dead, and knew there was a place called Death.

Surely someone had tried to create a way to enter that realm and return. After all, dying is easy, resurrection is not. But if they had created something, it was a one-way ticket only.

Harry, thinking of London, gathered the hints given and set them beside what he knew of the Ministry.

Why place the center of magical government in the heart of muggle civilization? Why not withdraw and move their base of operation, more easily separate themselves once the Statute was implemented? Why stay in London, unless something was there that could not be moved? Something of great value, and potentially a tool of great devastation?

Something like a door to the afterlife. Because if someone here had managed to make a door to go beyond the Veil, someone might manage to open that door from the other side and return. Or call forth the dead souls to rise again at their bidding.

Harry felt a burning desire to know growing inside himself. He wondered
what the dead behind the Veil might say to him, what secrets they might whisper if he only listened and did not call them out of that place of peace.

And if the Ministry was hiding such a door, there was only one place they could hide it without knowledge leaking to the public. An Unspeakable place.

Level Nine on the main lifts, The Department of Mysteries.

"When you ask for something, you do not do it by half measures." The Minister lay back in his chair, his light agitated. "I was not expecting this of all things when I received your owl. I rather thought you might want to discuss, say, werewolves?"

Harry shifted in his chair, looking about the office as he thought of the proper way to respond.

"Do you want to discuss werewolves, sir?"

A angry exhalation of air, bringing with it the thick smell of cigar smoke.

"You are supporting that young pup, aren't you? No doubt the Longbottom boy wants to help out his friend, Ronald Weasley. I've heard all about that situation. Right when things settle down this mess is dumped onto us. I've got activists springing out of the woodwork, people in my own Ministry causing problems for both sides of the issue."

Harry tried not to let his own annoyance show; knew it failed when he heard the tone of his own voice.

"I doubt the werewolves are comfortable with the situation either."

A moment of silence. Then chartreuse light flared with emotion as the Minister spoke.

"I worked years in the Auror Department, and more years as its Head. I know the damage werewolves can do if they set a mind to it. Semi-immunity to spells, even outside the the full moon. Brutal strength, magical and physical both. Increased senses, sight and smell. The list goes on and
"Sounds like they would make good aurors." Harry pointed out blandly.

"Until they devour their team." The Minister growled.

"Don't put them on a mission during the full moon. Give them a place to go instead, where they won't fear being hunted and killed. Where they can follow the drive of the disease without being afraid of killing someone."

Scrimgeour banging one fist on his desk, the sound loud enough to make Harry jump in his chair. "The drive of the disease?!" Another thud, another flare of light. "Any drive it has it to hunt, kill, and infect! Next you will demand we allow erklings to feast on children! It's only their nature!"

Harry sat stiffly, mouth tight as he listened to the Minister breathe harshly as his words wound to a brutal halt.

Then he spoke, leashing his own temper with rigid self-control.

"If you have read the studies, you would know that killing animals also soothes the hunger. And even if you did not wish to allow them that freedom, keeping them from valid employment does not remove risk of infection. They are on the streets instead, haunting alleys, growing more hungry and desolate as the seasons pass. They are not roving forests and avoiding humanity. They are beggars on the streets, waiting for the next Dark Lord to offer them rescue from an oppressive Ministry."

Scrimgeour slowly sat back in his chair, hands returning to his lap.

When he spoke, it was with the same leashed temper that Harry felt within himself.

"I have an emergency motion on my desk for the immediate forced capture of any known lycanthropes, for the safety of the public. People didn't know until the last month just how many walked among them, it appears. They are scared. They are afraid to shop in Diagon. We had three arrests this week, one of which was a werewolf who beat two wizards nearly to death. The werewolf said he was defending himself. The wizards say it was unprovoked. Who do you think the public is going to believe? What's going
to happen if this gets riled up any further?"

Harry felt the chill spread through his bones at the information. He spoke with a suddenly dry throat.

"What does this measure suggest be done with the captured lycanthropes?"

A husky, bitter laugh.

"Execution, what else? This is wizarding Britain. We do our best to destroy what scares us."

"It won't pass." Harry was certain of that. Had to be.

"No. Not yet. But many more instances like I mentioned and it might. It only takes one horrible thing to tip the scales of public opinion."

"These are human beings. Most infected through no fault of their own. Some are children. One is a celebrity!"

A drum of chartreuse fingers on green wood.

"Let a reporter get a photo of that celebrity as a ravenous wolf. Let a child be set loose, by 'accident', to go out and kill someone elses innocent children. Soon, people will be claiming the execution is to put said children out of their misery, preventing a long, horrible life of being a dark creature. Longbottom is in over his head. This is about to go very, very wrong."

Harry thought of lepers and their colonies. He thought of Hermione and her grand dreams to save humanity.

But could you save humanity from itself, when it was so determined to be inhumane?

"The werewolves need to go." Harry said softly, heard the other wizard make a sound of surprise. "Before the issue is forced. It needs to be their own choice, and to a place of their choosing. A safe haven."

"My ministry can not endorse that."
"It can't prevent it, either. A privately funded, protected place. Transportation provided by volunteers. If wizarding Britain doesn't want its werewolves, then it should let them leave."

A grunt of agreement.

"You better hurry then. Take the ammunition away before they can use it against you."

Harry didn't rise from his seat. He stayed there, trying to wrap his mind around what might happen.

"You would really let them legalize mass murder?"

Another bitter, angry laugh. "This is a democracy, Lord Potter, not a monarchy. Even the Wizengamot is manipulated at times by the consensus of uneducated fools. No government is perfect."

"No." Harry muttered. "I suppose not."

He certainly couldn't name one.

Harry slowly began to rise, already mentally writing his owl to Longbottom.

He might just ask Vaughn to deliver him to Longbottom manor. This seemed to be escalating far too quickly to wait on the wings of a bird.

"About the Department of Ministries." Harry paused at the Minister's voice, turned to face the seated man. "What do you want down there? Most do not even know what they research."

What to say? That he was researching into the mysteries of Death itself?

"I believe there is an ancient artifact hidden down there. The Veil?"

A flash of yellow-green light. Some emotion he could not identify by sight alone.

"I doubt simple curiosity about a veil would bring you to me to ask for a stroll on Level Nine."
An unspoken demand. *Give me information, and I'll give you some.*

Harry's right hand fisted inside his glove, the Stone a slight pressure against his palm.

"I'm studying Death."

Let the man make of that what he would. Harry wouldn't give him more, and considered what he had already too much.

They played their own manipulative games, the Minister and he.

"I see." No condemnation in that word, only blank acknowledgement. Only another pulse of light, the heart quickening with adrenaline, the blood moving faster in response to some threat. "A dangerous topic to study."

In more ways than one. After all, what way best to study something that to experience it first-hand? Only, experiencing death tended to be a very, very final thing.

"Yes." Harry agreed. "It is."

Silence, lit by the green walls and golden wards, the rapid pulse of the Ministers light a glowing miniature sun at it's center.

"I'm not very happy with you at the moment." Softly spoken words. "I have my suspicions that you are part of the reason the lycanthropy debate has ignited. Come back and ask me for Ministry secrets when I don't have the inclination to toss you from my office for the trouble you've helped cause."

"Fair enough." Harry inclined his head in bow he knew was taken just as it was given; with barely concealed annoyance. "Good day, Minister."

He was already opening the door when he heard the wizard's parting murmur.

"Be safe, Lord Potter."

"You work with the Hit Wizards so you would get answers when you ask
for them. He owes you." Hermione muttered.

They were waiting in the living area of Grimmauld Place for the others to arrive. He had sent Vaughn and Fallon both with letters to deliver to each of the witch and wizards who were spearheading the pro-werewolf movement.

They needed to act, and fast. He didn't have much energy left over to think about the Veil and the stone wall the Minister had placed in front of him.

"It's fine. I'll deal with it later."

She grumbled under her breath. "Makes me want to write a paper on the trustworthiness of Ministry politics."

A flare of anger spread in Harry's gut. He ran a hand through his hair, the length of it longer than his normal preference.

"That last paper could lead to people getting killed, Hermione. This entire thing has spiraled out of control."

"We only told the truth. The truth hurts."

Harry grimaced at her response.

"We can tell the truth more delicately, though. Instead of slapping the Ministry in the face with it."

"They need to wake up." Hermione's voice was low, angry. "They can't keep treating people who are different like crap under their shoe!"

"But we don't want to drive them to scraping that crap off and throwing it in the garbage, either!" Harry returned, voice rising. "We might have incited just the kind of violence we wanted to prevent!"

"That is their fault, not ours!" Hermione matched him, word for angry word. "And there is no way the majority of witches and wizards would allow what the Minister is implying! This is something that a few stuck-up rich snobs are trying to push through on the sly!"
"They're scared!" Harry countered, his emphasis nearly a shout. "They want to keep their families safe!"

"They have nothing to be afraid of!" She hissed back.

"Not completely true." The words were softly spoken, a jarring change between the heated words they had been exchanging. Ron Weasley dusted himself off, his fawn colored soul shining in contrast to the red flames behind him. "You can't tell people to pretend we are normal. We're not. We can hurt them, infect them, if we chose. Nothing you say will change that base fact."

Hermione deflated slightly in the face of the calm rebuke. But she didn't give up her stance.

"That doesn't mean you should be treated like monsters. Anyone with a wand can kill someone. They don't even need a killing curse or dark magic. Even basic household spells can kill with some imagination."

Ripples of pale brown light as Weasley shrugged, moving to sit in a chair.

"I'm not going to argue with you there. I just have no solution, either."

This time Harry noticed when the fireplace flared with light, another figure stepping gracefully through.

Cyan light moved into the room, strong with life and power. Lady Amelia Bones.

Another flare of light, midnight blue. His fireplace hadn't seen so much action in years.

Maybe, between them all, they could find the solution Weasley had already given up hope of discovering.

Next Chapter: Pink Blood on Purple Stone

Review Please!
Angela’s Note: Thank you for all the notes and reviews! It means a great deal to me. I did well on my half marathon, even with nature fighting me with a wicked headwind (2 hours 20 minutes, personal best). I had to have minor surgery on my wrist in the past month as well, but am recovering quickly so no worries. The only real trouble I have right now is to deal with the weather; my entire community has been hard hit with rainstorms the past few months, and entire crops have been ruined, which is a disaster hard to cope with.

Imagine with me. Imagine working eighty and ninety hour weeks for months, only to have rainclouds literally wash the work away and your profits with it, as well as any hopes or dreams for financial peace that summer, while you watched it all in slow motion from the window of your home, minute by minute, hour by hour. And driving by flooded fields and seeing your crops drowning, going from healthy green to sickly yellow to rotten brown as the days pass, and to smell it, this rotten unhealthy stink of growing things turned to muck. To spend hours with a shovel under cloudy skies, digging drains in water and mud in the hopes to spare a single acre of crop for the reaper's scythe in the fall, and praying with all your heart that the sun might wait just a few hours to creep out, knowing that if the sun shone out that very minute it would burn the plants under the water the way an ant might burn under a magnifying glass. And there is nothing you can do to stop the rain, your ditches are overflowing, there are men at the store exchanging glances of pity and helplessness, and the elderly farmers who never quite retired, who've been here before, they speak of thirty years ago when they replanted corn three times in a row watching each attempt wash away like chalk under a spigot, and they say the strong will persevere because this is part of it, of living off the land and on it and with it, taking the bad with the good in unequal measures. And when it rains yet again, the fourth time that week, you gather together in one man's equipment shop and discuss the fact that the plants that survive all this deluge won't be able to withstand any type of drought, because their roots are shallow on the surface and not deep,
weak stringy things without the hardy strength to weather tropical
depressions or hurricane winds or the days in July you all know are
coming, when the hot humid sun will finally bear down on the land for
weeks at a time without ceasing except in the cool clear night. And some
men curse God and banks and the world, and others brag about whose
land had the most inches of water, like having the worst flood was a
badge of honor that proves they are tough, and other men are just silent,
staring down at the hard concrete floor, specks of mud scattered across it
like boot shaped constellations of brown stars in a gray sky, planning and
calculating numbers and trying not to think about that rotten smell that
clings to their clothes all the time now and the things their family would
have to go without with the rest of the year. And your grandfather, halfway
through his eighties and still showing up to work most days, comes into
the farm office later and sits by you, watching the rain fall, again, it's
raining again, God help us there goes another hundred acres, and he
sighs and says "Farming is a little like war sometimes, a gamble and a
jump of faith, dumb luck and unlucky circumstance all laid out in front of
you, and you got to constantly be fighting, with your mind and with your
hands, in the burning heat and the stinging cold, with bugs and grease
and dust, but nothing else will ever make you feel so alive than watching
the sun rise on your own land over your own crops and knowing you are
bringing something into the world that the world needs, creating
something more from less than nothing. Nothing quite like a war worth
fighting." Then he's quiet again, one of the quiet ones who plan and
listen, most of the old farmers are, the ones who have seen it all and
done it all and lived to tell about the disasters of the past, the people
who've died or lost limbs through that dumb unlucky luck or their own bad
choices, when a drought lasted years and a hurricane flattened ten
thousand acres of corn the week before harvest, when a farmer down the
dirt road in his sixties crawled through his field on his knees with a burlap
bag dragging behind him and picked up the heads of corn off the ground
because he was stiff and couldn't bend over well. When a man dies of a
sudden heart attack in the middle of harvest and left behind a widow and
three children and the entire community drives over their machines and
pick his crop for free because that's what people who live like this do,
who know that the rain hits everybody sometime somewhere, that no
family or farm escapes untouched, all we have is each other and we're all here in the same boat of land, sometimes soaring on a good wind and other times bailing out the water bucket by bucket to keep from sinking. Imagine living like that.

Perhaps too long of an author's note, above. But I'll leave it be. Enjoy the chapter! I enjoyed taking a break from life to write it.

Harry had thought the brunt of the financial responsibility would fall to himself and Neville Longbottom.

He had forgotten that he was not the only wealthy pureblood who cared about those considered less than human.

Lady Griselda Marchbanks, her dark blue soul a slow pulsing light, was the one to first pledge money for the endeavor of building a private safe haven for those whose humanity had been mutated by lycanthropy. She was followed closely by the two Wizengamot elders she had invited to the impromptu meeting.

Lord Brown and Lady Gamp, their hues as old as their friend, did not often care to tie themselves to current debates. They were generally neutral, their seats not far from Harry's own. The two liked to argue, and more often than not would vote against one another for sheer spite and amusement.

But in this one thing, both could agree. No one should be killed simply because civilization was not civilized enough to find a humane solution.

Of the fifteen wizards who gathered in Grimmauld Place, the three eldest donated nearly all of the money required for the creation and warding of a wide tract of land owned by the Longbottom family. To the rest was given the task of spending said money, finding wizarding builders and warders who could prevent a werewolf at full strength from escaping said wards or buildings built on the property.

Lord Tiberius Ogden, the most business-minded of the group, began to brainstorm ways to set up an impromptu town, and how best to employ
any who gathered inside.

The sheer amount of detail required was massive, and the time they had to work with very, very little.

Kreacher and Kraken came and went, serving tea and refreshments as the hours passed late into the evening, their yellow lights flickering between the many rainbow hues present.

They argued. They agreed. They argued some more. Harry could only think of it as democracy at its best and worst as they tried to make everyone content with the overall outcome.

By the time they reached a consensus and broke to go about their set tasks, they were all exhausted.

As the last visitor left, Harry walked to where Hermione stood, blue-violet light slumped. He reached out to gently pull her to him, sighing in relief when she melted into the embrace.

"I didn't mean to shout." He murmured. "Earlier. I just think we might need to be more careful with those articles. They wield a far greater influence now than they ever have."

She pulled away, her light tilted up at him. He saw it streaming through the pattern of her face, its humanity so delicate and beautiful.

"I'm not mad. We're going to argue, right? We're not carbon copies of one another. We're going to disagree, especially about methodology."

"I still don't like arguing with you." Harry confessed, and began to grin with tired slowness. "I'd rather have a peaceful discussion that ends with me being right."

She laughed, ducked her face to absently caress his neck with her cheek, a soft fleeting touch.

"I'll think of a good reply to that when I'm not so drained. Don't stay up too late thinking about all of this. We've got a good plan now."
"Yes." Harry agreed, and watched her apparate away after a last farewell kiss.

Then he went to lay in bed under the Cloak's starry night sky, the palm that held the Stone a heavy weight behind his head.

When he went to sleep, he dreamed for the first time that he could remember, of a place where colors went to die and be reborn, vibrant strands connected in a nexus of cold heat. They were spun out one by one, so many hues with names he could not define, each unique and yet similar to one another, related simply because they were all pieces of a greater whole.

And oddly enough, his sleep was peaceful even when the colors faded away to nothing but pale white darkness.

November was spent in a flurry of activity, even though Harry had only a small portion of the wider effort.

He felt more like an observer than anything else, watching as other witches and wizards worked to create a place of refuge.

Lord Ogden sent plans for the building of a, theoretical, self-sufficient wizarding town. He included plans for a large garden and greenhouses to grow potions ingredients, a store and several shops, a healer's station and even a school.

"The key is to eventually employ the werewolves themselves to run these services. Few will be adequately trained in the beginning, I imagine, but it is a work-in-progress."

Harry had only nodded when Lord Ogden spoke, confident in the man's ability to organize this, at least.

Even if the man was also the driving force behind the cauldron debate. Nobody is perfect after all.

Warders came and went, but the massive undertaking to ward an entire forested area would not be finished in a month's time. Instead, several
initial structures were made to safely hold any werewolves who gathered, and Wolfsbane potion offered to all who desired it.

"There are several occupations that can be undertaken to help gather income. In the beginning, any income will have to be gathered collectively to distribute to the town as a whole. It will still require massive donated efforts of money and time from normal people, though, for a long time to come. Rome wasn't built in a day!"

Harry had wanted to point out to Ogden that werewolves were not abnormal people, but he couldn't. Normality was defined as typical and usual, and werewolves were not either.

Plus, the one time he had disagreed openly with the man, his bright bubblegum pink soul had fluttered in violent anxiety, so strongly it was reminiscent of the look of a heart attack. The short fluttery Lord was harboring a carefully concealed fear, one he covered up with a constant diatribe of words, explaining every possible detail whenever Harry was nearby.

As if Ogden thought he had to explain his actions, when Harry was not even the organizer of the refuge.

That honor fell into the lap of Neville Longbottom, who handled the task with the brave stubbornness of a Gryffindor.

Harry found himself, two weeks out from the December Wizengamot meeting, very relieved that Longbottom had been the one to stand up first in support of werewolves.

He didn't think he himself could manage so many people half as well, though eventually he would be forced to learn.

After all, it would take a great deal of people to bring the muggle and magical world peaceably together.

Of course, simply building the sanctuary would not be enough. Harry and Hermione also took on another vital task. They had to find and contact as
many werewolves as possible before the December Wizengamot meeting and invite them in to the growing sanctuary.

It had a name, now. One that was both ironic, and a hopeful wish.

*Non Mordere.* A simple latin statement that amounted to 'We do not bite.'

Weasley had suggested it first, in a fitful spike of temper when other, fancier terms were suggested. He had baulked outright at a town called *Moondance.*

"*Quit coming up with sissy names. Who wants to live in a town called 'moondance' or 'moon itch' or 'moon' anything? You might as well call the place 'moon slaves' if you want it to be accurate. Or 'biters'. Or better yet, 'we don't want to bite you so get the hell out of this place during full moons'. "*

Obviously, they had to shorten that name a bit, give it a less threatening spin. Harry rather thought Nolumus Mordere, 'we do not want to bite' would have been more appropriate, given that the werewolves certainly did bite. But *Non Mordere* was what the majority decided on.

So an article had gone out in the Daily Prophet, one written by the venerable Viola James, whom Hermione had *volunteered* to ask for help. It had spoken in carefully crafted words of a haven being built for those cursed with lycanthropy, a place they could go to be free from persecution if they wished. A place where they could be free to be themselves, not locked in cages to dig and bite at their own skin. But also a place where they would not have to worry about harming their families or neighbors.

There would be housing for non-werewolf family members, if needed. There would be work, jobs. It was a possible beginning, a possible new life.

It was hope.

And the werewolves began to gather, in ones and twos and threes. A trickle that turned into a flood, many bringing along family members who were not cursed but refused to leave their side.
Children carried by uninfected parents or older siblings. Brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers. Some entire families of werewolves, people who had wandered from town to town, trying to make what living they could doing odd jobs. Others were dressed in better clothes, witches and wizards who managed to make a good living despite the Ministry rules, but who now feared for their lives in the current political climate.

Refugees from a war that hadn't happened yet. An extermination Harry refused to let happen without him doing everything he could to prevent it.

Only in the wizarding world could a fully functional town be built within a few weeks. Houses springing from the ground and building themselves, materials teleported in via portkey in crates larger than said houses.

And it wasn't only witches and wizards who did the work. Elven Work had found itself yet another purpose for its rescued house-elves, one Lord Malfoy set a high price for on the labor of his very resourceful construction and clean-up crew. Some goblins even ascended from their colonies looking to investigate and invest in a new potential source of revenue in the large magical gardens and greenhouses that Longbottom had commissioned.

Harry thought it ironic that, within a few years, Neville might be making money off Non Mordere. The wizard hadn't truly done the math as Lord Ogden had on how much quality potion ingredients were going for. They were setting up what could potentially become a lucrative town focused on commercial magical agriculture.

But it wasn't there yet, and those who hated lycanthropy with a passion were sounding the battle cry in every venue they could muster.

The Daily Prophet ran exposés on the massive undertaking, calling it a 'mustering of half-human beasts' and a training ground for a 'new dark force'. There were rallies in Diagon Alley calling for Ministry action against such a commune that had the potential to 'exterminate normal witches and wizards in a hundred mile radius'.

Harry, walking hooded through the crowds to look for any last werewolf patterns, felt their fear and anger rumbling against his own soul, flashes of
color bursting within the crowds as magic swirled and eddied with the force of the rising emotion.

From one alley, he saw a living shadow watching him, the black stain of a vampire holding itself back from the mass of humanity around him, waiting as the vampires had said they would wait.

Observing him, recognizing him in his disguise as no witches and wizards around had. Letting him notice them, for he had no doubt they could hide themselves as they had always done so before.

The vampires had to know that a situation just like the one brewing around werewolves was just as likely to happen to themselves. They would see how he handled it.

Because this time, it was the opposition who had control of the press and the people, manipulating them with egregious stories of horror and murder at the claws and fangs of the monsters who walked among them.

And there was little Longbottom and his cadre could do to combat those stories, because they were true. Werewolves left uncontrolled and uncaged and unwarded would kill and infect, every single time. All they could say was that werewolves didn't mean to; all they could say was that werewolves were humans who had been cursed with a disease that stole their willpower from them and rendered them beasts once a month.

But that only made many more afraid, only gave Umbridge and Tripe more ammunition. Under the guise of 'helping', they would incarcerate every infected person and cage them for the rest of their lives. Eventually, they would pass a motion to euthanise them, if they could not get that portion done right away.

In response to such a move, the werewolves that were forewarned would revolt. They might decide, if they were going to die, they would do it free and take as many bigots as they could with them. In their desperation they would only prove themselves to be the monsters that the Ministry said they were, and humanity could pat itself on the back for a job well done when they killed the very last one.
It was a horrible potential future.

And as he feared, the full moon fell exactly two nights before the next session of the Wizengamot.

If anything was to spur the anti-werewolf movement in either direction, it would be on that night.

"They've hired guards on the outskirts of Non Mordere's half-finished wards. Some from J.T.P, as we recommended." Hermione said softly, her tea cooling between her fingers. "Not to keep the werewolves in, but anyone else out. Neville's afraid some protesters might try to get inside."

"I think we've found all of them that were living in Diagon and Knockturn." Harry's voice wasn't tired; it was strained, and she could see the stress lining his face. Neither of them were going to sit comfortably this night. "At least the ones that dared step outside of their hideaways. Word spread quickly though through their community though, what there is of it. I think any who wanted to are safe in Mordere's temporary warded buildings."

Hermione closed her eyes, tried to find the calm inside herself. They couldn't prevent what might happen. What could be happening at that very moment.

A pop of sound, Kreacher's urgent voice, and her eyes jumped open.

"Master Potter, the floo. Aethonan."

And she felt her heart drop, even as she looked into Harry's unfocused eyes and saw the grim knowledge there.

"Attack in Diagon Alley."

Aethonan's voice was matter-of-fact, quick and sharp.

"Estimated to have started ten minutes ago. Two casualties reported so far and transported out via the floo they escaped to. We go in, apprehend the beast or beasts, and withdraw to let the aurors handle the rest."
Backup is being held in reserve upon our signal if we can not handle the situation. We go in alone for now, eliminate the increased possibility for confusion and crossfire."

Harry stood beside the others, dressed in the purple-brown Graphorn armor, holding his simple dragon-core staff in one loose hand.

Who had been left in Diagon? What werewolf had stayed under insufficient protections, on this month of all months? When help had been offered?

"Portkey in three-two-one-"

A swirl of chaotic color, his soul winding through and around the teammates beside him, blue and lavender and red and orange, a horrible nauseating dance of power.

Then they were in the Alley, standing under the golden warded sky, the purple and green buildings that lined the street glimmering under wards of their own.

A single scream splitting the air, sobbing, choking in grief.

They approached at a coordinated run, Aethonan leading the way, Granian and Thestral at either side, scanning their surroundings for the slightest hint of a werewolf.

But Harry could see as clearly at night as during the day. He saw no other soul colors on this street except for the one on the ground, spilling pink life onto purple cobblestone.

He could see the mutation taking hold in the jagged tear in her arm, the fur pattern of lycanthropy sinking its way into her humanity like a worm squirming into freshly turned soil.

But only in her arm, at the moment. Even as Abraxan knelt to offer aid and prepared the emergency portkey to remove her to St. Mungo's, Harry fixed his emerald light onto the pattern of her arm and spoke quickly.

"I can prevent infection, if you will allow me to amputate and recreate..."
"Do it, do it!" The feminine voice shrieked before he could finish. "She left us here to die! We were supposed to just break the wards and portkey out, but she left us here! Please, do it! I'd rather die than become one of those monsters! I hate...!"

Harry slowed her life into unconsciousness before her shrieks could rise any more in elevation, the hints she left behind hanging morbidly in his mind.

For a moment, he was tempted to let the lycanthropy have her. She might have just condemned another human being to death.

"If you're going to do it, do it now." Abraxan spoke harshly. "Portkey activates in thirty seconds."

Harry shook his head roughly then broke the pattern of her arm off at the shoulder and tore it cleanly free, pink life splattering to flow freely onto the ground. Then he took the substance of that blood and the air and the bloody purple stone under her and transfigured them into the likeness of her amputated limb, the pattern pristine and now lacking the furred taint of lycanthropy.

He placed that arm against her body and reattached it quickly, shoulder and elbow and wrist, one whole pattern lying supine now on the ground, the jagged remnants of her former arm resting beside her. It felt just like placing the last piece of a puzzle into place, the edges matching up perfectly.

She vanished in the next instant, leaving behind only the pink infected piece that still sluggishly bled upon the stone.

Harry stood, ignoring the speckles of pink that now dotted his armor.

The others said nothing. The questions would no doubt come later, when they were out of the hostile situation.

A howl, distorted by buildings and space. They followed it, checking side streets and alleys, moving deeper into the heart of Diagon.

Away from Knockturn and towards Gringotts, which was open all night,
one of the few businesses that operated so in Diagon.

He smelled burned fur, charred and fresh. Heard the growling frustration and anger, the metallic clang of a body against brute magical force.

Then they turned a corner and saw the tableau.

Gringotts' golden wards had been activated between its wide purple doors of solid metal. He could not see behind those wards, but heard Granian's muffled curses.

"Fucking goblins just standing there doing fucking nothing!"

And against those solid impervious wards a werewolf crouched in the familiar hue of a red human soul inside a immature lupine pattern.

Bright, cardinal red. A tone that had been so cheerful and full of hope.

She had been singing the last time he came upon her.

She was only a teenager, and someone had purposefully set her free, knowing where she was caged, knowing she had no Wolfsbane in her system.

"Standard formation. Approach as a unit." Aethonan was speaking, and Harry felt that frustrated rage building hotter inside his heart.

Two casualties, already at St. Mungo's. Dead? Infected? Plus the one attacked on the street.

There would be no mercy. The anti-werewolf group would get exactly what it wanted unless someone could prove their own culpability.

An idea, stirring in his brain.

"Let me take her down. I need to go to St. Mungo's, now."

Quick words said to Aethonan, who turned her blue head to look towards him.
That light jerked down in a nod.

He wasn't supposed to be too obvious in his use of magic. He was supposed to pretend to be normal, do normal things where others of the public or Ministry might see. Save his power for those times when it was needed for, as the Minister said, a *miracle*.

But he didn't have time to pretend if he wanted to save Kelly Valopolis' life.

Harry reached out with his power as the red wolf lunged again for the golden wards, smelling the humans beyond, still unaware of the closer prey at hand, the wind working against her.

He took ahold of her rapid life, so full of energy and magic, a maelstrom of wild power, and he slowed it down, saw her form falter and crumple to the ground.

There it flickered wildly, attempting to fight the deep pull of unconsciousness as no unmutated human was capable of doing.

"She won't be out for long. Secure her, but... try not to hurt her. Please."

Harry hesitated to add the last. Aethonan gestured toward the others.

"Do it, then send up the signal." Resolution blue, reaching out to take his arm. "Now, St. Mungo's, you said?"

She placed a portkey of glowing white into his palm.

Gratitude fluttered through him, that he did not even have to ask.

"Yes. Thank you."

He heard the grim smile in her voice as she spoke.

"Find out which bloody idiots did this."

The hospital was a buzz of activity and color, the sterile lemon smell of magical sanitation charms a cloying signal of where he was.
Harry had arrived inside the partitioned triage room set aside for any injured arrivals from the Hit Wizard teams. A healer approached him immediately, her words brisk.

"Where are you injured?"

Harry shook his head, reached up to pull the mask from his face with one hand before quickly divesting himself of the armor, leaving him in simple green trousers and shirt.

And the bundled Cloak, which he had rolled and wrapped around his waist into an impromptu belt of shadow and stars before he left Grimmauld Place, following an urge he hadn't been able to deny.

The healer gasped, her light stuttering as her forward momentum stumbled to a halt.

"Potter! L-Lord Potter, sir..."

"I need to be taken to the people injured in the werewolf attack in Diagon Alley, right now. And I need someone to send for Head Auror Robard. Have him meet me there."

"O-of course, my lord!" The woman stammered, whirling to snap at another pattern that sat frozen behind a green desk.

Then she led him from the triage station and out into the hallway.

Some days, it was actually a good thing to be the Blind Sorcerer.

The first victim lay supine on a green cotton bed, its soft surface elevated by thin purple metal and red charms.

Lycanthropy had sunk into his right hand and leg, crawling up his limbs to approach the trunk of his body. He was almost too late.

"Wake him up." Harry told the healer who had stood up at their entrance.

The grey soul snorted.
"I don't care who you are, you don't march into this room and wake a man in a healing coma! He has dealt with a lot, has to deal with much more when he wakes..."

"I can remove the lycanthropy." Harry semi-lied. "But I need to speak with him first."

"Preposterous!" Grey arms folded against a chest wrapped in green robes and red sterilization charms.

"I've learned to quit saying that." Salmon light at the door, brushing gawking healers aside to slam the door in their faces. "This had better be worth it."

Harry didn't answer Robard's statement, or ask the wizard how he arrived so quickly.

He only reached out and took ahold of the sleeping wizards light and woke him himself, the man groaning aloud as he was forcibly awakened.

The grey healer jolted, springing forward with his wand in-hand.

A brisk word from Robard stopped any potential spells before they could be cast, sending the healer stomping for the door with a brutal slam of noise.

Harry ignored the commotion and Looked down into a face drawn tight with pain, a large nose above a larger mouth.

"Do you know who I am?" Harry asked, and the man's head dipped in a nod, eyes wide.

"Then believe me when I tell you I can reverse your lycanthropy, but only if you tell me and the Head Auror here exactly what you were doing in Diagon Alley tonight."

A single moment's pause, his throat bobbing with a nervous swallow. Harry saw it all in the emerald light of his Look, how the man's eyes flickered from side to side with quick glances, how his tongue darted out to wet dry lips.
Then the man told them every single detail in quick, halting sentences, along with a vow to testify the same under Veritaserum at the soonest opportunity.

When the man was finished, Harry removed his right arm and leg without preamble, not bothering to first slow the man into sleep. The scream that rang out died as soon as it began, unconsciousness the body's own choice to escape the shock of pain.

"Was that truly necessary?" Robard asked mildly, orange-pink light quickly turned away from the grisly scene.

Harry transfigured the new limbs and began to attach them, eyes narrowed in anger.

"As far as I'm concerned, I'm dealing with a man who attempted to murder a teenage girl tonight."

"Fair enough." The older wizard grumbled. "Warn me next time."

Harry stepped away from the bed, the infected limbs left on the floor like the abandoned pieces of a doll.

Except for the fluorescent blood that sluggishly crept across the floor underneath them.

"Let the healers come back in. We need to go see the other one."

The second man was bitten on his midsection, and the humanity of his pattern already mutated in every place it mattered. He had been savaged; pattern shredded and torn, entire bites taken from multiple injuries. He was lucky to still be alive.

Harry did not consider himself anywhere near experienced enough to recreate an entire body from the neck down. Something to practice another time on a pattern that was not currently alive, and in front of a witness who would not object to such experimentation.

"It's too far gone." Harry murmured to Robard. "I can only remove limbs
before the infection reaches the body to prevent its spread."

"A fact that the healers will be very eager to learn more about. They can regrow limbs not cursed with dark magic. I do not think they have tried amputation in werewolf cases."

"It hasn't been tried in modern times." Grey light, opening the door with an angry shove. "You sent my patient into shock! You think I will let you alone with this one now, too?"

"He won't be a werewolf now. I'm sure he can deal with a little shock." Harry snapped.

The healer snorted, the sound very horse-like. He wondered if the man was about to stomp a hoof.

"This is my wing! No one barges in and performs experimental surgery without my consent, interrogates my patients, and order about my staff!"

Robard raised one salmon hued hand, his voice low and soothing.

"Healer Smethwyck, there was a time limit we were working under, and a life still at stake on the testimony. Rest assured, this will not happen again."

"Hmph." The healer moved farther into the room. "And this one? No miracles here, I assume?"

Harry shook his head.

"No."

Robard shifted, voice losing its soft tone to be all strong command.

"Aurors will be back here, to guard the doors of all three admitted in this case. They will be required to give statements under Veritaserum, as allowed by the Ministry regulations of three years ago. I trust there will be no issues with this?"

"No." A hiss. "I'm only concerned with the recovery of my patients. The
Ministry can deal with the rest."

"Good." Robard moved towards the door, Harry following at a slower pace.

"You using the floo, Lord Potter?"

Harry sighed.

"I need to gather my things, then yes."

"Go get some rest then, because I have no doubt you will be summoned first thing in the morning. The Wizengamot will be convened early as soon as Lord Tripe hears about the werewolf attacks."

"Let him." Harry smiled with grim satisfaction. "We'll be ready."

"I'll have the statements given to Dumbledore. Better this come from a neutral source."

Harry had to nod at that logic. "Good." Harry began to turn, stopped.

"The girl?"

Robard's light slowly shook. "I haven't been briefed yet. Rest assured, the Minister won't let them do anything rash before the Wizengamot meets."

"Good." Harry repeated, then sighed.

"Someone could have been killed. Would have been, if people weren't so scared and stayed in their homes tonight."

"I'm sure that was their intention." Angry words. "And they will pay for it."

"I think we can all agree that these latest attacks only highlight the need for more vigorous policies regarding werewolves!" Lord Tripe, his tiger orange light a powerful flame as he spoke from the floor of the round amphitheater room. "We need to act now. The people want to feel safe when they walk their own streets!"
The Wizengamot was gathered, nearly the entire assembly summoned from their beds and their houses in the early morning hours.

An attack in Diagon Alley, the first attack since Fenrir Greyback's pack terrorized the populace with Lord Voldemort's approval, had been enough to call them together a day and a half early.

Murmurs of agreement rose from the crowd as Lord Tripe sat, rustling robes and colors a shifting sea of growing approval.

From the front of the room, placed at a separate raised dais, the Chief Warlock sat between the Minister and the Head Auror, blue between green and orange.

And it was the powerful pale blue of Lord Albus Dumbledore who spoke next, the red flecks imprinted upon his soul from his phoenix familiar nearly indistinguishable at the distance Harry sat from him.

"New information has come to light about the attack that took place yesterday evening that I believe the assembly needs to hear before a motion is put forward." Grave words said in a grave voice, gathering their attention with the ease and experience of a master orator. "Read aloud the testimony of the three victims, given under Veritaserum in front of approved witnesses."

A cacophony of sound; the scrape of a chair violently pushed back, a canary yellow woman's high pitched voice, her words a chiding rebuke.

"Now, Lord Dumbledore, is this really appropriate? Interrogating the victims of this attack under Veritaserum as if they are at fault for this tragedy?"

"Ms. Umbridge, please be seated. We have been convened to find the truth, not discuss the means the Auror Department takes to gather evidence."

It was a slap in the face to the yellow woman, who flounced down into her chair with an audible thump, to not use her title of Lady. The woman had been appointed to the Wizengamot by the previous Minister, but claimed to
all who would listen that she should have inherited the seat anyway from
the Selwyn side of her family as the last remaining heir.

No one could officially prove or disprove that she was a Selwyn without a
sample of her blood, which was why most erred on the side of political
cautions and called her Lady Umbridge despite what they might suspect.

To not do so now, in front of the entire assembly, had to rankle.

"If we can begin, please." Dumbledore requested, and the court scribe
scurried forward to take Lord Tripes previous place, a Sonorus charm
worked into the white runes beneath his feet.

All would hear what was said when someone stood on the floor of the
Wizengamot.

"The Testimony of one Caldwell Periwinkle, spoken under Veritaserum to
Aurors Williams, Matthews and Gillian, with Head Healer Smythwick of the
Dai Llewellyn ward present as witness. Mr. Periwinkle is in severe
condition, with injuries to his chest and internal organs. He is also now
infected with lycanthropy and has been returned to a magical coma to
complete the healing process."

The scribe cleared his throat and continued with the rustle of paper.

"Mr. Periwinkle now speaking. 'I left my shop an hour after closing, locked
the doors and began the fifteen minute walk to Gringotts to deposit the
day's profits. After only a minute or two, maybe three, I saw these three
people loitering outside Ms. Gilligan's little whole goods grocery. I always
check in at her shop when I pass as is my habit. Ms. Gilligan is a really
nice witch, very pretty and kind-hearted, I really like her. So I always look.
These three had their wands out and I thought maybe they were breaking
in or something, which was odd because this was a very busy street
normally. Except, it wasn't because tonight was the full moon, and we had
all read the notices put up in the Daily Prophet. I thought it was all a little
bit ridiculous personally."

The rambling words, read aloud in a monotone by a wizard, lacked the
personality that must have stuttered and paused on certain words. Harry
wondered if it was the Veritaserum that also made the man admit why he had a habit of looking at Ms. Gilligan's storefront.

He had studied Veritaserum briefly, years ago when Hermione's cousin could have benefited greatly from its use. It wasn't foolproof; it made the user speak what they believed to be true, not what was always actually true. It wouldn't be enough on its own to prove anyone's guilt or innocence.

But it certainly wouldn't hurt in this case.

"'Right as I was about to shout, one of the figures disappeared, using a portkey I guess because of the apparition wards within the Alley proper. The other two, they start running towards me and right as I'm about to scream for the aurors there is this big crash, this thing coming right through the wooden side door in the alley between shops. I don't know what's going on until it's right on top of me, and I must have fallen and cracked my head because next thing I know I'm waking up here.'"

The Scribe lowered his paper, waited for Dumbledore's signal to continue.

"The Testimony of one Delbert Ferrior, spoken under Veritaserum to Aurors Williams, Matthews and Gillian, with Head Healer Smythwick of the Dai Llewellyn ward present as witness. Mr. Ferrior is in stable condition, with minor wounds. He will recover fully."

Murmurs from the audience; heads craning to look towards where canary yellow sat, light flashing wildly.

As Harry had just been informed that morning by Vaughn, Delbert Ferrior was one Dolores Umbridge's assistant.

"Mr. Ferrior now speaking. 'It was all Ms. Umbridge's idea...'"

"I object!" A screech, a whirling leap of yellow. "This is a ridiculous accusation!"

"Silence!" The Chief Warlock commanded. "Or be held in contempt!"

Yellow sat, but there was no peace in the gesture. It was the wild
cowering of a rabid creature planning its next angle of attack.

He saw light gathering at the door, familiar hues of aurors he had seen in the past. Others were preparing as well.

The Scribe slowly continued, his voice holding the excited knowledge that he was about to read something very, very scandalous.

"It was all Ms. Umbridge's idea. She asked me to find a half-human candidate in Diagon to use as an example to prove how dangerous werewolves are. She hired this woman from Knockturn to case Ms. Gilligan's store, who I had learned fostered a werewolf girl. Gilligan kept the beast's cage right near the alley entrance in a side storage room. It was easy to hire a wardbreaker who would remove the wards on the steel so that the werewolf could break free. We were supposed to portkey out as soon as it was done, where I would go to the Leaky Cauldron and be ready to give a statement to the reporters when the aftermath was over. But Ms. Umbridge left without us. As soon as we realized we left, but the woman from Knockturn, I don't know her name, knocked me down. I heard the werewolf break down the door and saw her attack some wizard on the street, just rip into him just like Ms. Umbridge said it would. It was horrible, a vicious grotesque beast. I tried to get up and run, but the thing must have heard me. It knocked me down. I tried to kick at its mouth, but it took a chunk out of my leg. When I tried to hit it, it bit my arm, too. I was screaming at it when the thing just leapt off me and took off down the street. I lay there a minute before I got up. I was worried the thing would return. I managed to get my wand and levitate myself to the nearest apartment and call for help. This witch helped get me and the other guy the thing attacked to the floo where we went to St. Mungo's. She also called the aurors."

Silence fell as the Scribe wound to a halt.

"This is why we don't use Veritaserum in court." Sweet words now, as Umbridge stood, her soul a canary beacon of devious intentions. In that moment, Harry could almost hate the color yellow. She didn't deserve to have a soul in the same color scheme as a house-elf. "Delbert was mistaken. I would never order such a thing be done. This must be a set up,
an attempt to hurt my reputation on this issue."

"There is one more." Pale blue spoke. The Chief Warlock did not even acknowledge her statement.

The Scribe did not wait for Umbridge to sit or to try to defend herself again in what was turning into an impromptu trial.

Across the room, the tiger orange of Lord Tripe was fluctuating in extreme emotion, a harsh beat of violent emotion only barely reigned in.

"The Testimony of one Patricia Quinn, spoken under Veritaserum to Aurors Williams, Matthews and Gillian, with Head Healer Smythwick of the Dai Llewellyn ward present as witness. Ms. Quinn suffered minor wounds and has recovered fully, uninfected. She is being held on multiple past convictions prior to this incident. Ms. Quinn now speaking. 'I was hired right outside the construction where Borgin and Burkes used to be before it was blown to bits. This fancy lady, who her fancy friend called Umbridge, paid me one hundred galleons to case this joint right in the heart of the Alley. It wasn't worth anything, but this lady just wanted me to find out where this little beast was being caged and let her loose, like. I got an extra fifty galleons if I removed those wards on her say-so on the night of, so I did. She ain't paid me, though, and she didn't portkey me out neither. She left me and her fancy friend there to be beast meat. I seen what werewolves can do, I knew what the fancy lady was doing when she left us there. She done want us dead, cover her tracks like. So I knocked over the fancy and tried to get down a alley onto a side street, thinking maybe the beast'll be distracted like by the other two. But it done had my scent I guess, cause next thing I know the thing is right behind me. I get a good strike at it before it got hold of my arm, but not my wand arm. I got it point-blank solid between the eyes with a good specialty hex and sent the thing off to find easier prey than me. But it done sank its fangs into me, so I figure I'm good as dead anyway.'"

The Scribe stopped, lowered the green papers in his hand. With a dip of light Dumbledore sent him off the floor.

Everyone was silent for a heartbeat of time.
Then, to his surprise, Lord Tripe spoke, and in the quiet his voice carried around the room.

"You horrible, callous, unfeeling bitch."

Later, Harry figured it was sheer shock that stopped Dumbledore from halting the man's diatribe before it could truly begin to rage.

"You! You! You let one of those monsters free on our streets?! You think this would help our cause?! Imbecile! People live in Diagon Alley! Children! Innocent people!"

"Lord Tripe, please…"

But Tripe wouldn't be stopped now by anyone, not even Dumbledore.

"I was in the Alley last night with my grandson! I was in Gringotts when the goblins activated the wards! You traitorous bitch, you knew!"

The rising grumble in the crowd, arguments flaring and falling silent as the older wizard's scream rang in their ears.

"Did you plan to kill me too? Make an example of me to push through your precious legislation? Do you hate them so much you would put even your allies in danger?!"

"They are evil!" Umbridge finally defended herself, the drama unfolding better than any planned play ever could. "They deserve to be killed, every single one! Just like all other half-breed filth, less than human monsters. No price is too high to pay!"

"No!"

"Enough!"

The Chief Warlock stood, and pale blue magic swept over the crowd in a general silencing charm.

Harry saw it fall upon his emerald arms and hover there, trapping all sound below it. It took a powerful wizard to spread his magic so far and wide.
"Enough. In light of this new evidence, we will now break for the day. Aurors, arrest Ms. Dolores Umbridge. Tomorrow morning we will reconvene for the trial of all involved in this crime. In the meantime, all parties can seek legal counsel and advice. Dismissed."

As soon as the Chief Warlock retook his seat his power withdrew, and sound returned in the loud roar of dozens of voices speaking over top of one another with questions and demands.

Harry only sat and fought a sudden headache as colors mingled and swirled as forty-odd souls tried to make sense of the rapid change in events.

He figured it was irony that the December Session of the Wizengamot would begin with a trial of one of its own.

The day before had not been wasted. The Auror Department, led by Robard’s dogged determination, had uncovered more witnesses involved peripherally in the scheme, unknowing of its full extent. No one really liked Umbridge; many of her employees in the Improper Use of Magic Department more than eager to see her fall from grace.

Lord Tripe was not involved, a fact that disappointed Harry to an extent. He had hoped to get rid of the opposition in one fell sweep. But he would settle for seeing the last of Dolores Umbridge, which was what the final verdict was.

Incarceration in Azkaban Prison, minimum sentence of fifty years for the attempted murder of at least three people, one of which was another Ministry employee. Added to it was a few charges of endangerment to the public and tampering with the wards caging a dark creature.

It didn't feel like enough, but it would deal with her for a very, very long time, during which he doubted Ms. Umbridge would be on her best behavior.

Mr. Ferrior was also charged, as was Ms. Quinn, both of whom played integral parts of their own.
The young werewolf, Kelly Valopolis, was found to be in compliance with Ministry standards, her escape no fault of her own or Ms. Gilligan's. Harry doubted the girl would see it that way, though.

Werewolves remembered everything that happened during full moons when they regained their senses.

The Wizengamot session afterwards was almost anticlimactic. Lord Tripe had his same arguments, the ones everyone had been reading in the paper for the last months. Lord Longbottom had his research proving werewolves were safe outside the full moon and possessed their full mental faculty outside that one day.

It was a stalemate that came down to the pure intentions of the infected. Lady Bones brought up the growing sanctuary as a temporary relief for werewolves from stifling Ministry laws. Lord Ogden pointed out that the Ministry ought to sponsor such warded areas for law-abiding werewolves to be caged safely during their 'troubled time of the month'. Lord Tripe countered with examples of rogue, feral werewolves in times past. Lord Neville mentioned the many peaceful protests that had been organized by countless werewolves over the years.

The session ended with no clear winner once again, but no loser either. They had another few months of politics and rallies ahead of them.

But Harry was more than ready to set the matter aside for a few blessed weeks of peace.

She was waiting on the doorstep of Grimmauld Place, holding the hand of a woman whose light shone in amber tones.

"Lord Potter, we are so sorry to disturb you. I'm Ms. Gilligan. Kelly and I wanted to see you."

The girl's cardinal red light was still whole and unbroken, though he saw the shadow imprint of cracks that had began to stress its surface color.

But cracks could heal without scarring.
Harry opened the door and beckoned them inside, still wearing the elegant robes from the Wizengamot session. He had only just stepped from the floo when Kraken met him with the news of his visitors.

"They already let you go?" Harry asked, then wanted to kick himself for it. Maybe it wasn't proper to mention the girls recent incarceration at Ministry hands, nor allude to her attack two nights before.

Then again, why else would she be here with her guardian in tow?

Ms. Gilligan's voice was stern.

"They most certainly did. I had all the proper precautions in place for Kelly, and even had a Ministry inspector come by every six months to check the wards. We have always cooperated with the Ministry. To be treated this way... I am not pleased. The Daily Prophet will hear about this travesty. Using my Kelly as some sort of weapon."

Harry sat, watching as the other two did the same. He waited for the young werewolf to speak, but she only sat, quietly, her red hands folded in her lap.

"Are you alright?" Harry hesitantly asked, and she shrugged.

"I'm not going to be executed, so I guess so."

"Kelly, manners." Ms Gilligan nudged her, and Kelly groaned.

"I'm fine, sir."

Harry grinned at Ms. Gilligan's huff of disapproval at the tone. It was a relief to hear that the girl had remained in possession of her attitude and not shattered into a depressed, or conversely furious, being.

"What can I do for you?" Harry spoke when the silence began to grow.

Amber light straightened in stiff, rigid lines. "I was content to stay in Diagon Alley with Kelly, but I'm no longer certain in any way that we are safe. I've been reading about that town out in the country for werewolf kind. We just went and visited Mr. Periwinkle, too, who owns a small clothing shop
around the corner from my grocery. With his… situation now, he can no longer run his store once he is released from St. Mungo's. We would both, all three of us, like to relocate our businesses inside this new town if you will have us."

Harry blinked.

"That's… fast, don't you think?"

The woman sniffed in disdain.

"I won't remain a day longer if I don't have to. When I make up my mind, I see no reason to dilly-dally."

"She really doesn't." Kelly grumbled under her breath, and received another nudge for her trouble.

Harry ran one hand through his hair, shook his head.

"I'm not in charge of organization, so I can't say for certain about your businesses. The town is still being built, and I'm not sure any services are up and running yet in any case. But certainly you are all welcome."

"Who do we speak to, then?" Strict command in her voice. Harry smiled despite himself, that the woman did not show an ounce of fear at being inside the lair of the Blind Sorcerer, making demands. Lord Ogden could take lessons.

"Lord Longbottom. He can set you in the right direction, help you move all of your things and inventory if space is available for stores yet."

"Perfect. We won't bother you further, then." Amber light began to stand, but Kelly remained seated, her light intensely focused on him.

"Wait. I have a question."

Harry nodded, waited for her to speak.

"Can you cure my lycanthropy like you did two of the ones I attacked?"
Harry narrowed his eyes.

"How did you know I cured them?"

"Did you want to keep it a secret? If so, you shouldn't have shown your face in St. Mungo's and got all the healers talking."

"Kelly Valopolis."

"It was the quickest way to get things done. I'm sorry, Kelly. I did not cure their lycanthropy."

When she began to speak, he shook his head and held up one hand.

"No, I didn't. I amputated the infected limb, then simply had a new limb made and reattached. Lycanthropy, that I've seen so far, is a mutation that affects the very base humanity of your body. Maybe, if I was in very close contact with you before your infection, I could recreate your body pre-infection and... but that doesn't matter here. The body you have is a werewolf, and to change it could have disastrous consequences. Your body would probably no longer function properly. Maybe, with a great deal of experimentation, a technique could be developed. But that experimentation would result no doubt in many people dying during the attempts. The risk outweighs the possible rewards."

"That's why you didn't cure Mr. Periwinkle then." Kelly said, her voice deflated.

Harry nodded, though in his mind he had already considered just such experimentation. With death being a reversible state under his magic, he could risk killing a willing subject and simply resurrect them at will.

But he wasn't yet willing to take on human experimentation of that scale even if he did have the time to devote to it. If Hermione objected to him killing and resurrecting birds, he didn't doubt her reaction to him doing the same on human bodies would be... extreme.

"What I did any healer at St. Mungo's can do as well, if they are quick enough. Usually, however, before the victim is found the infection has spread too far. Or they are bitten too close to vital organs and the
mutation is in their bloodstream. It was ruled more humane and less
dangerous to simply let the infected recover as a werewolf, especially in
children. Regrowing limbs is not a… perfect process still, especially in
bodies not fully grown."

"I guess so." Red light stood to join amber, and he saw their lights touch
and clasp hands. "Thanks for explaining it to me."

Harry rose to join them at the door, but wasn't sure what to say. He had no
hope for a cure, wasn't sure one was possible. Lycanthropy was a
mutation that the very body itself accepted into its pattern, the same way a
familiar or animagus form was accepted. The body did not know that the
mutagen was an unwanted, horrible curse for its soul to bear.

"I'll see you at Non Mordere."

He meant for it to be a question, but it wasn't. Ms Gilligan jerked with a
nod, turning to exit the room.

And because his luck was obviously out for the day, that was when the floo
flared to life, and Aethonan stepped through its flames.

"Nice digs, Gryff. Really, I would say your floo security is shoddy but it did
take me a good hour to get through and I have a little side hobby in fire
elemental spells."

Harry sat back down, robes a rumpled green mess, and closed his eyes
with a groan.

"I know you can still see me." Aethonan stated, stalking over to sit across
from him, in the exact spot Ms. Gilligan had been not five minutes prior.

"How?" Harry grumbled, and for good measure kept his eyes stubbornly
closed.

He wanted this day to be over. He wanted to go to sleep for at least
twelve hours. He even wanted to eat, a rare feeling in the last months.

He wanted to do everything but talk business and reports and the Ministry.
He had counted it good planning on his part to get out of yet another meeting with the Minister and Robard after the Wizengamot broke session.

Robard had already chewed him out for the fact that several rumors had ramped up about his involvement with the Ministry. The Minister hadn't been happy either, but not for anything dealing directly with Harry. He was more unsettled about the entire situation, and the political storm that would ensue with a Wizengamot member sentenced to prison.

It also meant Scrimgeour had to assign another member to sit in that now-empty seat, and the wheel of politics was already spinning in motion.

_Favors and bribes_, Harry thought with another sigh. Why would anyone willingly fight to get involved in such a convoluted mess?

"Observation. The trait anyone worthwhile has in law enforcement."

Harry only groaned again, a wordless exhalation of his frustration with life in general at the moment.

"Stop your bitching, it's unattractive." Harry sat up at that and glared towards the blue woman, who only laughed in response. "Now _that's_ more like it. I'm here to talk about your little medical stunt back in the Alley. That, and taking a werewolf out by yourself in full view of two goblins. I hope that was worth it, by the way."

"It was."

"Good. Because as your captain, I can say if you planned to keep your identity secret, you just made an idiot, fool move. You'll be lucky if the goblins don't start talking, though with their disdain for wizards, you might get away with it there. But anyone with a lick of observation and a desire to dig in and know will figure out that the witch in Diagon was healed of her lycanthropy before she reached St. Mungo's. If they read the official transcripts and ask around, they're going to put two and two together. If you hoped to remain undetected you just screwed up big time."

Harry flinched, tried not to wilt under the stinging words. He had done the right thing, damn it.
Aethonan wasn't done.

"We deal with people, Lord Potter, that will try to kill you. And if they can't kill you, they will try to prevent you from killing them, or hurting their agenda, in other ways. There is a reason we all have false names and disguises."

"I know that already." Harry broke in with a snap, but Aethonan kept talking as if he was a simple fly buzzing in her ear.

"You can take care of yourself. I don't doubt you can, with the kind of resources and money you have, even put protection in place for your homes and family. But it won't be enough. Eventually, somehow, some way, someone will get to you or them."

She paused, but Harry suddenly had no words to say. When she continued, she had lost her harsh edge.

"I've seen it before, and I know the stories. You can't be everywhere, all the time. People make mistakes. And the people we hunt, Luxe Sumbre especially, have the motivation it takes to be patient and wait for those mistakes to happen. In the Academy, we learned of groups that plan for years to take out a target. They will come for you, because you are too important, too powerful, too involved."

She stood and approached him, sitting down next to him with a soft sigh.

"Gryff. I don't know your motivations for doing this work with Winged Horse. But I'm telling you now, without Robard's knowledge, that this is your turning point. This is your chance to get out. You leave now, anyone you've pissed off already might lose interest. They might leave you and your family alone..."

"It's alright." Harry said in the same soft voice, and this time she stopped at his interruption. "I know what you are telling me, and I don't think it matters. I'm already famous, I'm already a target. I'll always be one, because of what I did in the past and what I'm doing now in the Wizengamot. I'm going to make enemies. All I can do is be prepared for them."
Blue light flickered, one hand raising to run through hair, frustration in every movement.

"Most people fear you because of the rumors of your capabilities. But some of these groups, they aren't afraid of dying. There will be some willing to die just as long as they take you with them."

Across his shoulders the Cloak rustled, and Harry reached out to run his hand along its silk, the Stone on his palm sliding smoothly along the fabric.

"There are worse things than dying." Harry murmured in reply, then shook his head. "Thank you for coming to talk to me, but I don't see any point in stopping now. I can't live my life worried about every risk. If I did that, I might as well step down from the Wizengamot as well, and quit any movements to improve magical creature rights. Change is always going to make somebody angry."


She walked towards the floo, paused to turn, her life a flame as bright as the red heat of the fire behind her.

"Upgrade your floo security. I know a guy, I'll send him your way."

And with a flick of white crystal she stepped into the fireplace and was gone.

Harry sat in silence for a long moment, thinking of the team members Aethonan had lost, the many enemies she herself no doubt had, the family she probably protected.

"I'll upgrade the security." Harry muttered to himself, and leaned back into the couch, the Cloak raising without his bidding to cover his face and plunge him into its soothing black-white pattern.

He might be willing to take risks, but he wasn't going to take rash ones, not with himself, and most certainly not with his family.

Harry approached Privet Drive at a slow walk, his staff a comforting weight
in one gloved hand.

The wards gleamed strong and bright, a bright orb that gave off no warmth in the cold night air of the night before Christmas.

He had spent the last three weeks dedicating himself to studying the many unique warding patterns of wizarding security. His college classes had suffered slightly, leaving him with less-than-excellent grades, but he considered the work worth it.

He had to be sure that the warders he had hired were doing the best work. They had been; but knowing that for certain had comforted him after Aethonan's words. He had also prevented any potential floo connection from being opened at either the Dursley's or the Granger's old fireplaces, and spent hours working with an expert in floo security for his own setup at Grimmauld Place.

There was no longer a concept of too-much when it came to preventing possible break-ins. He was not content with simply adequate protection any longer.

Harry stopped at the edge of the Dursley wards, reaching out his free hand to gently touch golden strands, his hand passing through them with only the slightest sensation of pins and needles. It amazed him that such strong magic had such little impact on his physical senses. No smell at all, not even a haze in the air according to Vaughn. Even the touch of them was hardly recognizable as anything other than a slight muscle twitch.

The wards were strong, preventing unauthorized apparition, portkey, and now aerial broom travel. They extended below the ground in a dome identical to the one above, and would alert if anything larger than a rat tried to dig through underneath. He had tried to think of everything.

No package with a magical signature, person or object, could enter without alarm. A double layer of wards closer to the walls of the house would also alert if any non-magical person or creature tried to enter.

And over the holidays, he planned to ease his aunt and uncle into accepting his creation of a warded safe room inside the house. He could create a
wizarding space that would not take up a significant amount of floorspace, but would allow all inside to safely hide from any sight, mundane or magical. He had been crafting a design himself, utilizing his research into faraday cages, that would reroute any significant magical expenditure that tried to open the warded room safely aside.

Like lightning striking such a metal frame, any witch or wizard who made it that far would be unable to magically impact the room beyond its outer shell. He hoped to test a working model soon.

"Looking good?"

Vaughn's voice at his shoulder, his bangladesh light a steady hue. Harry had lingered too long in thought.

He dropped his hand, turned to nod.

"Yes. It would take a dedicated team of wizards an excessive amount of time to penetrate these."

Harry walked through the wards, saw the ripple of reaction spread through the golden strands. While he was allowed to pass, it would still warn those within. There would be a magical log of everyone who exited and entered, a fact that had not gone over so well with the Dursleys.

His aunt Petunia had equated it to living in a prison. Dudley had remarked that prisons were some of the most secure buildings around, and received a soft slap for it. But they hadn't told him to remove the register.

Probably because his aunt declared he was losing weight and looking stressed, two things she could not abide in her house. She wanted to fatten him up and wipe the worry from his face, so she agreed to the extra measures without too much complaint.

Though she *had* insisted he stay a week for the holidays, and he hadn't argued. He only packed a bag. He could live a week away from his laboratory, and perhaps the break would give him more insight when he returned.

By the porch, two souls glimmered under standard invisibility charms. The
new guards had been more than satisfactory according to his aunt, who even exchanged recipes with one of the muggleborn witches. Apparently the woman disdained magical cooking methods and preferred mundane appliances. His aunt had wholeheartedly declared the only true way to make something was with one's own hands.

He hadn't pointed out that using a stove was not exactly using one's own hands. He knew better than Dudley when it was good to keep one's mouth shut.

The door opened, and his aunt stood there, arms open, and Harry found a smile blooming across his face, feeling for all the world like a weary traveler coming home.

When she circled him with her arms, he held on tight, and memorized the sight of her loving purple light.

"What is that on your hand, young man?"

Harry paused, fork halfway to his mouth, at his Aunt's sudden words. Across the table Dudley snickered.

"It's a tattoo! Harry got a tattoo!"

"Harry James Potter!" Petunia exclaimed. "You did not!"

His uncles deep voice boomed in response. "Calm down, Pet. He's a grown man now, he can do what he wants. Why, I remember the time…"

"This is lot more permanent than that time." His aunt sniffed.

"What time?" Dudley demanded. "Dad, what time?"

"Well, uh…" Vernon suttered. "That is.."

"That is not important right now." Petunia broke in. "What is important is Harry getting a tattoo."

A pause, and Harry could feel their eyes focused on him. He sighed and
dropped the fork, holding out his right palm.

He had contemplated hiding it, but this was his family. He might not explain all of what it was, but he also didn't want to wear a glamor or gloves when he was supposed to be relaxed and comfortable.

"Wicked." Dudley claimed. "I want a magical tattoo now."

"Don't you dare." Petunia demanded. "It's not proper."

"Harry's got one." Dudley grumbled, but low enough his aunt ignored the statement. After all, she couldn't argue with it.

"It's a magical stone. I can use it working spells. The tattoo portion is just a… side effect."

Not a lie, not the truth. A paradox that represented the Hallows well.

"I see." Her light jerked in a nod. "So it's part of your research, then? Wizarding work?"

"Yes." Harry agreed easily with her conclusion.

"In that case, perfectly acceptable. Though you should keep it covered outside, its glow might scandalize the neighbors."

Harry grinned, heard Dudley cover a laugh with a hasty cough.

"Of course, Aunt Petunia. I would never want that."

She made a disgruntled sound, and Dudley quickly changed the subject with the ease of a brother used to deflecting attention from a sibling's descent into trouble.

"So I've got a competition coming up next month."

And just like that, Harry's tattoo was forgotten. Aunt Petunia, though she didn't quite approve of boxing, was also extremely proud of Dudley's prowess at it.
Harry smiled down at his plate. It was going to be a good Christmas.

Hermione faced off with her father, arms folded across her chest. They had argued the entire way home from the Dursley's Christmas party, after she had informed her parents of her decision. Now, in her parent's living room, she was determined to win the ensuing argument.

"I'm a grown woman. I can make my own decisions."

"Jane, please, help me out here." John threw his hands into the air, voice pleading as he looked towards his wife. "You can't seriously be okay with this."

"Honey, Hermione has a point..." He growled, face reddening with fierce anger. "If that boy thinks for one minute that it was okay to ask you to move in with him, I'll strangle him myself!"

"Dad!" Hermione exclaimed. "Harry hasn't even asked!"

"Then why this demand to move out? You have a perfectly decent commute with your magic, you can live anywhere!"

"Exactly! And I want to live with my boyfriend!"

"No!" Her dad yelped. "This is preposterous! Girls do not move in with their boyfriends!"

"Women do now." Hermione gritted her teeth. "And I practically live with him most days anyway! I only sleep here!"

His face mottled. She watched as he closed his eyes, sucking in a breath, fists clenched. Her mother lay a soft hand on his arm, fixing her daughter with stern eyes.

"Now Hermione. You need to understand that this is a lot to take in. Your father wasn't planning for you to get married until you're at least forty."
Hermione flushed, even as her Dad fixed his wife with a harsh glare. "We're not getting married." She muttered.

Her Dad's glare moved to her. "Exactly the problem."

Her mouth dropped open. "You would rather me get married at nineteen then move in with my boyfriend?!"

His chin lifted, as he mirrored her combative stance. "Yes. At least then you are a respectable woman."

Her incredulity swiftly turned back to anger. "That's the most backwards, ridiculous, idiotic…"

"Enough, dears." Jane Granger stepped between them, hands held out peaceably. "Let's not say anything we would all regret."

"Fine." Hermione lifted her chin. "I'll just ask him to marry me then."

"Absolutely not!" Her father burst out.

And suddenly, the humor of it struck her. Hermione met her mother's eyes, and saw the same emotion glimmering there. Nearly as one they laughed.

"Women!" Her dad thundered, and with a sharp pivot stomped from the room, his grumbling tirade fading with the sharp crack of a door closed a tad too violently.

Jane's laughter faded, and she held out her arms to her daughter with a shake of her head, giving Hermione a comforting squeeze.

"I don't think a marriage proposal is necessary at this juncture, unless of course there is something I need to know…?"

At Hermione's narrowed look, her mother's lips lifted in a smile.

"Thought not. Just give him time to get used to the idea. He'll come around. He likes Harry."

Hermione frowned. "I'm bringing it up to Harry at our New Year's party. I'm
sick of leaving him alone in that house with just the elves. He needs me, even if he hasn't said so. He would stay in that laboratory of his all day, and I know he's slept there at night before too."

"Well, I guarantee he won't sleep there once you move in." Her mother said, amused, and Hermione flushed.

"Mum!"

Jane shrugged. "I wasn't born yesterday. Neither was your father. He just doesn't like to think about the fact that you're not his little girl anymore."

"I know." Hermione sighed, smiled. "You'll talk to him?"

Her mother mirrored her smile.

"I'll talk to him."

The year ended with a snowstorm that hammered the windows with blue crystal and howling wind. Harry watched the flakes swirl and fall with violent motions, a chaotic pattern that made it impossible for him to even see the wards that surrounded the Grangers modest house nor the guards outside who no doubt huddled under warming charms and cloaks both.

The window that separated him from the chaos was his current nemesis. He had spent the past five minutes practicing seeing through the shadowy purple web that made up its structure to look beyond what would be simple clear glass to any other person.

But common glass was composed of silica, a mineral compound of sand, from which it derived most of its purple hue. The shadows in its pattern were probably the other multiple compounds processed into its solid shape during the glass-making process.

He had tried to catalogue the nuances and depths of such shadows to determine their base elemental compounds, but the experiment had been a failure. It was hard to categorize a void as anything other than a void. Still, from what he knew of glass, he could guess this type consisted of silicon dioxide, sodium oxide, sodium carbonate...
"Stop avoiding my father."

Her voice interrupted his mental list and broke his focus. The swirling blue crystals faded, replaced with the flat purple window. Harry grimaced.

"He's been snapping at me all night. I feel like a bug he wants to squash under his bootheel."

Hermione came up behind him, her hands wrapping around his stomach to squeeze gently. He leaned back into the embrace automatically, musing aloud. "What onearth did I do?"

She laughed, and he felt her lips press into his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry. It's my fault."

Harry turned in her arms, frowning, his magic raising as he looked at her, taking in her mischievous smile with suspicion.

"What did you do then to get me into trouble?"

"Nothing you won't enjoy a great deal." She was purposefully avoiding the question, and they both knew it.

Harry narrowed his look, saw the orbs of her eyes fixed on his face in a grinning green skull, and let the energy fade with exasperation. Sometimes it would be nice to see expressions with easy effort.

"Tell me."

Hermione laughed, and Harry grabbed her with a quick movement, her startled shriek cut off with a quick press of his mouth.

Mr. Granger already hated him apparently, so it was the man's own fault for making Harry resort to these methods to interrogate his daughter.

Very enjoyable interrogation methods, though. Harry's hard kiss turned gentle as her hands dipped into his hair, his arms straining to hold her up as he leaned back against the cold window, his hands enjoying the hold he currently had on her very delectable derriere.
"Harry." She mumbled against his mouth, sucking in a breath. "I need to ask you something…"

He didn't really care anymore at that moment. He captured her next words with another kiss, distributing more of their weight back against the window so he could hold her more firmly against him.

Now this was a wonderful way to ring in the new year.

"Harry!" She gasped again. "Don't you want to know…"

"Nope." He kissed her again.

"But…" Her hands were wrapped in his hair, her nails against his scalp, and the resulting sensation was felt all the way down to his toes.

"Not important." He muttered.

"Ahem."

The loud, forceful exclamation from the nearest doorway made him freeze. Hermione broke away and groaned, the sound almost obscene considering the circumstances.

Harry's closed eyes couldn't prevent him from seeing the navy blue soul of John Granger. At least he didn't have to see the man's no-doubt murderous expression.

Harry gently placed Hermione on her feet, though he was careful to keep her between him and her father. He didn't consider this act cowardly; merely a perfectly rational, intelligent decision to make, considering his current state.

"Dad." Hermione's voice was a warning. "I was just telling Harry about my decision to move in with him."

Harry gawked at her blue-violet light, the words completely derailing his current plan to escape the Granger house in any way possible, as soon as possible.
"If he's okay with that, of course."

She wanted to move in with him? *She wanted to move in with him?*

"Harry." One bony finger poked his chest, and Harry blinked.

"Sure. *Yeah.* I mean, yes!" His exuberance growing with every word, Harry grinned wide enough his cheeks strained, hands reaching out of their own accord to grab her again into an impromptu hug. "Yes!"

She laughed, the sound beautiful to his ears, giving him the urge to dive down for another wonderful warm kiss.

Until he remembered her dad was right there, fuming. And suddenly, he realized why the older man had been cold to him.

"Oh no. I mean, I don't know." Harry fumbled with the words to say, mind scrambling for the right answer. "This is, we... I, you..."

He stopped, flummoxed. Hermione stiffened in his arms.

Mr. Granger folded navy arms, one foot tapping in boots of light brown leather.

"You better know, boy. You make my girl happy, or I'll be very disappointed in you."

Unsaid was just what would happen when John Granger was disappointed in someone. Harry resisted the urge to gulp, nodded swiftly.

"I will, yes, of course."

"Hmph." The man's light jerked. "See that you do. I still expect to see you two for dinner, and right regular."

Hermione stepped away from him, and he watched as blue-violet light embraced deeper navy blue.

"Thank you." Her voice was small, emotional. Her father cleared his throat and stepped away, patting her once on the shoulder.
"Your mum told me to tell you the countdown starts soon." And he quickly fled, no doubt because Hermione's light was pulsing erratically, a sure sign she was about to laugh or burst into tears.

Harry shifted on his feet when she turned back to him, fighting the urge to follow Mr. Granger's sterling example.

"Are you happy?" She asked softly, and Harry blinked in surprise before quickly stepping forward, reaching out to fumble for her hands and grasp them tightly.

"Yes." He drew her closer, the kiss brief but full of excitement. "I'm surprised, but yes, of course I am! Are you?"

She smiled against his cheek.

"Ecstatic."

Harry leaned back, grinned.

"Euphoric?"

"Practically... rapturous." She breathed in response, arms looping around his neck, pressing them together into a lingering kiss.

"Yeah." He murmured when she pulled away, began to tug him back out into the main living area, where their combined families waited in a half circle around the large green grandfather clock that ponderously counted towards midnight.

"Blissful."

~*~Next Chapter: The Carbon Black Flesh of Living Shadows~*~

~Review Please!~
Chapter 27: The Carbon Black Flesh of Living Shadows

Angela’s Note: Thank you everyone for the kind comments! July was as hot as I expected and I’m glad it’s over. Harvest starts for me as soon as the corn "fire's up" (turns yellow from the bottom up) which can be in a couple days or two weeks. Plants grow on their own time and by their own rhythms. When that happens it'll be back to the 90 hour work weeks for me with not much energy to spare. But I'm happy to report I've written 3 chapters this last month that just need to be polished off as I get the time. The end of this story is within sight (10 more chapters? Or so? Let's be honest, probably 20....). Though it's going to be hard to leave it behind.

And again, thank you for the many reviews. I read them all, and it matters a great deal to me to know what people think.

1999

Kreacher took Hermione's presence as he took everything else; with calm efficiency. It surprised Harry that little had physically changed, and yet how everything felt so different.

Sleeping with her in his arms was nearly as wonderful as waking up to her beautiful light shining beside him from underneath the Cloak, a blue-violet sunrise he could look forward to every morning.

Not that there weren't a few arguments.

She wanted to reorganize his room, to start. She insisted they needed more space; space for under clothes, space for outer clothes, space for shoes and scarves and gloves and an entire new wardrobe of clothes that all looked the same to him but was apparently vitally unique.

Then she had to expand the library, which he was alright with until she decided she also was going to expand his laboratory.
He thought she ought to have her own. She thought they should share. The *discussion* lasted nearly three days of heated arguments and then heated make-ups until Kreacher took matters into his own more than capable hands and simply did the work himself.

Now, they had two labs side by side, only they were separated by a half wall and not a true doorway. The both of them had been suitably chastened by an aggravated Kreacher without one word being spoken.

Their schedules were also very different. Harry preferred to stay up late; Hermione to wake up early. Both wanted to fall asleep in each other's arms and wake the same way, which meant someone was going to have to give in.

"I have early classes." Hermione pointed out, as they sat eating breakfast one very, very early day in February. "So I have to be up early, which means I have to go to bed early too."

Harry grunted, trying to feel human at the god-awful early hour of the morning he found himself up at.

"You wake up two hours before your classes start, and your commute only takes, *oh*, roughly ten seconds by apparition?"

"I need to have time to wake up and prepare for classes." Hermione pointed out with painful calm.

"Why not prepare the night before? And it wouldn't take so long to wake up if you slept in a little longer."

"Not true." Hermione defended. "That makes no sense. It takes me at least an hour to be fully functional."

Harry groaned, and let his head fall onto the solid wooden table with a thump. "Why? Why does it take that long?"

"Not everyone can just roll from bed and conquer the world." Hermione uttered, then reached over to pat his head.

"Now. How do you feel about cats."
It was a statement, not a question. Harry lifted his head and glared suspiciously.

When he raised his magic to Look at her, he found her smiling wickedly.

"You want to get a cat?"

"I miss Hiss." She returned. "Come on, Harry, haven't you ever wanted a pet?"

"I've got a perfectly good owl."

That Kraken took care of.

"Not the same." Hermione rejoined. "I mean someone to cuddle up to."

"You've got me to cuddle up to." Harry demanded.

"I mean someone fluffy and soft."

"I'll grow fur and get fat." Harry returned stubbornly, only to have her laugh.

"Oh, Harry."

And just like that, he knew he lost yet another discussion.

No wonder Kreacher had demanded they not get a female elf. They always seemed to bloody win.

The letter arrived by owl in the late afternoon, sealed with an elegant capital letter G that Vaughn had recognized immediately.

"Gringotts." The guard remarked, breaking the seal with a snap. "You want me to leave?"

Harry, busy removing his outer coat and still feeling the chill from outside, shook his head. "Go ahead and read it for me. I can't imagine it's anything important."

"Hmm." Vaughn cleared his throat. "Lord Potter, the goblins of Gringotts
formally request your assistance in the removal of a... some long latin word I can't pronounce... curse. It has been brought to our attention that you might have some expertise in this matter. Please respond with your presence at your earliest convenience. Lord Shortsnout." The man passed the letter over with a huff. "Bloody goblins. They practically summon you, and don't even offer payment. Make sure you barter with them. They would let you work for free if you let them get away with it. Charge a fortune for me."

Harry wanted to laugh, but the urge faded as he thought more about how such abilities might have come to their attention.

The werewolf incident seemed the most likely start. Then just the kind of digging Aethonan had told him would happen had probably spiraled out from there.

It made him wonder if the payment the goblins hadn't offered would be their silence on the matter.

Harry made himself smile, and reached out to grasp his cloak and fling it around his shoulders once more.

"Why wait to make a fortune?"

Gringotts bank was a grand hive of magic and stone. In many places, the various wards were so thickly layered that the purple walls underneath were nearly invisible under the white, gold, and orange strands of magic.

It reminded him of a thick spider web, with the goblins that lived inside the arachnids that populated the space. Or perhaps an anthill would be a more appropriate analogy, considering the caste system that goblins preferred.

And so many of them. Goblins on every level, in every hall, streaming to and fro with the burnt orange color of their species, all busy at some task or another.

They presented a hole in his soul-theory. Unlike house-elves, they could interbreed with humankind, and yet they did not visibly have signs of a
uniquely hued soul. At what point did a goblin-human hybrid leave the orange color of their goblin genetics behind, and trade it in for a colored human soul? He had only ever seen one such hybrid, Professor Flitwick, and while the signs of goblin ancestry had been present, the man's deep yellow soul was very much human.

He didn't doubt goblins were unique individuals, just as house-elves were. Perhaps it was merely the nature of their magic that hid their consciousnesses from his sight. Or, perhaps their souls were all linked, as Fred and George Weasley's had appeared, and so they shared a similar color between them all.

*A hive mind,* Harry thought, *perhaps just like ants after all.*

But surely not all goblins in the world would share the same underwiring consciousness. They appeared very unique on the surface, with their own names and characteristics. Perhaps the mind would only be activated in times of great danger or stress, or even celebration. The advantages in battle would be immense, and might be a factor in the goblin's ability to nearly overthrow wizard-kind several times in the past, despite their lesser magical ability.

He would never know without time to study and a subject on which to study. He possessed neither, and didn't imagine having so for some time.

"Lord Potter." A nasal voice, sarcastic respect in the tone. Harry turned to face the goblin that had approached, his squat form dipping into a cursory bow. "This way."

Harry followed, letting himself be led like a dog on a leash. He focused instead on the way the goblin's light shone forth in vibrant rays, the color much deeper than the orange of dragons. Harry tightened his focus, curious as he studied that deep color.

A strand of purple might have been woven through the orange, like a vein of granite in solid orange stone.

"Here." Harry blinked, realized they had come to a stop before a slim doorway. He stepped through, and noticed immediately that Vaughn was
not following him. He paused, heard his guards gruff demand to pass.

"Lord Potter only." The goblin demanded stubbornly, and Harry turned to make sure the wizard saw when he waved a hand.

"It's alright. I'll be out shortly."

"Fine." He folded blue-green arms, his light flickering with agitation. Harry turned, and saw magic flex even as the door swung shut behind him.

He faced a large purple desk, its surface sparkling with white magic. Behind it a thin goblin sat, brown-orange light bold and shining with furious light. Here was a goblin apart from the mundane ones he had encountered before when doing business with the bank.

"Lord Potter. I am Shortsnout of Gringotts. May your gold spill forth from its coffers with abundance."

Harry approached cautiously, his staff held loosely in one hand.

"Likewise." He spoke softly, uncertain of the traditional greeting. As far as he knew, relations between goblins and humans were uncomfortable at best, downright condescending at worst. That tended to happen when one sentient species treated another as lesser beings.

"Gringotts wishes to hire your services in the destruction of wizarding curses in four extinct family Vaults, whose descendents have all been eradicated. This was determined by goblin magic."

The last sentence held a pointed edge, Shortsnout obviously familiar with wizarding condescension. He was probably waiting for Harry to ask questions of just how such a thing could be determined.

Harry would like to know. But he wasn't feeling very comfortable in his current surroundings. The magic of the walls and floor and ceiling seemed to loom around him, a world that breathed hostility and waited with claws bared for one wrong step.

He could ask about goblin magic some other time.
"Why do you think I can do this better than the cursebreakers Gringotts keeps on staff?"

There was a click, like bone on bone, or the snap of teeth. Very sharp teeth.

"Gringotts hires the best when it is warranted. According to our sources, which we will not disclose, you are such. We will pay well."

Harry glanced around the room as his thoughts categorized the facts. There had been no hint of threat in the words, no hint of blackmail. Only plain statements of what they wanted and what they would do to get it. Still, goblins were known for their craftiness.

"What's in the Vaults?"

Another click. Orange light flashing with life and speculation.

"Treasures, of goblin and wizarding make. Gold and silver, jewels and books, furniture and weapons. Wealth of centuries past."

Harry heard only one word that meant something to him.

"I want the books. Or any bound parchments containing instructive writing, in payment."

A pause, another click. He saw now how the form jerked with the sound, teeth snapping together inside a mouth that held two rows of pointed teeth.

"Wizarding books mean little to us."

A sharp grin, and inside that mouth he saw the purple hues of gold and silver.

Perhaps the purple light he had glimpsed earlier were pieces of metal, woven into piercings or deeper, into bone.

Harry blinked, nodded.

"I can work on them now, then."
The goblin stood, waved one thin long-fingered arm towards the door behind him. A flicker of orange light and purple metal, and the door opened.

"A pleasure doing business, Lord Potter. May wealth spring from your fingertips in silver and gold."

Harry bowed, smiled.

"My wealth is not in gold."

A laugh came that sent shivers down his spine, the cackle far too reminiscent of the mundane horror movies Dudley had made him sit down and listen to while he described the various shenanigans taking place on screen.

"Wizarding folly." And so saying, the goblin sat in obvious dismissal.

They were led to the Vault carts, the rickety vessels that catapulted them down into the depths of Gringotts Bank with chilling speed.

Harry couldn't close his eyes when the colors whistled by at nauseating speed. He could only watch the many hues of purple swirling by, complemented by the occasional green of wood and orange of goblin. He even glimpsed a dragon, it's brighter orange color a living flame among the darker hues around it.

The process of removing the curses was simple. He merely removed the strands of light that did not belong, transfiguring them into blue crystals of water that he quickly froze into ice to prevent them from damaging any relics below. That ice was then, in turn, vanished with a quick gesture of his staff.

Vaughn went about his own task efficiently, locating and removing any tomes found within into a featherlight satchel one nameless goblin had helpfully provided.

Slagnok, who had led them down to the Vault, merely stood aside in a silent vigil, a torch in the empty stone halls, neither speaking nor rustling in
impatience.

The first vault held three books; the second a dozen rolled parchments. The third was nearly bare, a cavernous space that had been emptied by its owners hundreds of years before. The fourth held mountains of gold; so much that Vaughn cursed as he made his ponderous way over them to the back, where emerald wooden shelves charmed not to rot held rows of deep brown cylindrical capsules he hoped contained scrolls.

He saw the minute the red spiderweb of a curse sprang forth to grasp Vaughn's leg, the guard letting out a howl as he was flung flat onto his face in the periwinkle gold below him.

Harry jumped into motion, Slagnok a shadow behind him, as the wizard screeched, one bangladesh hand fumbling for his wand as the other clawed at his right leg.

The scarlet curse ate at his flesh like acid, already sinking through green linen and darker blue-green flesh to the shining blood below, growing stronger with each heartbeat it drank down its magical gullet.

Harry's magic began to rise, his forward motion abruptly halted by a strong orange hand, Slagnok's words harsh and guttural with urgency.

"No magic! It attacks any source of power. You must destroy the source."

Harry focused down to where the red light led, a spiderweb trap that held a single pinpoint of deep eggplant light. A raw uncut jewel, in a diamonds trademark pattern. Harry quickly spoke, mind focused on that light as Vaughn's screech echoed in his ears.

"Does it matter how it's destroyed?"

Slagnok's light jerked negatively, and Harry didn't wait for him to speak.

"Bombarda!"

His lash of emerald magic shattered the diamond back against the lighter purple coins around it, flinging metal in every direction with the force of the strike. Gold clinged against stone walls, and Harry refocused on Vaughn
immediately after confirming the gem was gone, saw that the scarlet had faded, leaving behind a pattern with several outer layers ripped asunder in haphazard swatches.

Vaughn panted harshly into the sudden silence, his words spoken through gritted teeth.

"It's… bad. How's your… healing work?"

Harry grimaced.

"I can remove and replace it…"

"No thanks." The ex-auror quickly choked. "I'll pass. Just… give me a second."

The guard raised his wand, and began to cast one spell after another in a pained voice. Harry watched, frowning. Perhaps he should spend some time memorizing the nuances of the man's pattern, and learn to repair such structural damage on a small scale without simple replication.

"I'm sorry." Harry mumbled, when Vaughn finished his intonations with a gasp. The leg didn't look completely healed; light pulsed angrily inside the flesh, the muscular pattern not quite sealed under skin.

Vaughn waved one hand with a sigh.

"Should have been looking for traps like that. Just the sort of thing nasty purebloods like to leave lying around for aurors to find by 'accident'."

Harry chuckled weakly. "Still…"

"Just help me up." Vaughn interrupted. "Quit rubbing my face in it."

"I'm not!" Harry defended, and held out a hand to help the taller man to his feet. "I'm trying to apologize!"

"For me doing the job you pay me to do?" Vaughn grumbled. "Save it."

"Fine." Harry scowled. The wizard was acting like a grouchy wounded
bear. Which, since he was in fact wounded, Harry would ignore.

The goblin approached, the featherlight bag in one orange hand.

"I gathered your payment. Twenty-seven scrolls sealed in bovine leather."

"Thank you." Harry accepted the bag, and without prompting, slung one arm under Vaughns to begin to help the man hobble down the mountain of galleons.

The guard didn't fuss at him, but he didn't thank him either.

"Everyone makes mistakes." Harry began, as they left the open Vault door behind for Slagnok to seal with goblin magic. "Just because..."

"Please." Vaughns voice was strained. "I'd rather not talk about it until I have a few potions in me."

Harry nodded, lifted Vaughn up and down into the cart with a rush of emerald magic.

The guard sat back with a grunt, ran a hand across his bald head.

"I sure hope you like what's in those scrolls."

Harry shrugged.

"I hope Hermione likes them."

A moment of silence, as Slagnok leapt into the cart and began to expertly move controls, preparing them for ascension.

"Hermione?"

Harry grinned.

"It's Valentine's day this weekend."

The wizard's jaw slackened, his pattern gaping so that Harry could see the blunt spark of blue-green teeth at the short distance they sat from one another.
"You did all this for a Valentine's day present?!

It was a harsh exclamation, made only more so by the sudden rapid accelerations of the cart.

Harry laughed into the rush of wind, yelling his reply over the rushing sound.

"Mostly!"

Harry sat down in his laboratory, two souls of mixed color sitting across from him, their heads swinging back and forth in quick observation.

"This space is..." "...wicked." Bronze finished coppers sentence. "We might copy this design."

"It's based on a mundane setup." Harry told the Weasley twins. "Clean and efficient."

"Not much stone." Fred agreed. "No wood furniture, either." George continued. "Mostly metal."

"I do not like colorful distractions." Harry said, knowing they wouldn't understand exactly what he meant. There was a reason he surrounded his working space with only two or three base materials. It helped to highlight the objects within, instead of hiding green paper against wooden desks. So he now kept his floors and walls uniformly green, plant based material, and his surfaces the orchid purple of sterile platinum. The cost would have been ridiculous, if he hadn't transfigured the metal himself. He simply bought what he wanted, and leaving the base pattern of the object the same, transfigured the color inside to the material he wished it to incorporate.

Just like diamond roses and glass butterflies, Harry thought with a smile. Both of which he had pretended were Hermione's true present, and which she had accepted readily enough.

When he gave her the bag of books, however, her appreciation had known no bounds. If he remembered correctly, both roses and butterflies were
still sitting on a spare corner of her desk, unappreciated, while the main bulk of old parchments spread across the large library tabletop like a collage of beloved pictures she mused over for hours on end.

"Here are our first prototypes." Fred lifted a satchel, clicked it open to reveal a deep space that sparkled with three dimensional magic. He lifted out several objects that gleamed with orange-brown magic, began laying them out one by one across a purple table. "It took some time to find a way to fuel the spells held within. We had to use our own reserves, which with multiple experiments…"

"And multiple failures." George put in.

"...meant it took longer than we expected. But we have bracelet, necklace, and earring combos. All can hold a shield charm activated by keyword for roughly thirty minutes a piece. Constant bombardment however will probably shorten that estimate by a good deal." Fred jabbed at the first three objects.

"Magic is held in the jewels. They hold power much better than metal."

"Or wood, which works as a funnel."

Harry glanced between the two souls, nodded.

Fred then pointed to the next object, voice rising with excitement.

"But once we figured out how to hold magic and give the release of that magic a specific purpose..." "it can shield or attack, depending" George spoke into the pause, his brothers words halting to allow the joiner the way one might pause to naturally take a breath. "We figured, why stop there? If we are talking adults in danger for their lives, why not repurpose familiar weapons?"

Harry looked at the sharp object, brow furrowed.

"A sword?"

George nodded eagerly. "It can reflect most magic with the blade, except perhaps the most dark forms, and it also contains an activated shield in the
"Then there is this!" Fred picked up an object that Harry found chillingly familiar, and made him flinch when the wizard waved it about with the casualness of a child who doesn't quite understand what they held. "Muggles don't use swords much, right? So we asked Dad about common muggle weapons, got our hands on some samples. Had to remove some of the internal mechanisms, add garnets, but this bad boy can shoot spells! And at five times the speed of the average wanded counterpart! Won't match a master duelist, but still... for muggles it should be more intuitive, right? A familiar weapon?"

Harry looked from the gun to the wizard.

"How did you purchase a gun in Britain?"

"Magic." One twin spoke with a flip of one hand. "What do you think?"

Harry reached for a chair, sat.

Magic. Of course. Why waste time, effort and power on shielding spells when one could attack and destroy an enemy faster than with most spoken incantations? It was a natural evolution of his idea.

But while the Ministry might have punished them with a fine for putting shielding spells in the hands of muggles, putting offensive spell power there would require a great deal more political wrangling to get out of a jail sentence.

"It's great." Harry murmured. "But not marketable to the public sector."

"That's what the jewelry set is for." George plopped the gun back onto the tabletop with a metallic clang. "Even adult witches and wizards might go for easy, quick access to spells. It'll have a considerable markup in price, be made by commission only."

"But the weapons, that's for you, O' generous investor." Fred made a sweeping gesture. "Along with our idea for magical grenades, a widespread petrificus totalus mix. Still working on that prototype."
Harry leaned back in the chair, shook his head with a reluctant smile. "It's brilliant. I hadn't thought into offensive weaponry. Good job."

The twins slapped hands in a victory gesture reminiscent of Dudley and his friends.

"Wicked!"

"How many you want?"

Harry wasn't sure who spoke first, wasn't sure it mattered. He looked over the objects, made a mental tally.

"Two of each jewelry set for women. Three of the bracelets in a masculine style if you can manage it. Perhaps a watch feature." Fred pulled out green parchment, began scribbling with a lead pencil. "Add smaller stones into the watchface if necessary to hold more power."

Harry paused, did another mental tally.

"Add five more sets of the jewelry, two female, three masculine." It wouldn't hurt his wizarding guards to have the option for the prototype defensive charms. "And five swords. Give all the best defensive charms you know of, take as long as you need. I will pay for excess materials and time. Also, make all the items individualized."

He gave the gun one more glance, considered it, sighed. "When you are done, work more on the weapons angle. It has potential."

Deadly potential. The dark sides of magic and mundane technology. But no advances in technology had purely good applications.

To learn to heal was also to learn to harm. To learn to protect, was to learn to attack.

"Will do!" Fred began to gather the samples with jaunty movements. "Now, if you have a moment, there's a few more things we'd like to discuss…"

Harry sat forward, fixed his sight on the bronze and copper souls in front of them, their power shining as brilliantly as their intelligence.
"I have time." Harry said, and proceeded to sit while the Weasley twins discussed the potential for magical 'manufactories', while having barely an inkling that mundane technology was already capable of such feats with non magical material.

And while he did so, he thought about mass production of potions and medicine and weapons, and the entire cauldron of possibilities that seemed to be blooming in front of him like a flower in the spring.

Hermione frowned down at the parchments, carefully using her wand to delicately flip and rotate one page whose edges were beginning to crumble, its preservation charms long since faded into nothingness.

That wasn't true of all, or even most, of the books and scrolls Harry had brought her. Magic seemed to last a great deal of time, and preservation charms by nature were long-lasting. She had been beyond thrilled at the challenge of deciphering old english and latin while cataloguing the nature of each piece. There were books on potions, herbology, transfiguration and charms work. One was a family grimoire, containing spells she had never heard of before covering all imaginable topics. Another was a set of three school books for children, and had fascinating insights in wandless and accidental magic in the very young.

Wizards did not always wait until age eleven to train their young, nor had they always been so reliant on wand work.

But the scrolls had been a different story. They were all in latin, and much of it not spelled in the manner she was used to reading. Translation charms could only go so far, and so she had purchased more books on the different dialects of the old language, able to understand the gist of what she read if not the nuances.

They were old; from roman times, at least. They referenced events and people she had never heard of and styles of magic she could only guess at. They assumed she would know what it was she held, a history of a family that had died away hundreds of years before. And within that history was contained tales of magical feats on a scale unheard of in more modern times.
Manipulation of raw elements, mostly. Duels where witch and wizard hurled fire and water, raised spikes of stone and opened cracks in the earth. Where wizards flew on the winds in swirls of leaves, wrapped enemies in briars and vines, made homes of living trees and walked the branches like Tolkien elves. Magic was a brutal, blunt force that could be summoned to one's aid through battle chants and piercing songs, through dances or hand-crafted weapons carved with runes.

But most intriguing of all was one witch, Madam Aelia, who called the dead by name to serve at her side, as servants and warriors and even *amasiunculus*.

*Lover, paramour*. Hermione had checked the obscure latin twice to be sure she read correctly, the thought turning her stomach sour.

But the dead described in the yellow pages were not the rotting husks of zombies, nor the skeletal remains of inferi. If anything, they sounded most like vampires; normal in appearance, but with white complexions and dark black eyes. It was said they served Aelia with no will of their own, except they also resented her for their living state.

*The dead come forth from the door at their naming, and the pain takes them in but a moment.*

*The dead follow their mistress and hate her while they love her, their hands soft as a newborn babes, their nails sharp as knives.*

*The dead possess great beauty and eyes that see evil in every sight.*

*The dead feel only the pain of their life, not of broken flesh nor bone nor blood spilled.*

*The dead do not sleep, and as one will fall upon the living with ravenous fury upon her command.*

*The dead watch with unblinking eyes made of jet, and fear of them spreads through the earth.*

*At the sight of Aelia's hordes, all will despair that the dying no longer go*
It went on and on, inches of text that she painstakingly translated, until it ended as abruptly as it began. Aelia had been killed by a jealous cousin, her army of living dead burned with fire. It was written that most stood there, hands outstretched, while the flames took them. At peace.

"Door." Hermione muttered, eyes going back to the beginning of the segment. "The dead come forth from the door. Porta. Door, gateway, entrance...?" She sighed, pushed back from the table to rub tired eyes. Necromancy was Harry’s forte; she should probably leave this in his more than capable hands, and return to her own studies.

But the sight of his right hand haunted her at the oddest times. When eating breakfast, the black markings wrapped about a spoon or fork. When they lay in bed at night, when she felt the smooth edge of the Stone against her skin, its surface a cool contrast to Harry’s warm palm.

She had waited to tell him of this discovery simply because anything to deal with resurrection made her uneasy. She did not like that he seemed to accept the Hallows like long-lost relatives, nor that he treated inanimate objects like semi-sentient pets. They were dangerous.

But so was Harry. Hermione sighed again, standing to stretch, eyes flicking to check the time on the large wooden clock that graced one shelf of the Black library.

Their library, now. Would that make it Potter-Granger, or Granger-Potter? Or Black-Granger-Potter? Hermione smiled at her own foolishness, turned to exit the room.

She would give this new information to Harry and let him make of it what he would. She would just keep a curious eye on just what he might make of it.

Her boyfriend stood in the center of his laboratory, three portraits laid out in front of him, the subjects Black ancestors from ages past. Each of the wizards had their own stern eyes fixed on Harry with severe frowns and
arrogant postures.

"You don't have a real soul." Harry mused aloud as Hermione paused to lean against the doorway's solid frame. "Only the imprint of one. A fascinating way of printing a soul pattern onto canvas. I theorize you were painted first, perhaps with some blood of the one portrayed mixed in with the colors. How would that affect color tone?"

Harry paced a few steps, hands held loosely together, eyes closed as he spoke. Across from him, an enchanted blunt-nosed pen stabbed at paper with quick motions, dotted braille forming under its tip with swift efficiency.

"But the imprint would be enough for basic emotions and mannerisms. Maybe even memories, though... perhaps some memories could be stored inside dried liquid as it is in liquid form inside a pensieve? Need to test that theory. Some Master Portrait painters are better at this than others, which suggests the use of different paint compounds and/or spells, perhaps secrets that are passed from Master to Apprentice. Which would explain why I've gotten nowhere simply reading books. From my brief visit to Master Holden in Diagon Alley, I theorize that both paints and canvas contain spells, and that the brush might even contain a magical core, similar to a wand's make. Therefore, magical portraits can only be created by magical species, as multiple elements are in play."

Harry wound to a stop, nodded absently to the ceiling, and the pen beside him fell to the tabletop. Hermione squinted at the paper, saw it rested on a slab of sparkling clear stone on top of the metallic white surface of the table.

"Is that... diamond?" Hermione asked curiously, and Harry turned, a pleased smile widening at the sight of her.

"It makes a great surface to write on." He came forward to pull her into a hug, acting for all the world as if it had been more than a few hours since he had last seen her. She didn't complain, tilting her head up for a brief kiss.

"Sounds like you're about done with the portraits."
"I hope so." A grouchy voice grumbled from one of the aforementioned portraits, a black haired wizard with a sharply hooked nose.

Harry shrugged. "I've gotten as far as I probably will without apprenticing myself to a Master. I see little point in further study, though. I've learned enough that I can make an educated guess on how my father's map of Hogwarts was created."

"Really?" Hermione pulled away and found a seat on one cold metal chair, a quick warming charm taking the edge of the chill off.

Harry nodded, walked over to another table where the large Marauders Map had been unfolded.

"Still just a guess, of course. But my father and his friends were truly brilliant to create this. I wish I could have known them when they were alive."

Hermione bit her lip. She had seen the memory of Harry's parents, had tried not to cry at the way his mother had held her grown son.

Had tried not to flinch when Harry's hand had touched his mother in a burst of green power, the Stone a black nexus at the center of the storm, sinking into his palm like a tick burrowing under skin to feast.

"I'm not sure what application it might have with my future projects, but the knowledge might come in handy later." Harry continued, unaware that her thoughts had taken a darker turn. "I've debated having a portrait of my own made, to see if the horcrux appears. But I've found that even knowing the portraits are not stealing a portion of one's soul does not make me any easier either with the process. It feels like an invasion of privacy, for another person, a stranger, to be so connected to my soul that they are able to paint its likeness onto canvas."

Hermione nodded, tapped one finger onto shining metal. Harry's laboratory was a study in contrasts, the deep cherry wood that graced the walls and floor, the shining white tables and chairs, the towering metal bookcases with their engravings of magical creatures.

One such bookshelf had once been a wooden masterpiece. Harry had
simply loved its heavy efficiency, and she had walked in one day to find its beautiful warm oak converted to stark white metal.

She knew Harry had been merely practical when he picked platinum as his metal of choice. He had described it to her in detail, how he had discounted silver and gold for being too malleable in a raw state, and that the heavier platinums color was a more pure purple. He had originally decided on diamond, before figuring that having furniture made of diamond might be too distracting for any future visitors.

Especially their mundane families. Her own mother just thought Harry had an odd fondness for stainless steel.

"I've found something interesting in what you gave me. Well, it's all interesting." Hermione clarified.

Harry finally opened his eyes, their piercing green color focused on where she sat. Hermione cleared her throat, felt the Look he gave her down to her bones, his energy a warm blanket that flooded her body with power.

"It talks about some sort of door, where one member of this Roman wizarding family was able to summon the dead by using their given names."

Harry was already in motion, rising to begin his routine pacing motions, eyes turning to narrow at the floor. It was a posture she knew well, one that meant he was taking in every word she said in such a way he would be able to recall them in detail hours, even days later.

"Actually, it mostly just talks about the dead. They sound more like vampires than zombies, but certain characteristics remind me of the shades we summoned with the stone. Given names being used, for one, but also that they looked mostly normal, and felt pain at being in the living world. When Aelia was murdered, they allowed themselves to be destroyed without a fight."

"Amazing correlations." Harry murmured. "Can you read it to me?"

"Yes." Hermione stood, reached out to take the hand he extended towards her. He smiled at her like she was the most beautiful thing in the world, an
expression she never grew tired of inspiring.

"The segment only lasts about fourteen inches of scroll. It's in the library."

But he was already pulling her along, steps quick with eagerness. Hermione cast one look back at the portraits to find them all glaring at her with annoyed faces. She shrugged apologetically, and let herself be led out.

Harry listened to her read in halting latin, pausing to suggest multiple translation options based on the context, her voice rising and falling with excitement at each possibility.

*Mortui Viventes.* The dead that live, the living dead.

The Living Dead was an entire category of certain magical species, both sentient and non-sentient. It consisted of creatures who were not alive, biologically speaking, and yet still walked around like living people. From his own cursory study into the topic, he knew some zoologists debated whether certain species should be included.

Ghosts, for one, were heavily debated, alongside poltergeists. Some said inferi should not be included, others argued vampires hardly qualified under modern definitions of death.

No one debated zombies their right to be there, though. The rotting, putrid corpses were the epitome of everyone's idea of walking death.

Of course, in wizarding lore, truly resurrecting the dead was impossible. It was just accepted as one of the truly impossible things; just like transfiguring sustainable food.

Ghosts could not touch the living, could not eat or breathe. Zombies had no true intelligence, their bodies decomposing at rapid rates. Inferius were simply corpse puppets, charmed with dark magic to some semblance of life. Vampires had no heartbeats, were said to have no soul.

But the living dead that Aelia had risen fit none of the descriptions exactly, and the door mentioned made him think of the Veil and its potential secrets
he was itching to explore.

"She would have lived long before the Peverell brothers." Hermione mused. "And could in fact be part of their inspiration. Surely the fact that using the Stone requires using a true name is no accident. And the reference to a door could simply be a reference to death, or just the summoning process. It would make sense if she was truly summoning the dead shades that they feel pain at being forced to remain in the living world. That's consistent with our own studies."

Harry nodded. "Or, potentially the Veil was the door spoken of. The romans governed this part of Britain at one point in time. Aelia could have found or created the Veil as her door, and hidden the secret of how to use it."

"Or some other wizards hid it for her, after her death, wanting to prevent another uprising of that sort. I doubt a horde of the size described would be able to be hidden from mundane citizens. This was before the Statute, as well, so no reason to. Something like this should have made our history books in one form or another."

Harry frowned in thought. "Unless the Ministry purged the records at one point in time. They've done so with other events, and with any magical knowledge deemed too dangerous. People would not rest easy knowing they might be raised from the dead and be forced to serve someone. I need to see the Veil."

Hermione's blue-violet light flickered.

"Have you talked to the Minister since the last Wizengamot meeting?"

Harry grimaced. "I planned to talk to him after the next, in a couple weeks. See if he's cooled off any."

"We can afford to wait." her voice was cajoling. "You're busy, and so am I. The Veil's been around for centuries, it's not going anywhere."

Harry smiled at her. "I know. I just hate waiting."

She rose, embraced him with tight arms.
"Me too. But it won't kill us."

He laughed into her hair, enjoying her scent and the feel of her, solid, and so very alive.

"I suppose it won't."

__________________________________________________________

"Can I borrow a pen?"

"Sorry, I don't have another..."

Harry sat in the tiered classroom, one row above the two whispering girls in front of him, attention split between the blue professor speaking, the rows of braille under his fingertips that told of the explosion of computer technology and its future potential, and the bored students around him that passed notes, fiddled with paper and pen, or as the case of one green soul, slept soundly with head on folded hands.

"Do you have a pen? Mine's run out of ink..." The whispering girl, her light the dimmer color of a non-magical person, had turned to ask the boy on her other side. The boy shook his head.

"Now, in the next example, Kamh explains his expanded theory with examples of..."

'recently, with the advent of the platform Windows 98 this year, Microsoft is challenging the established thought of what consumers desire or need for personal use...'

He needed to complete his research into manipulating magical energy. If he could use a faraday cage to shield a room from outside magical influence, couldn't the same also be utilized to shield a television or computer from magic's electromagnetic effect? If he just...

"Can I please borrow a pen?"

Harry frowned at the paper in front of him, annoyance tinging his thoughts. Wouldn't someone just give that girl a pen and put her out of her misery?
His fingers moved again, the paragraph cataloguing some of the key difference in software protocol between Apple, Inc and Microsoft, Inc.

He needed to get his fingers on a computer of his own. If he could just figure out the correlation between electricity and electromagnetic pulses caused by the application of magical force in the immediate vicinity…

"Can I just borrow yours for a second then? I… please…"

"…meanwhile, Kamh failed to accurately describe the difference between…"

Harry lifted his hands from the paper, one finger coming up to rub the dull headache beginning to throb in his temples. He needed to drop this class. It was a complete waste of his time, and was filled with students who apparently also considered it a boring waste of their time.

Except for the one girl who needed a pen for some direly important reason, who was currently leaning forward to plead with the girl next to her.

Harry turned to the boy beside him, Adam something-or-another, who was leaning back in his chair, head tilted up towards the ceiling, fingers tapping against skin with flickers of aggravated light.

"I need your pen."

His quiet voice made Adam start, head jerking around with obvious surprise. After a moments pause, the boy hesitantly held out a skinny shadow, the pen barely discernible to his sight.

Harry accepted the plastic, and with a second to aim, tossed the thing onto the girl's desk. She jumped in her seat with a startled exclamation that made the students around her jump in turn.

It brought a little life into a room that seemed on the verge of stifling boredom.

The professor never noticed, his droning monotone not affected in the least. Harry stood, gathering his papers into his bag with quiet movements,
before turning to make his way out of the class, staff held loosely in front of him as he counted the steps to the carpeted stairway that led up and out.

He couldn't take another hour.

He walked home, the city streets a chaotic mix of sounds and scents.

He was alone, a rarity. Vaughn would no doubt be seriously pissed to discover him gone from their designated meeting place at the end of a school day.

But Harry was in a odd mood, and technically he was not the solitary being on the muggle streets. There were automobiles, bicycles, at least twenty different colored souls, all non-magical and passing him by with different levels of inattention.

The street was a contrast of shadow and light. Concrete made for a dark path, his staff a bright glowing green light that tapped the steps for hidden obstacles. Purple recycling bins sat squat down alleyways, some half hidden beside the black of their plastic counterparts. Green trees sprouted in manicured rows at even paces down the sidewalk, the bows of their branches dotted with lighter verdant leaves and flowers, their light a slow steady pulse of life.

Blue birds roosted in some of those green branches, while more flew through a black sky, no magical wards in sight. A brown cat crossed his path, making its weaving way through humanity to disappear into a crevice.

He passed green and purple doors that led into deeper purple buildings. Harry observed them all, saw a red light exit one to grasp the hand of another red light, their hues similar and yet unique, two kindred souls.

An alley to his left, and Harry stopped, turning to look into shadow.

Shadow that moved and set itself apart, and he saw it was not a shadow at all, but living blackness lined with the purple and blue light that ran through its veins.
"A powerful compulsion charm." Harry murmured, stepping closer as understanding dawned of his own irregular actions, his curiosity a cat that would no doubt get him seriously injured someday. "Did it take me in the classroom, or only once I hit the street?"

A hiss, air pushed through narrow lips.

Or sharp teeth.

"We can only encourage the natural desires of our prey."

Harry looked, saw an emerald green man of average height, hairless, face all sharp angles and deep grooves, long-nailed hands folded together in front of him.

The vampire shifted, voice low in warning.

"Stop."

Harry let the Look fade, the world dark again, but for the small sparks of light that hid in tiny places, the rats hiding in their holes.

They could sense a predator was at hand.

"Am I your prey, then?" Harry asked slowly, felt the Cloak at his back press into him, it's silk against his neck like a warm, comforting hand.

"Of a sort." The vampire moved closer, until Harry could make out the details of his veins, the purple and blue life streaming from his heart into every part of his body, slowly, dimly.

Like a light slowing dying away, the way he imagined the sun might set.

"We want you, Lord Potter. We want your influence, your money, your mind. Your power."

A half-smile, as Harry considered the different ways one might go about taking such things.
"Done waiting, then." A statement, and Harry tilted his chin back, closed useless eyes, concentrated on the magic inside himself, a pooling nexus of emerald green.

Just in case he misunderstood the potential threat.

"Some of us. Those who suffer the most. We would have equality and freedom."

"The werewolves haven't even gotten theirs yet. A few months ago I worried they would be exterminated. You sure you want my help?"

A shrug of violet-rimmed shadows.

"Who else will help us? We feast on life. To many we are death. We can choose, while the wolves can not."

"Choose to starve?" Harry countered. "That's not a choice. It's suicide."

"It's still a choice." Shadows in the dark, more of them, at least a dozen. They crept from corners he hadn't noticed, multicolored hues threaded through them like gilt, a soft shine in a shape that sucked the life from the color it carried. "One we've been asked to make before. But no more. We will walk free, drink freely. We will be alive again, able to be full and sated."

An entire coven of the creatures, pressing against him with power he felt now like a deep, cordant cloud, suffocating and electric. Magic he couldn't see but felt.

On his palm, the Stone began to burn. At his neck, the Cloak rustled, black stars and brighter shadows.

"We're a race dead and dying, Lord Potter. Too weak now to fight for ourselves. But you will help us. You will have no choice."

So close now he felt when the hot skin suddenly pressed against his cheek in a blink of time, saw the veins under that skin in bright detail, some other person's bright blood running through carbon black flesh.
Sharp nails that pierced his skin lightly, emerald blood spilling out to highlight fine-boned fingers.

Hisses all around him, choked, gasping for control.

Harry smelled his own blood, sickly sweet iron and copper, the pain sharp and raw. He didn't move an inch, staring into the abyss before him, his mind for once sluggish and quiet, no solution at hand, no will to fight.

Fingers dripping with green lifted to a dark gullet, a darting shadowy tongue that slipped out and sipped at his own life and power.

Emerald green light, and in that light the darker suns and brighter midnight, the humanity no longer quite fully formed.

His hand was on fire. He was suffocating, no air in his lungs, as he watched the shadow before him taste.

And then fall, choking, and to Harry it seemed his own light was a poison, sinking into shadowed flesh and molding it anew, making it into a new thing.

A new, ugly, monstrous thing, a pattern incomplete and tearing. Living black surrounded them, vampires holding themselves apart to watch the tableau. None moved to help or hinder, when Harry reached out his right hand to the fallen vampire and pulled out his green life.

Then in a growing fit of anger he took the blue, and then the purple, the colored threads coming unraveled into the air in a liquid stream, fading at the airs touch in slowing pulses, pooling onto the ground and mingling together.

How odd, to see his own soul mixing with two strangers, blood a common medium between them all.

"My lord." The fallen vampire hissed, no strength in the words. "Help us. Please."

"Why?" Harry demanded, mind clearing now, though magic boiled from every fingertip, his head feeling as swollen as a helium balloon, his feet
light as feathers.

Anger a furious emotion in his heart.

"Because we deserve better than this living death."

Movement, black on black, hands gathering the still form and lifting it, voices low murmurs in a language he couldn't understand.

Romanian, perhaps.

Then they were gone, leaving Harry alone in the dark alley, blood running down his cheek, magic a maelstrom about him.

He couldn't apparate to his chosen destination, due to the wards in place. He couldn't walk from the Leaky Cauldron without first disguising himself.

He didn't feel like waiting. He wanted answers, and he wanted a direct route to them.

Which is what led to Harry standing at the edge of the alley in the cold air, holding his staff aloft and thinking of quick travel.

It was mid evening at his guess, the Knight Bus only half-full with a rainbow of passengers when it arrived in a burst of white magic.

A magical conundrum, the Knight Bus. One he had thought on occasionally, and had no spare thoughts for now, with fury and confusion at war inside him.

The doors opened with a loud swoosh, warm air expelling with the motion to touch his face.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus, how… may… we…"

The words faded away, the conductor taking in the sight of him and the state he was no doubt in.

His face was cold in the air of February, the blood on his cheek drying to a
flaking tightness. Hours had no doubt passed, while he stood among vampires.

He was probably a fool, but he needed to know.

"Take me to The Crup, Knockturn Alley."

"We don't service..." The wizard's words fumbled to a stop as Harry stepped on and took a careful seat, the silence of the other passengers like a physical weight at his back.

There were no chairs, only beds. Perhaps it was later than he realized.

He held on through the jolting ride, magic a flexing force that expanded and shank around them at will, unable to close his eyes to the revolting sight of such chaos.

He needed to speak to Hermione and Vaughn. The vampires were dangerous, as proven by their last actions. They might decide to use such leverage as his family would present to force his hand.

Then again, their actions were confusing. There was no reason to attack him, nor to force a meeting. How was it possible for them to speed time forward by hours so much without him noticing, and what was even the purpose of doing so? It made no reasonable sense.

The bus lurched to a stop.

"The Crup."

Harry stood and paid before he descended the steps, barely glancing at the familiar purple building in front of him before he entered, the smell of dry wood and kindling heavy in the air.

He sensed a presence in the way the air moved, in the creak of a floorboard.

The warmth, like bright sun on a summer day.

"Why did vampires try to drink my blood?"
A breath, and how odd that he could hear the vampire breathing now, as if it had only just remembered it needed breath to speak, air to expel in order to make sounds and form words.

"To make you family."

Harry frowned, his mind swirling with what he knew of vampires, what little he understood.

"Can vampires be created?"

"We are born, but it's a birth without life. You will need to learn these things if you are to help us."

Finally, something close to answers.

"Then how would drinking my blood change anything?"

"Blood changes everything." A hiss that could be sigh, that could be annoyance. "Always. It's almost the strongest element used in rituals and magic, second only to the soul."

Harry gritted his teeth. "Then why."

"It's a bond, a sacred one to us. Those we drink become a part of us, and if we choose, we too can be part of them. Both may gain, if both are willing."

Harry sighed, his shoulders beginning to droop.

"You're telling me it wasn't an attack."

"No, it was. Of a sort."

The same words the other vampire had said, regarding Harry's state as prey. He ran a hand through his hair, felt the Stone still hot, its pattern flexing restlessly.

"Stop speaking in riddles. Just tell me plainly, before I decide I'm done with the lot of you."
A laugh, one that sent shivers down his spine.

"Some would try to force you to help us, would not take the risk of you deciding just such a thing. They would try to make our fight yours, by tying our fate to you. We are surprised they failed, but not unhappy. We are willing to wait months, years, decades to be saved if such is necessary. We have time."

"Time." Harry repeated, and thought of Aelia and her hordes, of Death and the Hallows and what link might be between them. "They didn't think so. They seemed desperate."

"It is not pleasant to spend life dying."

"I don't understand." Harry said forcefully. "Half of what you say makes no sense."

Mr. Brandon moved closer, voice low.

"I will tell you the story, if you wish. But not now. Return when your skin is not broken and you do not smell like a summer storm."

Harry took a deep breath, made himself relax and nod.

"I'll be back tomorrow."

*With Hermione and Vaughn. Probably Fallon as well. Hell, might as well bring along Kreacher and Kraken for good measure.*

"We will be here."

Harry turned and headed toward the exit and the cold street beyond, which was when he remembered he had a much better way to travel than the jolting Knight Bus.

"Kraken!"

~*~Next Chapter: A Red Worm in a Dove Grey Heart~*~
~Review Please!~