



# Journeyman Potter

## Prologue

I should have known.

Really, I should have. I mean, every single time in my entire eighteen years of life that I've ever felt totally at peace, or perfectly safe, or, let's face it, even vaguely happy, the universe always decides to step in and kick me hard in the bludgers.

I *really* should have expected it.

Just look at the way the Ministry reacts to change. It either ignores it, or overreacts.

Ron's dad didn't last long as Minister, even though old What's-His-Name came to grief on Arthur's watch. But nooooo! Because the man has an unhealthy obsession with muggle artefacts, half the laws proposed in the second half of his term infuriated the pure-bloods out there.

The wizarding world as a whole had no sense of irony after keeping a failure in power for years because he doesn't offend the right people, opposed to removing the successful guy just because his most burning ambition is to discover how a muggle device stays in the air.

No, I have no excuse for not expecting it.

Serves me right for even daring to think *about hoping* that my rather unusual living arrangements would go unnoticed.

I managed to duck under a rather obscure, but vividly painful hex and half-rolled to my right, before grunting with effort at reversing my momentum and rolling the other way.

An Eveberus curse shattered the floorboards where I would have been had I completed my roll. Luckily, Dobby was lying a little further behind me, or he would have been splattered.

The poor elf had immediately tried to protect me the moment I had been attacked, only to discover that Lucius 'Unlucky' Malfoy was certainly not the most powerful wizard around.

Lucius, hah! After the battle of Hogsmeade, I put the memory of our meeting in my pensieve. We had exchanged a handful of curses before the tide of people had pushed us together. I was unable to avoid a hex aimed at my legs and went down, with Lucius jumping on top trying to strangle me. I managed to get an arm free and jabbed my thumb into his eye, clasped the side of his head with my fingers as though I was holding a bowling ball, and with a little *push* of my magic, I smashed his head into the ground beside me.

Over the next few weeks, I must have caught Dobby looking at that particular memory at least a dozen times.

"Stop!" I shouted desperately, jumping over a hex that would have shattered my hip, but only managed to graze my right knee. Even so, it felt as though it set the tendons in the joint on fire.

Being caught without your wand when someone is trying to severely hurt you is a real fucking inconvenience. But of course, since it was happening to *me*, it had to be worse.

Being caught without your wand when someone is trying to severely hurt you *and* you are stark naked with no lethal toys at hand is so far beyond inconvenience that I'm willing to believe that Fate hasn't finished with me just yet. I'm quite sure my biography could be used as a blueprint detailing exactly what not to do to live a long and happy life.

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I leaned backwards and twisted in a moderately successful effort to dodge a scintillating blue curse I'd never heard of flash past my ears, thinking that anti-apparition wards are truly a mixed blessing. All that practise dodging bludgers hit at my by the twins was coming in rather handy though.

I waved my arms in a wide circle in an ungainly effort to regain my balance, causing my bits to jiggle around everywhere making an enticing target. Too enticing apparently. I tried jumping to my left to avoid a groin-high cutting curse that would have left me unable to grow a beard, but without my right leg functioning at top efficiency, all I managed was to trip over the remains of an armchair and have my left buttock slashed open. The sharp stinging at the edges of the wound easily overwhelmed the aching numbness from the rest of my hindquarters.

As my assailant took a step forward to get a better angle of attack, I took my chance, despite my swimming vision. "Aha! *Stupefy*!" I shouted.

I wasn't trying to cast a spell remotely, I had no idea where my wand was, given the current mess of the room, but he didn't know that. The robed figure ducked, spun and raised a shield charm in the blink of an eye with such elan it nearly made me envious.

Without a wand, in pain and panicking as I was, my magic was desperate to be released. I kicked out with my left leg at the pile of kindling, the remains of which had been a rather comfortable chair less than a minute ago. I *pushed* out a little with the kick, sending the pile of timber, leather and padding skidding along the floor at around half the speed of sound. The heavy pile thundered through the shield and shattered the bones in both of my assailant's legs below the knee.

He went down with a shout, landing hard. I actually felt the vibrations through the floorboards. His wand bounced out of his hand.

I dived for it in a flash, ignoring both my protesting knee and the remains of my buttocks, and scooped it up cleanly. But since I knew who I was

facing, I sure as hell didn't spend time gloating about it. I cast "*Protego* !" as quickly as I could.

A curse from the fellow's second wand hit my shield, nearly bringing it down.

Foregoing the usual techniques a wizard would employ in this situation, I leapt at my assailant, causing both our shields to collapse as they struck each other, and grabbed the wrist of his wand hand with my left hand. He howled in pain as his broken legs were twisted in a new direction.

As my wand hand wrist was in turn grabbed in a pain-fuelled vice-like grip, an uncomfortable feeling of déjà vu swept over me. All it needed now to make this worse was...

"What the hell is going on?" screeched a familiar voice in the doorway, causing my opponent and I to freeze.

Yep. That's it. That's what could make it worse.

## Journeyman Potter

### Here we go again.

Blaise had a furious expression on her face as she stomped over to me, well, us. It did not escape me that I was in a very similar situation now as to when she arrived at Zabini Manor and began hexing me. With a flick of her wand, I was casually lifted off and roughly tossed across the room and into one of the few surviving pieces of furniture. Fortunately, it was an armchair. Unfortunately, it was one of Hermione's favourites, and bloodstains made her queasy. The crimson flow from my backside was making the seat slippery, though putting pressure on my wound stopped the flow somewhat.

She focused on my assailant. "Well? What are you doing here, Great-grandfather? In our house?" she snapped.

Through teeth clenched in pain, Zab jabbed his finger towards me with indignation and hissed, "He's cheating on you! I caught him!" He spun to face me, his face mottled with rage.

Blaise blinked, looking up at the bed, noting that there was a vaguely human-shaped lump under the sheets. A lump with uncontrollable bushy brown hair at the far end. A smirk crossed her angular features. "You can come out now, Hermione. The *baaaaaaaad* man has gone away," she said in a sing-song, insulting tone.

I coughed, ignoring Zab. "She's stunned."

Blaise's eyes flickered with something resembling irritation. "Bugger. It would have been nice to be able to tease a Gryff for hiding during a fight." She turned back to Zab, making no effort to wake Hermione. "So let me guess, you barged in here, found my boyfriend in bed with another girl, and started throwing spells?"

Zab glowered at her. "Damnit, yes! I will not have a Zabini humiliated! Especially not by the media circus surrounding the bloody Boy-Who-Lived! I will not allow it!"

I slowly relaxed into the chair, ignoring the slippery sensation under my stinging bum, taking care to take pressure off my knee. Slowly my heart rate dropped as the chance of death, or at least humiliating injury, was reduced. My frayed nerves began reforming. Blaise reached out to help Zab to his feet, but gave a gasp of shock when the extent of his injuries became obvious.

Muttering something about having to find some way to negate testosterone, she set about healing her Great-grandfather's legs. As a first year medical student, she was studying and attending classes ten hours a day. Judging from the level of stress she tended to exhibit after coming home at the end of the day, I'd say things were progressing as expected.

Though judging from Zab's pain-filled grunts and hisses, either she hadn't paid attention in the bedside manner class (possibly), it wasn't required for Slytherins (highly unlikely), or she was taking out her stress on someone who couldn't fight back (far more likely). I gingerly rose to my feet, leaning on my left leg, and summoned my own wands.

The pair of wands erupted from piles of kindling which had once been a bedside table and a vanity unit. I ignored Zab's pointed glares with ease, since every time he tried to stare at me, Blaise did something at the other end that made him suck in air through his teeth and turn red. This rather ruined the effect he was after.

I'll have to work out a way to thank her later.

I gently revived Hermione, shushing her as she panicked in the first half second of her sudden burst of consciousness. It took her a few seconds to come to terms with the fact that our lovemaking session had been rudely interrupted, and in the interim the furniture in the room had been reduced to firewood. I imagine that it would be more than a little surreal.

Hermione clutched a sheet to her bare chest, sitting up and looking down at Zab and Blaise. "Who are you?" she demanded.

Zab snarled back at her. "I should ask you the same question, whore!"

Hermione flushed instantly, her fingers twitching as they searched the bed for her wand. Blaise's expression darkened as she stared into the back of Zab's head.

Zab yelped as Blaise ceased being as gentle with her ministrations. "Shut up, you. You have no idea what is going on here," she told him.

Zab turned and gave her an incredulous look. "What in Merlin's name is going on? You're a Zabini! He's in bed with some bitch! Why aren't you hexing him to hell and back?"

Blaise slowly let a sly smile spread over her pretty elfin features as she looked up at Hermione and I. "What do you say, Harry? Shall we let him have a taste of his own medicine?"

Despite the pain in my knee and bum, I returned the smile. I wondered just how Zab would take to us not answering any of his questions. "Sounds good to me," I replied as I tossed Zab's wand back. The wand rattled on the floor and rolled to a halt near his clenched fist. In a flash, he snatched out and grabbed it, once more hissing as Blaise pushed down harder than strictly necessary.

"You don't need to be that rough!" he snapped at her.

"You're completely correct, as usual," she replied winsomely. "It's entirely voluntary on my part."

Hermione had obviously caught up at this point, glaring down at Zab. "So you are Harry's enigmatic master. I had really wanted to meet you. A pity you don't live up to my expectations."

Zab flashed her a glare full of venom. "Don't speak to me, whore," he spat, before hissing in agony.

Blaise stopped jabbing her wand into her Great-grandfather's legs. "Perhaps some introductions are in order?"

I stood, a little light headed from the amount of blood running down my leg. "*Master* , do yourself a favour and shut up for a moment."

Zab's eyes narrowed. "Will you stop calling me that! Your apprenticeship ended months ago!"

I snorted. "Not while it still annoys you. Now, the lovely young lady dressed in a makeshift toga is Hermione Granger. You know, the witch you desperately wanted to meet, perhaps work with in your research for a while? She's my girlfriend. The malicious Slytherin medical student attempting to locate every single nerve ending in your legs is Blaise Zabini. I believe you've met her before. She's also my girlfriend."

Zab turned a faint shade of purple. "What?"

I sighed and moved over to Dobby, leaving my former teacher and Blaise to exchange family greetings, spit insults and generally catch up. My poor elf was still lying stunned on the floor. With a wave of my holly wand, I woke Dobby up from his induced nap. "Are you alright, Dobby?"

The elf blinked rapidly looking around the room in confusion for a few seconds. "Is Harry Potter sir safe?" he slurred.

I sighed, but nodded. "I'm fine Dobby. But you shouldn't have leapt into the fray like that."

A mournful expression crossed Dobby's face. "Dobby has failed Harry Potter sir." He picked up the leg of a broken chair and made to swing it at his head. I waved my yew wand and transfigured it into foam before he managed to hit himself. I'd discovered that Voldemort's old wand was better for transfiguration and other magical efforts requiring power, whereas my holly wand was far more effective for subtle work.

"Dobby! I've told you before; you don't have to punish yourself anymore!"

"But Dobby failed Harry Potter sir!" the elf wailed, still hitting himself rather comically with the spongy bat. He'd have been lucky to have squashed a fly with the thing.

I grabbed his wrists gently but firmly with the ring and little fingers of each hand, still retaining hold of my wands. "Dobby, listen to me. Go and get Winky to check you over, to make sure you are not hurt. You do not have permission to punish yourself. Do you understand?"

Dobby gave me a mournful look, but nodded and disappeared with a shimmer. I sighed at his antics. He'd been the Malfoy family's elf for too long. Despite being out from under their sadistic thumbs for five years now, whenever he thought that he'd failed me, he still felt the need to punish himself.

You know, there are times I really wish I could raise Lucius from the dead to kill him again. And again.

Bastard.

A shriek from behind me captured my attention quite effectively. I spun round with both wands at the ready and a curse on my lips to see Hermione fixated on my backside.

It wasn't the first time she'd been interested in that part of my anatomy. Both she and Blaise were quite vocally fond of squeezing my bum, and were adamant that my quidditch training continued to ensure it didn't change. But Hermione looked quite woozy at the sight of blood running down my leg.

"Blaise? When you're done, could you check me out?"

My Slytherin girlfriend gave me a wicked smile and lasciviously licked her lips. "You're asking me to give your arse a detailed examination? You do know how to make a girl's day."

Zab looked on the verge of having an apoplexy.

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It took quite a bit of quick talking before everyone was calm enough not to fling hexes and jinxes in every direction, not to mention administer medical aid. Zab in particular seemed to have a bit of trouble with the living arrangements in Grimmauld Place. While all three of us each had a room in which the other two had agreed to keep out of (for when we felt the need for some privacy), more often than not, we all slept together in the master bedroom.

It didn't take someone of Hermione's calibre to determine that Zab had some major issues with that.

"I thought you were living in Hogsmeade?" he demanded of Blaise as we made our way downstairs into the main living room. "That house on the main road?"

She smirked and wiggled her eyebrows at me. "You mean the house that Harry bought?"

Zab swung his head back to me, still coloured from recent bouts of fury. "What?"

I tilted my head to one side. "What what?"

Zab blinked, narrowed his eyes and glowered. "Listen, Potter," he growled before Hermione squeezed my shoulder.

"Harry, just tell him. He's going to have a coronary."

I sighed, and gave her a mock frown, before turning back to Zab. "I purchased that house a few months ago, for Blaise to live in. It has a floo connection between here and there, similar to one you maintain," I said, gently shaking my head and inclining it subtly towards Hermione.

Zab blinked. "You haven't told her?" he asked, quite surprised.

I frowned. "Of course not."

Hermione frowned herself. "Told me what?"

"Never mind," Zab and I said in unison. Hermione's gaze flickered between Zab and myself several times, before looking up at Blaise, who was smirking like a Slytherin who knew something a brainy Gryffindor didn't. Funny that.

"So that's where you got the idea from," Hermione finally said, looking back at me. "For a fixed floo connection."

I nodded, a smile on my lips. Zab relaxed a little, realising that his secrets were still just that.

"I also purchased a home for Hermione to live, in Oxford, close to her campus. The magical college there was too noisy for her tastes," I continued.

Zab gave me a sour look. "Another fixed floo?"

I nodded. "Joined to the fireplace in her room, just like Blaise's."

"You've gone to a great deal of effort and expense to keep your living arrangements a secret," he grumbled. I wondered if his mood was still due to his disapproval, or to the fact that he didn't know how we were living. Probably a bit of both. "Who else knows?"

I shrugged. "Apart from the three elves here, no one."

Zab blinked. "Three elves?" he blurted incredulously.

I nodded, my facial expression neutral. "Dobby! Winky! Kretcher!" I called.

The three elves appeared, Dobby shimmering in wearing his yeoman's outfit Hermione and I purchased for him, Winky appearing wringing her hands nervously on her apron, and Kretcher last, walking down the stairs from the elves' quarters instead of popping in. A studied insult to me, as the head of the house."

As Kretcher lisped insults to himself, Zab glanced at each elf, ending with the vocally treasonous Kretcher. "You put up with that from an elf?" He snapped at me.

I shrugged. "It bothered me to start with, especially since he tricked me into believing that Sirius had been kidnapped by the Lord High Crap Anagram Maker himself, but I grew to pity him. I think he's insane. But since he's bound to me and this house, he can't do anything dangerous."

Zab frowned, glancing back at the old Black house elf, still mumbling lisping insults about my lack of pedigree. "Just how old is he? Normally, elves don't start losing their teeth until well into their second century."

I smiled, and waved the elves away. "Thank you, I just wanted you to meet this man," I said, letting them go. I grinned back at Zab. "Let's just say that one of my elves took exception to Kretcher's insults. He was losing an average of three teeth a week before he learned to keep quiet enough to not be heard."

Zab's eyes bulged. "Your elves were fighting?"

I shrugged. "Dobby claimed that he was just administering discipline. You've got to remember that Kretcher was living here for years after Sirius' mother passed away, and all he had for company was her raving portrait in the entrance hall."

Winky shimmered into the living room, carrying a pot of tea and four china cups. She quickly settled the china down on the table and poured the tea before leaving quickly. She was still not comfortable around strangers. I really doubted she would ever be truly comfortable living with a family that wasn't the Crouch household.

I pulled over a cup as the other three began adding various bits and pieces to their own. Sugar, milk, cream, honey, lemon, all sorts of things. I just preferred plain tea. I took a deep breath to steady my nerves, raised an eyebrow and raised the steaming cup to my mouth without sipping. "So, to

what do I think for the pleasure of your company?" I asked him, making no particular emphasis on the word 'pleasure'. Since his arrival, we've both needed medical attention, so I'm guessing the irony wouldn't be lost.

Zab stared straight into my eyes, and I felt a subtle flickering against my mind, which I easily kept out. "Albus needs to speak to you," he said plainly.

I raised the cup of the piping hot tea to my lips. "I know," I said, before taking a sip.

Zab blinked, and that blank expression that I'd come to love flashed across his face. "You know? He's at his wits end trying to get some information to you!"

"Of course I bloody know!" I spat. "He's been trying to contact me for weeks."

Zab frowned deeply. "They why are you ignoring him?"

I took another sip. "How long do we have?"

"Pardon?"

"How long do we have?" I repeated. "I have many reasons. It's going to take a fair while to get through them all."

Zab's eyes narrowed. "Start from the top."

"I don't trust him."

Zab sighed. "Neither do I. However, the man does have more knowledge and influence than most. If he has something of import to discuss, it would be worthwhile to put aside your distrust."

I rolled my eyes. "If I want information, I'll get it from a reputable source. Dumbledore has never told me the straight truth in my entire life." I took another sip. "Even when he promised he would."

Zab rolled his eyes. "So go in there, *knowing* that you are only going to be told part of the story!"

"That sounds like a brilliant way of submitting yourself to his machinations," I replied sourly. "He knows how to get me to do things. He'll suggest that my friends are in danger, or that someone needs my help. Well, sod that, I'm not going to allow him to begin manipulating me."

Zab nearly snarled at me. "You don't trust that you could recognise, and possibly even reverse, his machinations?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. But I have no particular desire to listen to what he has to say."

Zab looked faintly concerned, but picked up his cup and took a sip. His face twisted into a grimace of disgust, and he half coughed, half spat out the liquid. "What the hell is this?" he wheezed through his choking.

Dobby appeared with a shimmering snap of his fingers. "Dobby is not liking bad wizards who attacks Harry Potter," the little elf said.

Zab snarled at him. "Listen here, you little pest-"

"I wouldn't," I said quietly, masking a smile with the cup.

Zab snapped his head around. "What?"

I chuckled softly. "This is the house elf that threw Lucius Malfoy across the room when he tried to curse me. Despite what you're used to, and the fact that you knocked him out earlier, he has no qualms about attacking people who threaten me." I glanced over to Dobby, giving him a broad smile. "And I wouldn't put it past him to have set something up to severely inconvenience you if you do act out. But besides all that, he's one of my best friends, one who I trust implicitly." Dobby blushed crimson with pride.

Zab took a deep breath, and returned his gaze to Dobby. "I see. So you are the one my own house elves are talking about. The free elf."

Dobby nodded, his tennis ball-sized eyes not even holding a hint of submissiveness. "Dobby is free elf. Dobby is highest paid elf in the world."

Zab looked surprised. "How much do you pay him?" he asked, turning back to me.

I sighed. "One galleon, two sickles and ten knuts a week. I can't persuade him to take any more. I had to trick him into taking that much."

"Trick him?"

I nodded. "He thought it was for a month."

A faint smile touched the corners of Zab's mouth, but he kept it in check. Turning back to Dobby once more, he said, "Then it appears I owe you an apology, young elf. I am sorry for both attacking your Master, and for attacking you."

Dobby slowly nodded, but didn't change expression. "Dobby is accepting Mistress Zabini's forebear, but will not forget."

Zab narrowed his eyes, but nodded too.

Dobby disappeared suddenly, only to return a second or so later with a fresh cup of tea. "Some proper tea," he said in his squeaky voice.

Zab thanked him, and took a sip without hesitation or expression. "Mmm, this is very good. I can see why Harry pays you so much."

Dobby blushed slightly, and disappeared without further ado.

"Interesting elf you have there."

"One of a kind," I agreed.

We sat sipping tea for nearly a minute before Zab continued. "Harry, there is a reason Albus has been trying to contact you. He told me he'd contacted all your friends in an effort to get them to persuade you to listen to him."

I shrugged. "And I've told them that they are not welcome here if they've come on behalf of Dumbledore. So far, only Shacklebot has broken that request." I leaned forward. "I'll give you three guesses as to who has been taken off the access list for the floo after I threw him out. You probably won't need the first two."

Zab glowered at me. "You are deliberately shutting yourself off from a valuable source of information. Did you learn nothing from my tutelage?"

"Cutting myself from a useless source of manipulation, you mean," I scoffed.

Zab slammed down his cup, breaking the handle off. "You can take what he says with a great deal of scepticism if necessary, but ignoring him completely is foolish in the extreme! Someone who wishes to know everything that is going on needs every channel of information open at all times!"

I casually took another sip during his tirade. "You're mistaking me for someone who actually *wants* to know everything that is going on. I don't. I want to enjoy my life for the next few years without having to bother with what is happening in the world."

Zab sneered at me. "Your exceptional NEWT scores proved that you could accomplish anything you wished. Now, after all your hard work, you just want to sit on your backside and do nothing?"

I chuckled softly. "Nope. I've been practising flying a good nine or ten hours a every day. I'm trying out for a couple of the local Quidditch teams in the next few months, ready for next season. My personal coach says that I've got an excellent chance of making the reserve lists for any team I care to name. That's all I care about right now, focusing on playing a game that I love." I smirked at Zab. "Both Blaise and Hermione are quite pleased with the results of my efforts," I finished, holding an arm out and making a fist. The muscles and tendons in my forearm showed with great definition.

Zab raised a hand and traced a finger and thumb around the edge of his goatee. "Do you have any idea the favours Albus had to call in to get in contact with me? How much effort and resources he expended to do so?"

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Of course. I must admit that I am surprised that he has gone to the effort of bothering you. You've already expressed in far more eloquent terms that you'd prefer not to be bothered by the rest of the wizarding world." I leaned forward, a wicked grin on my face. "Maybe he's trying to get me mad at you, or you at me. Maybe he's trying to drive a wedge between us, so that I go running back to him as my previous mentor?"

Zab's eyes narrowed dangerously. "As if cheating on my Great-granddaughter wasn't enough to get me angry with you."

"Oh, do grow up. I told them both straight out that if by choosing one to be my girlfriend resulted in losing the other as a friend, then I wouldn't pick either of them." I leaned forward, staring straight into Zab's eyes. "They decided between themselves that sharing me was preferable to neither of them getting me."

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Later, I watched as Hermione led Zab to the floo, the two of them frostily insulting each other. I turned to Blaise and gave her a grin. "Do you think either of them suspects?"

Blaise looked thoughtful for a moment. "Hermione? No. Great-grandfather, maybe. He's hard to fool." A smile erupted and she leaned over to kiss me. "It's just so *Slytherin* of you, I love it."

I grinned slyly back, before becoming stern. "Hermione can't know," I said seriously. "I need her innocence to pull off some upcoming deceptions."

Blaise actually became aroused at the thought. She slipped one leg over me and sat on my lap, grinding her hips into mine. "What did you have in mind, lover?"

I kissed the tip of her nose. "Dumbledore has put a great deal of effort into getting me to talk to him. So much that there are only really two possible explanations. When he tells me, I need Hermione there with her all-too-honest face to prevent him from picking out that I already know."

Blaise's eyes lit up. "You know? You already know what he wants to tell you?"

I shrugged, and then stretched, taking the opportunity to wrap my arms around Blaise's shoulders. "Either he's dying..."

Blaise raised an eyebrow. "He's not. He came in to the hospital for an examination recently. He's in perfect health, except for..." she stopped, biting her lip.

I grinned. "I know you can't tell me. Patient confidentiality and all that. But if he's not dying, then there is only one reason why he'd spend so much



effort just to talk to me."

She frowned. "And that is?"

I lost my smile. "Riddle is back."

## Journeyman Potter Will I, Won't I?

Hermione and I apparated to Hogsmeade directly from Grimmauld place. We arrived in the central square with a soft, dual pop of displaced air. I glanced around at the number of Hogwarts students thundering around; noting absently that it must be a Hogsmeade weekend. I frowned briefly in thought, trying to remember the calendar on my desk. This wasn't a scheduled weekend; it must have been a spur of the moment decision.

It still seemed that my fame (or infamy, if you prefer) was still intact since I sat my NEWTs. Many of the shopkeepers still stared at my forehead, and many of the younger students skidded to a halt rather than run around me. Despite all the friends I still had here in their seventh year, I simply could not get over just how tiny some of those younger students were. Even though only third years and above were allowed to visit the village, the younger ones just looked miniscule to me.

"Was I ever that small?" I asked Hermione.

She smiled back at me. "Harry, besides Blaise, you were the smallest child in our year for a long time. You've only just caught up to me, and I'm average height for a girl."

I grumbled good-naturedly for a little while, not really trying to stop a smile from forming. It was exactly my size that gave me an advantage as a seeker. It was a trade off I could easily accept.

We stopped by the fountain briefly as we made our way to Hogwarts. It was almost a ritual of mine. I'd stopped here to look into the waters every weekend since its erection. As calming and pleasant as it was to just sit there and listen to the gentle play of water on stone, I made it my duty to ensure that each of the sacrifices made on that day were still remembered. I stared into the water, watching Cho giggle and wave at me before dancing away, then at Grawp, grinning and eating sloppily.

The other Hogwarts students who had fallen were all there too. Of course, they had been there since the unveiling, but I had to check. As silly as it sounded, I had to make sure none of them were ever forgotten.

Hermione wrapped an arm around my waist and laid her head on my shoulder. She never really liked coming here; she preferred to remember those who had fallen in her own way. But she knew it was important to me.

I reciprocated the gesture, pulling her hip against my own, leaning my cheek against her hair. "Come on, 'Mione. Let's go and see what the Master Manipulator wants."

She made disapproving noises with her tongue as we set off towards the enormous castle. "Really, Harry, it's time you put aside this ridiculous feud you have going with him. Honestly, you've proven your point; you finished your NEWTs without having to submit to him, let it go already."

I smiled, not bothered by her words. "It isn't ridiculous at all, Hermione. He tried to force me back to a place where I wasn't safe, he attacked me for refusing, and finally ended up trying to blackmail me into staying."

She hissed between her teeth in frustration. We'd had this exact conversation many times before. "Yes, he made mistakes! Why can't you just forgive him?"

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "I have forgiven him!"

Hermione mirrored my expression. "Bollocks! You refuse to talk to him!"

I smirked at her use of language, if only to tease her a little more. She'd been spending quite a bit of time with Blaise. "Just because I've forgiven him, doesn't mean I've forgotten. Remember the old saying, 'Fool me once, shame on you...'"

She gave a little growl. "'Fool me twice, shame on me', yes I know. I just wish you'd get over it already. He's not trying to keep secrets anymore, he's not trying to manipulate you anymore, he's not trying to imprison you at your relatives' house any more, why can't you at least talk to him civilly?"

"You're so sure of that?" I asked slyly.

She actually had the grace to blush. "Um, sure of what?"

I grinned at her. "That he's not trying to manipulate me."

Her blush deepened. It would appear that Hermione still hasn't learned how to lie convincingly. "I... I just know."

I gave her hand a squeeze. "It's OK, 'Mione. I know that he's contacted you, and asked that you use whatever influence you have to get us into the same room."

Her pert, little mouth formed a perfect 'O'. "You know?"

I chuckled softly. "'Mione, Dumbledore has tried to get Tonks and Shackbolt to get me to talk to him. Remus and Arthur too. Not to mention Ginny and Ron. He's even asked Blaise, though she told him straight out that he should go and stick his head in a bucket of something rather nasty and drown himself." I paused as Hermione stiffened. "Blaise definitely has some issues with the old coot. I know she's put her memory of Ron belting Dumbledore with the poker into her family's pensieve. I know, because I've caught her gleefully watching it over and over again. At any rate, if all those people have been approached, why on earth would I think that you haven't?"

She bit her lip, looking quite cute and vulnerable. "I suppose. I love you, and even though he did attack you at the Burrow that one time, I still respect Professor Dumbledore. And I think you should listen to him. I don't want you to be in danger, at least, any more danger than you usually are."

"How sweet," I said, hugging her tighter.

She struggled out of my embrace. "I'm serious, Harry. If Professor Dumbledore has any information about your safety, I want you to listen and take his advice."

We walked in silence for a minute or so, getting closer to Hogwarts. "I can't promise that, 'Mione. I will promise that I will listen, but he has manipulated me far too often in the past for me to blindly take his advice and run with it. I'll hear what he has to say, then I'll take it away and think about it." I held up a hand to stop her as she drew in a breath to speak. "I will think about it neutrally. I won't let the history between us to affect my judgement. Ok?"

She closed her mouth so quickly that I could hear the soft noise of her lips connecting. "Fine," she agreed. "But I have the final say on whether you are thinking about things neutrally."

I gave her a cheeky grin. "Sure thing."

Her expression was priceless, trying to figure out why I'd agreed so quickly.

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Hogwarts hadn't changed. The magnificent, imposing castle stood just where it had resided for over a millennium, drifting through the stream of time like a graceful swan. Very much like a swan in fact. On the surface, everything appeared calm, serene. Underneath, there was a heck of a lot of activity.

Hermione and I stepped around a shrieking first year Hufflepuff, who came barrelling through the main entrance, crying her eyes out. Judging from the amount of water dripping from her clothes, I'd hazard a guess that Peeves was enjoying himself tremendously. We stepped in and made our way towards the Great Hall, figuring that most of the professors would be at lunch. We got maybe half way there before encountering a Prof-, well, an employee.

"Potter."

I rolled my eyes, sighing at Fate's predictability, before turning around. "Snape," I replied, if not politely, then with no real venom.

Snape hadn't aged well. He looked nearly as old as Remus, and given Moony had been transforming on a monthly basis for thirty years, that was not a good thing. Grey hairs had appeared in abundance through the greasy man's scalp, which gave him a look as though he'd just wandered through an old room full of cobwebs. Lines were etched deeply into his face; making the usual sneer of loathing he had when talking to me even more pronounced.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

I ignored the question, looking the man up and down. Even his usual, fastidious hygiene had taken a hit. His robes were stained, and a couple of his fingernails were crusted with some potion reagent. "You look like shit," I said, trying to suppress a smile.

Snape's eyes flashed with anger, a most common occurrence around me. "Answer me, Potter!"

I shrugged and half turned away from him. "Why should I bother?" After all, even though I did have a valid reason for being here, he wouldn't see it as such. No matter what I said, he'd take any opportunity to curse me he could get.

Snape had his wand out and pointed at me halfway through my response. Ah, it is so nice to be proved right. Again. His dark eyes glittered dangerously, while his right eye twitched rapidly. Despite Hermione's gasp of shock at his sudden action, I didn't move. I wondered just what had happened that had set him off.

Snape just stood there silently, the tip of his quivering wand aimed (more or less) at my heart. "Is something the matter, Snape?" I asked casually. "I can't recall the last time you physically threatened me without taking the opportunity to insult me or my father first."

Nothing. No response. The oily git just stood there, his spine as straight as though I'd interrupted him giving himself a broomstick enema. Ugh, not a pretty mental picture. Sometimes I wonder about my sanity.

"Mr. Potter! Professor Snape!" screeched a familiar voice.

"Professor McGonagall!" wheezed Hermione, thankful for the interruption. I think Hermione was expecting us to begin blasting each other across the room. To tell you the truth, I was beginning to think that Snape was going to try it, consequences be damned.

McGonagall stalked down the corridor towards us, her stern face tightly bound into an expression of disapproval. "Severus! What is going on?"

Snape continued to snarl at me, all but ignoring her. The uncomfortable tableau was held for a few seconds more, before Snape gave a hiss of dismissal, lowered his wand with a snap, turned and wordlessly marched off. His exit left the three of us alone to take a deep breath and sigh with relief.

McGonagall's sigh was the deepest of us all as Snape disappeared around the nearest corner in a swish of his billowing black robes. Despite her obvious frustration with her colleague, she still rounded on me and demanded, "Mr. Potter. Can't you at least *try* to get along with Severus?"

I flashed a look of frustration towards her. "You don't think that's a bit difficult when that bastard threatens me with his wand before the conversation gets past the initial salutations? If a parent of any student was here and saw that, they'd pull their children out of Hogwarts so fast there'd be a bloody sonic boom!"

Her expression turned blank for an instant, before a small frown appeared on her brow. Ah, she didn't know what happened when something breaks the sound barrier. So much for the supposed wizarding superiority. She gave a quick shake of her head and her face grew stern. Well, sterner. "Am I to believe you did nothing to antagonise him?"

I quickly shook my head as Hermione took a breath in preparation to defend me. I deliberately stepped forward and put my face right into McGonagall's personal space, "What fucking *wonderful* double standards you have. Just before the end of my last year here, Dumbledore was quite adamant that 'Sirius was much too old and clever to have allowed such feeble taunts to hurt him,' after Snape needled him about remaining in the house, suggesting he was a coward. Are you telling me that Snape is not old or clever enough to prevent feeble taunts from hurting him? Or that perhaps just that he cannot take what he so lavishly gives out?" I hissed, feeling the trembling sensation of my magic manifesting itself in the air around me.

McGonagall's eyes narrowed, but she didn't back away. "He has been under a great deal of stress recently," she said, ignoring the potential for violence in the air. I'll have to give her credit, she definitely belongs as the Head of Gryffindor.

I slowly leaned back, letting my anger fade. "I can tell; he looks ten years older than when I saw him at the Ministry. What has happened?"

McGonagall's lips were so tightly pressed together and straight you could have used them as a ruler. "I assume you have not been to the store run by the Weasley twins recently?"

I shook my head. "Ron and Susan have been working there. Let's just say that they have a different opinion on what levels of public displays of affection are appropriate, let alone comfortable to onlookers, than most."

McGonagall blinked, and actually half failed to suppress a smile, seemingly pleased that my anger was dissipating more quickly than the last time I screamed in her face. "Miss Bones and Mr. Weasley are becoming quite the couple then?"

I snorted. "You could say that. Anyway, why did you want to know if I've visited the twins recently?"

McGonagall drew in a deep breath. "They have produced a rather... *frustrating* ... line of products centred on and around Severus. Not only was he humiliated by the photographs taken while unconscious, but an entire subculture has grown around the incident. I understand a song has been written detailing the events leading up to his unfortunate... accident."

I raised my eyes to the heavens, even though we were indoors. "Unfortunate, my..."

Both Hermione and McGonagall cleared their throats in unison, glaring at me with identical expressions. It took all my will not to laugh at the sight.

I held up my hands in supplication. "My... *foof* . He barged into the washroom looking for a fight. I simply, um, *accommodated* him. As for whatever song was written about him, he did bugger all to prevent the Slytherins from writing a song about Ron's Keeping skills, remember?"

McGonagall sighed softly, turned and began to lead us to the Great Hall. "I remember quite well, Mr. Potter. But acting in the same childish manner does not excuse the behaviour in the first place." She continued in silence for a few moments before continuing. "While I could never speak ill of a colleague, I do find it very easy to believe that Severus would, well, seek you out, Harry. For some reason, you are like a rash to the man. He appears unable to leave you alone."

Hermione coughed, and I rolled my eyes. "*Now* you notice. I could have used that sort of observation when I was a student here, Professor," I said.

"Yes, well, given the amount of leeway the majority of the faculty gave you, I'm sure it evens out."

Hermione and I exchanged glances. "Are you including the fact that every single defence instructor I had tried to kill me?" I asked with a smirk. I wasn't truly worried, I had long ago come to terms with the fact that I was in danger so long as I was a part of the wizarding world, but it felt good to prod back occasionally.

McGonagall stopped in her tracks, causing Hermione to nearly bump into her. "If you insist on bringing that up, perhaps we should discuss some other things, such as your intolerable behaviour towards myself and Auror Shackelbot during your last summer with your relatives, hmm?"

I waved that away. "Considering the level of trust I had with the wizarding world at that point, I think I responded quite respectfully, given the situation."

McGonagall rounded on me. "Respectfully? Good grief young man, you spat in my face!"

gave her a cheeky grin. "Not deliberately. Only in the process of telling you to fu—"

"Harry!" squeaked Hermione.

"-um, telling you to go away," I finished lamely.

McGonagall huffed to herself. "We were only trying to help. We had your best interests at heart."

I sighed, feeling that familiar tendril of anger stirring in my belly once more. "You don't want to use that argument with me, Professor. Whenever *anyone* in the wizarding world has claimed to have my best interests at heart, I always ended up in a very bad situation. Considering that, are you at all surprised that I acted as I did?"

McGonagall, still striding towards the Great Hall, nodded stiffly. "Your actions that afternoon were analysed by a great many people, Mr. Potter. Most came to the conclusion that you needed space. Myself, I knew that insisting on staying would merely provoke you further."

I didn't get a chance to respond, as the three of us entered the Great Hall. Lunch was well underway, though with less than half the usual number of students in attendance. Dumbledore sat in the middle of the High Table, along with perhaps half the usual staff. He looked up from his lunch at our entry, and rose to his feet quickly and began making his way around the long table.

"Harry!" an excited squeal erupted from the Gryffindor table.

I turned just in time to catch an exuberant, redheaded missile. Ginny gave me a tight hug, her cheek pressed against my chest. "It's been ages!" she said.

I returned the hug, not fighting the smile that appeared on my face at her exuberance. "Hey, Gin. It's good to see you. But what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in Hogsmeade?"

Without releasing me, she turned her head and looked up at me, a mock expression of indignation on her features. "I had detention from Snape this morning."

"*Professor* Snape, Miss Weasley," corrected McGonagall.

I turned to face the Gryffindor Head and raised an eyebrow. "And yet, I understood exactly who she was referring to, without your refinement."

Before McGonagall could respond, Dumbledore arrived at our little group just inside the doors to the Great Hall. "Harry, I'm glad you've finally decided to come and visit. Shall we retire to my office?"

I looked blankly at him, not prepared to simply give in. I had no intention of giving away any advantage I had. I needed a way of implying that he wasn't the reason I was here. Ginny's presence here at lunch was a bonus.

"Nope," I responded coldly. "I told you before I'm not interested in discussing anything with you. I'm just here for a DA lesson." I grinned down at Ginny. "Gin, why don't you go and round up all the onyx rings. Meet us in the Room of Requirement. I've got some good stuff this time. Come on, 'Mione," I finished, holding out my arm to Hermione. Ginny gave me a look of surprise before she glanced from me to Dumbledore and back. Deciding something, she twisted her onyx ring and tapped it with her wand, informing all wearers of a new time.

The look on Dumbledore's face suggested that he'd just been hit in the guts with a bludger. By steering Hermione away from the old coot, he didn't get a chance to sense Hermione's confusion at the sudden change of events. Mind you, Hermione had a bit to say once we'd left the Great Hall.

She poked me in the ribs. "Why did you go and say that?" she hissed.

I grimaced slightly at the sudden pain. "I will not allow that man to have any more control over the situation than necessary. By implying that he is not the reason we are here, it means that he will have to come to me. That gives me the power to allow the conversation to take place. On my own terms."

Hermione opened and closed her mouth a couple of times. "I still think it was rude," she finally said, a bit lamely. I noticed the slight tinge of red to her cheeks, and I hid a smile. She was just arguing for appearances now.

I nodded in agreement as we walked towards the Room of Requirement. "Yes, it was, I agree. And I'm sorry that things have progressed so far that it has come to that. But in the games that the Headmaster plays with his minions, subtleties are everything. I'm not so vain as to think that I can outmanoeuvre him, playing his own game on his home turf, given he has decades more experience than me. So I need every advantage I can scrounge up when we finally meet."

Hermione was silent for a while, long enough for us to reach our destination. We entered the newly furnished room, ready for the lesson. She turned to face me, her lower lip caught between her teeth. "Harry, I really don't think you need to treat a conversation with the Headmaster as a game, let alone a battle."

I sighed, and took her hand in mine. "'Mione? I love you, and respect your analytical ability beyond any other. But this time, in this specific instance, you are wrong. He has kept too much from me for too long in the past, and I made some bad mistakes that others paid the price for. I won't let that happen again."

Her face darkened. "But," she began.

I put a finger on her lips, stopping her from speaking. "I can't lose you, 'Mione. Not like I lost Sirius. I will speak with Dumbledore, but I will put myself

in a position of strength before I do so. I can't afford to do anything else."

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After I kept him waiting for about three hours, I finally sent the onyx rings away to practise what we'd covered. They certainly weren't used to such a long session, and despite the usefulness and obvious practical applications of what I was showing them, there were many not-so-subtle glimpses at various watches and other time-pieces before we finished. Still, most of what we covered was used for first year Auror cadet training, which I'm sure will piss off whoever the Defense teacher is this week. Not to mention Snape. And the Headmaster. I can't imagine that he was really expecting me to continue to show up and corrupt his students. After all, a great deal of what I passed on today would have been absolutely invaluable to someone like, oh I don't know, say, Fred and George...

Am I a bastard or what?

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I slowly lowered myself into one of the armchairs in front of Dumbledore's desk. The old wizard took his own seat behind the desk, absently picking up the crystal container of lemon drops. He leaned forward slightly and held out the delicate container, an expected, yet faintly odd gesture. "Lemon drop?" he offered. I declined with a shake of my head, as did Hermione. He nodded absently and returned the container to its accustomed place on his desk. I finally noticed what was odd about the gesture. He used his left hand.

Dumbledore took a deep breath. "Before we begin, Harry, please let me say that I am truly sorry for going against your wishes to be left alone."

"Again," I said emotionlessly.

"Indeed," he replied weakly. "I cannot express how sorry I am that I was forced to go against your wishes. I shall not intrude upon your time any more than necessary."

He stood and stepped over to one of his many cupboards, extracting his pensieve from the dusty interior, holding it in his left hand. "I'm sure this looks familiar, Harry. Miss Granger, have you ever come across a pensieve in your studies?"

Hermione nodded quickly. "Yes. Harry has one. He's been kind enough to allow me to view some of his memories."

"Ah, excellent," Dumbledore replied. "It does my old heart wonders to see a strong childhood friendship grow into such a deep, trusting relationship." He rather unsteadily set the overfull container on his desk, still using only his left hand, before returning to his armchair. "Harry has already had the opportunity to examine a few of the memories in my own. I had intended on telling you exactly what happened that set me on the course of breaking your trust once more, but I think it would be better for you to view the events yourselves."

With that, he drew out his wand. My breath caught in my throat just as Hermione's did less than a second later. "Professor!" she gasped. "Your hand!"

Several silver figures rose from the surface of the pensieve. "Later, Miss Granger. It is a tale for much later. For now, I implore you, simply observe."

I blinked a couple of times to focus; putting Dumbledore's charred and blackened hand out of my mind. Even so, it was difficult to put out of my mind the sudden uncomfortable sensation in my lower belly on seeing the ruined appendage.

I focused intently on the silvery figures floating above the pensieve as they assembled themselves into a formation that appeared *very* familiar to me. We were going to be observing a session of the Wizengamot.

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## Journeyman Potter Revelations

*Dumbledore's ghostly gavel rapped the table in front of him, signalling the commencement of the session. The entire Wizengamot were arrayed behind him, each wearing the silvery version of their robes of office. Three figures were seated at a long table in front of them, two wizards and a witch. One wizard looked vaguely familiar to me, the other two I'd never seen before.*

*One wizard, obviously a clerk or recorder, since he was seated off to one side and didn't have any special robes or anything like that, stood and announced in flowery language the opening of a special session of the Wizengamot. One thing that struck me was the secrecy oaths required by each member. This wasn't just a blanket, 'Do you agree?' statement, asked of a group of people, but specifically answered by each member in turn, with the understanding that they would lose their ability to use magic should they break the terms of the oath. Nasty.*

*Once the opening insomnia inducing crap was out of the way, and Dumbledore once more rapped his gavel on the table. "Mr. Croaker, your findings please," he said formally.*

*The vaguely familiar wizard rose to his feet, and I finally remembered where I'd seen him. Mr. Weasley had pointed him out to me at the World Cup, saying that he was an Unspeakable and had no idea what the man got up to.*

*Croaker himself was replying in formal language. It only took me a moment to realise that he was reeling off the discoveries made after I'd knocked Voldemort's block off in Hogsmeade.*

*"...which, combined with the corroborating testimony from one Mr. Olivander, regarding the persons to whom he sold each wand, enabled us to positively identify the vast majority of the incinerated wizards. In cases where there was any doubt, hairs collected from the remains of the garments were combined with Polyjuice potion, giving us sufficient evidence for a positive identification. The definitive list of the so called 'Death Eaters' contains a great many notable families, many of whom were quite influential in Minister Fudge's term of office."*

*One of the Wizengamot members rose to her feet. The witch's features looked vaguely familiar. "Is it not possible, Mr. Croaker, that some of the remains identified were simply innocent bystanders, who were unfortunate enough to intercept some newdark curse that reduced them to ash?" she demanded haughtily.*

*Croaker drew himself up. "With all due respect, Madam Royston, no. We have testimony and pensieve evidence to corroborate the events during the Battle of Hogsmeade. The events leading up to the finale have been thoroughly documented and confirmed. Your Great-nephew was indeed a supporter of the Dark Lord."*

*The elderly witch's eyes flashed with anger, and it was only Dumbledore standing and quietly saying, "Anastasia, please," that she sat down.*

*Croaker continued. "While we now know who was involved as the Dark Lord's inner circle, there have been approximately two dozen recent disappearances of close family members to those very same Death Eaters. We have been only able to make contact with three. Those three however, have been able to supply us with some rather disturbing information."*

*"Get to the point, man! Some of us are required at some, er, functions," called out one elderly wizard, whose beard was as impressive as Dumbledore's, except that he had no moustache.*

*Croaker looked up at the old wizard. "My apologies for preventing you from attending such an important function as a regular Friday night pub crawl, Senior Member de Cort. If you'd care to renounce your vow to protect and uphold the laws of the wizarding world, the rest of us can get down to the business of preventing another catastrophe," the Unspeakable said, his words cold and icy with fury.*

*The bald-lipped wizard coughed and turned bright red, but showed he had the wisdom to sit on the Wizengamot by not responding.*

*At least one other member was awake and listening. "Another catastrophe, Mr. Croaker? Has the Dark Lord not been thoroughly defeated?"*

*Croaker sighed and shook his head. "Yes. Another catastrophe. My superiors were reluctant to release the information I am about to divulge, and while I don't agree with the decision, I do understand the reasoning."*

*"Well?"*

*"It appears that the Dark Lord's body has disappeared."*

*Several members of the Wizengamot gasped in shock and attempted to object, but Dumbledore shot to his feet, taking the initiative. "Disappeared? How?"*

Croaker clenched his jaw, obviously unhappy, but shrugged. "I'm afraid that we have no idea. The charms are still in place, the coffin was only opened once, specifically, when we had prepared to perform the autopsy. It was already missing."

The entire Wizengamot burst into outraged, babbling indignation. For several moments, each individual member of the Wizarding court made their own set of threats (mainly of sacking) towards Croaker. Rather calmly, considering the situation, Dumbledore leaned forward. "Correct me if I am wrong, Mr. Croaker, but the autopsy was scheduled to be performed over a year and a half ago," he asked over the noise.

Despite themselves, the Wizengamot quietened down in order to hear the poor bastard's answer. Croaker calmly glanced down at his notes. "Yes, sir. Nineteen months, six days ago."

"And you are only reporting this now because...?" Dumbledore thundered.

Croaker sighed deeply. "The information came into my hands a little over six hours ago. My former superior was initially put in charge of the investigation. Once it became clear that he had lost the cadaver of the most powerful Dark Lord in recent history, he panicked. He took the empty autopsy report and sealed it, declaring the contents secret. The three other wizards who were aware of the circumstances were all, according to them, forced to swear an oath of secrecy. It is only because of the political pressure put on my former superior to release the autopsy results that I was even informed of the actual events." Croaker sighed. "He committed suicide less than an hour later, this morning at approximately ten o'clock."

That news troubled more than one person in the assembly. The murmuring that ran through the body was both respectful and angry. The woman Dumbledore identified as Anastasia rose to her feet again. "How terribly convenient that not one of your retinue here today is to blame," she snarled down at Croaker, gesturing towards his two aides.

While the aides shuffled nervously, Croaker proved to be made of sterner stuff. His eyes narrowed slightly, but other than that, he appeared unfazed. "Indeed, though you should probably have begun that sentence, 'How terribly **in** convenient for **my** political career'."

"Enough!" Dumbledore said gruffly, rapping the table in front of him with his gavel. "This bickering between ourselves is pointless. Mr. Croaker, do you have any theory as to what happened to Voldemort's body?"

I'll give Croaker credit here, he was the only one in the room besides Dumbledore not to shiver slightly. "I have a suspicion, based on the events after his first demise." At Dumbledore's nod of approval, he continued. "The Dark Lord's body was not recovered from Godric's Hollow after the events of Halloween, nineteen-eighty-one. While Ministry personnel were dispatched to the scene, they arrived several hours after both Rubeus Hagrid and Sirius Black. Given that the body was not present, we all assumed that Black, or another loyal Death Eater, had retrieved the remains. From subsequent testimony, it became obvious that Voldemort was ejected from his body following his attempt to curse Mr. Potter. If, and this is just a blind hypothesis at this point, the body disappeared, disintegrated or dispersed before the clean up team arrived that night, it is possible that the same phenomenon occurred after we retrieved the body from the battle at Hogsmeade.

"It follows, if that specific hypothesis is correct, it is possible that the Dark Lord could, given a similar ritual which occurred after the Tri-wizard Tournament, be revived once more."

I sat back in my chair, ensuring that my Occulmency shields were well established, and that my expression was schooled into bland neutrality. Hermione had gasped with surprise several times during the presentation and was now looking at Dumbledore with a mixture of hope and fear.

Dumbledore took a deep breath as the silvery figures finally vanished into the pool of mercurial memories. "As you can see, the news wasn't taken very well."

"Why didn't you simply tell us that the idiots at the Ministry have mislaid Voldemort's body?" I asked evenly. I already suspected the answer, but wanted him to spell it out.

Dumbledore gave me an odd look before doing so. "You needed to see the entire exchange, including the timeframe." Ah, he thought my observational and deductive skills had atrophied.

Hermione frowned. "You mean that it took nineteen months for the report to be unsealed?" she asked.

I shook my head in disagreement. "No, that the Wizengamot have known for several weeks now, a few months even, and that they haven't informed the public as yet," I explained, keeping my eyes fixed on Dumbledore's non-twinkling blue orbs.

He nodded at my assessment. "Yes, Harry. We have not released this information to the public as yet. It terrified the majority of the sitting members enough that they decided to seal the findings."

I still kept my voice neutral. "What have you discovered since?"

I could see something in Dumbledore's expression indicating that he was beginning to realise that I was a little more informed than he suspected. "Several close family members of the late Death Eaters disappeared after the final battle. Initially, we all assumed that they were supporters, and would be rounded up with a minimum of difficulty and fuss."

"You've discovered differently," I said, with no surprise or interest in my tone. Hermione looked over at me rather oddly.

Dumbledore's attention shifted to Hermione briefly, before he returned his gaze to me. "Yes, I suppose we have. The three we have found are still in



St. Mungo's. Narcissa Malfoy is one example. Despite being one of Voldemort's supporters, she had no Dark Mark. She was not a member of his inner circle. Oddly, she was not apprehended in England, but travelling through Europe, towards Albania."

I raised my eyebrows at this unexpected piece of information. "Hardly a vacation hot spot for the rich, infamous and egotistical, this time of year," I offered.

Dumbledore nodded, looking rather relieved that I had begun taking part in the conversation. "Yes, though I'm sure you are aware of what significance Albania has when combined with the information you just saw in my pensieve."

I shrugged nonchalantly. "Those two pieces of information could easily be explained away as a coincidence, especially since Croaker was taking a wild stab in the dark, at night, at a black cat."

Dumbledore's expression flickered, and I saw an expression of deep disappointment there before Hermione took me to task. After a gasp of shock, she rounded on me and let loose. "Harry Potter! I cannot believe that you are taking this so irresponsibly! The Headmaster has information that could save your life, and you are ignoring him!"

I sighed, leaning slightly away from her tirade. "'Mione, please!" I half begged, holding up a hand.

"No! Why can't you accept that Voldemort may still be alive? Are you too afraid to face the fact that you may not have killed him?" she screeched.

I set my lips together and turned to face her. "Don't be so stupid, 'Mione," I hissed at her. "I said nothing of the sort. It's just that those two specific pieces of information could be explained away. Don't forget that he mentioned *other* disappearances too, and that they were being held in St. Mungo's! And he used the word *apprehended*, which more than likely means that aurors were involved. Those two things tell me that either the aurors were over-enthusiastic, in which case the supporters would probably be dead rather than incapacitated, or that there was something wrong with each of them to start with.

"If there was something wrong with each of them, it's not inconceivable to assume that Voldemort did it to them before his death. It can't be something as simple as an Imperius Curse; that would be easy to cure, and not require a prolonged stay at St Mungo's."

Hermione blinked, but I was far more interested in Dumbledore's reaction. He had initially reddened at my hostility, and at first, looked as though he would leap to her defence. But Hermione's surprise at the news encouraged his line of thinking down the path I wanted, that I was as ignorant as she. I didn't want him to suspect that I already had a good idea what he needed to tell me. That would put him at a severe disadvantage for the rest of the conversation.

I turned back to Dumbledore. "So, am I to guess that Tom Riddle Senior's grave has been violated? That his skeleton has been stripped? Perhaps these three baffled and bemused supporters were carrying an old bone or two on them?"

Dumbledore gaped briefly, but collected himself quickly. "Yes, you are in fact perfectly correct, Harry. Voldemort's father's remains have been exhumed. And yes, each of the three apprehended supporters had a bone in their possession. I must say that I'm very impressed with your-"

I waved his encouragement aside with a scowl. "I'm not interested in impressing you. So, we have a group of people who, while not Death Eaters, were at least strong supporters, or family members. That means that Voldemort had access to them before his timely demise. They disappeared after the battle, and haven't been seen since. The ones who have been captured each had two of the components of the spell used to return Voldemort back to life. They were all heading to a place where Voldemort was known to have fled the last time he was incorporeal."

Hermione frowned briefly, but then her expression changed to one of realisation. "*Two* components? Oh! *Flesh* and bone."

I nodded. Apart from the potion or whatever it was Wormtail dumped Voldemort into, all that was needed was blood forcibly taken from an enemy. And given how pissed the world was at Voldemort, just about every single wizard and witch in the world would fit the bill.

Dumbledore nodded too. "Yes, it seems that Tom put measures in place to ensure that he would have a greater chance of resurrection on his death than he had the first time around. Though letting his supporters know that he had put in place a means of cheating death would have meant that they would have pushed harder for his resurrection the first time, it would also point out a weakness of his to them."

"Yeah, well, he wasn't exactly the trusting type, you know."

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed. And while it seems the Tom did indeed learn from his mistake, his thirst for vengeance cheated him out of his inner circle."

I shrugged. "Perhaps he thought that if he was to die again, his marked Death Eaters would have proved themselves to be completely useless."

Dumbledore tilted his head, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. "Perhaps. At any rate, we are left in a situation where Tom's body has disappeared, and goodness knows how many minor supporters trying to discover his location."

I scoffed lightly. "Are they trying willingly? Or are they being compelled?"

Hermione gave me an approving look. She picked up on that too.

Dumbledore tilted his head to one side. "That is debateable. It makes little difference however, to our goals. We cannot allow anyone; whatever is driving them, to find what's left of Tom."

I frowned, crossed my arms and leaned back. Something wasn't right. Something Dumbledore had said didn't seem to gel with me. Whether or not my burgeoning Legilimancy skills were enough to get a light impression from the old man when he was telling a lie or hiding something, I don't

know. But somehow, I just knew he was leaving something out. I had already guessed most of what he had told us. It was what he was hiding that I needed to know.

“What is it?” I asked pointedly.

Nothing, not a flicker appeared in his eyes. “It, Harry? To what are you referring?”

Growling, I rose to my feet. “Listen, old man, you’re hiding something from me. Maybe it’s something you have been forbidden to reveal, maybe not. Maybe it’s something you’ve decided to keep from me, maybe not. But I will tell you one thing right here, right now. You will tell me everything, now, or I will walk out of that door, now, and for good. I will never speak to you again, no matter what happens in the world. Hell, dark wizards could take over every street corner, and I’ll ignore anything you care to say to me. I will never step foot in Hogwarts again. Any children I have will be educated at Beauxbatons, well away from any of your damned machinations. Dumbledore, either you tell me what it is, or I’m out of here.”

The old man’s face twisted into an expression of agony. “Please, Harry, I’m begging you. I cannot tell you what it is you wish to know! I am forbidden to speak of it.”

“Why?” I snapped, slapping my hand down on the desk.

“Need to know,” he whispered, the expression still in place.

I’m quite sure my expression turned as black as my godfather’s animagus form. I released the self-imposed limits on my magic, letting it flare in time with my anger. “Just whose decision is it as to who ‘needs to know’?” I snarled.

Dumbledore swallowed, but kept his ground. “The Minister.”

Reaching across my body with my right arm, I grabbed the left edge of Dumbledore’s desk and with a massive *push* and a growl of effort, I hurled it to one side. The half-ton desk crashed into the wall to my right, destroying shelves and knocking over Fawkes’ perch. Bits and pieces of magical gadgets and trinkets flew everywhere, shattering on impact with the floor. I faintly heard Hermione squeal, but I was focused completely on Dumbledore.

“Then you have thirty seconds to either convince our dear Minister that I need to know, or you break your vow and tell me anyway!” I shouted. “I refuse to take any action without knowing everything, Dumbledore! The last time I did, Sirius paid from my mistake!”

The old fart glanced over at Hermione, a pleading expression on his face. Hermione however, was leaning back in her chair, arms crossed over her chest, her entire demeanour exuding hostility. It’s nice to know that she will side with me when I’m proved right. With his admittance that he was keeping something from me, even though it was probably secret, he had effectively lost the only real ally in the room. Finally, realising that he was getting no help from her whatsoever, he slumped in his chair, the set of his shoulders wordlessly admitting defeat.

“Very well, Harry,” he whispered. “I will tell you. But before I do, I must ask you one thing. No, I must beg of you this one thing.”

I narrowed my eyes, not at all placated by his ceding ground. “What is it?”

He swallowed. “The information being withheld is that which Tom used to remain alive, even in spirit form, after his body was destroyed. I must ask that you...” He didn’t seem to be able to finish the sentence. Realisation struck.

My eyes bulged. “You think that I’d be tempted to use it myself?” I blurted incredulously.

Dumbledore closed his eyes. “It has been discussed at many levels, Harry. The ease of command you have over dark curses is a great worry to many in power. They fear that you will follow the path Tom did fifty years ago.”

I collapsed back into my chair, feeling bewildered. All I want is to be left alone to live my life as I see fit. By using misdirection after I shortened Tom by about a foot, (or more specifically, a head) my life hadn’t been overly invaded by journalistic parasites. The past few months had been the most enjoyable of my life. Despite what Zab and others thought, I was taking an interest in the wizarding world; I had even begun establishing the foundation for my own intelligence network. Sure it was only in the initial phase so far, but I had rather high hopes for it.

Now, because of the ill-informed opinion of a bunch of the mentally challenged, paranoid haemorrhoids in power, suddenly I was going to be the next damned Dark Lord.

“Dumbledore, I’ve not had such a magnificent life that I’d be inclined to extend it. And while you and your paranoid friends have been working themselves into a frothing panic about my intentions, I have been living in a quiet home, surrounded by friends, and simply enjoying my time. I’ve been more at peace over the past six months than at any other time in my entire life. And now, you actually have the gall to suggest that I want to follow in the footsteps of the bastard who killed my parents?”

He actually seemed to brighten at that. “I am pleased to hear that, Harry. I understand why you would be horrified at our reasoning, but please consider my position. I already have had one student who attained a level of power greater than expected who went on to become a powerful Dark Lord. I am terrified that...” he paused at my furious expression. “Please, let me finish. I am terrified that you will lose yourself, Harry. You are a fine young man. I want nothing more than to see you enjoy a long, happy and content life. Using the lore I had intended on keeping from you would strip you of that, something I would do anything to prevent.”

Oddly, he had lowered his mental defences, and I got an overwhelming sense of *truth* from him. I almost sighed out loud. Despite how open he was at the moment, and whatever strife he was willing to put himself in by telling me all this, I just still couldn’t get past the fact that he had manipulated me and my life from the start with no checks and balances. I forced myself to remember that he was a master manipulator, and that his subtle efforts

to compliment himself back into my good books should be discarded as irrelevant. I relaxed into the chair, reached over and took Hermione's hand.

"Very well. What is it?"

Dumbledore again drew his ruined hand out of his robes and wordlessly restored his desk to its original location. Another flick sorted all the papers, ornaments and other nick-nacks back into their original places.

"Sorry about that," I offered, lying easily, not to mention poorly. No one would have mistaken me for being sincere at ruining Dumbledore's office for a second time.

He waved my insincere apology away. "Once more, Harry, you have shown me that I continue to break whatever promises I have made. It is I who should apologise," he said, as he summoned a tome from one of his many shelves. The oddly dust-free book settled on his desk, facing us. I glanced over at the shelf, noting that while dust covered many of the books, perhaps three others had been used recently.

"Before we continue, Miss Granger, have you ever come across the term 'Horcrux'? Dumbledore asked her.

Hermione frowned; tilting her head to one side as she thought deeply, then finally shook her head, looking intensely curious. I resisted grinning at her.

Something in the back of my mind tickled me, a memory of that word. Well, not the word itself, but seeing it written down somewhere.

Dumbledore continued, not noticing my sudden frown of thought. "It is an object created by the darkest of magic. Something that no wizard would consent to teach to another."

That brought Hermione up short. "Why? Even the Unforgivable Curses are taught to others. Blaise has been taught to use both the Cruciatus and the Imperius curses in the course of her work."

"She has?" I blurted.

Hermione nodded, turning to me with a smile. "The Cruciatus, despite being used to inflict pain, can be used to stimulate dead or damaged nerve endings, helping them reconnect and heal correctly when combined with the proper treatment. It is only extended and unmonitored exposure to it that is truly harmful. The Imperius has uses in helping people overcome phobias and the like. She needs to get her Mediwitch licence before she can use them on patients though."

I gave a 'hmm' of surprised acceptance, before again focusing on Dumbledore. "So, we have dark lore that can only be learned from books. I assume that in teaching it to someone else it either exposes a weakness or gives a method of defeating whatever advantage it gives."

Dumbledore nodded with approval. "Very good, Harry."

Hermione gave me a brief dark look, one she saved for times I thought of things she wishes she had come up with first.

"You are not quite correct, but close," he clarified.

Hermione sent me a mock superior stare. I made a face back, which caused both of us to have to suppress our laughter.

Dumbledore watched our non-verbal banter with a cross between relief and longing. "Knowing the exact nature of a Horcrux will explain my answer. Essentially, it is an item that stores part of your soul, keeping it safe against all harm."

I raised an eyebrow. "Like a mythical lich's phylactery?"

The old wizard nodded eagerly. "Precisely! Except that while in classical mythology a lich holds his entire soul in the object, to remain permanently locked between life and death in an indefinite undead state, a Horcrux stores only a fraction of your soul, leaving you alive and keeping it safe against an untimely death."

"Voldemort," I said evenly, though a shiver ran down my spine at the memory of his rebirth.

Dumbledore nodded. "Tom Riddle did indeed use this lore to protect himself from death." He paused suddenly, before taking a deep breath and continuing. "With one, rather important, difference."

My eyes narrowed. Dumbledore obviously had to struggle with himself to tell me this part, despite his agreement to tell me everything.

"Tom didn't just use one. He created several."

The room fell silent, expect for the shuffling of the dead Headmasters in the various portraits around the room.

"Bugger," I said finally. "So we can't just destroy one to kill him? We have to destroy all of them before he will be gone forever?"

Dumbledore nodded his head sadly. "Yes. Though there is some good news, at any rate. I am aware of the destruction of two of them already."

I blinked. "Really? How? And how many are there in the first place?"

Dumbledore smiled at me sadly. "How many? We have no way of truly knowing, though I understand he had plans to split his soul into a numerically powerful figure."

blinked. "Sorry? A numerically powerful what?"

Hermione squeezed my hand. "Numbers have power, Harry. We learned that in Arithmancy."

I turned to her. "So what is a powerful number?"

She shrugged. "Mathematically? Both six and twenty-eight are perfect, in that the sum of their factors add up to the original numbers. In nature, there are some extremely powerful ratios, like Phi, the golden ratio. Eight is powerful to the Chinese," she paused, thinking hard. "Though perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is lucky rather than powerful."

I snorted. "So is there a particularly powerful number you could split your soul into for maximum evil?"

"Seven."

Hermione and I blinked in unison and turned to face Dumbledore.

"I beg your pardon?" I asked incredulously. "There *is* actually a good number to split your soul into?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, not really. I managed to track down Tom's original source of information. While this wizard didn't teach Tom how to create them, one thing he did remember was that Tom actually asked if he could split his soul up further, perhaps into seven pieces, since that was a numerically powerful figure. The notion horrified the Professor at the time. It took me a great deal of persuasion to get him to give up his memories."

I frowned. "Why? I mean, I realise that these things are considered dark. And that to teach someone else exposes your own to be discovered, but why is it such forbidden lore?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Because, in order to create a Horcrux, you need to commit a cold-blooded murder. One for each."

I nodded slowly. "Ah. I see."

Dumbledore opened the book in front of him with a flick of his wand. The pages flickered rapidly across until it was open at a specific page.

"This is a journal, written by a witch three hundred years ago, detailing her search for the Horcrux of a Dark Lord of the time. She describes in detail how the item was discovered, and how she destroyed it."

Hermione and I leaned forward to read; she eagerly, me with resignation. The text was difficult to make out initially, due to the appalling handwriting and archaic spelling, but I managed to finish the passage only three or four minutes after my Gryffindor girlfriend.

"My Master taught me four of the six spells she said she used," I noted absently. "I don't suppose you'd consent to teaching me the final two?"

Dumbledore gently closed the book. "I shall place myself at your complete disposal, Harry."

I nodded, ignoring Hermione's sudden frostiness she was wordlessly sending in my direction. "Now, you said before that some of old What's-His-Name's spiritual rubbish bins have been destroyed already. I assume you are referring to whatever happened to your hand?"

Dumbledore smiled at my new pseudonym for my old foe. "What's-His-Name, Harry?"

I shrugged. "Even now, after everything, people are still calling him You-Know-Who. If I can't get people to call him by name, I'll get them to call him by the most insulting thing I can. Calling him that gives people the opportunity to not actually say his name, but it is such an insult to someone to whom his name was everything, that the same effect results, people will be less afraid."

Dumbledore blinked, his eyes twinkling for the first time since I walked in the door. "Oh, Harry, your parents would have been so proud of you. There is no way I can express just how much like both of them you are."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "Thank you," I said softly, finding it harder and harder to continue to distrust this man. One thought burst through my conscious, pointing out that Dumbledore had studied me for years, and knows exactly how to compliment me without appearing fawning or gratuitous. A flash of anger at that thought raced through me, but I kept my face expressionless.

Dumbledore nodded slowly at my visible reaction, reaching across his body with his good hand to open a draw and extract a tiny object. He held forth a ring with an odd pattern.

"This is the family signet ring of Marvolo Gaunt, Tom's maternal grandfather. I discovered it located in the ruins of the Gaunt house, on the edge of Little Hangdon. They were, in life, rather proud of the fact that they were the sole surviving branch of Salazar Slytherin's descendents, and often proved it by conversing in Parseltongue with each other. When I retrieved it from its hiding place, it was whole, the centre stone unblemished. However, I rather underestimated the defences Tom put on it, which did indeed cause me my rather considerable injury," he said, gently rotating his right wrist, examining his hand. "Despite this, I did manage to evict the portion of Tom's soul stored within. Much like you did to another of his Horcruxes, Harry."

I frowned for a second before inspiration struck. "The diary!"

Dumbledore nodded, and again reached across his body to extract the familiar leather-bound book from the same drawer. "Lucius discarded it before he exited Hogwarts after you tricked him into releasing Dobby. Your strike broke all the enchantments on it, leaving it a worthless pile of soggy pages. Argus found it and brought it to me. It remained at the bottom of one of my many drawers of spent magical items until my research

into Tom's magicks led me to it once more."

I glanced down at the mangled diary, the gaping hole where I'd stabbed it with the tooth plainly visible. "It didn't try to blow me up when I stabbed it with the basilisk's tooth," I noted. "Was that because Tom's soul was already outside of the diary?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, or that wouldn't have destroyed him in the first place. The reason it worked so well is simple. A basilisk's tooth is one of the most potent weapons in existence. Deadly inside the beast's mouth, inherently magical outside, and can be used to great effect when manufactured into a dagger."

I gently bit the inside of my cheek, thinking hard. Hermione spoke up. "So, we need to find and destroy another five of these awful things."

Dumbledore shook his head, frowning in confusion. "No, just four."

I looked up at the pair, letting them banter while I thought deeply.

"But you said he had seven of them," Hermione pointed out. "If two have been destroyed..."

Dumbledore smiled gently at her. "Miss Granger, I merely said that Tom wanted to split his soul into seven parts. Six Horcruxes and his own body form seven parts."

"No," I said absently. "I'm sure there are five left. Hermione is right, just for the wrong reason."

The expressions they both gave me were the curiously mixed. Despite agreeing with her, Hermione looked betrayed, and despite disagreeing with the Headmaster, he looked intrigued. "Your reasoning, Harry?"

I took a deep breath. "I destroyed the diary years ago. Well before Tommy boy made a return. If I needed seven parts of my soul around to be more powerful, I'd have replaced the lost one rather quickly, just after being told about its loss, actually."

Dumbledore blinked. "Goodness me, I didn't think of that." He frowned. "Though you are assuming that Lucius actually told his Master that the diary had been destroyed."

I sighed. "Maybe, but you're assuming that the destruction of part of your soul would pass unnoticed."

Dumbledore nodded absently, and leaned back in his chair, his unharmed hand balled into a fist and resting against his bearded chin. The pose, combined with his unfocused eyes, indicated that he was deep in thought. "I had initially thought to simply focus on finding the remaining Horcruxes without alerting Tom to our activities. But if you are correct, and that he can indeed feel the loss of part of his soul, then if he is ever revived, he may well be able to create more. Though, spreading his soul so thin would be dangerous in the extreme."

I stared at Dumbledore for a little while before answering. "Tell me, exactly how did you know where to find the other Horcrux? The ring?"

With his left hand, Dumbledore gestured towards his pensieve. "To answer that, Harry, we need to examine the history of Tom Riddle in detail."

The three of us sank into memory after memory, living once more the childhood, adolescence and early adulthood of the world's most feared wizard.

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I leaned back in my chair, my head spinning. "Right, so we need to find Slytherin's locket, Helga Hufflepuff's goblet, some artefact of Rowena Ravenclaw's, and one or two others." I ran my tongue over my bottom lip. "So, where will I be going first?" I asked Dumbledore.

Hermione cleared her throat in a definitive manner. "I? What about 'we', Harry? I'm coming too!"

I raised an eyebrow. "What if the search takes months? Or worse, years? You've just begun your college education, you can hardly take months at a time off your studies," I pointed out. Reasonably too, in my opinion.

Not in her's though. "What if it only takes a few days?" she started, her temper flaring much like a Weasley female. She's been hanging around Ginny too long. "You still seem to think that you have to do this alone," she huffed, and this time her crossed arms were focused in my direction.

I sighed. "I don't think that at all. I do think that I have the training to hunt down and defeat someone who is protecting these Horcruxes, something you don't. I don't mean that in a bad way, 'Mione, just that my apprenticeship taught me things that aren't covered here at Hogwarts. I will need your help for research, for enchanting things to help my search, and for support when necessary. But I will not let you put your life on hold when it doesn't need to."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "If I may, perhaps I could offer a compromise? I have pinpointed the location of one of the artefacts, and I have a good lead on another. Perhaps I could persuade Miss Granger to accompany me when I retrieve one from its hiding place. Harry, I'm afraid that tracking down the second one would be far more suited to your situation and talents."

I raised an eyebrow. "You know where one is?"

Dumbledore nodded. "To the best of my deductive abilities, yes, I believe I have located the hiding place of one of the outstanding Horcruxes. It should be a simple matter for someone of Miss Granger's ability to retrieve, with my help, of course. The other, which I believe is Rowena Ravenclaw's personal experimental journal, is lost, though I have a lead. Since it may well require you to travel extensively to track down, I believe you would be the perfect person to take up this task."

I nodded glumly. "Right. Someone who has had extensive training, but is young, rich, idle, and would not attract any attention if they left the country for maybe years at a time."

Hermione's face fell, but Dumbledore nodded, just as glumly as I had. "There is no one else I could assign this to, Harry. None of the Order members could disappear for more than a month before raising suspicions, or at least, those with the training this will require. I do not trust the Ministry, and have not given them this information. Not even Severus has been informed."

I snorted sarcastically. "Well, you are beginning to show good judgement."

"Harry..." Hermione began.

Dumbledore waved away her objection. "Please, Miss Granger, Harry has every right to his opinions. As much as I wish it were different, I must accept most of the blame for the current state of affairs."

I sighed again. Bloody passive aggressive techniques. "Right, so the two of you have somewhere to go. Where will I be heading to tonight?"

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## Journeyman Potter Things are different overseas

The crowd in Piazza San Pietro was a curious mixture of tourists, hawkers and low and high level church figures. It's probably the only place in the world where cardinals outnumber priests. A flock of three babbling nuns passed a group of five cardinals who were speaking in hushed, but disapproving tones. With the earring Dumbledore had provided (and rather painfully pushed through my left earlobe), I could understand every word spoken. Dumbledore didn't have the matching tongue stud however, and since I had no idea what language they were speaking however, I couldn't enter the conversation.

Not that I would want to. Normally, I'd assume that any deep discussion involving five of the Princes of the Catholic Church would be so far out of my philosophical depth that I'd drown in bafflement. But this was different, not to mention totally unexpected. Churchmen discussing the internal politics of the church, I could imagine. Cardinals discussing deep, obscure philosophical ideas, I could certainly understand.

But Cardinals discussing the length of a woman's dress? Count me out.

I suppose I've never understood how (or, for that matter, *why*) Catholics would confess all to their local priest, and ask advice for everything in their lives. I mean, seriously, why on earth would you take sexual and birth control advice from someone who has made a vow of celibacy? Do Catholics take advice from an accountant who has made a bloody vow of poverty?

I took a moment to get my bearings, and to locate a place to examine my surroundings with a view to sneaking around unseen. I sat down on a bench with my back towards the central obelisk in the middle of the piazza, and contemplated events that had brought me here as I examined my surroundings.

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Before setting out on my little quest, I decided that travelling with friends would be far more enjoyable than kicking about alone. I visited the Burrow to try and convince Ron to come with me, at least for the first leg. Well, when I say 'try to convince', I of course mean, 'subtly try to pretend I don't need him, but finally reluctantly acquiesce to his insistent demands to join me'.

My plans to just have the two of us travel lightly through France took a dive when Susan decided that we needed female company and invited herself along. I hadn't exactly related the full and untarnished nature of my trip, not wanting to let anyone else know exactly what was going on, so it was not without trepidation that I agreed to Susan's presence. And her luggage.

Without lightening charms, Ron and I would have been suffering from hernias.

We left England to a rather melodramatic Mrs. Weasley and her shenanigans. I'm quite amazed that she didn't try fainting or something to get Ron to stay. What with Bill married, Charlie working out of the country, Percy still focusing on rebuilding his career and being distant (despite his reintegration into the family fold), Gin at school and the twins travelling all over trying to set up their business, Ron was the last son she had who was still at home more often than not. Finally promising that he and Susan would be back within a fortnight to make his tryouts, we managed to leave the country, on the muggle train under the English Channel.

Both Ron and Susan were suitably delighted at the novelty of muggle transport, though the trip was not without its hiccups. I had to speak sharply with Ron's passport photograph, insisting that it stop moving long enough for the little book to be stamped as we passed through passport control. The photo didn't want to cooperate, and in the end I had to subtly confound the passport control officer into ignoring the moving picture.

I also discovered that Ron had little to no concept of geography, and didn't realise that there were travel implications stemming from the fact that there was a fairly thick body of water between England and France. His panic attack on realising that we were travelling under the Channel was amusing, though the vocal histrionics went from hysterical to intensely irritating *very* quickly. Getting some eighty-proof spirits down his throat took some doing, and I managed it only after convincing him that it was the muggle equivalent of a calming potion.

A half a dozen shots later, and a very calm Ron was snoring away with his head resting against a window. After we left the tunnel, looking through that very window presented Susan and I with some simply magnificent views of the French countryside. From our conversation, I discovered that my unorthodox living arrangements were indeed quite secret, since she spent the majority of the rest of the trip trying to get me to agree to date some of her friends.

Somehow, I managed to avoid promising anything, and the three of us arrived in Paris without further incident. Well, except for Ron's insistence on proving he could function in the muggle world by hailing a taxi. I could only handle seeing him yell at three parked and empty taxis before pointing out that his father's old Ford Anglia was probably the only sentient automobile in the world, and that he had to talk to an actual taxi driver.

Sigh. Muggle studies really should be compulsory for pure bloods.

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Dumbledore's lead, a French auror, had been singularly unimpressed by my request for information about Ravenclaw's journal. Either Dumbledore

had neglected to inform me that he was in this fellow's bad books, or French wizards had a particularly bad attitude towards the English.

Of course, once it became clear that my entreaties were not going to succeed in getting the info we needed, Ron took it upon himself to become far more... *convincing*. I ended up having to order Ron to stop holding the poor bugger upside down and to put him down without permanently damaging him in any way. Pale and shaking, the French auror had quickly divulged what he knew, and beat a hasty retreat.

It wasn't until later when I had firecalled Bill (to get some of my cash transferred to the Paris branch of Gringotts) that I discovered exactly why I wasn't exactly popular over here. According to Fleur, (who had nudged Bill out of the way during the call and was rather pleased that Ron, Susan and I were visiting her country) the majority of the French wizarding world had lost a great deal of money during the Tri Wizard Tournament. Most had assumed that Fleur would have won, or at least put in a good showing. The fact that she didn't complete two of the three tasks meant that the bookmakers in France were rather enriched by the event. Ron found this incredibly illuminating, not to mention hilarious.

We travelled south, making a side trip to Beauxbatons. While it wasn't strictly necessary, it did help with my cover of being an aimless layabout, wandering the world with friends. Madame Maxine was delighted to see us, as was Gabrielle, though the number of times she steered Ron and Susan down the wrong passageway indicated that she seemed to want to spend more time with me alone, or that she was a highly skilled prankster herself. I allowed Madame Maxine to talk us into staying at the school for a few days, much to Gabrielle's delight. Even in her early teens, she was a devastatingly beautiful young witch, with an innocence about her that made her far more attractive than her rather proud sister.

I spent some time with the French school's flying instructor, Madam Dupont, while Ron and Susan made friends with the Potions Professor, who just happened to be a chess grandmaster. The days we spent at Beauxbatons were delightful, and I made a number of new friends in that time.

We stayed for nearly a week before we reluctantly gave our goodbyes and continued our travels down to Nice. I didn't get a chance to really explore the city before we tracked down the partner of the trader who had initially purchased the journal. What we learned set my teeth grinding. The trader himself was in prison. In bloody Italy, of all places.

Grumbling, and since Ron's two weeks were up, I had travelled on to Florence alone in search of this idiotic merchant. I mean, really, what kind of intellectually challenged individual would try to sell items so obviously associated with witchcraft in a country where the dominant religion made it a habit of burning people who had a wart on their nose.

Thankfully, it turned out to be rather fortuitous that I was alone, since circumstances forced me to break into the wizarding jail hidden beneath the cathedral there, to get some information out of the clumsy trader. I'm quite sure that Ron wouldn't have been able to keep his mouth shut about that little adventure (had he been involved), and I had no desire to spend more time with the Italian authorities than strictly necessary.

Even so, the mission could hardly be considered a success. The only thing of value I learned was that the merchant had indeed possessed the journal, but since he had initially been arrested by muggles (religious fanatics no less), all his wares had been confiscated by them and given to the Catholic Church for safekeeping, as demonic or for the purposes of witchcraft.

They honestly have no idea just how accurate they are sometimes.

So, after a wonderful meal of wild boar casserole in red wine with olives (which made me vow to return to Florence *very* soon), I set off down the country to Rome. Well, to Vatican City.

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So here I was, sitting with my back against a priceless work of Egyptian art amongst the crowd in the tiniest nation on Earth. Mentally taking notes regarding the surrounding buildings and structures, I slowly built my emergency escape route.

I rose and dusted myself off before passing the outraged clergymen, (still acting offended, while stealing every glance they could at the rather attractive pair of legs) and wandered around the main open area. The elliptical plaza was supposedly one of the most visited places on earth. The Mecca for Catholics all over the world (though Catholics didn't get to extend their name once they'd visited). I did the touristy thing for a while and wandered around the inside of St. Peter's. I just can't get my mind around the fact that the Pope, a man supposedly selected by God, lives in a building where the only reason it isn't called a palace is because it has been sanctified. The sheer opulence of artwork, precious metals and other wealth on display stunned me; especially since I'd seen donations placed into the church's coffers by Catholics too poor to buy enough food for their families to eat.

It didn't take me long to identify the stairs up into the building proper. A couple of cassocked priests submitted their credentials and were admitted by the security forces at the top of one set of spiral stairs.

Despite being the most highly trained, well equipped, highly funded and devoted troops in the world, the Swiss Guard are never going to be taken seriously by the majority of the world's population dressed like that. Supposedly, Michelangelo designed their uniforms. Either the man was colour blind, lost a bet, or he was pissed off at being forced to leave his sculpting for an unwanted commission in fashion design and decided to leave his displeasure etched indelibly on display forever. What else can you say about a pair of bright, blue and yellow-stripped pants that look as though they are doubling as incontinence trousers after a heavy night of fifteen pints of Guinness, two curries, four boiled eggs and a bean sandwich?

Leaving the clear winners of the 'Least likely to be able to sneak up on someone unawares' competition, I found myself a moderately empty nook and unobtrusively cast a detection spell Hermione had devised for me.

The spell made all methods (both magical and muggle) of remote detection or observation glow to magical folk. Magical wards and so forth glowed a faint yellow, while muggle surveillance cameras, peepholes and viewing platforms glowed bright blue. While I was expecting a fair few hidden cameras and so forth keeping an eye on the crowds within the Basilica itself, I didn't expect to have the area light up enough that I had to blink in the sudden illumination.



There must have been at least a hundred hidden cameras, with absolutely no point in the building out of sight of at least two. Each camera and peephole was glowing such a bright blue that, to my magical eyes at least, they lit the area up to the point of pain. The security system here must have been set up by someone as paranoid as Zab or Moody, but that wasn't what shocked me the most.

There were at least six layers of magical wards in place. Anti-apparition jinxes, portkey prevention, spell detection, they were all there. Not even Hogwarts was protected in such a powerful manner. In that instant, I discovered something that Dumbledore either had neglected to inform me of, or didn't know.

There were some very powerful wizards working for the Holy See.

I moved, as rapidly as I dared, away from where I cast the spell. In less than thirty seconds, that Transept was flooded with members of the Swiss Guard. Suddenly, the ridiculously clothed soldiers did not seem so useless. I threw a hood over my head and sipped from a hip flask I'd retained for just this purpose, grimacing at the taste. My features changed as the foul-tasting Polyjuice took effect. Now, either I would get out of here unscathed or I would have to fight my way out and poor Remus would never be able to travel to Italy. I removed my coat and jumper, rolling them into a ball and stuffing them under my arm.

The three members of the Swiss Guard that looked at me intently before moving on held a sheet of paper, printed with a slightly blurred photo of me standing in the Transept where I'd cast the spell. The only blessing there was that it was an unmoving muggle photo, and I was squinting at the time.

As I left the Basilica, a strange, unwelcome sensation trickled over me. Suddenly, the idea of raiding the Pope's private store of forbidden and confiscated arcane and demonic artefacts seemed a lot more difficult.

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Bloody Italian wizards! Whose fucking idea was it to put the entrance to Rome's wizarding community inside Trevi fountain? Not only do you have to either bamboozle all the muggles standing around, including the inevitable dozens of tourists, or wait until four in the morning (when the only people around are drunks, and they could see anything and no one would believe them), but you have to wade into the bloody thing, clamber up onto one of the rocky platforms at the back, stick your thumb into the mouth of the horse to the far left, and say a spell incantation.

Oh, to just tap a few bricks in a wall with a wand.

Sure, we English may be boring, but by Merlin, Diagon Alley is both secure and accessible!

Of course, one of the stones on the lip of the fountain has a keep-dry charm on it, keyed to wizards. They don't tell foreigners of course, which means that anyone wandering down their magical street dripping-wet is easily identified as an out-of-towner.

Sodding bastards.

I was so glad that the photo they took of me in the Vatican was snapped as I was squinting in the sudden light of the revealed spy-gear. With the rather unflattering shot I was thankfully unrecognisable as The-Boy-Who-Lived. The photo itself had been plastered on the Italian Ministry's Wanted board, but it was set amongst several dozen other photos of wizards and witches who had tried to cast a spell in St. Peters that I felt comfortable I wasn't going to be troubled any time soon. Mind you, it would have been rather inconvenient if they'd managed to snap a decent picture. Nevertheless, I wore a headband of black cotton, charmed to be both absorbent and cooling. It covered my scar quite nicely, though it made me look about fifteen years out of fashion.

Finally, I managed to get even my underwear dry (while still wearing all my robes, which was a neat, if obscene looking trick), and I stepped into the nearest apothecary. Immediately, I was greeted by someone who could only be described as the opposite of a greasy prick who goes by the moniker 'Snivellus'.

She was enormous, even for Italian motherly types. Not even Molly Weasley came close. What appeared to be a permanent, welcoming smile was etched into her face in such a way that, despite the fact that she wouldn't be entering any Miss Insert-Country-Here competitions any time soon, an inner beauty shone through. This was someone who didn't look like she'd ever had a bad thought about anyone in the world.

Her vibrant hair was dyed to look as though it had just emerged from a nuclear waste disposal unit. Her fingernails were painted a colour somewhere between calf-shit green and cat-vomit yellow. I'm not sure I could identify the colour any other way. I was sufficiently unnerved by her exceedingly vocal and physical welcome that I literally stood there dumbfounded.

"Welcome, welcome!" she bellowed, waving me into her store. "A foreigner, yes? Would you like me to speak English? French? German, perhaps?"

I shrugged. "I can understand each of them, as well as Italian, Dutch, Spanish and Japanese, so by all means, pick whichever you like."

Her eyes lit up. "Ah, an *educated* man. It is an honour to welcome you to my humble store. My name is Cerelia, how may I be of assistance? Are you looking for anything in particular? Or are you simply browsing to pass the time?" she asked, seemingly without drawing breath.

I didn't make an issue of the fact that I didn't actually *know* the languages, just that with the earring, I could understand them. "I'm James. Nice to meet you. Um, I was rather hoping you had some rather rare potion reagents and a few other odds and ends I need for a project." I pulled out a list. "Some powdered manticore bone, preferably from the jaw. Lower jaw, if at all possible. Some- well, here," I said, passing her the list. "Perhaps it would be easier to just give you this."

She gave me a knowing smile, accepted the list and scanned down. "Well, well. What are you intending to do with these?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Brew some potions, of course."

Her perpetual smile faded. “There are very few potions you need un-spun acromantula silk for. None of them are entirely... legal.”

My own smile disappeared. “That item specifically *isn't* for a potion. Notice that it is in a second group of items at the bottom of the list? I need a pair of uncontaminated acromantula silk sacs, if I haven't been specific enough.”

Her smile slowly returned. “Ah, I see. Good. I can help you, but it will be expensive. Very expen-” she stopped quickly.

I shrugged and opened my mouth to reply when I noticed two things. She was no longer smiling at all. In fact, she looked terrified. Second, and rather thankfully, she wasn't looking at me. I turned to see a sleazy, leather-clad young man saunter in. A smirk reminiscent of Malfoy at his best was plastered on his lips as he casually made his way towards us, before shoving me out of the way.

“You're late. My father hates it when people pay late.”

Cerelia began to stammer something, but a snarl appeared on my face and before she could answer, I snapped, “Does he hate it when you act polite too?”

The smirk on his face twisted into a look of incredulous distain. “Who the fuck are you?” he snarled.

I brushed my robes where he'd touched me in a not-too-subtle insult. “I doubt you have the capacity to pronounce my full name, since it has more than one syllable.”

His eyes flashed red. “Speak Italian, English bastard. Or can't you speak a civilised language?”

I sighed. Understanding every language is simple, but it does tend to be confusing you when you think you're listening in English to someone speaking something else. “Any language is sullied when you wrap your tongue around it. I'd have a bit of difficulty finding one after you've mangled a few. Why don't you be a good little boy and fuck off until I've finished with my business?”

Cerelia whimpered and scuttled behind the counter, feverishly mumbling prayers. She crouched down out of sight as the plonker's face reddened in a Vernon-esque way that actually gave me a wonderfully pleasant sensation of *déjà vu*.

I'm not stupid. A sleazy guy, swaggering with invulnerability, demanding monies from shopkeepers who are terrified of him, and thinks the world revolves around him; I know it probably means organised crime, and in Italy, the mafia. But to tell the truth, I honestly had no idea that wizards had mafia families. Normally, I wouldn't have interfered, but something about him just really pissed me off. Perhaps it was the fact that I had to keep myself from insulting him by calling him a ferret. Despite blowing Malfoy's hand clean off, things between the two of us never really got a chance to be settled once and for all before he met his rather overdue end at the hands of the very people he had insulted for six years.

My notion on the newcomer's family ties were confirmed when he drew his wand and a long-bladed knife from his hip. “I'll kill you now, English scum. That will teach you to mess with a Falcone.”

I sighed with exaggerated pleasure and gave a little twist of my wrist, letting the wand in my right sleeve drop into my waiting hand. “You know, it's been *months* since anyone tried to kill me,” I said casually. “I was beginning to feel distinctly unappreciated.”

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I never really got to watch movies much when I was growing up. I got to listen to them, of course, from under the stairs, but only Dudley was permitted to actually sit up and watch them. I had been making up for that recently with Hermione; she had been suggesting some of the better films from all sorts of different genres. Both Blaise and I were spellbound by some of her selections, and the three of us would often spend an evening lying in bed together, munching on popcorn and watching different movies before entertaining ourselves in another manner. One type of film I found myself loving (even though the girls found them ridiculous) was the Spaghetti Western.

I imagine the scene outside the apothecary would have been familiar to any aficionado of that genre. The entire front window of the store literally exploded outward as a limp, badly cut and bloody body was tossed through it on an almost horizontal trajectory, spinning out of control. The shrill, girlish scream emanating from the mafia wizard's throat would not have been out of place coming from a first-year Hufflepuff witch under the attention of Peeves, and any muggle-born observers nearby would have noticed the unmistakable application of the Doppler Effect as the moron flew past their ears at high speed.

I stepped through the now vacant windowpane, and into the street with a studied lack of care, my posture screaming casual boredom. As much as I hated doing it (not to mention attracting all this attention), I had to act as dissimilar to Harry Potter as possible. Acting like an attention seeking jerk, while almost expected of me, would cause enough people to question my identity if it was revealed.

I brushed a non-existent spec of dust from my shoulder, ignoring the stares I was suddenly getting from the rest of the wizards and witches in the street. I focused on my assailant, taking in the scene.

He was lying in a slowly spreading pool of blood, groaning and whimpering pitifully. For all his airs, for all his bravery at having an entire family name behind him, he was still just a bully. A bully, who happily pushes those weaker than him around, but begs to be left alone from those stronger than he. Typical.

As I made my way over to him, he finally looked up. Seeing me approach, he whined like a kicked dog, and rolled over onto his backside, scrabbling away as quickly as he could. Since he was slipping and sliding in his own blood, he wasn't making a great deal of progress. Figuring out that he wasn't going to escape me that way, he propped himself up onto his left elbow, and shielded his face with his right forearm.

“Please, no!” he begged.

I crouched down in front of him and waited for him to lower his arm, so I could look into his eyes. Finally, after not being hit for nearly half a minute, he winced and gingerly lowered his arm. I held up his wand, which I had taken from him almost offensively easily back in the shop. “Interesting wand. Cedar?”

His eyes flickered around the crowd, all of whom were watching the scene with a curious mixture of trepidation and satisfaction. Finally, he fixed his gaze back on me and nodded. “Y-yes.”

I raised it in my fist and brought it down on my knee, snapping it in two. “Get another one. You can’t use this one for crap.” I dropped the pieces at his feet and rose. “Go home. Train for twenty years or so, and you might just be a decent wizard by then. Look me up, you may actually be a challenge,” I offered, before turning away from him and walking back to the apothecary, my shoes crunching on the tiny shards of broken glass that had made it this far down the street.

Cerelia gapped at me as I re-entered the shop. Displaying only minor irritation on my face, I said, “I suppose you’d better add the cost of replacing the window to the list. Now, how long until you have my order together?”

She blinked and shook her head slightly, to clear the scene. “Um, t-tomorrow?”

“What time?”

“Ah, um, er, f-four?”

“Four o’clock?”

She nodded fervently.

“And how much in total?” I asked.

She swallowed. “Um, never mind.”

I sighed deeply. “Don’t be ridiculous. You just said that just one item on the list would be expensive. I can’t let you lose money that way. Ignore what just happened, how much for my order?”

She flushed pink, but scuttled behind the counter and scribbled quickly with a quill. “Six-sixteen hundred galleons?” she stammered, obviously rounding off. From the numbers she had been jotting down, she had definitely rounded down.

Expensive indeed, even with my discount. “Fine,” I replied, digging into my money pouch. I pulled out a couple of massive rolls of galleons, which suddenly became much heavier as they left the confines of a lightened, ever-expanding pouch. “Here’s two, four, six, eight hundred,” I counted, putting the coin rolls on the counter, looking for all the world like a collection of miniature golden skyscrapers. “I’ll pay the rest tomorrow on delivery, yes?”

She nodded in agreement, sweeping the bound rolls of coins off the counter and into a drawer. I nodded farewell, turned and left the store, feeling every one of the shocked and stunned eyes that followed my movements out of the area and back into muggle Rome. I took muggle transport back to my hotel, keeping an eye out for any ill-dressed followers. My plans had to be modified slightly now. Drawing on my extensive experience with Fred and George, I began mentally preparing for my next inevitable encounter with the wizarding mafia.

I made it back without incident, and I retired to my room. A hint of steam in the air set my reflexes into overdrive, banishing the weariness of the day, and I froze, examining my surroundings with every sense I had.

A faint noise was coming from the ensuite, the door to which was closed. I glanced down and saw light coming out of the crack between the door and floor. The light levels changed as an object that cast a shadow moved in the small bathroom.

Who knew where I was, I asked myself, both wands now in my hands. I scanned the room looking for clues, noting an extra case open on the floor on the other side of the bed. A small, familiar case.

I fought down a grin, and wondered just how I would play this.

I didn’t get to make up my mind in time however, as at that moment, the door opened and Blaise walked out into the bedroom, stark naked, humming to herself and towelling her hair. The instant she saw me she jerked as though an electric shock had surged through her, jumped about a foot in the air and she gave a little cry of fright.

“Nice to see you, Honey,” I offered, giving her wonderfully toned body a leer.

“DamnitHarryYouscaredme!” she blurted, clutching her heart, breathing deeply.

I kicked the door to the room closed behind me, not wanting anyone else to get an eyeful of a view reserved only for me. I tossed my bag onto the bed and swept her up in my arms.

“It’s wonderful to see you,” I said, hugging her tightly before placing a chaste kiss on her lips. “But what are you doing here?”

Blaise wrapped her still slightly damp arms around my neck and forced a more intense kiss. “I missed you. Isn’t that reason enough?”

I waggled my eyebrows at her. “Of course not. You’re a Slytherin, you’re up to something,” I teased.

She pouted, and a glint of mischief suddenly appeared in her eyes.

I must say, it is mindbogglingly distracting to have a delectable woman press her naked body against you and rub up and down. It makes thinking rationally very difficult.

"Maybe I am, but that is a discussion we can have at another time," she whispered huskily in my ear.

She knows me way too well.

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We both needed to use the shower again after our exertions, and soaping Blaise's petite form had me aching to take her once more. But she promised me that if I took her out to a nice Italian meal, she'd tell me why she was here.

I had no idea my curiosity urge was so strong, but it overrode my teenage libido, and within an hour we were sitting across from each other at restaurant that had been recommended to me. It was at one end of a blind street, and had little illumination outside as an advertisement, but the place was packed five minutes after opening and had a line of patrons outside.

They were mostly locals too, which I took as a very good sign.

We enjoyed a wonderful dinner, sharing each other's meal. Finally, my agitation got the best of me.

"Well?"

She arched her eyebrows and slithered her legs against mine. "I'm impressed at how long you lasted there, lover boy."

I coughed theatrically. "Now, now, I don't want to have to get rough with you."

Her eyes lit up. "Why not? That sounds like fun!"

I couldn't keep my lips from twitching with amusement, and we both burst into laughter.

"Fine, how have you managed to take time off to visit me? I thought you were stuck at the hospital full time?" I asked, once we got ourselves back under control.

She frowned. "Harry, it's Saturday. I get Saturday afternoons and Sundays off."

I blinked, and looked at my watch. "Is it the weekend already?"

She laughed at my confusion. "No wonder you didn't expect to see me. I simply thought that I could use a nice Italian break this weekend, and knew that you happened to be here all alone."

I grinned, but shook my head. "Try again."

She pouted innocently. "Are you reading my mind?"

I shook my head once more. "Nope. I don't want to get distracted by your memories of you and your boyfriend."

She smirked. "Such nice memories they are too."

I picked up the wine glass in front of me and took a sip. "Am I going to have to guess why you are here?"

She thought for a second. "You know, that may be more fun."

I hummed to myself, looking directly at her. "All right, did Hermione tell you what Dumbledore said?"

Blaise shook her head, suddenly serious. "No. I didn't see her until day after you left, anyway."

I blinked. "Then you weren't mad at me for just up and leaving? After all, I only left you a note saying that I didn't know when I'd be back."

She shook her head, surprise showing clearly on her face. "Of course not. Leaving aside the fact that I'm hardly home, I figured Dumbledore would have convinced you to do something, some task or other."

I frowned for a second, counting days in my head. "Hang on; you said you didn't see Hermione until the day after we went to see Dumbledore. How? You stay at the campus that day, because you work the night shift."

Blaise suddenly looked nervous. "Um, I saw her when she brought Dumbledore in."

I sagged my shoulders. "Bloody hell, is she all right? Did they find what they were looking for? What happened?"

Blaise rolled her eyes at me.

I coughed and looked down, embarrassed. "Ok, she's fine, I would have been told earlier if she wasn't. I guess they did find what they were looking for, if he needed medical attention for injuries. Can you tell me what happened?"

She shook her head. "Hermione has been tight lipped so far. She won't tell me a thing, saying that it is so secret that most of the Ministry doesn't know. And Dumbledore didn't come in for injuries."

I frowned. "Then what?"

She narrowed her eyes and her expression grew hard. "I can't tell you what, Harry. You know that."

I nodded, suitably chastised. "Yes, sorry, I do know."

Her face softened. "But I can tell you that they definitely didn't find what they were looking for. That much I did get out of Hermione. From what I can gather, their trip together was a complete balls-up."

"Do they need me to come home?"

Blaise shrugged. "They'd like to talk to you, but they can wait for you to finish whatever you're doing." She tilted her head to one side. "Are you going to tell me what you're doing? Or am I only going to find out once it's done?"

I sighed. "We're trying to chase down some objects Tom enchanted to ensure he could return after death. If we destroy them, he can't come back, no matter what he does."

Blaise's eyes widened, but she nodded with satisfaction. "Fair enough, though I bet there is a fair bit of detail you skipped over there."

I nodded. "Yeah, but you are safe just knowing that much."

A defiant expression flashed over her face, but she buried it quickly. "I suppose. I just wish that this were all over. It just always seems to come down to you, doesn't it?"

I nodded, draining the rest of my glass. "True, but I've been thinking. As much as I dislike it, I'm not sure I'd trust this to someone else."

She raised her eyebrows at me, but also drained her glass. "That's an interesting perspective."

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Blaise and I had a wonderfully relaxing lie in the next morning; we didn't actually get out of the bed until early afternoon. Blaise grumbled for a bit, light-heartedly complaining that she hadn't got to see much of Rome in the day she had free.

I promised that I'd take her here for her holidays, which were coming up in a couple of months. I rather hoped by then that all this business would be done by then.

Her portkey activated, sending her whizzing off home, and got myself ready to go and pick up my purchases.

I was expecting to see some mafia goons when I revisited the apothecary. I had no illusions that Cerelia would keep my next appearance secret, so a scouting job was certainly in order.

I decided to wear Ron's face on arrival this time. I wandered around the magical piazza behind Trevi Fountain for an hour before my order was due to be ready, simply observing the comings and goings of people around the apothecary. I made a mental note of the location of three pairs of wizards, who, like me, just seemed to be hanging around, doing nothing much but wait. As I felt my clothes loosen, I knew the potion was wearing off, and that I was becoming smaller, back to my usual scrawny self. I managed to scoot into a blind alley to let the potion completely run its course.

I gave a small sigh as I looked down at my now baggy robes. It only took a quick wand flick to transfigure them back to their original, well-fitted size. I did miss towering over people while disguised as my best friend. Ron had finally stopped growing only in the past three months or so, and had capped out at a little over six and a half feet. While it was vastly helpful in his burgeoning career as a professional Quidditch Keeper, his height was more than a little annoying to me, since I had to crane my neck just to look up at him.

I adjusted my now-fitting clothes, checked my defences, and exited the blind alley. As I approached the apothecary, each of the three pairs of wizards broke off whatever conversation they were in the middle of, and began converging on me.

Idiot. Just shout out your intentions, why don't you?

Cerelia was quite welcoming, though I could sense her nervousness easily, emanating from her like an emotive aroma. I was polite, but brief, as she collected my order and placed them out on the counter in front of me. I examined each carefully, accepting them all as fit for purpose. I paid her the outstanding balance, watching with mild amusement as each roll of two hundred galleons disappeared into a bottomless drawer within seconds.

I waved away her stammered thanks and hurried admonishment to be careful, holding up a short wooden stick I had charmed to look like my wand. Zab's lessons were coming in very handy, and I was as protected as I could be. With a real wand strapped to each of my forearms and the fake wand in my grasp, I stepped out into the street.

Where an invisible fist slammed into my stomach, making me wheeze and double over. I fell to my knees, unable to keep my footing.

Pain lanced through my back, as someone kicked me in the kidneys. One of my assailants snatched the stick from my hand. Keeping my head, I reached across with my left hand and pulled a button off my robe's right sleeve, partially activating the magic imbued into the material.

"I guess I didn't need to wait twenty years, eh?" came an unwelcome, but hardly unexpected voice. Several other voices joined in the merriment,

laughing and joking amongst themselves.

A meaty fist grabbed the hair on the top of my head, and I was painfully hauled to my feet. The slimy prat I humiliated yesterday appeared in front of me, a familiar expression on his features (just like a Malfoy), and he draped his invisibility cloak over one arm. He held up the worthless stick he had snatched from me, and then snapped it in front of my eyes. "What do you think of that, eh?" he sneered, not noticing that there was no magical core. Unobservant idiot.

"You hit like a girl," I chuckled, goading him while ignoring the pain in my gut. I whispered a command word under my breath, making it sound like I was insulting him.

Instantly, the final protections activated, and the material of my robes stiffened.

Slimy stepped forward and drove his fist into my gut again, with all his might.

It must have been like punching a statue. Hermione and I had designed the robes, once solid, to withstand the impact of anything up to and including a bloody jumbo jet.

The blow shattered both the enchantments on my robe (which were designed to dissipate after a single strike) and in all probability, all the bones in his hand too. I was rather thankful that the protections we had built into my robe ended after that one strike. It would have been inconvenient to try and move in robes that were more solid than a block of granite. I quickly raised one foot and dropped the button I'd ripped off.

It hit the ground with an almighty flash. A powerful magical shockwave travelled along the ground and floored everyone within five metres who were standing on two feet, and sent my hair standing on end as the magic entering me sought somewhere to go. George had mentioned something about standing on two feet 'completing the circuit', but I didn't really pay all that much attention to the details. All I needed to remember from his instructions was that I had to be standing on one leg when I dropped the button.

Oddly, Slimy was also relatively unaffected by the Wheeze I just set off. Mind you, that was probably because he was curled up on the ground, clutching his ruined hand and whimpering piteously. I drew both my wands and, holding them together, began covering the six recumbent lackeys with the most painful and difficult to remove hexes I could think of. Powered by brother wand working in unison, it was going to take someone with Dumbledore-like power to remove them before they faded naturally, which for all I knew may well be around a decade. I wanted them to have a long time to think about blindly supporting the leather-clad fuckwit.

Once I was sure that not one of the six hit-wizards would be eating, talking, walking or even shagging unaided anytime in the next year or so, I pushed my yew wand back into the holster on my left forearm and focused on my new friend. Ignoring his whines, I summoned his new toy. The pristine oak wand flew to me, where I turned it over, examining it closely.

"Now, you were saying?" I asked absently.

For the second time in two days, the mafia scion whimpered and scrabbled backwards, trying to get away from me. "No, please! I'm sorry!"

I shook my head. "Right. Of course you are. Tell me, exactly what would you have done if I had begged the same of you?" I asked, picking up his discarded invisibility cloak. Even though I already had two (my fathers, and the one I'd purloined from the battlefield at Hogsmeade), I'm sure Ron would want one. Or maybe I should give it to Hermione or Blaise.

"May I?" I asked, before stuffing it into my bag at his nod.

He hadn't answered my previous question, knowing that telling the truth wouldn't help his position, and lying would have made it worse.

I sighed at his silence. Well, relative silence, his sobbing was getting on my nerves. "What spell shall I cast upon you now, hm?" I asked as I ran my holly wand over his new oak one, muttering a few spells under my breath. I never really thought I'd ever get a chance to use these charms, which I had discovered in one of Zab's libraries.

Once done, I aimed my wand at the slimeball and asked, "Any last requests?"

"Enough!"

I turned gently to see a well-dressed, aristocratic man with a neatly trimmed beard and a cane standing amongst the six thugs I'd incapacitated. He had at least a dozen other wizards arrayed behind him, but the respect they gave this newcomer instantly got my attention.

"Ah, the guy with the really big testicles arrives," I grinned.

His face flickered with anger at me and my lack of respect. "That is my son," he said.

I gaped theatrically. "You admit it? You actually publicly acknowledge this waste of oxygen as your own flesh and blood?" I looked down at the son briefly before once more facing the father. "Good God, you do know that this sort of thing is the result when siblings marry, don't you?" I asked, gesturing at the mewling moron.

"Father," the broken wizard wheezed, having climbed to his knees. He reached out imploringly with his unharmed hand to the powerful figure, his other hand cradled against his chest.

"Shush," I said, absently kicking his shattered hand. Not too hard, mind you, but enough to keep his attention on the pain, rather than his surroundings. "Don't speak unless you are spoken to."

To his credit, the head honcho didn't visibly react to his son's predicament or suddenly shrill theatrics. "I did not authorise this," he said, gesturing to the groaning lackeys.

"Should I care?" I asked him. I tossed the oak wand down on his son, telling him, "Curse me again, and it will be the last thing you ever do."

The pathetic idiot scrabbled for the wand, finally getting a solid grip. I turned back to his father. "Sorry, you were saying?"

One of the older man's retinue had examined one of the bodies, and discovered how powerful the hexes were. He whispered something quickly into the boss' ear. The man's posture suddenly changed, and I noted a great deal more respect in his tone.

"I offer you a deal. Leave now, and never come back and we shall seek no retribution."

I shook my head. "Sorry, no deal. I may need to come back for some extra stuff before I'm done here."

He narrowed his eyes, and I felt a flickering against my mental shields. Though not particularly powerful, the attempt was subtle, and I probably would have missed it if I hadn't been protecting myself as a matter of course.

"Find anything interesting?" I grinned humourlessly.

The mental presence retreated. "You are strong. But if you remain, I cannot guarantee your safety."

I raised an eyebrow, knowing that I was pushing my luck, but I wanted to see just how far I could go with this. "I wasn't aware I needed your protection. I certainly haven't so far, and if these idiots are the best you've got, I hardly need it anyway."

The man's eyes flickered briefly, as they had when he was using Legilimency on me. But I felt no intrusion, no attack. Obviously, I wasn't the target.

"*Avada Kedavra !*" shouted a voice behind me.

I sighed as the expected green flash didn't arrive. The sound of a body collapsing to the ground did, however. The crowd around me gasped, but I was focused on the mob boss in front of me. His deliberately bland expression turned horrified.

I'm not really surprised, since it may well have been the first time he'd ever seen a curse come out of a wand the wrong way. "*I told him*," I said, feigned sympathy in my voice. "I told him less than a minute ago that the next time he cursed me would be the last thing he did."

The boss had paled, and was trembling. "My son. What did you do to my son?"

"Nothing at all," I shrugged. "Mind you, I *did* mess about with his wand, making the next spell he cast through it come out the other end." I shrugged nonchalantly. "Just something I picked up somewhere."

"You. You killed him," the old man wheezed, getting angrier by the second.

"No," I said, holding up a finger in a lecturing pose. "He cast the spell, on your order, by the way. He was just incompetent enough that he didn't realise that his wand had been sabotaged." As I spoke, I again drew my yew wand and subtly put both of my wands together, side-by-side.

"You will not leave this place," spat the now out-of-control boss. "Kill him!" he shouted to the wizards arrayed behind him.

Before one of them could even begin to mouth a curse, I apparated behind the group, and stunned two of them before they realised where I was. My war game apparition training was going to come in very handy.

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With a shield spell cast with brother wands, a handful of experimental Wheezes (defined, of course, as ones without safety features...), recent practise of apparating every two seconds in a hostile environment and a thorough knowledge of incapacitating hexes and jinxes, I literally waded through over half of the mafia wizards before they managed to organise any coherent defence. Even so, with so much confusion in the fight, at one point I appeared at the edge of the crowd and let the panicking wizards hurl curses at each other for a moment or two before they caught on.

Finally, it boiled down to me against three of the more senior wizards. Men who were magically strong in their own right, but who also had decades of experience of duelling. My spells, though powerful, were deflected easily, with a casual skill that made me want to practise for the next twenty years to accomplish.

I recast the shield spell, strengthening my defences, before launching a powerful assault on the three. I reached down into my reserves of power, deliberately bringing forth anger at the unprovoked attacks I'd been subjected to. One of the three tried to flank me, but I reached out and with a *push*, tossed him hard into a wall made of heavy-looking stones. Not something he could have expected. Or enjoyed, for that matter.

"Enough!"

I glanced quickly to see who called that out, only to discover that nearly everyone in the crowd had their wands out. While my heart stopped for a second, it began beating again when I realised that the bristling crowd all had their wands pointed towards my opponents.

"What?" demanded the mob boss. "What is this?! I am Salvatore Falcone!"

"I know how you are. We've been afraid of you for too long, Falcone. This young man has shown us just how impotent you really are."

The murmuring crowd agreed with the unseen wizard's words. Several others vocally agreed, before the tide of opinion flooded through the gates of

fear, drowning the suddenly petrified mafia king-pin.

I smirked at him, though he didn't notice. The crowd began to surge forward, cursing and hexing the unconscious lackeys. Both of his remaining bodyguards went down to spells fired at them from behind. Not wanting to be anywhere near a howling mob as it takes its revenge, I apparated out of there, popping into existence directly in my hotel room.

"Well," I said to no one in particular, dumping my bag down on the bed. "That was fun," I said as I sat down on the bed. I imagine that Mr. Falcone certainly didn't know just how bad a day he was going to have when he woke this morning.

In the past, I'd probably have felt guilt at what had happened. I'd probably have stayed to prevent any deaths, protecting those who would have killed me without a second thought. Now, I only really only gave them one thought. And that was, 'Stuff them'.

After a nice dinner of seafood and pasta at a local restaurant, I returned to my hotel room, and transfigured the bed into a large workspace. I set out all my purchases on the transfigured desk and organised them into groups. Once I was ready, I pulled out the mirror. I needed Hermione's help to build a few items that I'd need.

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## Journeyman Potter The Art of Larceny

Hermione had not been impressed with my plans. Not that I'd gone out of my way to explain them to her, but she had refused to help until I'd told her what I'd be using the items for in the first place. While I'd been sorely tempted to lie, I just couldn't justify that to myself. Not after what Dumbledore had done to me in the past. She had gone from shrill with disbelief to icily silent within a minute.

"Harry James Potter! I cannot believe you are even considering this, this..."

I raised my eyebrows, giving her a questioning look. "This what?"

"This larceny! You are planning on stealing from the Pope!"

I sighed. "Would he just hand the journal over to me?"

She frowned. "Well..."

I continued, interrupting her. "Oh, I suppose I'd actually have to ask him personally first. Would he grant me an interview?"

"I don't-"

"I suppose I'd have to have a good reason for a personal meeting. Would telling his secretary that I was trying to save the world from an evil man get me in?"

Hermione actually blushed. "It would probably get you taken away in a straight jacket."

I grinned at her. "Hermione, love, listen. I have an invisibility cloak. I can cast magic spells. There isn't a muggle bank in England I couldn't get into, rob blind and waltz out of again. Yes, stealing is wrong, I agree, but this needs to be done."

Nearly a fortnight later, I silently crept through Piazza San Pietro once more, dressed rather differently.

Rather than give the ex-mafia moron's invisibility cloak away, I incorporated it into my wardrobe. I had brought along the cloak I'd nicked from the battlefield at Hogsmeade, so I now had two spare, incredibly rare items. I essentially cut up both cloaks and sewed them together into a rough set of robes. Instead of an invisibility cloak, I had an invisibility suit.

I'm hardly a master tailor though, and the first few times I put it on I tore the seams just by moving normally. After the third error, I picked apart one set of robes I'd had for a while, and matched the pattern to the invisibility material. But now, after resewing it over and over, I had a loose set of robes that completely hid me without threatening to tangle my feet when trying to run. Hmm, maybe I could patent this and go into business supplying the Ministry and Order with these things.

*Concentrate*, man!

I knew that there were spells that rendered invisibility cloaks useless, and that they would undoubtedly be used within the cathedral itself. But I assumed that they wouldn't dispel the invisibility immediately, since that would prevent *authorised* use of invisibility inside the holy building.

I had a few other items I had created in my room and some potions I'd brewed. As ready as I'd ever be, it was now or never to take on the fortress-like St. Peters.

I made full use of my new gloves, the only part of me that was visible. I was rather proud of them. Matt black when unworn, the gloves were made of a mimic's skin, which allowed them to take the colour and texture of any surface they touched. I'd also enspelled the palm and fingers with the unspun contents of the acromantula silk sacs, giving me the ability to climb the walls just like a cartoon character Dudley used to watch when we were kids.

(The first time I tested my gloves, their failure was fairly obvious, and I nearly fell over laughing. The test had involved me jumping up and pressing my fingers high up the wall in my hotel room, in an effort to have the gloves' fingers stick to the wall, and have me hang there without falling. The first of which I must say, worked perfectly. What wasn't planned was the fact that my hands didn't stay in the gloves. After all, how do you take a glove off? You pull on the fingers! I had collapsed straight down into an undignified heap on the floor as my hands slipped out. It took me a while to stop laughing and even longer to work out how to get the gloves down from the wall to make modifications.)

So rather than creep through the babbling crowds unseen, I climbed up one of the pillars surrounding the piazza to the top of the enclosing structure, and ran along that structure's roof. With no one to accidentally bump into, and in a place where there would be far less attention, I quickly made my way to St. Peter's entrance. Or, more specifically, the façade in front of the building, *above* the entrance.

I reached the main building rather quickly. With my gloves, I managed to creep along the front face of the building, hanging from my hands. I didn't have the exceptional strength of that cartoon character, so I had to rely on my own muscles. Fortunately, it didn't take much more of an effort to hang from my fingers as it did to hang from a broom flying at over two hundred miles an hour. I inched sideways across the face of the massive church, pausing occasionally when a stone ledge or statue came within reach of my feet. I'd take the weight off my hands to get my breath and to give my arms a rest.

I scaled up the front façade and finally crept over the balcony that the pope uses to address the faithful during his masses. Though there were no guards present here, I could feel the subtle tripping of the wards, alerting the people within the well-protected building that an intruder was in their midst.

I quickly made my way into the building proper, looking for a likely candidate for the next stage of my plan.

A cassocked Cardinal was half-jogging down a corridor, a sheaf of paper in his arms. I glanced around, noting that there was no one in sight, so I snapped off a stunner, dropping him to the hard, marble floor. I raced over to the poor guy, quickly pulling a pair of potions from my belt.

I poured one down his throat, and rubbed the paste-like contents of the other onto a tiny spot on the inside of his wrists. I glanced down at his feet, noting with irritation that his boots would take me an hour or so to remove.

Forgoing the final touch, I cast an enervation charm to finish off the deception. Even though I was expecting it, it still gave me a small shock as the man's eyes snapped open, the pupils like tiny pinpricks in his light grey irises.

"I see him! He's here! My Lord is here! Praise be!" he shouted, struggling to his feet.

The befuddled man sprinted down the corridor and down the nearest stairs, into the church proper, shrieking his potion induced, euphoric rantings. Almost as soon as he was out of sight, more shouts and screams joined in as an accompaniment.

I grinned tightly as I scaled the wall to hang from the roof. The paste I'd rubbed into his wrists would cause blood to seep through the skin, leaving no wound behind. Even as the blood was wiped away, more would seep through. Which, combined with his divine visions, would undoubtedly attract a great deal of attention. Especially in this building.

I swung down the corridor, avoiding the suddenly packed hallways, full of churchmen, soldiers and the poor folk trying to find me in the chaos. Calls of 'Stigmata' echoed throughout the building, attracting more and more people. I hurried down one corridor that seemed to have fewer people than the others, looking for someone alone with whom I could duplicate my trick.

I discovered one of the Swiss Guard making his way towards the disturbance. Obviously it was his turn on the night shift, since he was still in a pair of shorts and t-shirt, looking rather rumpled and only half-awake, and struggling into his uniform while hopping along the corridor. I grinned to myself. One more quick stunner, judicious use of two potions, and a final enervation charm, and I'd have an even more effective distraction. This time, I even managed to put some of the paste on his feet too.

I watched with an enormous amount of satisfaction as the partially dressed guard shrieked about his divine visions to the world. People are required to wear long trousers or a full dress to enter the place. Having one of the guards run around in his boxers may well give some people here a heart attack. I glanced down at the small container of paste. It was nearly empty. I didn't have enough for another go.

A pity. The potion had been difficult to brew, and since it achieved the consistency of peanut butter by the time it was finished, stirring it was tiring to say the least. It was certainly worth it, though. I silently thanked Zab and his vast, if ancient, potion library. When I originally found the potion recipe, in a medical text book published in the sixteen hundreds, I actually wondered about the pranking possibilities. The paste soaked into the skin (requiring the person dispensing the stuff to wear gloves), and drew blood to the surface. Generally, it was used to draw out poisoned blood around a bite mark or wound. And since it didn't break the skin to do so, the recovery time was much quicker.

These days, there were literally dozens of potions (not to mention bezoars), which would counteract any poisons in a person's bloodstream, with far better effect. Most were easier to brew too, and that made this potion obsolete. In this case though, it was just what I needed.

Calls of 'Praise be', echoed throughout the building, indicating that at least one of my test subjects had been successful in tricking those around him. I glanced around the corridors and passageways, looking for one which richly decorated, highly guarded and exhibited evidence of much use.

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I discovered my destination far less quickly than I'd hoped. The building was disconcertingly laid out, with no rhyme or reason to the architecture. Despite my efforts to travel unseen, I had been forced to confront five separate patrols of Swiss Guards, and I only managed to scrape a victory against the last two thanks to blind luck.

I was beginning to panic, thinking that I'd never find the Pope's chambers before I was eventually overpowered, before discovering the entrance I was after. The two permanent guards outside the antechamber to the Pope's private apartments were easy to spot, since nearly a dozen extra guards accompanied them, all looking murderously alert. I guess my distractions were seen through. More than one gun barrel was pointed in my general direction at all times, and it was only my invisibility suit that kept them from noticing me (and cause my death from lead poisoning).

I shook my head. I should have known that making two people appear to have stigmata would ring some alarm bells somewhere. These guys look like they have no sense of humour and a great deal of cynicism.

It took a rather impressive effort on my part to confound the majority of the guards, and over half of them bolted in search of a fictitious vision of a gun-totting, masked terrorist, much to the dismay of the remaining guards. As much as I dislike pandering to stereotypes, it was quite obviously the quickest way to get them to run.

Foregoing subtlety, I crept up beside the nearest, gathered my strength and *pushed* out at the last five, sending them flying along the corridor with shouts of surprise and denial. Several stunners later, the dozen guards who had been standing their ground outside this room were either unconscious or wondering where the armed fellow with a personal disagreement with fundamental church policies went.

I spent the next few minutes building a set of defences that would have put Grimmauld Place to shame. I layered aversion charm after aversion charm, transfigured a granite wall in the middle of the passageway and lined the area with delayed blast stunning spells. Anyone coming near the place would have to overcome my aversion magic, break through a slab of stone two feet thick and dodge a dozen stunners coming from multiple directions.

This would give me a maximum of five minutes, if the wizards around here were any indication.

I finally crept into the antechamber leading into the Pope's rooms. The well-appointed room was empty, though showed signs of recent activity. Blueprints were arrayed on the large oak desk in the middle of the room. Papers, a computer and a couple of trays lay haphazardly on the floor nearby. Obviously, someone had swept the desk clear before laying his load down on the desk.

The rest of the room was opulent, yet utilitarian. There was no extraneous artwork or decorations, but the chairs and furniture were all expensively decorated and adorned. From the antique silver tea sets in a cabinet to the solid gold pens littering the floor, the room was filled with beautiful, but utilised items of all kinds.

The wall at the back of the antechamber was dominated by an enormous pair of double doors, the same style as the ones at the entry to this room. I turned to examine the doors leading into this chamber, noting that there were heavy wooden bars on the inner side. Well, it stands to reason that there would be the same on the other side of the doors to the Pope's room too.

"*Reducto* !" I cast at the closed doors, only to duck (and swear) reflexively as the spell rebounded straight back at me. A small explosion and a rain of stone chips occurred behind me as my spell hit the wall on the far side of the antechamber.

"Bugger," I said, casting a spell that would tell me if there was anyone in the corridor outside. No one. Yet. Well, it wouldn't be long. There was no way my little traps would keep powerful wizards at bay for more than a few moments. Fortunately, the new hole in the wall gave me an idea. I moved back in front of the Pope's doors, lined my wands up side by side and cast the spell again.

Not at the protected doors though, at the wall *next* to them.

The spell hit the marble-sheathed wall hard, sending shockwaves throughout the whole building. While my spell didn't break through the wall, it did send such a spider web of cracks through the stone that the hinges of the door came free from their moorings. The left massive door pulled away from its twin and arced over in a wonderfully slow show of gravity, allowing me entry.

Fortunately, I was not in the doorway, since the space was suddenly full of the rapid, full-throated crackle of aerodynamically shaped pieces of lead. Going through the now open portal would have sent anything short of a tank to meet its maker. I hurriedly cast another shield charm and cowered against the side of the antechamber as bits of marble and chips of granite rained down around me.

Not for the first time I wondered if what I was doing was strictly necessary. Perhaps diplomacy would have been a better bet. It was far too late now though.

The enormously loud expenditure of ammunition stopped temporarily, and I heard one voice command someone to check the antechamber. With an adrenaline-fuelled vertical leap, I touched the ceiling with my fingertips and hung there briefly, before pulling my body up and holding it tight against the roof.

A helmeted head slowly emerged from the ruins of the doorway, scanning the antechamber intently for intruders. "Nothing," the nervous soldier reported, before the head was withdrawn back into the room.

I silently dropped to the floor, holding my wands at the ready. Taking a leaf out of Dumbledore's book, back in the Department of Mysteries, I transfigured some of the free stone blocks into tiny stone dogs, and sent them into the Pope's chambers barking and growling. I didn't have the skill to actually make them into attack dogs, only just enough to give them voices and movement.

It was enough, however. The three guards in the Pope's private chambers were panicking at the unexpected intrusion and were shooting off rounds at the floor, shattering my creations to bits. I stood in the doorway and shouted, "*Accio* guns!" tearing the weapons from the guards' hands, as well as summoning all the holstered weapons in the room.

The weapons sparked and spat as they hit my shield, then dropped to the ground. I stepped over them, and into the room. The three guards, though disarmed, were certainly not rendered incapable. But what terrified me the most was that each looked directly at me and took on a martial arts stance that sent shivers of horror at the impending pain down my spine. As one they leapt at me, no fear in their eyes.

How could they see me?

Panicking, I *pushed*, sending all three of them plus half the nearby furniture into the wall on the far side of the room. And since it was a bloody big room, they built up enough momentum that furniture was destroyed and each of the guards slumped down unconscious, out of the fight.

But I took Moody's lesson to heart, and stunned each before checking to make sure they were in no danger of dying. I finished my diagnosis and accepted that each would survive. They'd have concussions, major headaches, fractures and assorted bruises mind you, but they would survive. I cast a mobilicorpus charm and levitated them all out of the room, dumping them unceremoniously in the antechamber before repairing the wall and the door. I needed time alone and no distractions to accomplish my little heist.

Who are you?"

I jumped, startled at the voice, and whipped around, wands leading. In front of me I saw a man instantly recognisable at the Pope, sitting in what looked like a huge glass box, built solidly into one wall, obviously for his protection. He was looking directly at me, obviously able to locate me in my invisible state. Without thinking, I threw back my hood, allowing him to see my face and replied, "Sorry, I cannot tell you that. I'm here for something dangerous."

The Pope straightened, pride and unbending determination quite visible in his posture. "Then you have made the effort for naught, wizard. There is nothing in this room that fits your description."

I nodded. "I know, your Holiness. The item I need is in your personal storeroom."

The Pope's eyes narrowed. "I shall never give you the key. Leave this place now."

I shook my head sadly, noting absently that I was covered with a fine layer of stone dust. My outline was perfectly visible to all. With a wave of my wand, the dust was removed, once more making me invisible. "I'm sorry. But as long as you have that book in your possession, an evil cannot be driven from this world. *Accio* keys!"

Keys flew to me from everywhere, from the broken belt of one of the recumbent guards, out of the keyholes of locked boxes on the shelves and even out of drawers by the massive bed. One drawer remained locked however, but it vibrated and shook as though something was struggling to escape. With a sigh, I sent another reducto curse at the ornate set of drawers, shattering the priceless piece of furniture. I quickly sifted through the remains and picked up an ancient looking key.

Cries from outside the room indicated that my outer defences had been breached. I drew my wands and reinforced both the door and the wall to the Pope's chambers. Once both were as strong as I could make them, I cast as many locking and defensive charms as I could remember. Before I had finished, muffled booms echoed throughout the room, signalling the efforts those outside were going through to gain entry.

I cast a detection charm, which lit up one otherwise inconspicuous wall. It took me what felt like an hour to discover the hidden keyhole, but once found, the old key fit and turned easily.

I'll give the Pope credit, despite the waves of panic and defeat I was detecting from his unoccluded mind, his poker face was well established, and outwardly gave no indication that I was just seconds from my goal.

The hidden door swung open, revealing a tightly curving stone spiral staircase, leading downward. Not exactly the epitome of Health and Safety; the only way a wheelchair would be getting down there was in pieces.

Trusting that my protective spells would keep the remaining guards out of the Pope's room for the moment, I descended the long, winding stairs. Though it felt as though I'd descended deep into the earth, it probably wasn't much deeper than the crypts, four or five levels down.

I absently cast "*Lumos* ," to keep the oppressive darkness at bay. Well before I reached the end of the stairs, I could sense the oily, dark magic residue in the air. I had a little trouble breathing for a second or two, before I mentally shook off the unholy stench of the place.

I held my wand high, to illuminate a treasure trove of items that had me gasping. I seriously wanted to return to the Pope and demand, "What on earth have you got back here? It stinks of pure evil!" Shelves were lined with arcane objects that my magical senses warned me to stay away from. Lifelike statues were arrayed around the room, along with jewellery, weapons and ugly pieces of artwork.

Light footprints in the dusty floor drew my attention to a set of bookshelves. The most recent visit someone had made down here was to go to a bookshelf and back again. I'd taken only one step towards the shelves before a sound straight out of my memories froze me to the spot. The soft, subtle, slithering of enormous coiled scales. Suddenly, the number of human statues took on a far more sinister meaning.

Instantly, I shut my eyes as tightly as I could. The slithering grew closer, and I heard a hissing.

*A man creature comes. I can smell it. Shall I eat this one? Or should I add him to my collection?*

Oh. Shit. They have a basilisk.

I drew a deep breath. *Stop* , I hissed in parseltongue.

Oddly, or perhaps, thankfully, the sound ceased.

*A manling who speaks the noble tongue? Who are you, little one?*

I tried to keep my heart from bursting through my chest. Didn't snakes have to obey a wizard who could speak their language? Perhaps I could command this one the same way Riddle commanded the one I killed.

*I merely seek a book. I shall leave you to your duties*, I continued, still with my eyes shut. I didn't want to be petrified, and Fawkes wasn't here to blind this one.

*You didn't answer me, manling.*

I licked my very dry lips. *I am one who learned to speak the language of serpents from the last of the line of Salazar Slytherin.*

*Who?* The basilisk asked, sounding slightly bored.

If I didn't have my eyes closed, I'd have blinked in shock. *Salazar Slytherin was one of the founders of the school of wizardry known as Hogwarts. His symbol was the serpent.*

*I have not heard of this Salazar, or this Hogwarts of which you speak, though this is not surprising. I have not had the pleasure of conversing with another being for many centuries.*

I swallowed nervously. *How old are you?* I hissed.

*What is time to a basilisk? We live forever, until we hear the accursed crowing of a cockerel.* The basilisk paused. *Why do you avert your eyes, wizard?*

Or until some idiot kid with no sense of personal safety jams a magical sword through the roof of your mouth and into your brain. *I do not wish to be turned to stone,* I replied simply.

I could almost sense the amusement coming off the creature. *You have nothing to fear from me, little one.*

*You won't attack?*

The amusement grew. *No, the light from your wand has disappeared. Without light, I cannot use my gaze to petrify.*

My heart nearly stopped, before I ran his words through my mind again. *Was that a joke?*

The basilisk sounded amused. *Of course, wizard. I could no more attack you than bite my own tail.*

My heart rate dropped from a vibration to a mere two hundred odd beats per minute. Steeling myself, I cracked my eyes open, only to see nothing. My wand had indeed gone out. *You are the protector of these objects?*

*I am.*

*What if I were to take just one?*

The basilisk seemed to think on that. *I would be unable to stop you, wizard. No serpent can disobey the orders given by one of your kind who speaks the noble tongue, not even one as ancient as I. But powerful as you must be to get this far, I suspect that you will not live to escape this place.*

I swallowed, moving a stubborn lump. *I need to take that chance. There is an item stored here that I need to destroy. As long as it exists, an evil wizard will not pass into the realm of the dead. May I take it?*

The slithering coils began again, and I could just make out the outline of a moving, shiny creature. Once more, my heart leapt into top gear. This basilisk was at least twice the size of the one I killed. *As I said, I cannot, and will not stop you, wizard.* I sensed the massive head swivel to stare at the staircase. *You do not have long though. As loath as I am to encourage the only conversationalist I've had in centuries to leave, if you wish to survive, you must go now.*

I swallowed again. *Thank you.* With that, I summoned Ravenclaw's journal.

A disappointingly small, leather bound tome flew to my hands. I quickly cast a couple of the spells designed to reveal a Horcrux. Instantly, the book responded to my proings, indicating that this was indeed a piece of Voldemort's soul. I gently rubbed the cover, feeling a familiar tinge of magic.

I sighed at what I had to do. I bade the basilisk farewell, and ascended the tightly spiralling stairs. Tom's corruption of this irreplaceable artefact was wrong on so many levels. Not the least of which was that in order to dispel this portion of his soul, a Founder's repository of knowledge and lore had to be destroyed. "Damn you, Tom Riddle," I said as I moved back into the Pope's chambers.

Unobstructed voices instantly indicated that my magic had failed. Just one complete turn from the top of the stairs, I could make out voices demanding that someone be given the task of going down below and retrieving my statue, for identification purposes.

No one appeared to be ready to volunteer. Another voice said that they would need to drop some food down before it would be safe to enter. Seems that they knew exactly what hunted down there.

I again raised my hood, again fully disappearing from sight. I rounded the final curve, noting that there were only six guards in the room.

Two of them were wearing robes though, and holding a wand. One of them looked straight at me (through his enchanted spectacles), and his eyes widened quickly in surprise. Without further ado, I stunned the bugger, but that only gave me a half second of surprise to use as I could.

I tossed an Eveberus curse at the remaining wizard, the purple spell blasting through his hurriedly raised shield and tossing him across the room. Before I even saw the effects of my spell, I dropped to my knees and allowed myself to slide painfully down the rough stairs for a turn or two.

Once more, I was showered with stone chips as bullets hailed and ricocheted around me. I cast another shield charm that sparked and glinted as it kept me from harm.

I could feel my anger building, but it was directed at me rather than the guys trying to kill me. I was, after all, trying to steal something from them. No, I was getting pissed at my own lack of proper planning. I should have assumed something like this would have happened, and planned accordingly.

There wasn't room in the stairwell for me to brace myself against the roof and let the guards wander down beneath me, so my invisibility would only work for surprise just once. I wracked my brains, my mind working overtime, trying to figure out just how I was going to get past the last four guards.

A soft crunch of boot on stone alerted me to the slow descent of at least one guard. Gritting my teeth, I cast a quick jinx, and then gripped the side of the stairwell tightly with my spider gloves.

As the booted foot came into view, I could see the cautious young man's face as he crept down nervously, a massive gun at the ready.

Mentally, I shook my head, marvelling at the fact that stupidity seemed to transcend all boundaries.

He stepped right on the jinx, sending him into some sort of Highland fling as he tried to keep his balance.

He had no chance though. With such a large weapon, he couldn't manoeuvre enough to keep his footing. With a yelp, he crashed to his backside and began slipping down the stairs. His back slammed into me rather solidly, but since he was facing the wrong way, by the time he had tried to turn and grab me, he was already passed my body, heading down and, from the sounds of things, accelerating. He did manage to shout a warning to those above.

Wonderful.

With the stairs covered with fine gravel, creeping up unnoticed, or at least unheard, was going to be difficult. I could silence myself quite easily, but any footprints I made in the rubble would be instantly visible.

My friend below me had managed to stop himself from falling further, and was climbing back up.

Making a decision, I raised my wand and cast the most powerful wind inducing charm I could.

The rubble and gravel on the stairs was instantly swept up in the spell, sending maybe twenty kilos of tiny rocks and sand swirling up the stairs. Curses and screams came back down, which I took as a good sign.

I took a deep breath, silenced my feet, and barged up the stairs, trusting my shield would withstand anything tossed at me long enough for me to incapacitate everyone.

It did. Two of the last three guards were on their knees, scrabbling at their eyes, while the last was unprofessionally dividing his attention between his comrades and the stairwell. All three fell to my barrage of spells, leaving me to just slam the door to the stairwell shut and lock it with a quick charm.

More shouts came from outside the room, from the antechamber. Despite feeling light-headed from all my spell casting, I once more slammed the main doors shut and reinforced them with a powerful locking spell. It wouldn't last as long as the first lot of spells, but I should be safe for a few moments at least.

I lowered my hood, leaned back against the door and sighed with relief. This may work out for the best after all.

I faced the Pope, who for the first time showed emotion. Complete, gob smacked surprise. I guess there are very few people in the world that could talk a basilisk out of petrifying them. I looked over the glass room he was encased in as I reached into my robes. "That is one fucking big basilisk you have down there. I'm impressed. But tell me, if I destroy this here, will you be safe where you are?" I asked, holding up the tome I recovered.

The Pope blinked. "You intend to destroy that? You don't intend to simply take it?"

I shook my head. "No. As I said, it needs to be destroyed to stop an evil, and if I was to be caught leaving, it would just be returned to your idiotic collection downstairs. And I simply have no way of ensuring that I can leave this place safely with it. Destroying it promises to be quite violent. Will you be safe from the backlash?"

The Pope nodded slowly, his expression showing his sudden caution. I don't think he believed me that I didn't want to take it. "I believe so. This contraption was designed to protect me against any modern weapon," he said, tapping the side of the small room.

I raised an eyebrow, but didn't take the time to discuss whether or not something that could counter muggle devices would stand a chance against a magical backlash. "Very well. I'll destroy this here. On the off chance that this does kill both of us, I hope that I have your forgiveness."

The Pope watched wordlessly as I began tracing a protective diagram in his carpet. With wards as strong as I could make them, I placed the book within the protective circle, holstered my wands drew out a shiv from my robes that have been carved from the horn of the last Imperial Arch-griffin, and stabbed the book.

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I painfully forced my eyes open against the bright light above me. Agony lanced through my eyeballs and I slammed them shut again, groaning out loud.

"You're awake," snapped an unfamiliar voice. "Good."

"Where am I?" I croaked.

"You will answer our questions, wizard, not the other way around."

I tried to move, only to discover that I was tied down. Slowly opening my eyes, my sight gradually became adjusted to the light. I was in a completely white room, with two members of the Swiss guard standing to either side of me, each holding a powerful looking gun pointed directly at my heart. The man who had spoken to me was dressed as a cardinal, and was roughly examining me.

“You are healthy enough to undergo interrogation,” he announced. He withdrew a vial of familiar looking clear liquid and nodded to someone behind me. Rough hands gripped my head and forced my mouth open. Three drops of the potion were placed on my tongue before the hands forced my mouth shut.

I felt my tongue tingle, and the rest of my body relax as the potion took effect. Somewhere in my mind, I realised that I’d just been dosed with Veritaserum.

Fucking wonderful. With some effort, I fought the clouding in my mind and examined my memories of Zab’s lessons on how to defeat Veritaserum. The only real option once you’d been dosed was to make your captives give you more, forcing an overdose. The only way to do that was to convince them that you were lying. Once overdosed, you were catatonic for nearly a full day, leaving you unable to answer questions at all. Even after that, until the potion had completely worked its way out of your system, (usually between four and six days) any new dose of the clear potion sent you into the same condition as an overdose. Unfortunately, licensed practitioners knew exactly how much to give in one dose. The only hope was that it was an unlicensed person administering the potion.

“What is your name?”

While I had to answer truthfully, I found I could inject my own tone on my answer. Sneering, and injecting as much sarcasm as I possibly could, I spat, “Harry Potter.”

Furious whispers erupted at one end of the room. Even with the earring still in my ear lobe, I had difficulty making out what they were discussing. The debate continued for a while before one faction won, and once more my mouth was forced open where another drop was placed on my tongue. I felt my consciousness spiral out of control, deep into my psyche. Wonderful, they couldn’t have acted any better if I’d answered that I was the Pope. My last thought was that my answer had bought me a day.

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Consciousness arrived slowly, but this time, I managed to keep my wits about me and not groan to announce my arrival back to the world of the living. I gently cracked one eyelid open the tiniest amount, enough to just get a feel for who else was in the room.

An unfocused, man-shaped blob stood on either side of me, and I assumed that they were the humourless gun-toting guards I saw earlier, or at least their replacements. Strains of a far off conversation reached my ears, which I struggled to overhear.

“...believe he intended to kill His Holiness.”

“...cannot take the risk...”

“...powerful wizard...”

“...execute him immediately...”

The last comment sent a shock through me. Bugger. How wonderfully ironic. For my entire life, I’ve been in danger from the most evil wizard in recent history and his followers, and now it appears I about to be killed by people who are supposed to be the epitome of good.

Fuck that.

I opened my memories, pulling forth everything bad that had ever happened to me, and let anger flood through my body. Wrath surged through my mind, giving me access to the wells of power that are only available to me when I’m in a rage. I forced the split in my mind and let my anger feed itself, allowing the helplessness and unjustified response of my situation to fuel my impressive temper. Soon, the magical potential in the air tingled, causing even the muggle guards to become nervous.

It continued to build, and cries of alarm at the trembling magical potential in the air filled my ears. Short, sharp, barked orders came from either side of me, as the barrels of two powerful guns were jammed into my ribs.

Pain flooded through me as the barrels abused my already punished ribs, and I suddenly screamed my fury, venting weeks of frustration at how long my quest was taking. Hollering at the idiocy that ignorant fools displayed trying to stop me from finally removing an evil bastard from this world.

I *pushed* with all my might, hearing nothing but the roar of my heartbeat in my ears.

I have no idea just how long I screamed for. Suddenly, my arms jerked upwards. In my slightly befuddled state, it took me a moment to realise that I had been unconsciously straining against my bonds. With magic surging through my body, I’d torn the thick leather straps from the bed’s metal frame.

Once my breath had been expended, I gulped in a fresh lungful of air, and opened my eyes fully. Blinking rapidly in the bright room, I absently took stock.

Two armed guards, one on either side of me? Check.

Both of them unconscious? Check.

One beefy guard behind me, likewise unconscious but lying in a rather uncomfortable looking manner on his head? Check.

Remains of a bed complete with straps which, had they not been broken, would have held a prisoner down? Check.

Oh, my legs are still strapped to the remains of the bed frame. I guess the bed is less broken than I imagined. I blinked, trying to form thoughts. Something I found remarkably difficult to do. It took me a few moments to work out how to undo the simple buckles on the restraints attached to my legs.

I forced myself to think, but my concentration was shot. I felt as though I was trying to control my body from afar. Being drunk on firewhiskey was nothing compared to this.

I blankly looked up at what appeared to be some sort of viewing area, the place from where the subject of this room was observed. The large glass window that had separated the two rooms was gone, or at least, was now scattered around the place in shards of lethal looking edged pieces, like a dangerous jigsaw puzzle. Three figures were in that part of the room, two white-clad hospital types and a cassocked cardinal. Only one of the people wearing white was awake, and even he was dazed.

I undid the remaining straps on my wrists and stepped through to the other area with exaggerated care. I was still dizzy and fuzzy-minded after my little pyrotechnic show.

The orderly who was dazed seemed to be shaking off his stupor. With a cry, he seemed to realise just what had happened and drew a wand from his robes.

I kicked out as hard as I could. My foot connected just under his ear. He slumped back down to the stone floor, as did I, though I had further to go.

Well, at least my legs work, even if I can't keep my balance after a kick. Not to mention the fact that I was aiming for his wand hand, but this works well too.

I struggled to my feet and picked up his discarded wand, before casting an enervation charm on myself. I didn't really expect it to do anything much, but I did feel a little more clear-headed afterwards. Now I only felt like I'd been drinking for three straight hours, rather than three straight days.

I retained enough presence of mind to cast a disillusionment charm on me the next second.

Just in time for when a trio of Swiss Guards burst into the room, two waving guns, the third waving a wand.

Despite how tired I was, I couldn't let them catch me again. With everything I had left in me, I called forth an eruption of ivy from the floor, which entangled the three almost instantly. Such a simple trap wouldn't hold a wizard more than a few seconds, but it was enough for me to summon the guard's wand.

I took a deep breath and sat down, ignoring the bound trio's shouts. The pair of muggle guards were trying to get a grip on their radios, but were having a bit of trouble with the plants restraining them. One part of my mind was screaming at me to get moving, but my body just wanted to relax.

"Come on," I told myself. "Imagine Aunt Petunia coming through the door."

That perked me up a little. I silenced the three bound guards and physically removed their comms gear, before I made my way out into the corridor. I just didn't have the energy for three stunners at that moment.

While the interrogation room was reminiscent of the hospital wing, the interior decorators obviously didn't get to the rest of the place. The damp, dank, stone corridor was obviously part of the original building, and probably located below ground. Another pair of guards came into view ahead, running towards me. They raced past me, missing my disillusioned self in the dim light of the corridor. It was the work of an instant to cast *Petrificus Totalus* at them from behind, before I continued on my way. First year spells were all I had in me at present, and even casting them left me feeling alarmingly drained.

The door they were probably guarding was just ahead, since they'd left one of their number behind. I staggered towards it, supporting myself with one hand against the wall, noting that there were several other similar doors that were unguarded. With my wits and magical strength returning too slowly, I hardly felt ready for a one-on-one fight, but I should be fine so long as I could ambush my opponent.

The guard was obviously a muggle.

One spell later, and the guard was an unconscious muggle.

I placed my hand on the door handle, but paused, looking down at the snoozing guard. A smile appeared on my face, and I quickly shed my hospital issue gown for a Swiss Guard uniform.

That little piece of deception gave me about three seconds I wouldn't ordinarily have had. Long enough to send the two guards in the next room to sleep with a simple but obscure jinx, and then petrify the single wizard who was intently examining a pile of magical items before he noticed.

My magical items.

How very convenient that everything of mine was to be found in one place. I took a few seconds to gather my strength and cast a sleeping spell on the petrified wizard, just in case he had the strength to break my first spell.

It felt much better to dress myself in my own robes, including my invisibility robe. I strapped my wand holsters to my forearms and slipped my gloves on before noting that not all of all my items were here. The shiv Dumbledore had loaned me was missing, as was one potion and both of my wands.



Panicking, I re-searched my pockets three times before accepting that my wands had been taken elsewhere.

Damn. No wands, and no Potensavenenum. Not that drinking it in my current condition would have done anything more than give me about fifteen minutes of power before sending me into a coma for a week.

I did find something useful as I scrabbled through my pockets though. I pulled out an item the twins had given me, something they were producing for the Order, not for the public. I unwrapped the sweet, then forced opened the unconscious wizard's mouth. Holding the tiny sweet over his now gaping maw, I squeezed. One end of the toffee burst, letting three clear drops fall out, the perfect dose of Veritaserum, hidden within the perfect disguise.

Mentally thanking the twins, I gently kicked the wizard awake.

"Where are the wands that were taken from the prisoner?"

The wizard looked up at me with bleary, unfocused eyes. "His Holiness has them," he slurred.

Oh, fucking great. This little adventure just keeps getting better and better.

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## Journeyman Potter Can't we talk about this?

I staggered onwards towards the Pope's chambers, occasionally bumping gently into the walls, with fluff clogging my mind and fatigue filling my body. It took me far less time, since though I was moving slower, I wasn't continually taking side trips down blind corridors. I was still encountering wandering guards though. The last group of guards that I encountered forced me to change my tactics. Not through choice, but by necessity. Hoping against hope that they wouldn't come closer than they needed, I simply leaned silently against one wall, and allowed the patrol to pass.

Pity I didn't think of that tactic in the first place.

Though, given the fact that I haven't seen a wizard since my escape, perhaps I've neutralised them all.

I waited for a time, which could well have been a minute, after the troops had turned down another corridor, out of sight. It took me a couple of seconds to remember what I was supposed to be doing once they'd gone.

*Oh, that's right. Break in to see the highly guarded Pope again. Bugger.*

With sluggish limbs, I pushed myself from the wall and kept moving. After an eon, I found myself slowly approaching the antechamber entrance, which still displayed some fairly impressive damage. From the scorch marks on the walls to the tattered, scattered remains of carpet, it was obvious that a great deal of magical energy was expended here in an effort to get through my impromptu barriers. I would have felt some pride at that if I had the energy to spare.

Voices, maybe three or four, were coming from inside the antechamber, or perhaps from further on in the Pope's actual quarters. The voices were raised, but for the life of me, I couldn't focus enough to make sense of them.

The voices quietened suddenly, before a few shouted exclamations of surprise again reached my ears. I suppose someone told them something that they didn't want to hear.

I stopped moving, trying to make sense of it when a young member of the Swiss Guard strode out of the antechamber, his hands above his head. Blinking, I glanced around in vain, trying to discover to what exactly he was surrendering.

In less than a second however, he went from certain to unsure, and his hands instinctively dropped to his sidearm, before he forced himself to re-raise his arms. Though obviously nervous, the young guard had a fixed look of determination on his face. "I cannot see you," he said to the empty corridor at large, never once fixing his line of sight on me. "But I have been told that you are in the corridor, and that I am to escort you in to an audience with His Holiness."

I smothered a yawn, and tried to figure out if this was a trap.

The soldier began looking around more nervously. "Um, the man who told me that you were out here was quite definite. Apparently, there are ways you can sense your own kind. You may as well show yourself. Please?"

I nearly growled in my throat, trying to keep quiet, but also try and infer all the ramifications of giving up my invisibility. But for all my efforts, I just couldn't think.

I let my hands reach up and push the hood back, leaving my head floating in mid air. "Go on," I urged him.

Unexpectedly, as it happened. The poor fellow was facing in the opposite direction, and started so violently at my voice that he nearly lost his balance on his return to earth. He'd jumped so high I'm sure I could have crawled under his booted feet before they landed had I been ready. The poor bugger finally managed to get his body back under control, only to notice that it was only my head visible.

That revelation sent him back onto his bum with a sort of half-squeak, half-yelp of trouser-dampening fright.

Sensing that I had at least some measure of power over him, I simply dead-panned, "Shall we?" while gesturing towards the doors. His face paled further, and it took me a second to realise that he couldn't see my arm, just my black-clad hand. Wow, a floating, detached head and hands. I just can't imagine why I get these kinds of reactions from people.

Rolling his head around in a sort of oval nod, the guard scrambled to his feet. He moved a little less fluidly than I had expected a highly trained soldier, with one trembling hand again securely clutched to his holstered weapon.

I closed my eyes, initially to give him the impression that trying to attack with a muggle weapon would be futile, only to have a sudden desire to keep them closed. It took an audible grunt of effort for me to lift them again.

Apparently, that was enough to convince him. "Um, could you please show yourself? Completely, I mean."

I shook my head. “Not until I'm sure this isn't a trap.”

He swallowed nervously, but nodded. “Very well,” he said with an exaggeratedly deep voice, obviously trying to haul back some machismo into the situation. “Follow me.”

I gingerly stepped through the doorway to the Pope's chambers. The room was already cleaned and repaired, with the Pope half-lying, half-sitting up in an enormous bed. The bed had far more medical gadgets and gizmos built into it than were in half the hospitals in the entire city of Rome. The thing had wheels on it, with treads! I'm sure it could have exceeded the speed limit.

Besides the Holy chap, there were six other people in the room. Two guards standing behind the Pope's bed, looking ready to perform any guardly duties so ordered, (so long as it involved throwing someone out), the young fellow with the nervous tic who showed me in, and three elderly wizards, including the most unwelcome sight of Albus Dumbledore, whose expression was one of extreme disappointment.

“Where is Captain Giogi?” the Pope asked my escort curiously. I ignored the soldier as he shrugged.

I simply glared at Dumbledore, much of my fatigue suddenly disappearing under the blowtorch of anger at his expression. “What are you doing here?” I demanded, shrugging out of my invisibility robes. Some voice in my head told me I wanted my fists free for this.

The old man managed to keep a serene expression on his features. “You are fully aware that I am the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, Harry. When one of the most protected sites in the world is penetrated, it is I who performs an investigation.” He gestured to his companions. “This is the Italian Mugwump, who also has jurisdiction over Vatican City, and this is Henri Kellermann, Head of Security for the ICW.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course it would be you, Dumbledore. You can't let anything out from under your control. Not Hogwarts, not the Wizengamot, not even politics around the world. But before I could voice any of this, the Pope had glanced from Dumbledore to me and back again before speaking up. “I assume the two of you know each other?”

Dumbledore gave the holy man a smile full of warmth. “Indeed, my friend. I've known Harry here since he was a baby.”

I nodded darkly. “Oh, that's right! That's when you decided to go against my parents' wishes and deposit me into an abusive household for ten years, before finally sending someone to check up on me,” I said in a sour tone, throwing my robes over a chair, making half of it appear to disappear.

Dumbledore gave me a glare that I pointedly ignored. In the mean time, I looked over the Pope, who was looking quite healthy for someone propped up in bed, and mighty curious as to what I had just said. “I'm sorry that you were hurt, Your Holiness. I guess I, and I suppose your engineers too, miscalculated. I'm glad to see you weren't too injured,” I said respectfully.

I received a smile and a gentle, dismissive wave. “My Safe Room performed adequately. The members of my household are far more protective, not to mention paranoid, of me that is strictly necessary. To tell the truth, I am only lying here today to stop my Captain of the Guard from escorting me to another location where I would be turned into little more than a medical pincushion until something could be found wrong with me. Speaking of the Captain, is there a reason he is not with you?”

I raised an eyebrow, a sudden knot appearing in my lower intestine. “This Captain, was he supposed to pick me up from the cell I was being held in?”

The Pope nodded slowly. “Yes...”

I winced, shrugged and sighed, not liking at all how this looked. Even so, I grabbed a free chair and sat down. “Sorry. I wasn't released, per se. I, er, sort of, um, blasted my way free. Sorry,” I repeated, a bit sheepishly.

“Harry!” Dumbledore interrupted. “What on earth have you done? Is all this chaos due to your actions?”

I speared him with a sideways glance, before holding up a fist, and extending the middle digit. Leaving the gesture in place, I turned back to the Pope. “I hope you can forgive me, but the only reason I sought you out now, rather than leaving at the first opportunity, is that I was told you have some of my possessions.” I released Dumbledore from my silent insult and held out the hand palm up to the Pope. “May I?”

The Pope had gone pale, and ignored my request. “You escaped? You are not here under escort?”

I opened my mouth to say something sarcastic, when a rather intense commotion from outside the room interrupted. A haggard looking guard with a little more decoration on his arm than most of the others burst into the room. “The prisoner has escaped! Your Holiness, we must evacuat-” he blurted, before seeing me sitting quite calmly in front of his boss.

I turned away from the stunned man, trusting that he wouldn't shoot me in the back when his boss was in front of me in his line of fire, and spoke to the Pope once again. “As I told you earlier, Your Holiness, my actions were necessary. The item I retrieved from your cache had to be destroyed, not hidden. And while I know that my actions were morally wrong, I will reiterate that they were necessary. If I had tried to contact you with a request to destroy the tome, I cannot imagine that I would have even been given an interview. Even had I managed to secure a meeting with you, again, I cannot imagine that you would have allowed me access to your hoard of artefacts, even to destroy one.”

The Pope's smile disappeared, but he nodded faintly. “It is one of my sacred duties, to prevent any of the evil artefacts stored below from ever seeing the light of day once more. You are correct that no matter how persuasive you were, I would not have allowed you access.” He shook his head gently. “Though perhaps not for the reasons you suspect. It is far too dangerous, even for me to descend into the chamber too often. On occasion in the past, some Popes who were either too frail or scared sent proxies to deposit or collect something on their behalf. Each time, no

one returned."

Dumbledore coughed, and rose to his feet. "The rumours are true? You have a collection of dark magic here?" he demanded of the Pope. "Your predecessors have always denied it!"

The older of the two present guards rose and stepped forward, seemingly ready to toss the old fart out of the room on his arse. Something I would have paid good money to see. But the Pope raised his hand, silently radiating the kind of power and demanding the level of respect that not even Dumbledore managed. "Kindly keep your tone civil, Albus."

Dumbledore's expression flickered between argumentative and contrition. While it was a sight I would normally have enjoyed, I did need to clear up something.

"There is a creature guarding the chamber below. It is intelligent enough to recognise whom is currently the Pope, and allow you access. Any others who got in would be dead within seconds," I said.

The Pope's expression changed to one of shock. "There is a ritual to be followed each time a Pope enters the chamber. A sheep or goat must be sacrificed and lowered first. Is that for this creature?"

I shrugged. "Probably. But even if someone tossed it some food, it wouldn't ignore its duty. It must somehow recognise you and let you leave in peace."

Dumbledore had gone pale. "Harry? What is down there?"

I gave him a sarcastic scowl, trying to convey that he should be able to figure it out. "A basilisk."

Everyone in the room started shifting uneasily. "Yes, you mentioned that when you emerged, and I didn't believe you at the time. I'm not sure I believe you now. Are you suggesting that a mythical creature dwells beneath my chambers?" the Pope asked evenly.

I nodded. "And it's bloody big too, pardon my French. Judging from the diameter of the head, I'd say it was at least twice as old as the one I killed at school."

"Harry," Dumbledore wheezed, his tone indicating that I was giving away too much information. I didn't care.

The Pope appeared troubled at this. "I take it from your tone that you are not joking," he said weakly. "If it is so deadly, how did you survive?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm not joking. A giant serpent that can kill with a look lives within earshot of this room. But its duty is to protect the artefacts below, preventing any from being removed, unless it is by the Pope." I thought for a second. "Or me."

Both the Pope and Dumbledore started suddenly. "What?" both blurted, suddenly far more worried, for different reasons.

I smirked at the pair's unconscious echoing. "How do you think I retrieved the book? The basilisk let me."

The Pope looked ready to faint. "How?"

I sighed, looking around the room at our audience. Steeling myself, I answered, "Because I can speak to snakes. Any magical being who can speak the language of serpents can command and control any snake, including a basilisk."

The Pope seemed to collapse deeper into his bed. "You can talk to serpents?" he asked as the Italian Mugwump blurted, "You're a Parselmouth?"

I nodded, noticing even in my fatigued daze that the two ever-present guards moved away from the Pope and flanked me. "It's not a talent that I was born with," I slurred tiredly, hoping to buy enough time to stop them from arresting me again. I didn't have the strength to break free once more. "The bastard we are trying to defeat tried to kill me as a baby. Somehow, the protection my mother gave me defeated him, and I absorbed some of his abilities."

The Pope looked shaken. "Speaking to animals, especially snakes, has long been considered a demonic power, one gained by swearing fealty to the devil."

I snorted. "So is raising people from the dead," I responded pointedly. "I understand that someone who once did that was nailed to a bit of wood a while ago."

The Pope actually smiled. "Point taken."

I held out my hand once more. "May I have my wands back?"

Dumbledore frowned. "Wands, Harry? You have more than one?"

I closed my eyes and cursed my foggy brain. "Just a backup, in case of an emergency, old man. That's all," I said wearily.

The Pope gestured to one of his guards, who used a key on a chain from his pocket to unlock an iron-bound chest. The thing looked as though it was strong enough to have withstood anything short of a nuclear bomb at ground zero, and, judging by the scorch marks and discolouration, probably had already done so. The guard opened the massive piece of furniture, straining slightly under the weight of the lid, and withdrew a large, decorated wooden box. It could have contained cigars.

The guard let the lid slam down as he returned to his boss' side. Deftly turning the box around to face me, he opened it slowly. With a smile, I gratefully raised my pilfered wand and wordlessly summoned the contents. My own wands, a small bottle filled with Potensavenenum, the shiv I stabbed the book with, and the tome in question, now sporting a hole through the front cover and most of the pages.

There was a faint pop as the two wands first broke through some sort of magical barrier, but they and my other items flew unimpeded to my waiting hands. The second my fingers curled around the two wands, a surging tide of warmth flooded up my arm, making me give a small, involuntary gasp of pleasure. The warmth drove away much of the brain fog that had settled in my frontal lobes, acting like a half dozen cups of thick, syrupy Italian quadruple-espressos.

Though I was far more awake, I didn't know how long it would last. I reversed the wand I had taken from the poor bugger downstairs, and handed it to my nervous escort. The man accepted it without comment, but he did wait for a confirming nod from the Pope before accepting it.

Dumbledore was looking at my wands with something akin to horror on his features. "Harry? That- That wand! That's Voldemort's wand!"

I sighed. "No, it's mine," I disagreed, shaking my head. Both wizards sitting next to Dumbledore shuddered at the name, but no one else in the room reacted. "Spoils of war and all that rot. Besides, it is the only other wand in the world that is compatible with me to any great degree. Not to mention that they are brother wands, and as such, not something I'd want in the hands of an enemy." I looked directly into his eyes. "And given the Ministry's actions in the past, you know, little things like sending Dementors after me, I consider the entire bloody bureaucracy an enemy."

Dumbledore actually had the grace to accept this quietly, though given the looks he was getting from his colleagues, I don't suppose he was ready to defend the actions of the English Ministry at this time. Though I saw in his features that he would be bringing this topic up with me when we were alone. The Pope however, had some questions.

"Brother wands? What are brother wands?"

I held up my pair of wands. "Wands are traditionally made with wood and a magical core. Wands with the same type of magical core are similar. These wands are brothers. They are made of different wood, but both have a magical core donated by the same animal." I shook my holly wand with my left hand, sending red and gold sparks out of the tip. I shook my yew wand with my right, again sending sparks flying, though the gold was mixed with silver. "But when you place them together, so they work with each other," I said, holding them together in one hand and shaking them lightly, just once. A veritable cascade of red, gold, and silver sparks erupted from the tips, which caused a number of small fires in Dumbledore's beard and hair.

You know, sometimes life just gives you a free kick. As much as I'd like to claim that, it was an accident.

Dumbledore chuckled heartily as he patted out the flames. "Impressive Harry. You are not entirely correct in some assumptions, but that display was visually delightful."

Vowing to talk to Zab at a later date to find out what he meant my 'not entirely correct assumptions', I rose to my feet, swaying only slightly. "Well, Your Holiness, I shall not take up any more of your time. The book is destroyed, and cannot be used. Thank you for your hospitality."

The Pope raised a hand, and the guards turned their attention back onto me.

Bugger.

I was taking a breath to centre myself when the Pope spoke. "Before you leave, young man, perhaps you could inform me just what the book you destroyed was?"

Dumbledore spoke for me as I was calming down. "It was a simple tome, written by a great witch, that had been cursed by an evil wizard recently. That is all."

The Pope nodded, but I said, "Bollocks."

Both men turned to face me. Dumbledore with a warning expression, the Pope with a curious one.

I ignored the Pope, and continued to shout at Dumbledore. "Yes, I said 'bollocks'. Look, Old Man, you obviously haven't learned anything from how you and I have fallen out. Keeping secrets for the sake of keeping secrets is idiotic. Either you tell him the full truth or I will," I demanded, wondering why I cared so much.

"Nothing I said was in any way incorrect, Harry."

I snarled at him. "I suppose you'd call World War Two a fracas, then, as opposed to an unforgivable and tragic loss of lives?"

The Pope cleared his throat. "I appear to be missing something here."

Despite Dumbledore's subtle, yet somehow emphatic shaking of his head, I simply replied, "The tome is," I coughed, "~~was~~ a priceless work of magical theory, written by a legendary witch, who was powerful enough to be one of the founders of the school I attended. The evil I told you about is a wizard who split his soul into several pieces, storing each piece in a different artefact. By destroying this book, I've destroyed that part of his soul, but lost much of the knowledge contained within. However, by destroying this book, he cannot use the piece of soul within to cling to life."

Dumbledore winced, his two companions looking at him in an oddly accusatory way, but the Pope looked faintly ill. "Are you saying that there may be items stored below that have pieces of someone's soul?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. The lore is essentially forbidden, since they are the blackest of magic. Apparently even evil wizards do not even pass this lore

on to their students, and as such, they are pretty rare. All I know is that while these items exist, the person whose soul is stored within cannot be killed. That is why I decided to sneak past your guards and destroy it. I did what I could to keep Voldemort from destroying my friends, and if hunting down each and every one of the items is something that takes me decades to do, I'll do it."

The Pope settled back into his bed, looking thoughtful. "How did you know which item in my cache was the one you were after?"

This was an odd line of questioning. "Each of the items has, I mean – had, a special significance to Voldemort. And there are spells to detect such an item. I tracked down a likely suspect, broke in, confirmed it contained a piece of his soul, and destroyed it."

The wizard Kellermann, who so far had not said a word, leaned back in his chair and crossed his impressively muscled arms over an equally impressive barrel-chest. "You say that like it was easy to break into the Vatican, instead of being considered impossible," he said with a thick, Polish accent. Though his tone was jovial, I could see the deadly seriousness and determination behind his eyes. This was a man who, if necessary, would laugh to put someone at their ease, then slip poison into their drinks without remorse.

I shrugged, determined to be wary around him. "It took more power out of me than when I defeated Voldemort, plus the fact that I needed brother wands to pull it off. That and the fact that I may just be the only Parselmouth on the planet at the moment, and I doubt you'd find another individual who could pull it off," I said, fighting off a blush. I didn't want to sound egotistical, but it was true.

The Pope had an expression on his face that was almost a smile. "And I assume we have you to thank for the Stigmata displays downstairs?"

Dumbledore and the other wizards looked intrigued, but stayed silent as I smothered a yawn and nodded. "Yeah, they were supposed to be a diversion."

The Pope nodded sagely, the twist to his elderly lips finally turning into a wry smile. "It was in fact those events that set off the alarm in many minds. A true Stigmata is only seen once in a lifetime, if at all. Two in five minutes was simply too much of a coincidence. Pray tell, how did you manage it?"

---

The final two hours of the conversation was basically taken up with me describing in detail exactly how I had penetrated the established defences, with the Captain chiming in with requests for more detailed explanations along the way, already incorporating the new information into his plans for greater defences. The Captain was furious at the simplicity at which I had convinced my interrogators to up the Veritaserum dose, though each of the wizards in the room found it rather amusing. Despite efforts by the Captain and Kellermann, the ICW security wizard, the Pope refused to have charges brought against me. All he asked was that I return to the Vatican in a month's time for another interview. He pointed out in all seriousness that I may be charged with something then, but I just nodded and agreed to everything just to stop people talking to me.

We were escorted from the building by an entire squad of Swiss Guards, many of whom were sporting bandages of some kind. Dumbledore and his two colleagues said nothing to me as we were led away, but I got odd looks from each. I was in no condition to decipher the expressions however, so I just ignored their antics. We reached an underground garage, and were told to wait where we were, which turned out to be a curb. A wave of dizziness swept over me, and I felt a steadying hand placed on my shoulder. I rolled the shoulder with a small growl, and the hand was removed quickly. Determined not to show any weakness to these wizards again, I spread my stance a little wider and waited for whatever was to come next. It turned out to be a rather nice limousine, with blackened windows and Vatican licence plates.

We were bundled into the back, which was more luxurious than anything the Room of Requirement had dished up to me so far in my life. I sank gratefully into the soft velour, and felt my eyes close.

One of the wizards cleared his throat. Again, it took a massive effort on my part to open my eyes again.

"What?" I growled.

Dumbledore held out a pendant shaped like Fawkes. "Harry, here is a portkey to the Hogwarts Infirmary. You should use it now that we are beyond the wards of the Vatican, and let Madam Pomfrey take care of you for the next few days."

I looked down at the pendant for what seemed like forever. It had been modelled on Fawkes quite well, with tiny ruby chips acting as glittering feathers, and perfect tiny onyx spheres as the phoenix's eyes. It was as stunning as it was beautiful, and probably cost as much as my house. One thought brought forth one last flare of defiance. I was not going back to Hogwarts!

I shook my head as I slowly slipped my free hand into my pocket and gently grasped the bottle of Potensavenenum. As Dumbledore began to debate my decision, I levered out the cork with my thumb. Dumbledore had obviously finished whatever point he was trying to make, and was waiting for my response. Instead of speaking, I pulled the small glass gourd from my pocket and tossed back the frothy potion.

Oh, man, what a rush!

All of a sudden, my fingers were twitching with barely concealed nervous energy. Whereas a second ago I could hardly keep my eyes open, at this very instant I couldn't imagine sleeping ever again.

I gave my escorts a savage grin. "Bye!"

I apparated out of the car with a loud crack.

---

My hotel room had obviously been cleaned in the days I had been away, which allowed me to quickly double check I had left nothing behind once I had summoned and packed all my belongings quickly. Glancing at my watch, I noted two things.

One, slight, almost invisible magical sparks were arcing and grounding themselves between my fingertips.

Two, that probably meant that I had only a few minutes left before the Potensavenenum ran its course. My body was obviously burning it too quickly.

I needed to check out, but since I'd paid for the room in advance, (avoiding having to let the muggle hotelier keep my passport) I didn't need to leave any extra money. I cast a couple of lightening charms on my luggage and bent down to pick them up, only to find that instead of making the suitcases nearly weightless, they were only a few kilos lighter.

Damn, I had literally no magic left. Potensavenenum could only work with what you had, after all.

I dragged my bags out of the room, feeling my legs begin to weaken. They stopped shaking with nervous energy, and began quivering with fatigue. Fortunately, only a junior staff member was at the check-in counter when I finally reached it. Ignoring her questions, I slapped down my keys and kept going towards the elevator.

The instant I was alone in the muggle device, I reached into one of the pouches on one of my bags and scrabbled around inside. I quickly found the portkey I wanted, and activated it without hesitation.

I appeared in my bedroom at Grimmauld Place, the familiarity of the room nearly overwhelming me with relief at returning here. I managed to croak out, "Dobby!"

Instantly, Dobby appeared by my side. He took one look at me and nearly croaked himself. "Harry Potter sir, what has you done?"

With the last vestiges of Potensavenenum having left my body, I could just shake my head. "Bed. Help," I whispered, weakly gesturing towards the king size bed against one wall.

Dobby bundled me into bed wordlessly, removing my outer robes and shoes. "Harry Potter sir is tired, yes? Does Harry Potter sir need Dobby to tell anyone he is home? Does Master need anything?" he asked, wringing his hands helplessly.

I shook my head. "Water..." I murmured.

Less than a second later, cool, fresh water was at my lips, and I drank thankfully. I was asleep before I finished swallowing.

A long, dreamless sleep was just what I needed. I wasn't sure just how long I had been asleep, but the unwelcome sensation of a bladder of the verge of exploding dragged me into the realms of consciousness long before I felt even remotely rested. Keeping my eyes closed in an effort to stay as close to sleep as possible, I gently extended one arm to find the edge of the bed.

My fingers encountered an unexpected, warm object. Further detached exploration finally signalled in my mind that one of my girlfriends was sleeping on that side of me.

I rolled over, only to encounter another warm body.

It took me a second or two to realise that I was trapped. Signals from my bladder were increasing in urgency.

With a mental growl, I allowed myself to wake up a little more to try and solve this seemingly intractable puzzle. In the dim light of the room, Hermione was sleeping on my left, Blaise on my right. What was odd was that they were both fully clothed, and sleeping on top of the blankets. I blinked hard, dislodging the sleep that had built up in my tear ducts. On opening my eyes again, I noticed a thin beam of light coming in through the miniscule gap in the curtains. The thin sheet of golden light lit up the tiny specks of dust that hovered in the air, convincing me that it was daytime.

No wonder the girls were still clothed. They'd probably dozed off after a lazy afternoon of looking after a recumbent, boring boyfriend. I wiggled out of the sheets and crawled down the length of the bed, feeling relief as my bladder was no longer pressed against my intestines. I let my eyes close as I reached for the wall, and followed it to the ensuite.

Whoever invented silent-flushing toilets was a genius. While it took me nearly a full minute to take a piss, neither of my girls so much as stirred. I washed my hands and slowly made my way back to bed.

I tried to squirm back under the sheets without interrupting either girl's nap, but Hermione noticed my movements and snapped awake. "Harry?" she whispered, looking over her shoulder at me, her hair looking rumpled and sticking out in all directions.

"Shhh," I hushed, one finger pressed against my lips. I completed my wriggling, getting back under the covers without waking Blaise. "How are you?"

Hermione blinked. "How am I? Harry, you're the one who's been asleep for two days!" she hissed.

"That long?" I yawned, taking care to cover my mouth. If I'd been out for two days, my breath probably smelt like an open sewer.

"Yes, that long," she whispered back harshly, before grabbing me around the shoulders and hugging tightly. "I was so worried about you."

I patted her arm absently. "There, there," I offered quietly, wanting to return to sleep.

Hermione pulled away. "What happened?" she demanded.

I shook my head. "Later. Turn round," I finished with another yawn.

"What?"

Taking another yawn, I waved a finger around in a circle at her, until she half rolled over, presenting her back to me.

With a smile, I draped an arm over her body, sliding my hand up her abdomen to the curve of her breasts, lay on my side and fell asleep once more, this time with a smile on my face, and the scent of her hair filling my nostrils.



## Journeyman Potter A day in the life of...

I finally woke with a cough, a wheeze and a sort of *blort* sound. Steeling myself, I tried opening my eyes, but gave up after about a billionth of a second and covered them with the back of my hand. I gave an audible groan to let the world know that I was awake, and I wasn't happy about it.

"You're awake."

I cautiously lowered my hand and blinked in the light to try and determine just who it was. "Well spotted," I offered.

The unfocused blob moved forward, resolving into an unfocused Blaise, who kissed me on the cheek and said, "Good morning, sleepyhead." She then lightly slapped the back of my head. "The next time you want to sleep for three days, give me some warning first. I'll steal some of the hydrating potions that can be rubbed onto your skin from work."

"Thanks, but that won't be necessary. I don't plan on doing it again any time soon," I mumbled. With a grunt of effort, I pushed myself up onto my elbows, blinking blearily in the bright light. "Three days?" I asked.

Blaise nodded. "Three and a bit days. Dumbledore has been leaving messages for you on an almost hourly basis. Oh, and a bloody big owl obviously has orders to give his message to you only, and has been waiting in Hedwig's aviary for two days. Hermione thinks he is from the Vatican, which reminds me, she insisted that you send her an owl the instant you woke up." Blaise paused, looking at me thoughtfully. "But you really need to do something first before all that."

My yawn probably gave Blaise a good view of my tonsils. "Whassat?" I gapped.

Blaise winced and turned her head to one side. "Brush your teeth. Please?"

---

I ended up ignoring the massive owl, Hermione's message, Dumbledore's stack of letters and even breakfast (though I did shower and brush my teeth). The owl and Dumbledore had waited long enough that another few hours wouldn't matter, Hermione was at university classes for the whole day, and my stomach had been empty for so long I was full after just a quick drink of pumpkin juice. There was someone I needed to speak to, in order to make sense of recent events.

I stepped out of the floo with at least moderate grace (finally, after all the trips Zab had made me make to foil tracking, my floo skills had increased to the point where I could actually use the travel method without making an arse of myself), and ran my wand over my body, casting a quick spell to remove the soot. Not for the first time, I wondered just why that particular spell wasn't taught at Hogwarts.

I hesitated in my stride. Perhaps it was, but just in one of the last two years.

I made a mental note to ask Hermione or Blaise when I got home, turned around and picked up the little silver bell on the mantle above the fireplace. I gave it a tiny shake and sat it back down. Within a pair of breaths, Brennan appeared.

"Sir?"

I nodded to the ancient elf, the head of the Zabini house elves family. "Good morning, Brennan. Is your Master at home?"

"Master is in his study," the elf said politely.

I nodded. "Has he left instructions not to be disturbed?" I asked, from experience.

"No, sir. Would you like Brennan to announce you?"

With a smile, I nodded. "Yes please," I said, not wanting to take any chances.

Brennan led me down the familiar hallways of Zabini Manor, still immaculately kept and maintained. I wasn't sure how many elves worked for Zab here at the Manor, but there had to have been far more than I had met.

Brennan gestured for me to wait outside Zab's study, and disappeared with a shimmer. As I absently cast my eye around the hallway, I wondered if it was possible for a wizard to learn elf magic. The ability to move around an area warded against apparition would be most useful.

The door to Zab's study swung open as silently as ever. I stepped inside without waiting to be invited. I learned quickly during my apprenticeship that Zab would not waste words when actions were enough.

My old Master looked up at me from his seat behind his desk. Even this early in the morning, he was dressed in immaculate robes that were of an

older style, but had been looked after so well they still looked brand new. His all-seeing eyes swept over my form, picking up clues like seashells on a beach. "I believe Dumbledore is expecting you," he said tonelessly.

I shrugged. "He can wait. So can the owl from the Pope. I need some advice."

One of Zab's eyebrows migrated north. "Papal correspondence can wait? This sounds intriguing."

"Yeah, well, don't get too excited," I said, plopping myself down in one of the available chairs. "If you react in any way like you did to my remote casting, I'm out of here."

Zab placed his quill down and leaned forward, putting his elbows on the desk and lacing his fingers together. "Continue."

I gave him a quick rundown on my little mission to the Vatican, not glossing over anything. I explained that I'd been captured, and that I had blasted myself free. "The thing that I've been thinking about was when I escaped from their custody. I was exhausted afterwards, and I don't know why."

Zab, who had mostly been silent during my story, held out a hand, palm up. "Well, the most obvious answer is that you expended too much energy. What did you do just beforehand?"

I shrugged. "I just pushed everything away from me with every last scrap of will power I had. But I'd lost control of my emotions before and did that. Hell, I even did it deliberately against Snape earlier in the day that my apprenticeship started. It left me tired, but it didn't leave me drained of magic."

Zab was quiet for a few moments. "Pushed, you say?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Here, look," I said, looking around the room. My gaze settled on an armchair near the empty fireplace. I took a breath and with a dismissive gesture, *pushed* out at the chair. It skidded along the floor away from me until the front legs encountered a rug. The sudden resistance sent the heavy oak chair tumbling, eventually ending up with its four legs pointing forty-five degrees into the air.

Zab glanced from the chair back to me. "Wandless banishing?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm not casting a banishing spell when I push. I'm just... well... pushing," I finished lamely.

Oddly, Zab didn't roll his eyes or give me a sour look due to my incompetent level of description. "Can you please be more specific?"

I grimaced. "When I escaped, I pushed my magic out in all directions, deliberately doing what I accidentally did over the summer before my apprenticeship. It shattered everything around me."

Zab leaned back in his chair, and ran the tips of a finger around the edge of his goatee. "How long did you... push for?"

I blinked, thinking back. "I'm not sure. A couple of minutes, I guess," I said with a mental groan, having just figured out the answer. So bloody simple.

A flicker of a smile traced over Zab's lips. "So you pushed out with all your magic in all directions for an inordinate length of time? Tell me you don't still need to know why you were exhausted."

I gave him a grimace. "Yes, I mean, no, thank you. I just didn't think about how long I had been pushing. I wanted to make sure that anyone around me was pushed away. I guess I just didn't think about how long I was focusing for."

"Excellent. Another mystery solved. Now, this pushing..."

I groaned aloud. "What?"

"Are you sure you are not silently casting a banishing spell?"

I shook my head. "No, nothing like that. You know how long it took me a while to pick up silent casting during my apprenticeship, this is something that I can just, well, do. I can cast a banishing spell wandlessly, but it is weak and draining, nothing at all like what I'm doing when I push out. I suppose I just learned to control the outbursts I had when I was going through that irritable phase."

Zab's expression was a deliberate cross between disbelief and horror. "Irritable phase, he says. Let's see, you shouted down three senior faculty members of Hogwarts on numerous occasions, assaulting two of them, some Ministry personnel, including the head of Magical Law Enforcement, and successfully used your anger to break through the strongest Occlumency shields on the planet, and you call it a irritable phase?"

I shrugged and stayed silent.

Zab's expression turned into a grin. "Good, you are learning not to rise to bait. Now, this pushing..."

"What about it?"

Zab picked up the parchment he had been working on, and put it into an empty tray on his desk. He pulled out a sheaf of fresh parchment and poised his ever-inked quill above them. "When was the first time you performed this pushing?"

---

Zab and I spent nearly a full day practising. We started out trying to moderate the power I used when pushing out, with little success to begin with. Since it was anger that I had used in the past as the trigger, pushing without rage was as though I was pushing against a stuck door. A small

amount of effort didn't seem to work, but once I passed a certain boundary, my magic shot out and I figuratively fell flat on my face.

By the middle of the afternoon, at Zab's suggestion, I had managed to change the direction of the force of the push. Instead of just being able to shove objects away from me, I could angle the magic so that I could push things at across my body. Even almost directly across me, though the greater the angle, the greater the effort it took to force the magic to work. It also took a rather expansive gesture to help me direct the flow of magic, which Zab berated me for constantly. It appeared to seriously appal some innate sense of style of his. Or perhaps more likely, it offended his almost obsessive need for secrecy. Waving your arm about like a windmill vane wasn't the best way to keep opponents from guessing your intentions.

At any rate, it took a focusing gesture from me to direct my pushing from any direction other than away from me. Though it was rude of me, I bolted when Zab pulled out a fresh notebook similar to the one in which we used to take our notes on remote casting. Since I was only really after some advice and direction, I sure as hell didn't want to embark on one of Zab's intensive studies.

Letting him think that I was just taking a toilet break, I made my way to the main room, with the inviting fire. Before Zab knew it (though, in all honesty, I bet he suspected it), I was spinning my way back home, via a half dozen counties. While the security on Zabini Manor was strong enough to let even someone as paranoid as Mad-Eye get a good night's sleep, it did eat into your supply of floo powder.

---

Hermione's expression on my arrival back at Grimmauld Place was emphatically emphasised with her balled fists resting neatly on her hips. And while that position stretched the fabric of her blouse across her chest in a most interesting way, pointing this fact out was probably not the best thing to do at that point in time.

"Good..." I paused, checking my watch. "Afternoon, 'Mione. Bloody hell, is that the time?" I blurted, completely unconvincingly.

She ignored my act. "Harry Potter, you selfish prat! You were supposed to owl me the minute you woke up!"

I swallowed, feeling the heat rising into my cheeks. I hated being yelled at my Hermione. Though she never belittled or threatened me, ala the Dursleys, her words hurt far more than anything Vernon ever said to me. "Sorry. I didn't think..."

"No! You didn't think!" she spat, interrupting me. "You didn't think how I would feel at all!"

I sighed. "Actually, I did. What I didn't think was that I would be so long when I left this morning."

Her eyes narrowed. "And how does how long you would be out affect the fact that I wanted you to owl me the minute you got up?"

I rubbed the back of my neck with one hand. "Because you were in classes all day. Thinking that I am still asleep for a few more hours wouldn't stress you out anywhere near so much as knowing that I was awake, but not at home."

"Yet you allow me come home first and find you gone with no word!"

I closed my eyes and sighed again. "Sorry, but as I said, I didn't expect to be out for as long as I was."

Her eyes blazed fire. "Can you honestly tell me that you didn't expect to be delayed? That you were absolutely sure that you would be home when you expected to be?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but closed it quickly as I thought deeply. While I only went to Zab's for some advice, I should have known, or at least suspected, that he would be interested in my ability to push my magic out. "I guess not," I said honestly. "But in my defence, I didn't *want* to be out so long."

I braced myself for another verbal assault, but received a physical one instead. Not a slap, but an almost mortally aggressive hug. Her arms tightened around my neck, all but cutting off my air supply. "You great prat! I was so worried about you!"

"Sorry," I managed to croak. After a few seconds, I even managed to remember to put my arms around her, holding her close. For an instant, I regretted my actions, since they caused Hermione to tighten her own grip, cutting off my ability to breathe completely. But she quickly let go, pushing against my chest to put me at arm's reach. She was blinking rapidly, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"Damn you, Harry. I promised myself that I wouldn't hug you until I'd yelled at you for longer," she almost pouted.

I blinked. "There was more you wanted to yell at me about?"

"No, but I was so *angry* with you. Would it have killed you to send Hedwig to me when you woke up?"

I shook my head. "But I didn't want you to spend all day with your attention on something else!"

Hermione threw her arms into the air with a huff and stormed off. Well, I suppose that could have gone better.

---

After verbally duelling with Hermione, I left her alone to cool while I answered my mounting pile of letters.

Blaise hadn't exaggerated too badly, there were eleven letters from Dumbledore, which meant that he was posting something to me more than three times a day. With a sigh, I ignored them and greeted the pompous looking owl who was waiting patiently on Hedwig's perch. The massive bird gave her head an aristocratic tilt and held out one leg, managing to convey that she doubted that I had the ability to untie a simple letter without

help. I gave it an insincere nod and opened the letter. The scrollcase broke away at my touch, leaving a tightly folded and rolled wad of parchment.

It turned out to be a cunningly worded invitation back to the Vatican in a little over a month's time. Cunningly worded in that it was technically a demand, but used language that actually suggested that I had a choice. I shrugged and put it aside for now and picked up a handful of letters from the Dumbledore pile.

I broke the seal with my thumb and scanned the letter. Nope, nothing of interest. I balled it up and tossed it into the fireplace and broke open another as the fire brightened momentarily. Same again.

He's sorry, and he wants to know how I am, and where the horcrux is.

I scooped up the rest of Dumbledore's literary efforts and added them to the now-merrily blazing fire, then went and made myself a belated, late-afternoon breakfast, whistling as I went.

---

Hermione and I made up later in the evening, and then she introduced me to the concept of make-up sex. It had not occurred to me that such a thing could exist, but then again, it was only in the middle of third year that I became aware of the act of sexual intercourse itself. It was only after not getting any of the sexual-oriented jokes the twins told me that Hermione deduced my ignorance of all things biological. She had taken me aside and, with a crimson face, patiently explained to me about the birds and the bees.

To this day, I praise my luck that Ron and the other Gryffindors didn't notice that I had no idea about sex. Not that I felt at all to blame. After all, who the hell would have sat down and told me? As a child, I was always told not to ask questions, and I can't imagine that either my Aunt or Uncle would have been kindly disposed enough towards me to give me The Talk.

At any rate, 'make-up' sex was just as explosive as the argument beforehand, only infinitely more enjoyable. Hermione and I had all but savaged each other in our haste, but once spent, I finally rolled off her and took several deep breaths.

"Well, that looked like fun," came a voice from the door.

Hermione gave a sort of 'gleep' squeak of surprise and dragged the damp and twisted sheet on the bed up to her chin. Since I was lying on it, I ended up almost rolling off the bed as it was yanked from under me. "Blaise," I greeted as I steadied myself. "Care to join us?"

Blaise rolled her eyes and stood up straight, before walking into the room. "From what I saw, there's probably no wood left in your tree, Harry," she said while looking directly at Hermione with a smirk on her face. Hermione managed to hold Blaise's gaze, despite her scarlet cheeks, but also managed to look rather proud at her former rival's proclamation.

Blaise looked back to me. "Your former master would like me to pass on his profound disappointment at your cowardly escape today."

I grunted. "I'll tell my former master later that I don't have the six months necessary to spend with him."

Blaise and Hermione both raised their eyebrows. "Six months?"

I nodded. "Minimum. That's how long it would take to document what he wants. He'll have to make do with three-quarters of a day."

Both girls gave that some thought. Hermione broke the silence first. "What did he want to document, Harry?"

I sighed. "Does it matter?"

Blaise crossed her arms. "Yes," both my girlfriends said in unison.

I turned to look at Hermione in surprise, but she had a similar expression on her own flushed features. I may have been forgiven, but I guess she hadn't quite forgotten my little error. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You know my remote casting?" I asked rhetorically. "Well, it took my former Master and I nearly nine months to document that skill to his satisfaction. I can now sort of push things away, or even across me, just by letting my magic seep out. Sort of direct manipulation of the forces involved. No spell casting, no wand movement, just pure magic."

"What?" both girls all but shrieked.

I waved my hand to stop them from exploding with questions. "Look. Hermione, you remember that time you came to Privet Drive? With Professor McGonagall?"

She gave a cute little huff. "Of course," she growled. After a pause, she added, "You mean that psycho-kinetic surge?"

I nodded, feeling a little odd discussing magical theory while stark naked between two gorgeous girls. "Yeah. Well, I've sort of managed to work out how to do that sort of thing deliberately. To start with, I could only do it when I was angry, but now, I can do it just by concentrating."

Blaise shared a glance with Hermione before saying, "Show us."

I glanced around the room for something to *push* against, and my eyes fell on the heavy, leather couch in the far corner. With a wicked grin, I looked at Blaise and waited until she showed signs of nervousness, then with a flick of my hand, *pushed* her into the couch. She gave a squawk of surprise, but the soft leather couch cushioned her impact enough that she was only shocked, rather than hurt.

Hermione spoke first. "Wandless banishing?"

I laughed out loud at her awkward mimicking Zab's first question. "Look, if we are going to have a magical demonstration, may I at least put some clothes on?" I asked her.

"No," Blaise said, with feeling. I turned to face her to discover that she had risen from the couch and was right at the edge of the bed. A sultry fire in her eyes was the first hint I got before she put both hands on my chest and pushed me back onto the bed.

I suppose a Slytherin would be turned on by a demonstration of power...

Oh, and while it took nearly ten minutes, I did eventually manage to get more wood for my tree.

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The next morning saw Hermione and I in Hogsmeade, making our way towards Hogwarts. I stopped once more at the fountain, feeling not a small amount of déjà vu. The only difference between now and the last time was that there was one less of Voldemort's functioning horcruxes in the world. A definite net gain. I was half-surprised that there wasn't more birds singing in the trees.

My eyes were drawn to Cho's tear-free visage as her image danced and spun away within the waters of the fountain. Once more, my heart clenched as I thought about the sacrifices others had made fighting Voldemort. For some who still lived, who had lost everyone they cared for, the victory must have seemed so very hollow. Not for the first time, I silently gave thanks to the universe at large for having two brilliant and wonderful women in my life. Not for the first time, I silently wondered just how it would affect me to lose one of them. I'm not sure I could survive the 'Survivor's Guilt'.

I looked up at Hermione, held out my hand and gave her a bright smile that belied my most recent thoughts. "Come on, 'Mione, the Master Manipulator wants to see us."

Hermione sighed, but took my hand. "Would you please stop calling him that?"

"Why?"

"Because he is trying to do everything he can to make up for the mistakes he made in the past. Are you ever going to welcome him into your life again?"

I thought deeply for a second. "I'm not sure, 'Mione. A few months ago, I would have said no. Now that he's no longer treating me like a child, it might make it easier. But he is still making assumptions about me and my well-being. If I need help, I'll ask for it. I did before I took off on my whirlwind adventure. He gave me the earring so I could understand the different languages, and the means to destroy the..." I paused and glanced around. Even though no one was around, I was taking no chances. "...item. But when he turned up, well, he just assumed that I needed help getting out of there."

She gave my hand a squeeze. "Is that all? The fact that he still assumes things?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Given his track record, that single thing is a lot."

Hermione nodded. "Maybe. But his intentions are good."

I sighed. "Road to hell, and all that rot. Anyway, there is one reason I doubt I will ever trust him again."

Hermione's face grew set. "And what exactly would that be?"

I put on a sneer, reminiscent of our ex-Potions Professor.

She rolled her eyes, suppressing a giggle. "Snape?"

I nodded. "He still trusts the slimy git. And I have a sneaking suspicion that he has confided in him."

Hermione gave my hand a squeeze as the imposing castle came into view. "Are you sure? When we last spoke to him, Professor Dumbledore said that he had not even informed Snape of the existence of the horcruxes."

I nodded thoughtfully. "True, but that certainly doesn't mean that he won't. To study the bloody things, or at least discover how to destroy them, he may need to consult with someone who has a deep knowledge of dark lore. Snape is the obvious choice, though I would prefer he spoke to Moody, or that fellow from the Department of Mysteries, Croaker. Hell, even Remus would be a suitable choice."

Hermione gave me a scandalous look. "Harry! Professor Lupin would never..."

I held up a hand and touched my index finger to her lips. "All I meant was that as the bookworm of the Marauders, and suffering from a dark curse himself, I'd imagine that he would be a little more than an expert on dark magic matters. That is not to say that he specialises in that area."

Hermione pursed her lips, giving the tip of my finger a silent kiss. As I removed them, she continued. "But you still think Professor Dumbledore would tell Snape before any of those others?"

"Probably," I replied glumly. "He made Snape and Sirius work together, even though they wanted nothing more than to kill each other. Snape and Remus may have a tolerable working relationship, but the pair will never be friends. And every time in my childhood I needed something extra, that's who Dumbledore recruited to do the job. Through it all, I just get the feeling that it was as much for Snape's benefit as my own."

"What do you mean?"

I shrugged. “Snape is a bitter, twisted little man. He clings to whatever power, no, not power. Authority. He uses it like a cloak, to keep out the world, and abuses the power it gives him, just to prove to himself that he can. I think Dumbledore is desperately trying to change him, force him to become more human, before it finally does push him from dark to evil.”

I turned to look at Hermione, only to discover that she was looking back at me with an expression of intense interest.

I shrugged. “Anyway, everything about Snape’s relationship with me revolves around what happened with my father. Snape hated him, well, they hated each other, but my father proved that he certainly didn’t want Snape dead. Now, as much of a prick as Snape is, I’m not sure I can see him letting an enemy die, if he could prevent it. But what I can see, is that he would then lord the fact that he was owed a wizard debt over that person forever.

“And I think that is why he hated my father so very much. The fact that James Potter saved his life, yet didn’t, as far as I know, demand anything from him. It must have driven Snape wild, wondering when the debt would be called, or what imagined humiliation he would have had to endure to discharge the debt. As different as I am from my father, I can’t imagine that he saw a wizard debt from Snape something to abuse like that.”

“Are you sure? I mean, Snape and your father absolutely loathed each other.”

I nodded. “Yes, but when it came to something as important as saving a life, my father did the right thing. He may have been a prankster, but he was infinitely more serious about important things. No, I’m not convinced he even realised that he had earned the debt. And if he didn’t think about it, while Snape was consumed by it, well, you can almost understand why Snape is like he is today.”

I again looked up at Hermione as we approached the main doors of the ancient castle. Oddly, her cheeks were a little flushed, more than I would have expected from the leisurely walk up the road from the town below. She slowly licked her lips, then caught her bottom lip between her teeth. Signs I belatedly recognised.

“Um, ‘Mione?”

Wordlessly, she leaned over and crushed her lips against mine. I reciprocated happily, though I was curious. It was very unlike my Gryffindor girlfriend to be so... mercurial... in her emotions.

She finally pulled back, and looked up into my eyes. Her own were lidded with desire. “I’ve told you how sexy it is when you use your mind.”

I swallowed, wishing I could adjust myself. Part of me had just grown significantly, and was in a rather uncomfortable position. “Well, the Room of Requirement is probably available,” I squeaked, mentally cursing my unmanly change of tone.

Hermione shook her head with an expression of regret. “No, we have an appointment with Professor Dumbledore. It would be rude to make him wait for us.”

I gave a small growl of frustration. “Fine, but give me a minute,” I said, looking around for any voyeurs. Finding none, I shifted my hand to my groin and adjusted myself into a more comfortable position. Her expression had changed to a mock one of scandalous shock.

“What?”

“You could have let me do that,” she pouted.

I raised an eyebrow. “Not unless you wanted to do some cleaning charms before we went in there,” I said with a smirk.

Her scarlet face was almost Weasley-esque as we finally entered the building. I gave her a few moments to compose herself before we climbed the stairs to Dumbledore’s office. I gave her hand a squeeze and whispered, “‘Mione? Whatever happens in there, please just follow my lead? If you want to yell at me afterwards, you can, but if Dumbledore has brought Snape, I need to set things straight.”

Hermione shook her head. “I still don’t think the Headmaster will ask Snape to join us,” she said.

I nodded. “I hope so too. It would mean a lot to me. But just in case, please just stay quiet and let me say what needs to be said.”

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I pulled my backpack off one shoulder, and pulled Ravenclaw’s journal from within. I placed the book on Dumbledore’s desk, closely followed by the shiv he had loaned me. I hoped he would ignore the fact that it had a blackened blade, and much of the magic within had dissipated. (I’d done some research in the library at Grimmauld Place before coming to Hogwarts to return the items, and discovered to vague horror that the shiv was one of only two in existence.) I gripped the earring in my lobe and whispered the command word, allowing the tiny metal stud to slip relatively painlessly away from my ear. Wordlessly, I gently placed the metal stud next to the book, before stepping back and sitting down in a waiting armchair.

Throughout the whole time, Dumbledore’s eyes never left my own, the ancient blue eyes behind the half-moon spectacles radiating a deep sadness. At first, I thought it was pity, and I was prepared to launch into a verbal barrage that would have made my explosion at the end of my fifth year an inconsequential thing. But something in his gaze was different, and I finally recognised a combination of sadness and regret.

I leaned back into the armchair and waited silently, simply taking comfort in Hermione’s presence in the chair next to me. I needed all the comfort and support I could get, since Snape was indeed leaning against the wall in a shadowy niche behind the Headmaster with an arm-crossed sullenness that exuded menace. Hermione and I had shared a glance and a smile when we noticed that he was present. Oddly, I didn’t feel a single touch to my mental defenses, so either the oily prick had been ordered to behave, or he had learned that poking a lion with a stick was not a good

thing to do when the only thing between you was the lion's ethics.

Oddly, McGonagall was also present, and she sat stiffly on the other side of Hermione, looking over at me with an oddly blank expression. The only flicker of emotion that crossed her stony features was, weirdly, a flicker of a smile when Hermione reached out and took my hand. I gave it a squeeze, before releasing it and lacing my fingers in front of me. Displays of emotion in front of McGonagall still seemed inappropriate to me.

Dumbledore finally stopped looking at me, and glanced down at the items I had returned. With a deep, regretful sigh, he picked up Ravenclaw's journal and began gently flicking through the ruined pages, stopping to read the odd legible passage.

"I'm not entirely sure I have the courage to have been able to have done this, Harry. As much as I am grateful you were ultimately successful in your mission, the price was so very high."

I nodded sharply. "Hermione has already told me just how expensive it was. I'm not sorry though, it is just one more thing that the world will have to accept for Voldemort's actions," I said cryptically. "May I ask what he is doing here?" I asked tonelessly, jerking my head in Snape's direction.

"Believe me, Potter, your desire for me to be absent in no way comes close to my own," Snape snarled.

Dumbledore stiffened, and his eyes hardened. "Severus, please! Harry, I have confided in both Professors Snape and McGonagall our aim to destroy Voldemort's horcruxes. I still believe that it would be best in terms of secrecy if you were to locate and return them, however."

"Headmaster, you can't be serious! The idiot compromised..."

Dumbledore slapped a palm down on his desk with a loud retort. "Severus, *please* !" he repeated.

Hermione and I exchanged a glance filled with curiosity. Dumbledore had always been, if not supportive, at least apologetic for Snape's actions and attitudes. I couldn't remember a time when he had told the oily git off for any infraction what so ever. Even cutting Snape off in mid-tirade was so unusual as to almost be unique.

"Are you fully recovered, Harry?"

I blinked at the unexpected question. "Yes," I replied simply.

Dumbledore appeared a little uncomfortable. "I wish to apologise for my presumption on leaving the Vatican. I had assumed that any escape route you had planned had been removed from you during your incarceration. I should have known that you would have had something they could not take away up your sleeve."

"In my pocket, actually," I clarified. "And they did take that away."

Snape snorted. "*Planning* is just a pair of syllables to you, isn't it, Potter?"

I leaned forward in my chair and levelled my eyes on Dumbledore. "I refuse to work with him. Either you throw him out right now, or I will," I said, just louder than a whisper, but enough to be heard by everyone in the room.

Nearly all the portraits reacted in some way, but their objections went unheeded, for the most part. Snape's eyes bulged as he took in my threat, and he had his wand out and took aim at me while Dumbledore just closed his eyes with resignation and frustration. "Is it at all possible for the two of you to even *sit* in the same room without antagonising each other?" he asked the room.

Coming to the conclusion that he was not about to heed my request, I called upon the training I had done with Zab just yesterday and sprang to my feet. Swinging my left hand as though I was trying to slap Snape from a distance, I *pushed* out with my magic, enhanced a little with the anger and hatred I felt for this waste of oxygen.

Snape's sneer slid from his face comically as he was suddenly hurled from his nice, comfortable shadowy corner and across the back wall of the office. He managed to twist in the air to land hard on his palms and knees, rather than on his back. He still managed to hiss out a shield charm, and the air around him flickered slightly. Not that a shield charm in any way affected what I was doing. With a grunt, I made a lifting gesture with my right hand, which, combined with another *push*, propelled the slimy git vertically, in spite of his protective magic. In the midst of all this action, Snape was screaming epithets at me, Dumbledore was roaring something else, with McGonagall joining it too.

I ignored them all.

Snape passed the high window before he reached the apex of his vertical flight, (aka, the ceiling, which he hit rather hard) allowing me to time my next move. As he fell, I mentally *pushed* out at him a third time, combined with a double-handed, thrusting gesture, just as he reached the window on his return leg.

The glass shattered as he was forcibly defenestrated. His screams of anger turned to shrieks of fright, and I could hear the rapid clatter of him hitting the tiles of the roof outside of the Headmaster's window. More clatters and his rapidly diminishing vocal histrionics indicated that he was falling away quickly down the steep slopes of the roof. Ignoring Hermione's stunned silence and the shouted comments from Dumbledore, McGonagall and the portraits, I turned to Fawkes, whose head had retreated away from the noise, but the old man beat me to it.

"Fawkes!" snapped Dumbledore, pointing towards the shattered window. The beautiful phoenix leapt from his perch and shot out the broken window in a crimson blur. Snape's cries and screams of fear and rage were suddenly cut off by a faint "oof!" From then on, only a series of ever-fainter curses and insults reached out ears. Fawkes was obviously lowering the Potion Master to the ground.

Stunned silence reigned for nearly a minute before Dumbledore almost exploded.

"Good Lord, Harry, what has gotten into you?"

I blinked slowly and focused my eyes on Dumbledore. "I gave you an option," I said.

He blinked in return. "I beg your pardon?"

I leaned forward, putting my knuckles on the edge of his desk. "I. Gave. You. An. Option. You could have asked him to leave. You could have sent him away. You didn't. I did. Just as I said I would."

"Mr. Potter!" bawled McGonagall. "You could have killed Severus!"

"Nah," I said offhandedly, waving her comment away. "I'm not that lucky."

"Mr. Potter!" McGonagall shrieked, after just the barest of pauses to compose herself. I'm almost sure she fought down a smile, and was just being indignant for forms sake.

"Harry! If Severus had fallen, you could have been charged with murder! He could still press charges of assault!" Dumbledore said heatedly.

I reached out and grabbed a handful of the front of Dumbledore's robes and pulled him close. It was probably the first time since he had faced Grindewald that he had been physically assaulted. "Snape drew his wand on me," I spat. "Now listen to me very carefully, old man. I will say this once, and once only. I swear on my parent's grave that if that bastard *ever* draws his wand on me again, either he or I will die."

I released his robes with a shove, physically pushing him back into his chair. As the old man collapsed into his armchair, his expression was one of total, uncomprehending shock, right down to the gaping mouth.

"Harry," he started, before I cut him off.

"No!" I shouted. "Time and time again, you gave him power over me, and time and time again, he abused it. Not once in the entire time I was a student here did that bastard ever given any indication of wanting to do anything other than curse me into oblivion. Now that I am an adult, he simply ignores any rules that govern his behaviour here and threatens me with his wand on sight. You may trust him, I do not. You may think he can be redeemed, I absolutely do not. He is a cruel, vindictive, petty man, who has a chip on his shoulder so big he can't see past a twenty-year old grudge to save his soul. The sadistic bastard should not be let anywhere near children, let alone allowed to teach. You had best tell him what I said word for word, because I imagine he will commit suicide by trying to curse me if I have to.

"Now, I am here on my own terms, not yours. I don't trust you, or your motives. You may be a beacon for the light, but you've fucked up my life with your overhanded decisions, manipulations and lies so often that I simply cannot afford to give you the benefit of the doubt. If you want my help, then you will accept my terms. It is as simple as that. And rule number one is quite simple. Snape and I have nothing to do with each other. Got it? I don't want any potions he has brewed. I don't want any tutoring from him, no matter if he is the last repository of knowledge on the planet. I don't want him any where near me, hell, I never even want to see him, now or ever again. Do. You. Understand?"

"Harry-"

For some reason, hearing him call me by my first name irritated me. I cut him off with a sudden wave of my hand. "Shut up. Rule two. From this point on, call me Mr. Potter. I never want to hear my first name from you again," I snarled, wondering if I was overdoing it just a little bit. Thankfully, Hermione was holding to her agreement, and not interrupting me.

"Mr. Potter, I'm sorry. I had thought we were building a new working relationship. One based on mutual respect," he said carefully.

I dropped back down into my chair without grace or dignity. "We were, until you decided to make that bastard involved."

My choice of language was apparently having an affect on McGonagall's ability to speak, and Hermione was still silent, though her expression was flickering between shock and amusement.

Dumbledore gazed intently at me for a while before responding. "Was there no way to discuss his inclusion? His knowledge of dark magic is almost unparalleled."

"Which is only beaten by his hatred of me. No, I don't trust him."

Dumbledore suddenly looked so very tired. "H- Mr. Potter, Severus has proved himself time and time again."

I shrugged. "So you keep saying. I haven't seen it. As a matter of fact, your blind devotion to that datum without visible evidence supports a theory I've had for a while."

Dumbledore blinked. "And that is?"

"That he cast the Imperius Curse on you and made you believe that."

"Mr. Potter, like yourself, I can rid myself of the Imperius," he said haughtily.

I narrowed my eyes. "If someone cast it on me, and told me to kiss my girlfriend, I'm not sure I could break it."



He frowned. "Meaning?"

"That you want to believe Snape is redeemed, or at least, is in the process of being redeemed. How hard is it to resist the Imperius when you are being told to do something you want to do?"

Dumbledore sat back in silence for a few moments pondering my words. "Very well, Mr. Potter. I shall have Poppy give me a thorough check up, to detect any trace of the Imperius Curse on me."

I shrugged. "Do what you like. So long as you follow Rule One, I don't give a rat's arse."

Dumbledore's expression turned from careful neutrality to disappointment. "But we need someone who has such a deep understanding and knowledge of dark objects, Mr. Potter," he said, almost pleading.

I kept my own expression grumpy, but determined. "Then get Croaker, or Moody."

Dumbledore shook his head and looked down at his lap. "I have no authority over Mr. Croaker. I cannot request that he aid us in this endeavour. And I'm afraid that Alastor is quite ill at present."

I blinked in surprise. "You actually admit that you need authority over someone before you approach them for help?"

"That's not what I said!"

I shook my head. "Sorry, but that is what you said." I replied, just as thundering footsteps ascended the staircase outside the Headmaster's door. I took a deep breath, and held it for a second.

Snape barged through the door, purple faced and spluttering, spittle gathered at the edges of his mouth. Despite Dumbledore's barked warning, he levelled his wand at me and shouted, "CRU-"

He got no further before I gestured and *pushed* hard and fast. My magic hit him in the stomach and blew him backwards like a leaf in a cyclone. The esteemed Potions Master of Hogwarts sailed out the door and into the spiral staircase, where he continued to fall, arse over head. The thuds, grunts, yelps of pain and the occasional snap of bone echoed up the enclosed stairway.

You know, it was becoming easier and easier for me to use my magic in this way, and it felt more satisfying as well. Of course, that could simply be the fact that I've been beating up on Snape, but I think the point remains.

## Journeyman Potter Painful Discoveries

"Dear Lord, Harry!" Dumbledore exclaimed, rising quickly to his feet. I was rather astonished at just how fast the old man could move when he had to. Something to ponder once I was sure I had the old man's measure. "Minerva, quickly, could you attend to Severus? He will need medical assistance."

"No," McGonagall said stiffly.

Dumbledore blinked, his face a paragon of uncertainty. "I beg your pardon?"

McGonagall crossed her arms, and glared at the Headmaster. "Severus has been openly antagonistic, hostile and aggressive towards Mr. Potter here, from the instant he entered this office. Since it appears to have occurred so often that you have become blasé at the attempt of a Hogwarts Professor place a member of the public under an Unforgivable Curse, I'm afraid I have no sympathy for him. See to him yourself, Albus. I hereby refuse to have anything to do with the man beyond official school and house business."

Dumbledore's expression of shock deepened. "Minerva?!" he breathed, aghast.

Keeping a smirk of triumph from my face, I dispassionately glanced down at my watch. "Wasting valuable CPR seconds," I offered.

Dumbledore's attention shot between McGonagall and myself, before the old wizard rounded his desk and ran down the stairs.

Hermione's wide-eyed expression of shock at McGonagall's sudden lack of empathy was amusing to behold. "Professor?" she began. "I thought you respected Professor Snape?"

McGonagall ignored her, glaring straight at me. I matched her stare, knowing that she was about to test me, and I'd better have the right answers.

"Mr. Potter! Your own actions were hardly blameless. Would you care to explain?"

I nodded. "Of course, Professor," I replied politely. "Do you have any specific questions first?"

McGonagall's eyes narrowed, her pointed hat trembling slightly. "Would you care to explain why you antagonized Severus?"

Hermione blurted out, "Professor! You just said that Professor Snape-" before I placed my hand on her arm. She looked at me with a frown.

I gave her a quick smile before turning back to McGonagall. "It was a simple test, Professor. The hatred between Professor Snape and I mostly runs one way. I would simply prefer to avoid the man and, if possible, to live and let live. Dumbledore however, has other ideas. He takes every opportunity to thrust us together, I assume, in the hope that we can discover a way to work together; one where he didn't need to supervise."

"I am aware of that, Mr. Potter. I am still waiting for an explanation."

I nodded. "Yes, I have one, but first, I'd like to make an observation. I noticed the house-points jars on my way in this morning. They resemble the situation during my fifth year, with plenty of emeralds on display, while rubies, sapphires and topazes are rather rare. I took this to mean that Snape has been rather liberal with his deduction of points from other houses. Even more so than usual, that is."

McGonagall sighed deeply. "Yes, Mr. Potter. Your observations are correct."

I nodded again. "Dumbledore wasn't trying to make Snape work with me because that would be the best for all concerned. Dumbledore was trying to make him work with me to try to get Snape over the grudge he holds for my father and I. While I was a student, he had power over me and could assign detention, or deduct points, or destroy my work, or whatever he wanted, just to make himself feel like he was better than I was. Since I have no longer been a student, that power has gone. He has confronted me a few times since then, in an effort to prove to himself that he is still better than I am. Each time, he has left the encounter either needing medical assistance, or has been humiliated.

"He still clings to his belief that I am an incompetent buffoon who uses a famous name to bluff my way through life. He cannot accept the fact that I have worked hard to be where I am, and that I am more powerful than he is. Since he is no longer obliged by oath to keep me safe, I sure as hell do not *feel* safe around him, not that I ever really did. My comment was simply a test, to see what his reaction was. Had he taken it calmly, dismissively, or even snorted at me, I would have allowed him to stay. Nevertheless, the man drew his wand. Proving my point, and destroying Dumbledore's pathetically vain hope.

"I'm sorry, but I will not work with such a petty, vindictive little man."

I ended my rant by leaning back in my chair, and waited for McGonagall's response. Many of the portraits around the room were mumbling, some with a tone of agreement, others with disapproval. McGonagall finally nodded. "Very well, Mr. Potter. While I cannot, and do not condone your attack

on Severus, I will acknowledge that it was justified. I sincerely hope that circumstances do not call on you to carry out your threat. Homicide is not looked upon favorably in the Wizarding world, you know," she said, a small smile gracing the tips of her usually stern lips.

I casually shrugged and let a large grin grow over my features. "A muggle author once wrote that there are four different kinds of homicide, Professor. Felonious, excusable, justifiable and praiseworthy. While it would make little difference to Snape himself, I'm quite sure three-quarters of Wizarding Lawyers schooled at Hogwarts in the past fourteen years would argue that the death of Professor Snape falls into the last classification."

Hermione snorted from the effort of hiding her laughter, and McGonagall's lips were twitching faster than I'd ever seen. "Quite," the normally unflappable Transfiguration Professor finally managed.

"Now," I began, changing the subject. "Professor, do you know Mr. Croaker's first name?"

"Christophe. His mother was French."

I nodded, rose, and walked over to Dumbledore's fire. I took a pinch of powder from one of the velvet bags on the mantle and tossed it into the flames. "Mr. Christophe Croaker, Department of Mysteries," I said clearly.

It took nearly ten seconds before a face appeared in the flames, a wary expression easily discernable. "Hmm," the face said, silently scrutinizing me in detail for some time. "Mr. Potter, I presume," he said in a deep, grizzled voice.

I nodded. "Please forgive my intrusion, but I was wondering if I could have a moment of your time."

"Regarding?" came the rapid-fire response.

"Voldemort- and how the bastard keeps reincarnating himself."

"Why me?" he snapped.

I raised an eyebrow. "Because, after your presentation to the Wizengamot, I would have thought you would have wanted to know where the hell his body got to."

Croaker's eyes narrowed dangerously, and he shook his head. "Dumbledore," he spat. "What has he told you?" the man demanded.

"Would you care to join me? We can discuss this here."

The man laughed nastily. "Do you think I'm an idiot? I don't go anywhere where I'm not in control."

I shrugged. "I'm currently in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts. Should you change your mind, I shall be here for the next hour or so. If you wish to discuss things, but would prefer a location where you feel more comfortable, let me know and I shall do what I can to accommodate you."

I pulled back as the man shouted, "Wait!" and cancelled the conversation.

I turned back to the two witches. "Well, that was interesting."

Hermione frowned. "It certainly was. That man is nearly as paranoid as Professor Moody."

McGonagall nodded in agreement. "Christophe was always rather secretive. Even as a youngster, I just knew he was destined to be an Unspeakable."

I rubbed my chin. "No, not just that. The fact that I gave the impression I knew where Voldemort's body was, but he just demanded to know what Dumbledore had told me."

McGonagall frowned. "Mr. Potter, I hope you are not accusing the Headmaster of keeping things from you."

I rolled my eyes. "Of course not. After all, he's only done that my entire life. I'm sure there's no reason for him to keep doing it now."

McGonagall's eyes narrowed dangerously, and it took a conscious effort on my part to remember that I wasn't twelve anymore. Just as she opened her mouth, Dumbledore stumbled back up the stairs, his face pale and his hands shaking.

"Minerva! It's Severus! He's, he's dead!" the Headmaster blurted.

Ice crystallized in my gut, and I had a sudden urge to use the toilet. I needed to vomit.

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The rest of the day past by in a blur.

Aurors were called. Statements were taken.

Throughout it all, Hermione sat ashen-faced, still and in shock. McGonagall was as stoic as ever, her account of events starkly evenhanded and accurate. Dumbledore looked as though he had lost something, constantly wringing his hands and reorganizing his desk when he was sitting. He patted his pockets and minutely shifted his many ornaments when he was walking aimlessly around.

At least four different people questioned me closely. Each one kept asking if I was sure I hadn't used a wandless banishing charm. Rather than

exploding with rage and giving the unimaginative idiots a physical example of exactly what I had done to Snape, I took the sarcastic route. With contempt dripping from every syllable, I eventually agreed with them, that yes, I had used a banishing charm without a wand. Though they finally had the answer they wanted, suddenly, they were not as sure as they had been moments before.

Still, that is what went into the report. The fact that Snape had the first syllable of one of the Unforgivables out meant that I wasn't going to be arrested on the spot, much to the disgust of at least three of the Aurors. Having three witnesses is a wonderful thing. It makes dealing with policemen (who were far more interested in making a famous arrest than actually doing something like, say, *investigating* ) so much simpler. I know that in the Wizarding world, guilt and innocence tend to be secondary considerations compared to expediency, but even so, with Rufus as the current Minister, I would not put it past them to cart me away just for defending myself.

Though I hadn't really thought much about it, the Minister had been savaged in the press lately for the sins of the past. The three investigations into the death of Voldemort had each produced different findings, adding to his embarrassment. Personally, I thought the stuff they wrote about him was mild, at least compared to the shit the collective Wizarding media had put me through over the years. Old Scrim must just have thinner skin.

Operating on automatic, Hermione and I were finally granted permission to escape the circus and make our way home.

That is where the fireworks really started.

---

We arrived in a flash of green, both of us with identical expressions of shock and disbelief. I forced myself to think back to what my motivations were as we arrived at Hogwarts, an eternity ago. Somehow, the idea that I would be the one to kill Snape suddenly didn't seem so much like a pleasant fantasy anymore. The fact that he broke his neck falling down Dumbledore's moving staircase didn't overcome the fact that I had pushed him down them in the first place.

I honestly hadn't meant to kill him. Though I suppose I had honoured my rather hasty declaration on my parent's grave, I did expect that Snape would at least be given the chance to hear my threat. But did that matter? The fact that he was about to cast an Unforgivable on me gave me just cause to defend myself, but--

"You killed him," Hermione said, interrupting my own internal dialogue.

I nodded mutely. It's not like I could deny it or anything.

"You killed him," she repeated, more forcefully this time.

Again, I nodded. "Yeah," I agreed tonelessly.

"Harry, you killed him!" she all but shouted. "You went in there to goad him and kill him!"

The accusation hit me almost as hard as the realization that I had actually sent the man to his death. Well, pushed him to his death. I tried taking a breath to reply, but found my lungs wouldn't fully cooperate.

My delay in answering seemed to be an answer of sorts for her. "You, you, you deliberately killed him! You murdered him, Harry!"

Despair flooded through me, as I realized that Hermione could think that I could actually kill someone in cold blood. The shock was even worse than the previous one. I could hardly breathe.

"You, you not only murdered him, you made me an accomplice!" she shrieked, her voice reaching all corners of the massive house. "I could go to Azkaban for this!"

I shook my head dumbly, trying to form a coherent argument, only to find my mind full of hot pink fluff.

Hermione had tears in her eyes, and her hands were shaking badly. Mumbling to herself hysterically, she babbled about being a criminal, that she was going to prison, that she wouldn't be able to accomplish her life's goals from Azkaban.

I shook my head and said the first thing that came to me. "But we got away with it!" I blurted, trying to convey that since I was acting in self-defense, that there would be no repercussions on her.

I didn't even think about what I said, I only saw her face run clear of colour. I didn't see her hand rise like the leviathan, striking my cheek as hard as I'd even been hit before.

The only thing that ran through my mind as Hermione turned and ran from the room was that she must have learned how to *push* too. That slap had hurt!

---

When Blaise arrived home from work, she found me at the door to Hermione's room, looking in.

I'd been there for some interminable time, trying to come to terms with the fact that the room was empty. Only the bed, chair and desk remained. No books, not pictures, no clothes. Nothing with Hermione's scent remained.

Blaise slipped an arm around my waist. "What happened? You and Hermione have an argument?" she asked, unable to keep the smirk from her voice.

Not that I picked up on it. "Snape is dead," I said simply.

She stiffened. "What?"

"Snape is dead," I replied, sounding like an automaton.

I found her hands on my cheeks, and she gently turned my head around to face her. "What happened?"

"I killed him."

Blaise sucked in a lungful of air in surprise, her dark eyes searching my own. "How?"

I blinked, and finally joined the conversation mentally. "I threw him down the stairs to Dumbledore's office," I said challengingly, wondering if she was going to leave me too.

She blinked, but her eyes didn't harden to chips of ice like Hermione's had. "Why?"

I closed my eyes and looked down shamefully. "I goaded him. I threw him out the window first, but he charged back up the stairs and tried to curse me."

Blaise ducked her head to look up into my downward-facing gaze. "What curse did he try and use, Harry?" she asked kindly.

I shrugged. "He got the first part of the Cruciatus curse out," I mumbled.

Surprising me, she reached out and encircled my neck with her arms and held me close. "Then you have nothing to worry about. He got what was coming to him."

"Really?" I asked, my voice as timid as a child's. I seriously needed reassuring at that moment.

"Really," she confirmed. "Besides, I won ten galleons today."

I blinked at the sudden change of topic. "Really?"

She laughed at my repetitiveness. "Yes, Harry. I won ten galleons today."

I nodded, still coming to terms with the fact that she wasn't going to leave me for killing her Head of House. "Great. Um, how?"

"Oh, just a bet I had with Daphne Greengrass."

I frowned, trying to get my mind up to speed. "A bet with Greengrass?" I asked, vaguely remembering a pudgy girl with mousey-brown hair who was always studying as hard as Hermione at the back of every class. "What about?"

Blaise smirked. "We both thought that you and Snape would eventually have it out with each other. We bet on who we thought would survive."

I frowned deeply. "You bet that I would kill your Head of House?"

Blaise waved my question away, as though it wasn't important. "Don't be such a Gryffindor."

"But you just said--"

She reached up and covered my mouth. "Oh, shut up. The bet was only if you two finally earled it out."

I blinked, trying to work out what she meant. "*Duked* it out, possibly?"

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever. The point is that we both thought that Professor Snape would go too far one day and that either you'd snap, or he would. Daph thought that since he is a, er, *was* a powerful wizard in his own right, he'd blast the Gryffindor Golden Boy into dust. I knew there was a fair bit more to you than the insults Professor Snape kept sending your way over the years, especially after you came back after the third task of the TriWizard tournament. Even Daph finally realized that, and tried to change the bet after you faced down What's-His-Name after our OWLs." She smirked. "I didn't let her, of course."

I smiled thankfully. "Of course." I looked into her eyes, and wondered why her reaction was so different from Hermione's. "Um, you don't seem upset."

Her concerned expression didn't change. "It's hard to care about the death of someone who you don't respect. I saw how he treated Gryffindors in general and you specifically. Yes, he was my head of house, but the only thing I'm surprised about is that someone didn't do him in earlier."

Her unwavering acceptance of my actions settled my rolling stomach somewhat. "Thank you, love."

Blaise nodded. "Now, what caused the princess to toss her toys out of the crib?"

I winced. "Must you insult her like that?"

She scowled at me. "I'm not sure. I'll know after you explain."

I sighed deeply and related the day's events. "We went to Hogwarts to meet with Dumbledore to discuss something else. Before we went in, I asked Hermione to just play along with whatever I said. I was going to give Dumbledore another bashing if he brought Snape along."

Blaise rolled her eyes. "Let me guess," she said rhetorically. "Professor Snape was there."

I nodded. "Snape and McGonagall were both there with Dumbledore. I asked what Snape was doing there, he spat something back, and Dumbledore said that he was there at his invitation."

Blaise shook her head. "Idiotic Gryffindors," she muttered.

I nearly grinned at her insult. "I told Dumbledore to throw him out, or I would. Snape drew his wand at me, so I threw him out the window."

Blaise blinked. "How?"

I did grin this time, but it was weak. "The same way I threw you across the room."

"Oh," she said, before her eyes lit up in understanding. "*Oh* !"

I nodded. "Anyway, Fawkes was sent to save him before he hit the ground."

"Dumbledore's phoenix?"

I nodded. "I got yelled at for a while, but I just kept a blank face. I told Dumbledore to tell Snape that if he ever drew a wand on me again that one of us would die."

Blaise's laugh filled the room with warmth. "You should have kept with Divination."

I gave her a mock scowl. "Sod that. Anyway, he charged into the room and tried to curse me. I pushed him down the stairs."

"With your little..." she said, with a little shooing hand gesture.

I nodded. "The aurors wouldn't take *pushing* for an answer though, and I had to settle on wandless banishing. I suppose there isn't a place on their forms for 'Undocumented power'."

"And Hermione?"

I sucked in a shuddering breath. "She accused me of murdering Snape. That because I asked her to play along with what I said in the meeting, that I made her an accomplice."

Blaise looked at me for a long time. "Is that all?"

I shook my head. "She hit me."

Blaise reached out and took my hand. She looked at me intensely for a few moments before shaking her head with a low laugh. "So, do you *ever* have a boring, *normal* day?"

I glanced back sadly at Hermione's empty room. "Once. It was a Tuesday, I think."

---

The next day, I got an owl from Dumbledore. Well, a phoenix, at any rate. The sight of a fire-bird appearing in the middle of the lounge room in a burst of crimson flame startled Dobby, who tried conjuring a bucket of water. Fawkes, who I assume had never in his Immortal life been greeted with a face-full of soapy water, gave a sort of wet, warbled trilling at this novel welcome, as though trying to say, "What was *that* for?" as he stood with his dripping wings spread.

The sight of a soaking phoenix is probably unique, and certainly one I'd never forget. Despite the fact that Fawkes still looked nervous at my presence, the soaking bird delivered his burden without haste.

I cast a drying charm at him, whose cautious gaze softened at my actions. I remembered the time Fawkes had flown down into the Chamber of Secrets to save me, and had been drawn to me by my loyalty to Dumbledore. Phoenixes must have an owl's ability to track magical people, since I certainly wasn't feeling terribly loyal to Dumbledore at the moment.

Kreacher decided to make an appearance at that point, never missing a chance to mumble at Dobby about how he was such a bad elf for making a mess of the noble Black house. The insane elf took one look at Fawkes and froze in absolute terror. For his part, Fawkes noticed the petrified elf and gave a disgusted screech of disjointed musical notes.

I blinked at the cacophony. Fawkes' voice had been, up till now, soul-cleansing and beautiful. Obviously, phoenixes had the ability to make horrible-sounding noises too. Horrible being a relative term of course. The noise sounded like heavenly angels having an argument. To me, it was faintly uncomfortable, but Kreacher clutched his battered ears and screamed in pain before running from the room at high speed. I turned back to Fawkes, only to decide that the bird's new expression could only be described as self-satisfied.

Again, marveling at my ability to decipher a magical turkey's expression, I asked Dobby to fetch some food for our avian guest and opened Dumbledore's letter.

---

Dear Mr. Potter,

*It dismays me to have to put this in a letter, but I'm afraid that after yesterday's events you would not, under any circumstances, agree to a meeting which I had organized. I cannot in all good conscience blame you.*

*Severus' unfortunate death was instantaneous, according to Madam Pomfrey. He did not suffer after the instant his neck snapped. While I am fully aware that many of his current and former students have in the past wished harm upon the man, and perhaps even a painful end, I pray that this news soothes your conscience somewhat.*

*I will leave all the self-recriminations out of this missive. I know what responsibility I hold for his death, and it is certainly not inconsiderable. Again, I pray that someday you will forgive me for putting the pair of you in a situation where all the ill-feeling between you boiled over uncontrollably. I had been doing all that I could to get the man to renounce his dark tendencies. My optimism blinded me to the truth, which, under the mountain of owls I have received in the past day, is now glaringly obvious.*

*Moving on from the recent tragedy, I know that Miss Granger has been rather tight-lipped regarding our little adventure together. This was at my request. I know that you have requested that I keep nothing from you, but there were facts involved with our little jaunt that Miss Granger is not aware. I simply wanted you to be in a position where you could get all the information in one sitting, rather than on an ad-hoc basis. I never want you to be in a position again where you are compelled to act on incomplete data.*

At this point, Dumbledore launched into an overly detailed tale of how he and Hermione had retrieved what had turned out to be a fake Horcrux. He described how Hermione had assisted in making him consume a potion, and had then dual-apparated them to Saint Mungos, where he had been admitted and held for several days while the potion he drank wore off. Their initial jubilation at having found another piece of Voldemort's soul had quickly soured when it became terribly apparent that someone else had already beaten them to it. All that swimming, fighting with inferi and drinking a power-sapping potion was for nothing.

Blaise had been right, it was bollocks up from the start.

*In any event, it would appear that a Death Eater, or at least a highly involved sympathizer, going by the initials R.A.B. had both discovered Voldemort's secret, and had become disillusioned with his stance and/or policies. Remember, while many of the older, pure-blooded families in the wizarding world often silently agreed with Voldemort's view of the inferiority of Muggles, Muggle-born and half-blooded folk, he had started targeting established, pure-blooded families of good character, history and social standing who disagreed with his views. It was at this point that much of his silent, sympathetic support became fearful support, and many of his devoted followers began having doubts. Severus fell into this group. So, it would appear, did Sirius' brother.*

*It was those doubts and fear that enabled so many of the Death Eaters to re-enter society after you and your mother defeated Voldemort the first time.*

*But I digress. Initially, it appeared that Slytherin's locket had been taken from its hiding place before Miss Granger and I arrived, perhaps by a couple of years, perhaps by over a decade. On examination and analysis of the facts, I have come to believe the latter. My reasoning follows. Firstly, his followers during his second, much briefer reign, were all rabidly bigoted not only against Muggles and Muggle-born folk, but also against the pure-blooded families who they viewed as blood traitors. Voldemort's support was rising as he faced you that last time, not falling. Secondly, none of his then-current followers had the initials R.A.B. Third, the letter itself made no mention of recent events. While the short note could have been planted to give the impression of age, I must assume that it is authentic, or the sheer scope of the task would threaten to overwhelm us.*

*I'm not sure if Sirius ever told you he had a younger brother. Regulus was sorted into Slytherin, and was part of the group who believed in blood purity. I am afraid that he joined with Voldemort of his own free will, early on in the Dark Lord's first reign. Something happened though, and Regulus tried to leave the circle of Death Eaters.*

*As you have probably guessed, Voldemort does not take kindly to those who betray him and his ideals. Regulus' body was delivered to Grimmauld Place around the time of your birth.*

*Regulus' middle name was 'Archimedes'.*

*It is therefore not difficult to deduce that Regulus somehow discovered Voldemort's use of horcruxes (or at least the existence of one of them), and decided to take the locket and hide it himself. Whether he knew about the others is a secret he took with him to the grave. I have several agents from the Order working to try and discover the location of the locket, by investigating Regulus' last documented movements, but it is proving slow going.*

*I am more than pleased that you managed to succeed where Miss Granger and I failed. Recovering, not to mention destroying, a piece of Voldemort's soul, especially one as well protected as the journal had been, is no mean feat. If an international incident was the least of the repercussions, I consider it well worth the price. I cannot say how proud I am of you for your skill and perseverance.*

*I understand that you have received an owl from the Vatican, requesting your presence at an investigation in the near future. While I realize that advice from me is particularly unwelcome, I feel obligated to urge caution in your approach. As noble and genteel as the Pope is, the man has a Slytherin's ambition, a quality necessary for any Churchman who wishes to attain the highest rank within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. I predict that your skill with Parseltongue will be of great interest to them, since there exists a significant minority of Cardinals who would be incredibly interested in cataloguing and perusing the papal storehouse of confiscated items.*

*If you are asked to once more descend into the bowels of the Vatican on a retrieval mission, please inform someone in the Wizarding world what was recovered. If not myself, then Madam Bones, or Kingsley, or even Nymphadora. You may not be aware, but certain segments of the Church were complicit with Grindlewald and his Muggle puppet Hitler. Much like our own society, there are elements within whose bigotry and xenophobia drive them to acquire power over those they hate, be it items, knowledge or position. Please, do take care.*

*Verily, this vichyssoise of verbiage veers most verbose, vis-à-vis a venture of vindication, so I shall sign off here in the hope that I remain yours sincerely,*

*Albus Dumbledore.*

I placed the rather long letter down on the table, and sat down in one of the chairs. Fawkes was staring straight at me, head tilted to one side questioningly. The fire-bird had ignored every plate of food placed in front of him, from bacon-rinds to peppermint ice-cream.

“Either you’re not hungry, or you’ve got a really weird appetite,” I said, selecting a marshmallow from one of the plates on display. I popped the fluffy sweet into my mouth and grinned at the curious bird. “You know, marshmallows taste so much better when they are toasted,” I muttered to myself, chewing thoughtfully.

Fawkes tilted his head to the other side, and gave the sweets an evaluating stare. He looked back up at me briefly, before leaning over and pecking at one. After a couple of tries, he managed to get his beak into the soft treat, and stood back up straight.

“Go on,” I said. “Have a taste.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin as Fawkes’ head burst into flames, quickly reducing the marshmallow to a charred, sticky mass. As quickly as they had arrived, the flames disappeared, and Fawkes gobbled down the remains of the sweet quickly. He even pecked at the droplets of melted sugar left on the table, left over from the bits that dripped before he could swallow.

I clutched at my chest, feeling my heart slowly return to its normal beating rate. “Right, note to self, never suggest cooking anything in front of a phoenix, ever again.”

---

After Fawkes left, I sat back in one of the armchairs on the top floor and thought deeply.

Hermione leaving me was a blow. The floo to her house was still active, though that meant little. Even if she had disabled it, I could still Apparate to her home in less than a second. Though the fact that it was still active perhaps meant that she would come back, or perhaps at least gave herself the option of coming back. Either way, traveling to her house in Oxford to try and force the issue would be counter productive. She was smart enough to think through events once she had calmed. I hoped. The day could hardly get worse.

In the mean time, I needed to digest the news that one of the Horcruces had been moved from its original hidey-hole. If Dumbledore had been relegated to a hospital bed after the recovery, then whoever took the locket must have been either very powerful, or very cunning.

And I’d go with cunning, to leave the fake locket under the same levels of protection as the original. That in itself would have been a great shock to Snake-face if he ever got around to hunting for the things again.

Where would Regulus have left the thing? Certainly not somewhere the big V or his henchpeople, goons or lackeys could get their hands on it easily. That left out places like Grimmauld place, which until the death of Sirius’ mother, had been a haven for dark wizards, or at least those with a blood purity fetish. That’s the thing about blood purity. Those who insist on sticking to their own gene pool refuse to notice when it gets shallow, until the deficiencies become too much to overcome. Take the Malfoys, for example. For someone who was such a Slytherin, Draco didn’t actually have the will to make anything happen. He simply believed that it was his birthright. A true Slytherin, like Zab or Blaise, identifies their goal, then makes it happen, by whatever means. Whenever Draco’s idiocies were thwarted, he couldn’t believe it, and generally stood around pouting and sulking. It had been pathetic watching the intellectual cripple over the years. Every time he was threatened, the existence of his father would miraculously enter the conversation.

Mind you, I suppose even bright people who fall into those sort of beliefs shed IQ points at an alarming rate. Take Tom Riddle. Incredible student; bright, driven and powerful. Suddenly, blood purity is everything, he decides to protect his life with horcruces, and promptly leaves them lying around, ready for a magical scavenger hunt. I mean, family heirlooms, documents and powerful artifacts are constantly being stored in Gringotts’ vaults safely. Why would you hide pieces of your soul scattered around the place?

That reminds me, I must get the gear I made in Italy to break into the Vatican together and go and store it at Gringotts.

I blinked. Was it that simple? Could RAB have stored the locket in a Gringotts vault? If he died, it would have gone to his family. Or someone who was against the big V.

Only one person fits both scenarios. Sirius.

And Sirius left his vaults to...

As if in response to my thought, another owl swooping in through the window interrupted my silent ponderings. It dropped a note from its beak, and flew out the window without pausing.

I picked up the envelope from my lap, turning it over in my hands. Speak of the devil, it’s from Gringotts.



*Dear Mr. Potter,*

*It is our embarrassing duty to inform you of a successful robbery from one of your vaults.*

The letter fell from my suddenly nerveless fingers, the rest unread.

Well, I suppose the day could get worse.

## Journeyman Potter The Gringotts Job

I packed all the unique items from my own little Italian Job, along with some of my other sentimentally valuable possessions that I hadn't used in a while, into a bag to take with me to Gringotts. I wasn't sure if I'd leave it there or not yet. If the security on my vaults was so piss-poor that something got nicked, then I'd hardly be in any frame of mind to entrust my own inventions to the Goblins.

The only reason I was even thinking about leaving things with them was because I was willing to give them the chance to convince me. If they could show me how the person got in, and how they intend to prevent that from occurring again in the future, then I'm pretty sure I'd feel safe enough leaving my gear there. If they didn't have a plan, I could always use my enlarged backpack to withdraw some of the more valuable and rare items. I'd have to then make provisions to store the things at Grimmauld place. With the new version of the *Fidelius* charm on it, it was inaccessible to all who didn't know the secret. I daresay I could put together a few more charms on at least one room to deny access to anyone expect myself. Maybe I'd even make my own version of Malfoy's secret chamber under the drawing room floor.

Just as I zipped my backpack shut, the floo flared green, and a wild-eyed, unkempt Ronald Weasley stepped into my living room. His quidditch training attire was drenched in patterns that clearly indicated he'd been perspiring for quite a while. He probably just finished a training session with the Cannons, and forgot which door from the dressing rooms led to the shower block.

"Harry!" he shouted, catching sight of me.

"Ron," I shouted back. Hey, if he wanted to play the state the obvious game...

"Harry!" he shouted again, advancing on me quickly. Before I could respond, he had grabbed me in a bear hug and lifted me off my feet. The first thing that hit me was the smell. Yep, he definitely just left training without showering. Again.

"Put me down you stinking idiot," I wheezed indignantly. I could feel his coarse chest hairs through his soaking shirt. Ugh.

Rather than complying, he started spinning around in a circle, whooping with laughter.

"Snape! You got rid of Snape! Woohoo!"

Oh for the love of... "Would you put me down? Please?" I said insistently, letting a low growl creep into my voice.

He released me suddenly, and I fell backwards, unable to keep my balance. It didn't stop Ron from dancing around in circles like a deranged Celtic lunatic. "Snape is gone, Snape is gone. I can't believe you killed him without inviting me to watch. I'd have pawned the Burrow for a front row seat."

I grimaced. "Ron, stop prancing around like a git for two minutes, would you? First of all, I didn't mean to kill him. I just shoved him down the stairs before he could curse me. Second, I-"

Ron stopped and stared at me. "You're not happy. Who are you, and what have you done with Harry?"

I coughed, trying not to chuckle. "*Second*, I feel really fucking bad about it, since Hermione has decided to leave me because of it."

That sobered him up. "Oh, shit mate. Hermione left? Why?"

I took a deep breath, still sitting on my arse where Ron had deposited me. "I asked her to play along before we went into Dumbledore's office. Snape was there, and I told Dumbledore to throw him out, or I would. He didn't, so I did."

Ron's expression turned into one of bliss. "Tell me again. More detail this time please. Or could you put it in your Pensieve. I'll see if you can wear out a memory from watching it too often."

I grabbed a cushion off the nearest couch and threw it at him. "Prat."

He caught it easily. His training was quite obviously sharpening his reflexes. "That's me," he said with a wide grin.

"Anyway, he charged up the stairs, tried to curse me, so I pushed him back down. He broke his neck halfway down. Hermione thinks I goaded him deliberately into cursing me, so I could kill him. I had a brain fart and said that we'd got away with it when we got back home, which she took to mean that I deliberately killed him, and made her an accomplice. She hit me and packed her things."

Ron's expression conveyed his sympathy more clearly than words. "Mate, I, I don't know what to say."

I nodded, and got to my feet. "Don't worry about it."

Something occurred to him, and he suddenly grinned. "Hey, at least you have a spare."

I gave him a low growl. "Blaise is not, and will never be, a *spare* !" I spat heatedly.

He shrugged, not at all phased by my tone. "Going somewhere?" he asked, looking for the first time at my bag on the table.

"Gringotts," I replied shortly. "I got a letter from them, saying something of mine had been stolen."

His eyes bulged. "What?"

I pulled the letter from my back pocket and handed it to him. "Have a look for yourself."

He quickly skimmed the note. "Jeez, Gringotts have never had a successful robbery before. They'd have to have a hell of an excuse."

I nodded glumly. "Yeah, I can't imagine why I'd be the unlucky bugger whose vault got hit first," I said sourly.

Ron's grin returned. "I could. Normal wizards without hyphenated names only get normal doses of karma. People like you, Mr. Boy-Who-Lived, and others like What's-His-Name, get bigger doses than everyone else, both good and bad."

I scowled at him. "Good and bad?"

He nodded quickly, his grin not shifting. "Yeah. He got to torture Malfoy on a regular basis, but then he ran into a spell of yours that turned his head into pink mist. You get to sleep with two girls for a while, and then you get robbed." He turned thoughtful for a second. "Hey, if I got the chance to get Hannah to join Susan and I, I'd settle for being robbed too."

I shook my head at him, not able to get angry when I was trying not to laugh. "Look you prat, why don't you come along and listen to their excuses? But first, go and have a shower. Take your time. Really. Take as long as you want. And use lots of soap. Please."

---

Apparating to Diagon Alley, I took a moment to gather my wits and collect my bearings. The Alley was only about half as busy as it usually was at the end of August, meaning that I could make my way through the crowds with little difficulty. Ron arrived with a distinctive crack behind me; he'd not bothered to learn how to Apparate silently. Typical of the man. When it came to something he enjoyed, like Quidditch, he trained harder than Oliver. But once he could do something that bored him, he didn't try and improve his skill at all. Well, I suppose that is typical of the majority of the wizarding world. At least he wasn't leaving little bits of his body behind anymore. Hermione was rather descriptive with the mishaps my fellow classmates had while learning to Apparate.

In a pair of hooded cloaks, we were simply another pair of wizards going about their business. The anonymity the deep hood provided allowed me to avoid the inevitable (not to mention tiresome) gasps of surprise and finger pointing that usually accompanied me during a trip in public.

Gringotts itself was unchanged, and but the atmosphere within proved it was not unchangeable. Incredibly long queues of people lined up to speak to one of the numerous goblins manning (or perhaps goblinning?) the desks along one wall. One queue stretched almost to the front door. Judging from the expressions of boredom and irritation on the faces of the queuing folk, I'd hazard a guess that given the recent theft, the goblins were executing every single documented security protocol they had. To the letter. No matter how long it took.

Well, we sure as hell weren't going to wait. I took the still (mostly) unread letter out of my pocket, and strode straight up to the massive goblin standing guard at the entrance to the vaults. Obviously he was either born to be a guard, or he was the result of some sort of medical experiment involving an warthog, a walrus, and a brain-ectomy, with bladder-expansion surgery probably thrown in for good measure (to allow him to stand still for long periods of time without having to think about anything). This fellow was nearly as tall as Hagrid, with arms as thick as my chest. The flab on his belly squeezed out through the gap between his breastplate and loincloth indicated that this role was brand new, and desperately needed, since they'd been given the closest thing to a matching fit as could be found at short notice. The goblin raised a gnarled, knobbly arm to stop us. "Get in line," he grumbled.

I gave Ron a quick grin and held out the letter. "Wonder how long it took him to learn that line?" I mumbled under my breath so only Ron could hear. While he went red trying to keep from laughing, I said aloud, "How much business do you think you'd lose if I shouted out that something of mine has been stolen?"

The goblin's eyes narrowed as its brow creased, evidently trying to decipher my threat. After a few moments, I came to the conclusion that he got his looks honestly. Yep, this goblin was not exactly the sharpest sword in the armory. I took pity. "Look. We have a letter here saying that I've been robbed. Who do I speak to about this?"

The goblin guard blinked very slowly, looking as though he was coming to a decision.

Before Goyle's separated-at-birth-twin could formulate an answer, another goblin, this one wearing what looked like an expensive muggle suit, stuck his pointed nose into the conversation. "Can I be of assistance, sirs?" he asked us, with a tone that suggested he seriously doubted it.

"I'm not sure. Are you intelligent enough to explain how something was stolen from one of my vaults?" I asked, matching his tone.

The goblin blinked. "Mr. Potter?"

"Bingo," I said blandly.

That seemed to throw him. "Mr. Bingo?"

I sighed and shook my head, but Ron let out what sounded like a fart trying to keep from laughing. “It is just a muggle phrase. I’m Harry Potter.”

The goblin frowned for a second, but nodded. “I see. If you would be so kind as to follow me, sir. I shall introduce you to your account manager.”

I gestured to the goblin with one hand. “Lead on.” I turned to face Ron as we were escorted into the main building. “I have an account manager?”

Ron shrugged unhelpfully. “Probably. Remember, this is you we’re talking about. You’ve always had loads of things you don’t know about. Magical parents, the ability to speak to snakes, insane dark wizards out for your blood, that sort of thing.”

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Ron was rather firmly told to remain in one of the sitting rooms while I was led to an office that housed a seemingly ancient goblin. My account manager who, to my initial hesitation, turned out to be a female goblin. One thing I remembered from Binns’ lessons was that female goblins tended to be viewed as less than capable. The fact that she was here meant that she was both exceedingly capable and ambitious enough to take on the patriarchal society of goblinhood.

“Ah, Mr. Potter. I am most pleased to finally meet you. I am Rilifa, Keeper of your Vaults,” she said insincerely, holding out a hand so fragile that I was amazed that she was able to hold a quill. As gently as possible, I took her hand and gave it a shake.

“Harry Potter,” I said in introduction. “Why have I not been introduced to you before?”

Rilifa sat down behind her desk before answering, a rather studied insult. “Normally, I only deal with the patriarchs of the old families. The Blacks, the Zabinis, the Marchibanks, the Malfoys, the Potters,” she said easily, reeling off a few examples.

I frowned, noting that most of the named families had dark ties. “I’ve been the ‘patriarch’ of the Potter family since I was one, since I’m the last member.”

She tilted her head to one side, as if acknowledging my complete ignorance. “Technically, no. You are the last Potter of the direct family line; of that there is no doubt. But according to custom and law, you must be a full eight years beyond your majority to formally be named as the head of a family.”

I mimicked her head tilt. “So, someone needs to be twenty-five to speak with you, in the normal course of events?”

Rilifa sighed, and was about to answer when I held up a hand. “No, sorry. You did say ‘normally’.”

She blinked, and a small, slow smile spread over her wrinkled face, doing nothing except sending the skin creases to different locations. “Ah, you do pick up on things others miss.”

I grinned at her with no humour. “When did you last speak with Aloysius?”

She blinked, and appeared flustered. “I beg your pardon?”

I leaned forward. “Aloysius Zabini,” I clarified.

She actually coloured slightly and wouldn’t meet my gaze. “I’m afraid that Aloysius passed on many years ago,” she said strongly.

I grinned at her with no humour in my expression. “We both know that’s a lie.”

Finally, she seemed to come to a decision, and looked directly into my eyes. “Very well, Mr. Potter. While I cannot divulge my timetable regarding my clients, I must say that you are rather well informed. I know of only one other person who is privy to the fact that the Zabini Patriarch is not Xavier Zabini, Aloysius’ son,” she said in a questioning tone.

I waved expansively, and decided to give her a red herring. “I’m dating a young lady named Blaise Zabini.”

Rilifa blinked. “I see.”

“Could you expand on what you meant by ‘normally’?”

In answer, the goblin gestured to one wall, which blurred and shifted. It finally took the form of a massively detailed family tree. “There are very few of the old families remaining. I am the last of the original council of goblins charged with focusing on only our most valued clients. Over the years, many old families who were once clients of mine have lost favor and influence. Families like the Weasleys. While they are sufficiently ancient to warrant my attention, they no longer have the financial status to command it.” She paused. “Though the business acumen of two of the Weasley scions may well reverse that within a generation or two.”

I crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair. “Right. So, it takes being twenty-five, from an old family *and* rich.”

Rilifa rose to her feet slowly, and used a cane to assist her movement. “I now have less than ten families as my clients, though these make up over three quarters of all the wealth in this branch of Gringotts.” She rapped part of the wall, making a single family tree grow larger and bold, then turned to face me. “While you are still too young to be the head of a family, the fact that you are the heir to *two* houses is why you are here today.” She pointed to the highlighted tree. “The Black family,” she said.

I frowned, rose to my feet and glanced over the deeply detailed tree. All the interconnections with the other, non-highlighted families made the thing less a tree and more a hedge. Unlike the tapestry in Grimmauld Place, even the disinherited members were listed, though they were not highlighted to the extent of the rest of the family.

One thing stood out. Actually, it waved its arms above its head and whistled for my attention. “Charlus Potter married a Black? Is he a relative?”

Rilifa frowned at me, then reached out and rapped Charlus’ name. Instantly, the Black family tree faded into the background and the Potter tree became highlighted. Well, the Potter *line*, anyway. “You don’t know your own Grandfather?”

“No, I’m afraid I’ve never had anyone sit down with me and discuss my genealogy,” I said through clenched teeth, reading down the distressingly thin line. Charlus, James, Harry. Says it all, really.

The goblin was kind enough not to comment. “As your Grandfather, Charlus Potter sired James Potter rather late in life. Your godfather, Sirius Black, was actually your second cousin. He named you heir to the Black house.”

I blinked, then touched Sirius’ name on the wall. Again, the Black family tree brightened. I followed the convoluted path down one part of the wall. “By direct lineage, Draco Malfoy was the heir,” I said with a satisfied grin. “Having me named heir must have pissed him off no end.”

“Initially, there was a challenge to have your nomination struck from the record,” she said with a sniff. Obviously, she agreed with whoever made the challenge.

I raised an eyebrow. “Someone could do that?”

Rilifa nodded, but sighed. “It is difficult to explain to someone who was muggle-raised. Many of the wizarding customs are lost upon you. Simply let us say that the current Patriarch may name his successor, provided a number of rather complex rules are followed. The nominee must be pureblooded of course, raised as a member of the wizarding elite, and must be a powerful wizard of good character in his own right. Another of the rules is that he must be of the same generation by paternal lineage, and have a common ancestor within five generations.”

I held up a hand. “I might be more powerful than the average wizard, but I’m certainly not pureblooded.”

Rilifa sighed. “Exactly. While you are of the same generation as Sirius Black, and your reputation surpasses the power and character requirements, your upbringing and your mother’s lineage marked you as ineligible. Your nomination has been challenged repeatedly.”

“Let me guess. By someone acting on behalf of one Draco Malfoy?” I said, rolling my eyes.

Rilifa nodded. “Narcissa Malfoy. Her son was the next heir to the Black family, by direct lineage. However, as the last remaining male of his generation, you were the only person Sirius Black could nominate to prevent the Black family from being absorbed by the Malfoys. And the only reason the challenges have not been successful is due to one, overriding rule.”

I shrugged. “Don’t bother making me guess. I’ve given up trying to understand why pureblood families do what they do.”

That earned me a frown. “A patriarch can name another family patriarch as heir. In the past, families with long histories but few current members have merged with another family and then split again, once the family lines were stable once more. If in this instance, you followed the established protocols, your eldest son would assume the Potter title, while your second son would assume the Black title. Thus, a family in decline could be resurrected. This overriding rule allowed Sirius Black to nominate you, as you are the heir to another ancient family. It was of course assumed that the Patriarch of another family would fulfill all the other requirements.”

I gently bit the inside of my cheek as I absorbed this tidbit of wizarding culture.

Rilifa continued. “When you reach the age of twenty-five, both the Black and Potter family fortunes will come under your direct control. This will make you a very wealthy young man in muggle terms, though not one of the London branch’s wealthiest customers. Remember, much of the wealth is tied up in various ventures and trusts which would take some effort to dissolve. While they return a rather handsome income, they are designed to be permanent, or at least semi-permanent investments. While you will effectively control some millions of galleons, you would be hard pressed to withdraw even twenty-five thousand more galleons than is in your own trust vault in cash.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Given what a galleon weighs, I could hardly expect to walk out of here carrying several tonnes of gold in my pocket.”

She actually smiled. “So very true.”

I leaned back in my chair. “So, while moderately wealthy, I am not a particularly wealthy client, but the fact that I will head two families means that the rules about meeting only those over twenty-five are relaxed in my case?”

Rilifa waved a hand, and the wall returned to its original state. “No.”

I frowned, thinking deeply. Just as she was about to explain, the answer came to me.

“You’re afraid I’ll withdraw my assets from Gringotts because of the theft!”

Rilifa eased herself into her chair. “A blunt, but accurate summation, yes.”

While the goblin shuffled some papers on her desk, I again withdrew the letter. “Then I trust you can explain this?”

“How it happened, no. We have a timeline, and a report on our security protocols and what was discovered. I can however assure you that the thief has not yet emerged from the catacombs beneath the branch. Whatever he took, I believe it is still within our sphere of control.”

A faint flare of hope stirred in my heart. “The thief hasn’t escaped yet? Are you sure?”

“Correct. No one has emerged from the catacombs below since the theft. Anyone wishing to make a withdrawal from their vaults have been given the galleons at the tellers, and an accounting shall be made at a later date.”

I leaned back in the comfortable chair as I thought hard about the situation. Perhaps something could be salvaged from this debacle after all.

“Can you tell me exactly which of my vaults was robbed? And perhaps even how many vaults I actually *have* ?”

Rilifa sighed with irritation, but nodded. “Very well. From the Potters first. You have your own trust vault, set up to provide you with funds until the age of majority. At seventeen, you obtained control of both your mother’s and father’s personal vaults. You father’s contains items he personally inherited from his father, but not Potter family heirlooms. Once you reach twenty-five, you shall take control of the Potter family vaults, of which there are three.

“On the Black side, there are four family vaults that you will assume control of at twenty-five. You have already received your monetary inheritance from Sirius Black, even though it is inaccessible at present. At seventeen, you obtained control of his two personal vaults. One was his everyday vault, which holds a few heirlooms, a broomstick prototype of his uncle’s and a botormi-” Rilifa paused and shuffled the sheets in front of her. “Sorry, a *motor* bike. It also currently contains a single galleon, sickle and knut after the funds were distributed as per the terms of his will, though you are not able to withdraw those.”

I frowned. “Why are three coins left?”

Rilifa gave a larger sigh of frustration at my interruption. I guess she is not used to someone displaying my level of ignorance, but it just made me more determined to interrupt her again. “That is the smallest bequest that can be left to a relative, according to the Black Family Trust. Had Draco Malfoy lived, he would have been told that he would be inheriting a secret amount, but only after he disavowed any affiliation with the Dark Lord.”

I couldn’t help but grin. “So, if he was still alive, he wouldn’t be informed of the amount he was to inherit?”

“Correct. Had Mr. Malfoy taken Veritaserum and sworn that he did not support the Dark Lord, he would have received that bequest. Due to the irregularities in his death, his estate has not yet been processed.”

I burst into laughter. “Oh Sirius, that is priceless. But what irregularities?”

Rilifa frowned at my antics. Sternly, she continued her description of my vaults. “As you are not an immediate relative, or included in Mr. Malfoy’s will, that is not your concern. Now, the other vault belonging to Sirius was initially opened by his brother Regulus, and was specifically deeded to Sirius on Regulus’ death. As far as our records are concerned, apart from the initial opening and deposit, that vault has never been accessed. It may be that Sirius was not even aware of the vault’s existence, or simply did not care to discover the contents.”

Whatever was jumping around in my stomach was doing such an energetic job of it that it would probably earn a couple of perfect tens from Olympic gymnastic scorers. “Let me guess. Whatever was in that vault has been stolen.”

“Correct,” Rilifa said calmly. “Though it was not the first vault to be broken in to.”

I frowned at her calm dropping of the bombshell. “I beg your pardon?”

“Sirius Black’s personal vault was broken into first, almost an hour before the vault opened by Regulus.”

“How?” I demanded.

She sighed. “We don’t know. Magic was cast from within the vault, which alerted us to the presence of thieves. When the goblin security detail arrived, the door was still firmly closed. They opened it and examined the interior of the vault, and found nothing. Nearly an hour later, the contents of Regulus’ vault were taken.”

I leaned forward, trying to cover my rapidly darkening mood. “And do you know what was stored in that vault?”

Rilifa again examined her papers. “A single, hardwood jewelry box.”

Bugger, I thought to myself.

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It hardly took any effort to convince my Account Manager to allow me access to the vaults below. Even if the thief hadn’t escaped, they still couldn’t pinpoint how he actually entered Gringotts in the first place. If someone could get in without notice, it hardly seems to be a great logical leap to assume that he could *exit* without notice too. Rilifa shook my hand and organized an escort down into the catacombs. I picked up Ron who had been stuffing his face with foods from the elegant buffet table laid out for Gringotts’ wealthier clients, and followed our escort.

Walking past the long lines of disgruntled clients, many of whom threw more than the odd nasty glare at us, we climbed into a cart with a familiar goblin. Griphook, the goblin who took me on my first cart ride, was as grumpy as he was the first time. Despite the horrible feeling of having a horcrux slip through my fingers, it was a vaguely comforting sensation of déjà vu that helped me stay outwardly calm. Only Hagrid’s presence could have made it better, even if Hagrid and I didn’t really see eye to eye on the matter of Dumbledore. Not that many people saw eye to eye with the eight-foot tall half-giant in any event.

We flew down several tunnels at speeds that meant that only the charms on the wheels that stopped the bearings from glowing red. One speed only, my arse. There were at least three speeds on this cart. Fast, blindingly fast, and bowel loosening. More than once we rounded corners on two wheels. Mind you, if Griphook was trying to intimidate us, he was spectacularly unsuccessful. Both Ron and I hung onto opposing sides of the cart and screamed with pleasure at the breakneck pace. More than once I had to cough out a bug that got caught in my mouth.

My ears popped as we exited the tunnel and entered a massive, open chasm. Like an open-cut mine, the massive chamber had a rail track for the cart running around the edge, each circuit taking the path one level lower. Like a massive spiral, we zoomed passed dozens of vaults on our way down into the depths. The only difference was the number of dragons flying around on guard.

I fell nearly arse over tit when Griphook suddenly slammed on the brakes. Both Ron and I ended up face first against Griphook's rather greasy tunic.

He shrugged us off. "Your vault, sir," he said, indicating a hole in the wall that appeared to have been created by a fairly powerful explosion. Scorch marks along the floor gave me pause. I wondered just what sort of spell could cause this sort of damage.

We jumped out of the cart and picked our way through the rubble. There was nothing left of the door, or the walls around the door, for that matter. Mentally measuring the width of the stone doorway, I had serious doubts that even with both my wands acting in unison, and at my most angry, I couldn't even hope to replicate such carnage.

"What sort of spell did this?" I asked Griphook.

The goblin shrugged, seemingly unconcerned. "No spell detectors went off before the explosion, only a couple of summoning spells happened afterwards. No muggle bomb detectors went off either, before or after. The only other magic signature is a faint conjuration charm. And that wasn't a spell, but probably an item that got blown up inside."

I froze. An item inside was destroyed?

Ron picked over the rubble. "You know, I'm really rather glad this sort of shit happens to you. I'd have no idea what to do if it happened to me," he said with a grin.

"Gee thanks, mate. Your sympathy is underwhelming."

Griphook coughed. "Anything else you want to see before we go back?"

I frowned. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

He looked at me with an expression of annoyance. "Look, your bloomin' vault is empty. Not much we can do now, is there?" he said sarcastically.

I shared a glance with Ron, before deciding not to push the issue. "Take us to Sirius Black's other vault."

He grumbled to himself for a second or two. "Fine. Get in."

This time, he went slow, just to piss us off.

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Griphook ran his finger over a section of the door, causing it to open fluidly. I looked over the top of the grumpy goblin and into Sirius' personal storeroom.

There were only three coins on the floor, but the rest of the vault held various objects. Ron and I entered, and began looking around.

In the very centre of the vault was Sirius' infamous flying motorbike. That was one thing I'd have to take home to use. I can't imagine he'd have wanted it to sit here forever. A desk dominated the back wall, and a long broomstick with two seats hung from the ceiling. Several shelves lined the wall to the right.

Ron ran his hand over the motorbike's leather seat. "Oh, man, what I'd give to freak Mum out by flying this by the Burrow," he said wistfully.

I laughed at the image as I glanced up and down the shelves. Some rather odd looking devices sat alone, while an odd amount of cutlery and china was gathering dust at one end. "You should buzz past her bedroom window at three in the morning for the best result," I offered, picking up various bits and pieces from the shelves. Griphook behind me was getting more and more pissed off. In turn, I gave each item an even more thorough investigation. Passive aggression is a wonderful thing. So long as you aren't the recipient.

One item that I picked up was a heavy metallic jug. Lifting the locking latch on the lid, I pulled the top off, noting that it was full of water. I frowned, wondering why jug hadn't been emptied before being stored. I picked up a matching mug from the set and poured out a glassful. As soon as I'd tipped the jug back upright, it quickly refilled itself.

"Hey Ron, check this out," I said, holding it out, drawing out as much time as possible, wondering how annoyed I could get the goblin.

"What?" he asked, wandering over. As soon as I showed him what the jug could do he burst into awed laughter. "These things are cool. They fill up with anything you want." He grabbed the jug. "Pumpkin juice," he said firmly, grabbing another mug. Sure enough, thick, orange-coloured juice oozed out of the jug, slowly filling the mug. As soon as Ron tilted the jug back upright, it refilled. He grinned at me and tapped the rim of his juice-filled mug with my water-filled one. "Cheers," he said, and downed the juice in one gulp.

I laughed out loud, absolutely delighted. "Well, that's one thing I'm definitely taking with me today," I said, locking the lid closed and putting it into my backpack. Imagine being able to host a party where the booze never ran out? The dream of every binge-drinking teenager in the world.

Griphook's patience seemed to evaporate. "Are ye coming?" he snarled.

Ron spun to snap back, but knocked the lower shelf with his elbow, sending the contents flying. The cacophony of breaking dishes, shattering glass

and splitting wooden items continued for some time.

Ron, who'd remained perfectly still from the instant his elbow connected with the shelf, in the hope that whatever happened it would go away, looked over at me with a nervous expression.

I began chuckling at his clumsiness, building up to a booming, gut-busting laugh. His expression just made it all the more amusing.

"Uh, sorry mate," he said sheepishly, but started laughing along with me soon enough. "I guess I need some more training on keeping in my own personal space," he finished.

I shrugged, still laughing. "Once you stop bloody growing, you might have a chance to learn just how much room you take up," I said, looking around at the broken objects on the floor. Nothing but china plates seemed to be too damaged, and only a few wooden boxes were anything but cracked. I stopped laughing between one breath and the next as I saw a familiar item on the ground. "Griphook?" I said, getting the goblin's attention.

"Aye?"

"How long ago was this vault breached?" I asked, still focusing on a glittering gold necklace.

He checked his pocket watch. "Pretty much five hours ago, exactly," he replied.

A slow, evil grin grew on my face, and Ron followed my gaze to see what the matter was.

An identical smile appeared on his face as he recognized the object of my attention.

A Time Turner.

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I slipped the time turner around my neck and then dropped the chain around Ron's before I gave it five turns. The magical item spun the other way, sending us hurtling back through time. With a slight stumble, we appeared in the pitch-dark interior of Sirius' personal vault. I shut my eyes and concentrated hard, wandlessly summoning a globe of white light into existence above my head.

"Right, we've got a few minutes before the goblins detect that we are in the vault," I said to Ron, who was looking at the intact shelving with a trace of nervousness. "Here, put my invisibility cloak on, and grab that long broom over there," I finished, handing him my cloak and rummaging through the other contents of my backpack. I chuckled to myself as I noticed that even though I had the jug in my backpack, another was sitting on the unbroken shelf.

"What are you going to do?" Ron asked, pulling the tandem broom down from the ceiling hooks. "And why the hell does this broom have two seats? What's the use of that?"

I grinned tightly. "Susan would bemoan the fact that you have absolutely no romanticism in you at all."

He blinked, and glanced back down at the broom again. "Oh, right. A date sort of thing. Yeah, I could understand that."

I clenched my eyes shut and deliberately coughed to stop my self from laughing. "You were thinking of Quidditch, weren't you?"

"Well, yeah," he said awkwardly. "Don't blame me, I play the game for a living."

I grinned. "I am going to wear this," I said, pulling out my invisibility suit. "And we are going to go and stop a robbery."

Ron grinned maniacally at my plan, but still asked, "You sure I can't ride the bike?"

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We waited for the arrival of the goblin brigade by simply hovering above the door. With me in my suit, and Ron under my cloak, which just managed to cover the long broom with us on it, we simply waited for the goblins to burst into the vault, before drifting slowly through the door while they were hunting in vain for whoever had broken their security.

Once free of the vault, we sped up, trying to back track to the section of the catacombs that was like an open-cut mine. A while passed before we found it, a long, spiral railroad followed the line of vaults, one full circuit of the massive pit taking it one level lower. I angled the broom so that we followed the rail track. With the broom partially visible during flight (we couldn't get the cloak to cover the broom during flight with a high head wind), taking a shortcut down the chasm may well have attracted the attention of the dragons lounging around the vaults, which would give both our days a turn for the worse, very fucking quickly. After doing a few laps of the spiraling path, I slowed down to read the numbers of the vaults flashing past.

"Still a few hundred out, Harry," Ron said quietly.

I nodded and accelerated once more, still following the tracks one of the carts would take. Every so often, I'd slow down to drift silently past a nesting dragon. It took us longer than I had planned, but we eventually reached the vault Regulus had opened all those years ago. I checked my watch and noted that it was still a few minutes until the theft was to take place. Looking up, I could see several levels before the entrance to this section of the vaults. With morbid fascination, I crept to the edge of the drop, looking down at the railroad one level below. And the level below that. And below that.

Suddenly, feeling a bit dizzy, I nearly fell forward, straight down to the level below, but managed to keep my wits about me enough to back away



from the edge. I quickly looked at the floor to clear my mind. I'd flown higher than that on a broom many times, but looking at the levels descending into the gaping depths below made my stomach queasy. I took a slow, deep, but silent breath, and let it out just as silently. I needed to concentrate, and avoid announcing my presence to the local draconic fauna.

"Right, Harry?" Ron asked from somewhere in a whisper.

"Yeah," I replied, just as quietly, noting nervously that the nearest dragon's head swung around towards us curiously, before shifting back to its previous position. As silently as I could, I crept across the rails to the door to the vault itself. It looked similar to my own trust vault, except that there was a great deal of ostentatious decorations on the door. Angels, demons, knights and wizards were all portrayed in an epic battle scene, once which looked vividly realistic. I shook my head and glanced at my watch; there was little over a minute until the theft. Once more, I looked around, noting that with the exception of Ron and the rather large, dozing Norwegian Ridgeback whose presence was making me nervous, there was not a single being in sight.

With a suddenness that threatened to send me into shock, I had an epiphany.

"Ron?" I breathed.

"Um, Harry, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

I rolled my eyes, and sent out a tendril of Legilimency. "Yes," I whispered with conviction. "We are the thieves."

No one else could get here in time. Hell, no one else even knew of what was in the vault. And I only got the notification of the theft the instant I realized that the horcrux could be at Gringotts.

Now, all we had to do was work out how to get in. In less than a minute.

Bugger.

Right, Ok. Focus. As powerful as I was, Gringotts had been secure against nearly everyone, with the exception of a possessed DADA professor. I doubt any of the auror level spells Zab taught me would be of any use here.

Perhaps I need to think about this like a muggle.

One of the few times I got to watch television when living with the Dursleys was when there was an educational program on that Dudley needed to watch himself for school. A scene from one of the shows popped into my head as I was staring at the obstinate door. One where the host was using a liquid form of a gas to snap freeze all sorts of items. A tennis ball dipped in the liquid shattered when it dropped onto the hard floor. Maybe that was the way to go.

I drew my wand, but held my tongue, looking around for any nearby draconic guards. It must have looked odd, a floating hand with a wand. Taking no chances, I waved my wand at the door and was about to mentally cast, '*Frigidum*', when Ron grabbed my wand and lowered it away from the door. "No spell residue, remember?" he hissed.

I nodded. Damn it! That spell wasn't designed to cool something down from room temperature to minus two hundred degrees anyway. I needed something with a little more kick, something I had on me. With only half a minute left, I remembered the jug I had taken from the vault above.

I pulled the jug out from my backpack, wondering what pranks Sirius pulled on people with it. I searched my memory hard to recall the name of the gas that was cooled to a liquid, but for the life of me, I couldn't remember. I think it ended in -gen. Notragen? No. Ontragen? No. Hypergen? Wait, was it Oxygen? That was one gas whose name I remembered. Shit, why didn't the wizarding world teach chemistry to its students? For that matter, why didn't muggle primary schools teach it? Was it the right gas? Hermione would know. But she sure as hell wasn't here.

"Ron," I whispered. "Quickly, what is the name of a gas?"

"A what?" he asked, pulling back the hood of the cloak, his head appearing in mid-air. An odd thought in the back of my mind told me that at one time, not too long ago even, I'd have considered a disembodied head to be rather odd.

Mentally cursing the inadequate level of muggle educating in the wizarding world, I brought the jug up to near my face and whispered, "Liquid Oxygen," in the hope that Oxygen was cold enough as a liquid.

The sudden sensation of intense lack of heat quickly indicated that Oxygen was indeed scrotum-shrinking cold. I stood on tiptoes and poured the liquid gas all over the front of the door, reaching over the decorations extending out from the stonework. Instantly, the heavy stone door began creaking and snapping, as it rapidly turned colder than any natural situation on the planet. I gave a small grin. Another fifteen seconds of this, and I may be able to hit the door hard enough for it to shatter. But the whole door would need to be cold to do that.

"Ron, here, you do the top of the door," I whispered, handing him the jug. He nodded and with a hand on my shoulder to balance, stood on tiptoes to pour the liquid gas onto the upper parts of the door. I used the broom as a crutch to help us both stay steady.

I could feel Ron's excitement; I could hear it in his breathing, feel it in his heartbeat. Without thinking, I let a tendril of my mind enter his, luxuriating in the endorphin rush. Suddenly, a sharp, cold, burning sensation flooded my right hand, and I shook my arm with a hiss. Ron however, dropped the jug with a silent scream and fell backwards clutching at his own right hand. Without insulation, the jug's handle had quickly frozen. Without gloves, the fingers that had been holding the jug by its handle were red and blistered.

But that wasn't the worst of it. The jug fell from down behind the intricate stonework, coming to a rest upside down, the lid breaking off. Our slow pouring suddenly turned to a rapid gushing, spilling liquid Oxygen over the whole door and onto the stone floor. With panicked eyes, we shared a

glance before both shouting in unison, “**SHIT!**” I reached in, desperately trying to jerk the jug out from its confines while avoiding the rapidly expanding puddle of steaming Oxygen that was cold enough to snap-freeze toes.

I should have used my wand to levitate the jug. I could have cast a spell to negate the intense cold. But before I could even draw my wand Ron’s sudden tugging on the back of my robe combined with the prickling of the hairs on the back of my neck indicated that an enchanted container spilling an unending amount of freezing gas was a secondary danger at this very instant.

I turned at what felt like the speed of continental drift, to look up into the maw of a massive Norwegian Ridgeback. The dragon itself was sucking in a lungful of air in preparation to flash-fry us to a crisp.

“Oh, bugger,” I said to no one in particular, and leapt to one side. A sharp, rather ungentle *push* sent Ron (who was gaping up at the Dragon’s maw in a rather terminally stupid way) cartwheeling away in the opposite direction down the tracks. The broom still in my left hand fortunately kicked into gear, and by the time the dragon’s breath was passing the little pilot light, or whatever the hell dragons use to ignite their breath, I was sailing at a respectable fraction of the country’s highway speed limit.

I had only wanted to get away from the dragon’s fiery breath. I was certainly not ready for the detonation behind me that turned the world white. Or the shock wave quickly caught up with me, sending me barreling in mid-air down the path.

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I was in a mess of pain when I blinked myself awake. The last time I’d been this sore I had to spend a week at the tender mercies of Madam Pomfrey.

I pushed myself up onto my elbows and retained the presence of mind to check my watch. Though it took a bit of concentration, I calculated that I’d been out for less than a minute. With a deep breath, I looked back at the door to Regulus’ vault. Well, the hole where the vault used to be, anyway. *Good show, Potter*, I dizzily thought to myself. *Muggle science, 1, Magical world, 0. It even looks like howwe sawit later on. Before.* I frowned. *Whatever.*

From this far away, I could see a couple of levels down the chasm. The dragon that had attempted to invent the dish *Potter flambé* with a side of char-grilled Weasley was lying unconscious on its back, just two levels down. With a blackened head, neck and chest, no less.

Damn. I hadn’t meant to hurt anything. Oh shit! Ron!

Praying that both the dragon and Ron would survive (if either didn’t, I sure as hell wouldn’t be relating this little adventure to Charlie Weasley any time soon), I rose unsteadily to my feet. With all the dragons circling around, excitedly flaming off at every little thing, I decided against actually approaching the now wide-open vault. Fortunately, I remembered that I was a wizard. “*Accio Ron! Accio Jewelry box*,” I cast, waving my wand.

A charred, battered, and partially intact box flew out of the ravaged vault and zoomed towards me, overtaking a charred, battered and partially conscious Ron Weasley. Fortunately, my invisibility cloak was still twisted around his large frame, and arrived with him. I managed to catch Ron, but dropped the box. “Di’ w’ do it?” he slurred, his eyes a little unfocused.

“Yeah. Hang on now,” I said, stuffing the ruined box into my backpack. I didn’t need to cast any spells to determine if the horcrux was within, since the I could almost smell the evil through the smoking lid. “Right. Can you hold onto the broom?”

Ron glanced down at the tandem broom for a few seconds, pondering the seemingly difficult question. “Yeah, think so,” he said, a little clearer this time.

I climbed onto the broom once more, and helped Ron climb on behind me, where I covered him again in the cloak. I even stuck him to the seat with a temporary sticking charm, though hopefully he wouldn’t notice unless he was about to fall off. Once secured, we very slowly drifted directly upwards towards the exit. Carts full of goblins entered the area zoomed along the tracks at arse-clenching speeds. I timed my cresting each level so that there was a fair gap between the goblin-filled carts. I had to hover and wait above the entrance to the chasm for the last cart-full of goblins so speed past, which took so long that even sitting on a broom with a comfort charm became an exercise in self discipline. It had taken me nearly ten minutes to rise up a dozen levels, but none of the dragons, or swarming goblins, ever caught a whiff of my presence.

Three minutes after the final cart of goblins rocketed past me, I finally entered the tunnel, still keeping an eye out for any pissed-off humanoids. It took nearly three hours, but I finally managed to get us back to Sirius’ vault without being spotted. We sat down between two vaults a little way down the corridor, shrunk the broom down to the size of a matchstick, and settled down to wait. I checked my watch and made some mental calculations. “I think we’ve got about forty minutes to wait until we arrive with Griphook,” I said to Ron. “The first time,” I added.

He grumbled incoherently. Sitting on a tandem broom for a few hours without being able to control it at all hadn’t improved my friend’s disposition. “What the hell did you use? What were you asking about gas for?” he demanded, still cradling his injured hand.

I shrugged off my backpack and pulled it out from under the invisibility suit. “Liquid Oxygen. I remember watching a show about how when gas in the air is cooled down, it turns into a liquid. With that jug that makes any non-potion liquid, I figured a liquid gas would make the door cold enough to shatter when we hit it with a rock. I just couldn’t remember the name of any other gas.”

He frowned. “How cold does Oxygen have to be to turn into water?” he asked, not quite getting the difference between ‘liquid’ and ‘water’.

I shrugged, not particularly worried. “A few hundred degrees below zero, I think,” I said, unzipping my backpack. I pulled out the damaged box whose procurement had set of all sorts of internal problems for various goblins. Briefly, I wondered just how we were going to explain this one away without getting into trouble with the goblins.

I opened the lid, well, *broke off* the lid, and looked inside. The familiar locket simply sat there, not even glowing or anything. You'd think that when something has been infested with a palpable evil, it would at least glow red or something. I cast a couple of the spells Dumbledore taught me for forms sake, which easily confirmed the presence of Voldy's soul fragment.

Ron looked down at it. "So that's what was stolen? We stole it?"

I nodded. "Yep."

Something occurred to Ron. "Hey, we stole it! We broke into Gringotts! You and Me! Woohoo!"

I rolled my eyes. "Pipe down. I didn't check my watch when we arrived here the first time, so I'm not entirely sure how long we have to wait. Just stay quiet, alright?"

We looked at each other and just exploded with laughter at the same instant. No matter how much we tried to control it, the tension of the past few hours just flooded out, leaving us cackling insanely. It wasn't until I had no breath left that I managed to finally wipe my eyes clear of tears. Ron pulled back the hood of the cloak and grinned at me with a smile so wide you could have seen the edges of his lips from behind. "The twins are never going to believe this," he said, putting an arm around my shoulders and hugging me tightly. "Harry, mate, we are going to go down in prankster history."

I couldn't help but chuckle at that, even though my stomach muscles were protesting. "Don't tell me that Fred and George are documenting the history of pranking?"

He shook his head. "No, but damn, that's a fine idea. Just imagine, a list of all the great pranks ever pulled. The Marauders would have their own bloody chapter of course, and so would the twins, but we'd have to have at least a couple of honorable mentions!"

I smiled to myself at Ron's enthusiasm, leaning my head back against the rough wall of the tunnel. I had another piece of Voldemort's soul in my possession. I'd just had another exciting adventure with my best friend, technically becoming the first successful thieves from Gringotts. Life was good. I even managed to cast a few healing charms on Ron's injured hand, and though I was not as skilled as Madam Pomfrey, I knew he wouldn't lose the use of his hand through non-attention.

Something tickled the back of my mind. "Um, Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"When we arrived the first time, this broom was in the vault, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, so?"

I turned to face him. "So we took it from the vault nearly five hours ago. So who puts it back there?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Bugger."

"Any ideas?" I asked.

"Yeah. We have to go back five hours again, wait until we float out of the vault after the goblins go in, then float in, replace the broom, and wait another damn five hours until Griphook brings us here. Once we use the time turner, we can take off the cloaks and leave with him."

I blinked. "Yeah. Exactly. I was just thinking the same thing."

Ron grinned at me, and punched me lightly on the shoulder. "No you weren't."

---

A few minutes later, a cart carrying Griphook, Ron and I grated into view, slowly pulling up in front of Sirius' vault. Under our invisibility, we watched as Griphook ran a finger over part of the door. The vault opened, and the three entered. I tapped Ron on the arm. "Ready?" I whispered, and turned the timer five times.

Once more, we flew back several hours. Once more, we ended up in pitch blackness.

"Right," I said. "Jump on the broom, and we'll hover on the far side of the door, waiting for us to come out."

Once more, Ron punched my arm. "Eh, just who came up with this idea anyway?"

"Fine, be that way, but I'm going to love watching you knock all that shit off the shelves again," I said with a mocking tone.

Ron, surprising me, grinned. "Could we then go back and watch your facial expression when you saw the dragon for the first time?"

My own response went unsaid as a cartful of goblins screeched to a halt in a shower of sparking brake pads. With military precision, they jumped out, formed a sort of phalanx, and entered the vault.

Even though we were expecting it, we both nearly missed the slight breeze that came from our earlier selves under various invisibility cloaks drifting past. Ron tapped my shoulder, and I nodded, leaning forward on the broom and nudging it into forward motion.

We entered exactly how we left, and hovered in the upper corner while the goblins searched. Finally giving up, they left, once more leaving Ron and I

In a pitch dark room. "You know something," Ron asked as we landed.

"What's that?"

He started laughing. "If we'd taken the broom from the future, instead of the one in the past, we wouldn't have to bother with all this. We could have just gone in after we took the timer back the first time."

I rolled my eyes. "Now you fucking tell me," I grumbled.

"Anyway, your punishment is having to listen to me for the next five hours complain about how hungry I am."

I sighed theatrically. "Ron, somehow, I get the impression that only one of us is going to walk out of here alive."

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Even in the darkness, we managed to feel our way around enough that we could hang up the broom. We sat down in a far corner, hid under the cloaks, and just talked about all the adventures we had during and since leaving Hogwarts. We used the water-filled jug from the shelf to quench our thirst once or twice, and dozed off occasionally. Though it felt like a week in the oppressive darkness, sure enough, five hours later, we entered the room with Griphook.

We watched as I discovered the jug. We shuddered with repressed laughter as Ron again knocked over the contents of the shelf.

We pulled off the invisibility cloaks as the earlier us used the Time Turner.

As the version of us that used the time turner disappeared, Griphook gave a gasp of shock and turned around in a full circle. "What the-?"

"Are you alright?" I called out. Instantly, Griphook looked at us, on the opposite side of the vault. "But, you were over there," he stammered.

"Sorry?" I asked politely.

He blinked. "But you-," he started pointing at me and then over near the broken shelves.

I turned to face Ron. "Geez, I hope he doesn't space out like that when he's driving the carts," I said sarcastically.

Ron grinned, taking up the idea. "You reckon we'd better tell his superiors?"

Griphook's face paled, or at least I think it did. With their different colouring, he could have been turning green for all I knew. "Well, he did take a long time to get us to this vault. Perhaps he's losing it. Maybe it's time for him to retire gracefully?" I suggested to Ron.

The trip back to the surface easily broke the existing record, whatever it was.

## Journeyman Potter Another one bites the dust

Ron and I had already decided not to give the goblins a description of just what occurred down in the catacombs. Not only would we implicate ourselves in some unauthorized, explosive-driven excavations without the correct permits, but we probably also gave an expensive guard dragon a bad case of blow back, not to mention the concussion. Add to that the fact that we used a prohibited item that could interfere with the nature of causality, and now possessed an item described as the most foul in existence. Basically, you end up with a situation where, if the Ministry was to find out what occurred, Ron and I would die of old age before the bickering between all the departments about who got to prosecute us first was done.

It took some doing, but eventually Rilifa decided that her time was far more valuable than to spend it interrogating an uncooperative pair of teenagers about some odd events occurring well below her feet. Ron's constant requests for food may well have played a small part in our hasty exit too.

We stepped out into Muggle London and wandered around for a little while until we found a restaurant that looked interesting. I treated Ron to a massive meal (accompanied by a large number of exotically named drinks in odd-shaped glasses) to celebrate our pilfering from under the goblins' noses. Now that he was earning more in a season than his father was in three years, just for playing in the reserves for the Cannons, Ron was far less sensitive about me spending my money on him. Thinking back, I probably owed him a meal or three from when we were traveling around France. I'm pretty sure he paid for more than his share to subtly impress Susan.

As if his two metres plus frame wasn't enough to do that. It certainly impressed the four waitresses in the restaurant who each somehow managed to find something to do near our table while they weren't whispering in hushed tones together while giving Ron some very appraising looks.

Even with a disgusting Horcrux in my backpack at my feet, time seemed to just fly by. I'd forgotten how much fun it was to just talk with Ron about Quidditch. The more we drank, the more expansive our gestures became, as we recounted moments from games past. He had a rather unique perspective now, having been picked as a reserve for a first class team. Of course, first class was a relative term when used to describe the Chudley Cannons. The only reason the team still existed was the enormous trust set up by their original benefactor. Still, Ron was easily the match for their current keeper in terms of skill alone. In terms of height, arm-span and strength, the current keeper could hardly keep up. It was only his record of saving the most attempts at goal (held continuously for the past five years) that kept him in the senior team. The fact that he also let through more goals than any other keeper in the same period was overlooked.

What Ron (and I too, to tell the truth) found most amusing though, was when a tiny fellow dressed in orange nervously came up to our table and stammered out a request for an autograph. Initially, Ron had thought that the little tyke was after *my* mark. When it became obvious that the kid had no idea who I was, Ron's sense of irony kicked in, and he could hardly control his laughter as he gave the young Cannons fan an extravagantly loopy signature (his first) on the back of a napkin. Yep, Ron's career looked promising. Especially if he could get over the fact that he didn't need to play for his beloved Cannons, he'd be snapped up in a heartbeat by nearly any team who were looking for a long-term investment in a promising young keeper.

At any rate, both Ron and I were both rather drunk and sporting regular yawns by sunset, along with a bad case of time-turner-lag. We found an alley out of the way from prying eyes and apparated back to Grimmauld place, an action that probably would have cost us a rather large fine if caught by the Ministry, not to mention a prolonged stay at St Mungos if we had been a little less skillful.

"So, what are you going to do with this thing?" Ron asked while gesturing towards the locket in my backpack, his eyes a little bloodshot.

Before I could answer, Blaise swept regally into the room. "Harry! Where have you been?" she asked before noting Ron's presence. "Weasley," she greeted him with a cautious nod.

Ron returned the nod with an appreciative grin. Blaise wasn't wearing a bra, and judging by the sweat stains around her neck and down her chest, had obviously been working out. "Zabini," he replied.

Unconcerned with her petite, but well shaped frame being on display, she turned back to me. "Well?"

"Soul searching," I slurred slightly with a giggle. Hey, I wasn't lying.

She frowned. "What?"

Ron grinned and butted into the conversation. "We just robbed Gringotts," he said with pride.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. Drunk-Ron didn't have a single subtle bone in his body. "Mate, we're not supposed to tell anyone else, remember?" I scolded him. Mind you, thinking back, Sober-Ron isn't much better.

He blinked at me. "Oh, yeah. Sorry," he said, sounding anything but.

Blaise glanced between the pair of us, a dubious expression on her face. “You *robbed* the Goblins?” she half-shrieked.

I drew myself up to my full height, about level with Ron’s armpit. “We most certainly did not!” I said indignantly, though my slight swaying must have detracted from the tone I was trying to project.

Ron put his fists on his hips, a dopey grin on his lips. “That’s right! We robbed *Harry’s* vault!” he said happily. “You’d have to be daft to rob the Goblins!” he concluded, wagging a finger at her.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to think through the fog of fatigue and alcohol to mount a better defense. “Ron, please shut up anytime you feel like it, ok?”

Blaise frowned at us, trying to decipher drunk-Ron-speak. She seemed to be pretty good at it, given her next statement. “Harry, you can take anything out of a vault you own at any time, you know,” she said patiently, as though talking to children.

I nodded impatiently. “I know that! We were only trying to stop us from robbing me,” I said, explaining as eloquently as possible, given the circumstances.

She blinked slowly, but just looked at me, an expression of frustrated incomprehension on her pretty face. She finally opened her mouth and asked, “Will it be safe to send Weasley home by himself?”

My eyes widened as my imagination ran wild with visions of Ron describing his day to his mother in a drunken slur. “Absolutely not,” I replied emphatically.

Blaise gave me a sour look. “Of course not,” she said sarcastically. “You,” she snapped, pointing at Ron. “Come here!”

Ron gave her chest a detailed ogle, but still retained a healthy dose of respect for the volatile Slytherin. “Why?” he asked, nervously.

She sighed, but reached out with her wand and tapped Ron on the forehead, muttering something under her breath. “There, now you won’t think the world is coming to an end tomorrow. Winky!” she called.

The nervous house elf appeared in a flash. “Mistress?”

“Take this big oaf down to one of the guest rooms, please. You may want to get Dobby to remove anything breakable between here and there, just in case.”

Winky gave a small curtsy. “Yes, Mistress,” she said, before heading off with Ron. My friend compliantly followed along, but as they left the room he asked Winky if she would mind making him a snack.

Once Ron had been led away in the direction of the kitchen, Blaise rounded on me, and on seeing my inquisitive expression said, “Hangover-prevention charm. Now, just what in Salazar’s name is going on?”

I sighed, figuring that she had a right to know what I was up to. I put the backpack on the coffee table and rummaged through it, pulling out the foul necklace. “Looking for this,” I said.

She frowned for a half-second before gasping with shock. “That’s what the Headmaster and Granger brought with them to St. Mungos!” she blurted. “The night you left for Europe.”

I shook my head. “Not exactly. They found a replica made by my second cousin. This is the original.”

Blaise looked at the locket reverently. “Salazar Slytherin’s locket? That is his actual property?” she asked reverently, reaching out for it.

I nodded absently, but frowned as something she said kicked my alcohol-infused brain. “Just how did you know who it belonged to?” I demanded, pulling it back out of her reach.

She suddenly looked like a caged animal, biting her lower lip. “I, ah, I sort of overheard Granger and Dumbledore talking in his ward after they got back,” she said, her cheeks taking on an ever-so-slight pinkish hue. “I told you in Italy that they came in for treatment.”

I raised my eyebrows at that. “I’m guessing that eavesdropping is not a part of the standard St. Mungos student healer curriculum?”

She made a face at me, more in an effort to get rid of her blush than in any real malice. “I ~~was~~ sorted into Slytherin for a reason”, she offered as though it was a mitigating factor as she reached for the locket again.

“There’s just one thing you need to know, before you try it on for size or anything like that,” I warned, letting her have it.

She sent me a mock glare. “And that would be?”

“It is a Horcrux.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head with incomprehension. “What, exactly, is a Horcrux?”

I took a deep breath. “The foulest of magic. It requires a cold-blooded murder to create, and it stores part of your soul in an object. That object is then defined as a Horcrux. So long as it survives, the person who made it can’t die. If you do, some of your soul is held in this world until you can claim it. This one contains part of Voldemort’s soul.”

She dropped the locket as though it was radioactive and looked up at me in horror. “Riddle?”

I nodded with a sigh. “Yep. Despite me killing him once as a baby, then again a couple of years ago, he’s still around in spirit form even though he is effectively dead. Somewhere. He needs to have one of his followers perform a ritual in order to come back to life, but by himself he can just about possess a snake.”

“The ritual that Wormtail took your blood for?” she asked tentatively, after a pause.

I nodded absently. “Yeah. I still don’t know enough about the bloody things. I mean, when you perform the ritual, do you take back the part of your soul you put in the horcrux, or do you, I don’t know, sort of... share it?” I looked up from my drunken musing. “Look, Dumbledore thinks that Nagini is a horcrux. Well, the snake was the only horcrux anywhere nearby during the ritual. So, either the snake is no longer a horcrux, and that part of the soul was absorbed again into Tom’s body, or he’s sharing it with the snake. If the first, we only need to go after the other horcruxes, and we can ignore Nagini. If not, we need to take out the snake too.” I paused. “Did that make any sense to you at all?”

Blaise paled, but nodded. “Just a minute. Riddle has more than one of these things?” she asked, turning a bit green.

I swallowed and nodded. “Yeah, he split his soul up into seven parts. Six horcruxes, and whatever was left of his soul, he kept. At least, until I killed him as a baby. At that point he had six bits left.”

Blaise nodded. “So, you killed him again a couple of years ago, that makes two parts of his soul you destroyed.”

“Four. I destroyed a horcrux in my second year without knowing it.”

She blinked. “What?”

I shrugged. “It had to do with the Chamber of Secrets. But the story isn’t exactly mine to tell. If I ever get permission, I’ll let you know.”

Conflicting emotions warred in her eyes for a few moments, but she eventually nodded and asked, “The fourth?”

“While I was in Italy,” I said simply.

She brightened. “That’s why you were there? You were chasing down these things?”

I nodded. “It was being stored by the Vatican as a demonic artifact.” Before she could ask for more information, I continued quickly. “Please don’t ask.”

Her frustrations nearly boiled over. “You’re leaving an awful lot out, Potter,” she said angrily.

“I know,” I said in a placating tone of voice. “But until I have permission to tell you more, I just can’t.”

“Fine,” she grumbled. “The last three?”

I nodded as we got back on track. “One was Riddle’s maternal grandfather’s ring. Dumbledore destroyed it, but you saw his hand afterwards.”

Blaise paled. “Destroying one of those things did that?” she nearly shouted, absolutely horrified. Instantly, she grabbed my hands and turned them over, looking for some sort of blemish, I assume. She even went as far as to tap my hands with her wand and mutter something. The only response was a slight glow coming from the *I will not tell lies* scars on the back of my hand.

“Yeah. Anyway, of the two remaining, this is one, and the other is probably a goblet belonging to Helga Hufflepuff,” I continued, drawing her attention away from the thrice-damned scars.

Blaise looked at me oddly. “How do you figure that?”

I shifted a bit uncomfortably. The memories Dumbledore showed Hermione and I were fairly detailed, but not exactly something I wanted to relate. “Something Dumbledore and I worked out. Riddle seemed to have a fascination with items that would have traditional or sentimental value. After Hogwarts, he spent a lot of time tracking down things belonging to the founders. The goblet belonging to Hufflepuff was one of the items he found, and has disappeared.”

Blaise looked down at the locket, then back up to me. “What do you plan on doing when you find it?”

I shrugged. “Destroy it,” I said simply. I was in no condition to come up with anything better.

She rolled her eyes and muttered something about drunken Gryffindors. “How?”

“Dunno,” I replied helpfully.

Once more she shut her eyes and muttered under her breath. “How do you intend to even find it then?” she asked.

I blinked, and grinned. “I thought I’d pay your patriarch a social visit,” I said easily. “He’s probably got the best information network in the UK. But, first thing tomorrow, I’m dropping this into Dumbledore’s lap,” I finished, looking down sourly at the twinkling locket.

“Good idea, pass it on to him.”

nodded, and looked up at her. "Now, could you cast that spell on me too, so I don't have a hangover tomorrow?"

Early the next afternoon (having spent the morning recovering), I stopped at the fountain outside of Hogsmeade. The dark, threatening clouds in the sky matched my mood perfectly. A dark, bubbling rage simmered in my soul, lit less than ten minutes before when I'd met a sixth-year DA member near the apparition point in the town, who greeted me warmly, even though I couldn't remember his name. All I could remember was that he was a friend of Dennis Creevey. In an effort to get over an uncomfortable pause in our conversation, I asked him who was now teaching potions.

The student had snorted and said, "Snape of course, Nothing will ever get rid of *him*."

I barely remember making my excuses before storming over to the fountain. I had hoped that the joyful images within would calm me, but Grawp's massive grin did little to make me feel better. Even Cho's fun-filled giggle and twirling, care-free dance couldn't lighten my mood.

Dumbledore had lied to me. Again.

A lie that had caused Hermione to flip out and leave.

A lie that had me spend hours wondering if I was a murderer.

I'd given the old man too many chances. If he lied to me about killing Snape, what else would he be lying about?

I clenched a fist as tightly as I could, feeling the locket's hard edges bite into my skin. The urge to lash out was overwhelming. I needed to hit something. I wanted to hit something.

I drew in a deep breath and let it out explosively. It didn't help much, but I managed to stop from unleashing uncontrolled magic. No, that wasn't the way.

Without looking back, I marched off towards Hogwarts. As my mood darkened further, the heavens opened, and it pissed down.

I never even wondered just how he intended to keep such a secret from me.

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The long trek up the hill to Hogwarts simply fuelled my anger. Visions of physically assaulting Dumbledore flickered in my mind, each more gory and painful than the last. With each scene, my anger grew ever more intense, to the point that by the time I reached massive doors covering the entrance to Hogwarts, I didn't intend to just open them. They were shut tight against the rain, but that wasn't about to stop me. I bundled my anger into an incandescent ball in my belly, then *pushed* it with everything I had, shouting, "MOVE!"

The raw magic hit the ancient doors, and with a shower of sparks, smoke and debris, the bottom third broke apart and blew inward.

I stomped through the new portal, ignoring the wards as they alarmed loudly. That would just bring Dumbledore to me. It would save me hunting him down.

Sure enough, besides Mrs. Norris, who took one look at me and fled in a sort of crouch with her belly against the floor, Dumbledore was indeed the first on the scene. His aura was flaring with anger, much the same as mine was, I imagine. The instant he saw me he paused, a look of confusion on his face. "Harry?"

With a snarl, I held up the locket. "This look familiar, you bastard?" I shouted, trembling with rage.

His eyes widened. "You found it?" he asked dumbly. "Harry, are you all r--"

With a snarl, I drew back, and hurled it towards him with a scream and with more than a slight *push*. My aim was a little off though, (proving that I was certainly a Seeker, not a Chaser) and it struck a suit of armor to Dumbledore's left, knocking the helmet off; though my unexpected action did cause him to flinch away. "Take it, and never speak to me again! We're through," I screamed, much to the astonishment of the slowly gathering crowd.

I ignored the gasps and stormed back out into the gathering tempest.

Oddly, as the rain lashed my face and drenched my hair and clothes, it not only cooled my skin, but my temper as well. Within a few minutes, I was half-way to Hogsmeade, and wondering why I was feeling as though a weight had been lifted from around my soul.

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By the time I'd reached Zab's abode, several floo trips from a new starting point, I'd calmed down enough that I was frowning at the sudden change. Before discovering that Snape was still teaching Potions, I told myself that the next time Dumbledore lied to me, I'd just silently leave his presence and never talk to him again.

So what caused the sudden, not to mention deeply vivid rage? Not to mention its equally sudden disappearance.

It didn't take much logical thought to determine that it had been the locket itself that had fuelled my emotions. While it was gratifying to know that I wasn't really capable of that sort of explosion of wrath at simply being lied to, it was intimidating to know that I could be manipulated so easily. Especially by a non-sentient item. At least, I assumed the locket was non-sentient.



Brenen led me to the sitting room to wait for Zab, who apparently had left instructions not to be disturbed. I sat down, rested my cheek against a fist, and began to think.

Some undetermined time later, Zab sat down in an armchair opposite me. "Apparently, it has been a rather remarkable day," he said.

I slowly focused on him. "Hmm?"

Zab gave me a knowing smirk. "Albus Dumbledore is being praised for single-handedly driving off a demonic creature from the gates of Hogwarts. According to witnesses, a creature at least ten-feet tall smashed its way through the main gates of Hogwarts and set about destroying the castle until the unflappable Supreme Mugwump appeared on the scene and banished the creature to whatever hell spawned it," Zab said with amusement in his voice.

I rolled my eyes. "Did any of these witnesses mention a lightning-bolt shaped scar on this demon's forehead?" I asked sourly.

Zab's eyes were alight with amusement, but as usual, he didn't answer my question. "Mind you, not every witness could describe exactly what he or she saw. As a matter of fact, if you gathered all those who claimed to have personally viewed the hellish apparition, there wouldn't have been room in the entrance hall of Hogwarts for such a creature to exist," he finished.

I sighed and waved his amusement away. "I suppose I'd best be grateful that no one saw the whole incident. I'm sure the Prophet would gleefully make something of the fact that I threw a locket at Dumbledore and told him to stay out of my life. I need your help."

That brought him up short. "You're maturing," was all he said.

I gave my old Master a level gaze. "Because I've learned when I need to ask for help or because I know who to approach for help?" I asked sourly, not expecting an answer.

"Yes," he replied ambiguously. Of course, if I wanted help, I'd sure as hell have to work hard in asking for it. Zab wasn't the sort to offer any help in that respect.

I took a breath. "Voldemort is closer to being fully dead now than at any time in the past," I said softly.

Zab didn't respond immediately, his exquisitely sharp mind processing all the direct and implied information in my statement without any tiresome exclamations of surprise and denial. Finally, he said, "His body wasn't stolen, was it?"

I frowned at the first point Zab wanted clarified. Most people would want what they saw as the most important point clarified. Not Zab though, he was logically working through the whole timescale, defining points where different outcomes would have changed the whole picture. "No, neither time."

Zab's eyes briefly focused on my own, conveying a sense of approval. "Then many assumptions I made will need to be reevaluated. Assuming that Riddle is not, as you say, completely dead, then my original premise was incorrect."

I thought for a second. "If you thought he used a Horcrux to cheat death, you were partially correct," I said, trying to subtly mislead my old mentor.

Zab blinked and stared at me. "Where in Salazar's name did you learn about Horcruxes?"

"From Dumbledore."

Zab rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair. "Naturally," he grumbled.

"Anyway," I started, not in the mood for one of Zab's lectures on Dumbledore's failings, since I already had a fair amount of personal experience with them, "Riddle was forced into spirit form after he died attacking my family."

Zab narrowed his eyes at me. "If Riddle had created a Horcrux, then it must have been present at the ritual that restored him to his body. The few texts I have on the subject say all agree that you cannot create another Horcrux once you have died and been resurrected. If he is not completely dead, then he must have discovered another way to keep his spirit alive while his body was destroyed."

I shook my head. "Nope. Before he died, Riddle made six Horcruxes."

Now that piece of information shocked the normally unflappable wizard. "Six?" he bellowed.

I nodded. "That number was picked on the basis of seven being a numerically powerful figure. Seven parts of his soul, six of them stored in objects."

Zab cupped the sides of his head and rested his elbows on his knees. "I never suspected. I never came remotely close to imagining this wild possibility," he muttered softly. Eventually, he gathered himself and looked up at me again. "Well, that little datum puts a whole new light on things. Until now, I had assumed he used a single Horcrux, which was exhausted when he resurrected himself." Again, his voice dropped and he muttered to himself. "What insanity would convince someone to even attempt to split their soul into even more than two parts?"

I frowned. "The belief that their soul was worth nothing compared to eternal life?" I said rhetorically. "Are you absolutely sure the Horcrux is exhausted when finally used?"

Zab ran his forefinger and thumb around the edge of his goatee, a sure sign he was thinking deeply. "Each of the three texts I have on the subject that mention it all agree on the point. The portion of your soul stored in the Horcrux is reabsorbed into the body during the ritual. The Horcrux then returns to its original state. Why?"

It was my turn to frown. “It means that I only need to track down one more Horcrux, rather than two.”

Zab stared at me. “You’ve found some of his Horcruxes already?”

I nodded. “That’s what Dumbledore wanted to speak to me about.” Slowly, I told Zab everything I knew about the Horcruxes, and what I had seen of the Gaunt family’s and Riddle’s life in Dumbledore’s pensieve. I described the destruction of the diary, ring and journal, and my theory that Nagini was the Horcrux that Riddle used at the ritual. I even told him about the locket, and how it stoked my internal anger at hearing of Snape’s apparent survival.

Zab’s eyes followed my own throughout my exposition. He asked no questions, trusting that I would give him all the relevant information. He did snort softly when I described my reaction to Snape still teaching Potions.

“I trust you have re-thought your opinion, regarding Severus’ death?”

I nodded slowly. “He’s a ghost.”

Zab nodded, a small smile on his face. “Well done.”

“It’s the only explanation. Snape either has an outstanding life debt he needs to repay; one that for obvious reasons cannot be passed on to his descendents, or he has some unfinished business that needs to be completed. I remember Nearly-headless Nick telling me that some ghosts were simply afraid to cross over. Snape is a bastard and a bully, but spying against Voldemort shows that he will never go down in history as a coward. He wasn’t afraid of death.

“There was no way Dumbledore could have kept it a secret from me if he had survived, especially if he was continuing to teach,” I continued. “But that is my problem, or at least, my problem that I can fix by myself.”

That piqued his interest. “Go on.”

“I need your help in tracking down the last piece of Riddle’s soul. There is an extremely high probability that the final Horcrux is a goblet, originally belonging to Helga Hufflepuff. The Smith family inherited it generations ago, and it stayed in the family until a young Tom Riddle Jr. stole it from the estate of Hepzibah Smith.” Frowning with concentration, I waved my holly wand and created a short-lived illusion of the golden goblet for Zab’s perusal.

Zab frowned. “And how am I supposed to assist in this endeavor?”

I shrugged. “Use your spy network to see if the goblet has surfaced anywhere. Right now, I have no idea where to start looking for the thing,” I said sourly.

He sighed. “My ‘spy network’, as you so eloquently referred to, is not in the habit of tracking the whereabouts of individual magical items. I initially created it in an effort to collect and filter information during Grindewald’s rise. If necessary, it could probably be used to track down a person, but an object? No chance.”

I tilted my head to one side. “Would it help to know that if it isn’t in a hiding place, it is probably with one of Riddle’s surviving lower-level underlings somewhere in Albania.”

Zab blinked slowly. “It may,” he said, once more not answering my question directly. “Tell me, have you decided what to do with it, once you recover it?”

I blinked. “Destroy it. That’s the whole point of this exercise.”

Zab sighed. “Think, boy. Do you think everyone wants it destroyed for the same motives?”

I frowned, thinking on what Zab said. I was long past getting angry at his innocent-sounding insults. “Destroying what’s left of Riddle is a noble goal in and of itself,” I said, not sure what Zab meant.

Zab rolled his eyes and muttered something uncomplimentary about Gryffindors. “Very well, let’s start with you. Why do you want to risk your life to hunt down and destroy this Horcrux?”

“Because it would mean closure for me. Riddle would finally be destroyed, with no chance of returning to make my life a misery.”

Zab nodded impatiently. “Yes, yes, that’s what you’ve told yourself. Now, what is the real reason? Why are *you* so adamant that the item be destroyed as soon as you have it?”

“I told you—” I began.

“No, you gave me a wonderfully noble reason.” Zab snapped. “Look deeper. Why do you want it destroyed as soon as you hold it? Why not in a day? A week? A year? Would you let someone else study it first before destroying it? Would you let someone else destroy it?”

My mouth opened and closed a couple of times as I thought. Finally, I said, “Dumbledore, I suppose. I just gave him one to destroy.”

Zab nodded sadly. “Yes, we’ll come to him in a minute. The situation is different though. You gave him the second to last Horcrux. Technically, he need not destroy that one until you procure the last. So I ask again, why do you want to destroy the last Horcrux as soon as you can?” he repeated.

I took a deep breath and let it out. "Because I don't trust that it couldn't be stolen from me," I said finally.

Zab leaned back in his chair, a satisfied look on his face. "So, you have a motive. Now, do you suppose that Dumbledore has the same motive?"

I frowned. "Broadly, I'd say we do. We have the same goal in mind."

"The end goal is not equivalent to motive," Zab nearly spat.

I frowned more deeply. "He didn't want me to know to begin with. He didn't want me to know what a Horcrux was." I blinked. "He wants their existence destroyed so others don't learn of their power!"

Zab's thin smile reminded me a little of McGonagall. "Aha! The boy shows some brains at last. Remember Harry, the most important question is not how, or who, but why. Goals can be identical, while motives can differ dramatically. A burgeoning Dark Lord who knew of Riddle's Horcruxes may want to hunt down and destroy them too, if only to ensure that a powerful wizard isn't raised to challenge him later."

I nodded, absorbing this new facet of the game of human interaction. Looks as though I've still got bloody light-years to go before I'm at Zab's standards. "Ok, that I understand."

Zab nodded. "So, do you assume that Dumbledore and yourself are the only people who know of the existence of the Horcruxes? What of the members of the Wizengamot, who may have their own goals and motives? What of the Ministry?"

I swallowed. While it would be nice to believe that everyone had the same goal, that of Voldemort's permanent inhumation, Zab was right in that there were probably as many motives as people. Hell, some of them may not even want the last Horcrux destroyed.

That sobering thought brought me up short. "Hang on, what if the goals are different? Most people would want Riddle gone for good, be it for revenge, safety, pragmatism or just on principle. But what if there are people who want the last Horcrux to be kept safe?"

Zab's face split into a grin. "Go on."

I ran the tip of my tongue over my upper lip and continued. "Well, the obvious faction would be those who support, or at least sympathize with the pure-blood agenda. There may be those who want the power for themselves, and want to study the Horcrux to find out how to replicate it, since information on creating a Horcrux is pretty sparse."

Zab nodded. "It is indeed. Anything else?"

I thought about the people I had known at school. "Sycophants like Pettigrew would want it to resurrect Riddle. Clever Slytherins like Davies or Greengrass may want it to hold power over a Dark Lord, should he arise again through another method." I paused. "There may even be those who want to destroy Riddle who want to possess it too, if they believed that you couldn't guarantee his death with the final Horcrux's destruction."

Zab leaned forward, giving me a sort of seated bow. "Excellent reasoning, Harry. Now, knowing this, would you still destroy the Horcrux the moment you possessed it?"

I sat back to think. "No."

"No? Are you just saying that because you think I want to hear it?"

I shook my head. "No, of course not. But I've just listed a few reasons why some people would want the last Horcrux kept intact. If and when I actually do have that goblet in my hands, I'd need to think long and hard to ensure that I was in fact not doing someone else's bidding, and that I was destroying it for my own reasons."

Zab again gave me a half bow. "And that, my boy, is one of the most important lessons you can ever learn." He rose swiftly, once more making me marvel at the athleticism he displayed for his age. "You may see yourself out, and I would be obliged if you informed my Great-granddaughter of recent events. She may not be directly involved, but her indirect assistance would be invaluable."

I nodded and rose myself. "Thank you," I said sincerely.

Zab smiled. "I do believe an old acquaintance of mine is about to feel an overwhelming desire to visit some obscure ruins in the middle of bloody nowhere, somewhere in rural Albania," he said as he left the room.

## Journeyman Potter You want me to do WHAT?

Over the next few days, while waiting for Zab's report, I ostensibly prepared to try out for the seeker position for the Tornados. When the day of the tryouts finally arrived, it took a considerable amount of coaxing on Blaise's part before I summoned the courage to face the inevitable media blitzkrieg. Though I completely expected it, the sheer intensity of the media frenzy over one of my rare public appearances still shocked me to the core. Distracted as I was, my performance was pretty average from my perspective. It had been a while since I'd spent any time on my Firebolt in a real competitive atmosphere. As much as my natural talent at flying made me successful at Hogwarts, the world of league Quidditch was miles beyond what I'd experienced as a teenager.

The tryout session was even more grueling than one of Oliver's worst nightmare-come-to-life training sessions I had become used to in my first years at Hogwarts. By the end, even though I made the short list, it was obvious to everyone that I was more than a little rusty on a broom. I didn't feel too bad about my performance though, since the three others who made the short list had all practiced everyday for over a year in preparation. The Seeker coach for the Tornados announced my inclusion in the short list with more than a little disgust in his voice. One of the senior players told me that he heard a rumor that he lost a great deal of money betting against me in my second year at Hogwarts after Malfoy Senior bought Junior onto the Slytherin team with the new brooms.

Hey, at least I know I didn't just make it due to my name.

It wasn't the only Quidditch I got to experience after visiting Zab. Ron invited me to his debut match with the Cannons against the Harpies, and I received an invitation by the team manager to sit with the reserve players in the box as the game progressed. Ron started on the bench, sitting next to me nervously, but eventually got a go after the first string keeper took a well-thrown quaffle to the head, and who then started complaining that the Harpies were fielding six chasers. Ron's nerves were definitely on show; he failed to block the next three shots at goal. But once he managed to block one shot, his anxiety settled, and his success ratio ended up being well into his favor by the time the Harpies' seeker finally managed to catch the snitch.

That night, after a long and raucous party in which enough alcohol was consumed that both Ron and I somehow managed to dare two of the Harpies' chasers to a broom race around Muggle London (which did not impress the locals, or the Ministry obliviators who were sent to clean up. Thank goodness using a broom isn't considered casting a spell in front of Muggles), I got home to discover Hermione asleep on one of the sitting room couches.

Though a bit more than tipsy, I was still in enough control of myself not to wake her up. The last thing I wanted to do was trash our relationship further, which I'm sure would happen if she saw me in my current state.

Instead, I sat down in a chair opposite her and simply stared, thinking about how our relationship reached its current point. I certainly wasn't going to apologise, I had long ago reached an acceptance of my role in Snape's death, and the fact that he was still sort-of-alive and teaching softened the finality of it somewhat. Without knowing what Hermione had thought about, I honestly didn't know how to approach the conversation. I knew from hard-won experience how hard it was to shift an idea once Hermione had hold of it. Her intelligence was like the Hogwarts Express, extremely powerful, but it was fucking hard to make it change direction.

A soft shuffle on the carpet behind me signaled Blaise's entrance to the room. "As you can see, the Gryffindor princess returned," she said sourly in a low voice.

I turned my head to face her. "When did she get here?" I whispered.

Blaise smirked. "About three minutes after you left this morning. She obviously hasn't been keeping in touch with Weasley, and had no idea there was a Quidditch match on today. I may have forgotten to inform her what your plans were." Blaise came over and sat down on my lap, the fluffy robe she wore tickling me lightly.

I reached around and grabbed her possessively in a tight hug. She sighed softly and leaned into me, wiggling slightly to get comfortable.

"Remember the first time we shared an armchair?" she giggled, putting a hand to her mouth to soften the noise when Hermione shifted in her sleep.

I couldn't help but smile. "Of course. I remember wondering what to do with my arm."

Blaise rested her head in the crook of my neck. "Hmm, you are still just as comfortable now as you were then."

I smiled, a little sadly. "What are we going to do with her? Not that I mind that our relationship is now a bit more orthodox, but she was my very first female friend."

Blaise raised her head from my neck. "Harry, I won't say that I'm not pleased to have you all to myself now. And if you do both make up, I suppose I would be fine with you being with her again. But remember, she hurt you. She hurt you badly. You always said that she knew you better than anyone

else did. Sure, the situation was extreme, but she cut and ran before the argument had ended.” She ran a hand down my cheek. “You will always be more than welcome in my bed, but I won’t be in a threesome; I won’t share a bed with *both* of you again.”

I nodded absently, and Blaise rose from my lap. She kissed me gently and said, “I’m going back to bed. If you want to join me, I’d like that. If you want to stay and talk to Granger, that’s fine too.”

I frowned. If Blaise had reverted to calling Hermione by her surname, then things were not good between the two. I suppose that the pair had been here together all evening, and judging by the tension in Blaise’s voice, some hostile words had been exchanged.

I found myself wondering how the upcoming conversation would have gone if she had come to see me the day following Snape’s death, or even the following few days. It probably would have been easier on us both to have cleared the air quickly, rather than have this whole awkward situation hanging over us. While I was quite sure our friendship could survive intact, I was worried that enough things had changed to ensure it would never be the same between us.

I must have sat there for an hour, watching Hermione sleep; watching her chest rise and fall softly with her breathing. My mind wandered back to when we first met on the Hogwarts Express, to the troll in the bathroom, and all the other memorable incidents during our Hogwarts years. She had stuck by me then, all the way up to the Department of Mysteries, when even Ron had succumbed to jealousy a time or two.

Despite being a Gryffindor, I found I didn’t have the courage to wake her.

In the end, I silently summoned a thick blanket with a permanent heating charm, covered my bushy-haired friend, and let her sleep in peace.

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I had real difficulty sleeping that night, even curled up next to Blaise. I couldn’t help but think about the difference between the two girls. As much as I loved both of them, only one of them had asked how I felt after killing Snape. Hermione had been worried about herself, or at least her career, first and foremost. Being associated with me was probably not going to be advantageous to her or her career in the long run, especially if the Prophet decided they needed a whipping boy to increase sales again in the near future.

Blaise hadn’t even bothered thinking about what others thought. I had been her primary focus.

The difference had been both startling and thought provoking. Waiting so long to patch things up had probably made it impossible for us to get back together as we had been. I wondered if there would always be some sort of thought in the back of my mind that if something untoward happened (hardly a rare occurrence in my life), I wouldn’t receive the support from her that I would need.

With a soft groan, I realized that there was one more relationship in my life that an apology would go far to fix, so long as it was done sooner rather than later.

Despite the early hour, I rose silently, and dressed.

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It was the first time I’d ever watched the Hogsmeade fountain as the sun rose over the horizon. Grawp’s image’s happy munching on some unidentified carcass made the need for breakfast redundant, but Cho’s playful dance again put a small, sad smile on my face. As I waited for the castle in front of me to wake up, I continued to watch the images of the heroes of the final battle, those who had given their lives.

After a few more minutes, Hagrid’s roosters began crowing, signaling the start of the day. I began trekking up the path to Hogwarts.

It was with a red face that I saw that the castle doors had been repaired since my last visit. Even though the Horcrux had been influencing me and fuelling my rage, I was still embarrassed that I had once again been manipulated by Voldemort. After my experience with the bloody diary, I should have known that a Horcrux could change someone, even during such a short time.

This time, the doors were already open. I entered the ancient castle, which at this time of morning was still silent, and the only movement was that of the portraits. A few yelped at my presence, and one figure even disappeared from the frame, probably to warn Dumbledore.

Even though the halls were empty, I felt like I was out of place. That I was... unwelcome. It was a wholly uncomfortable sensation. Hogwarts had always felt like home to me, but now a damp, dank miasma of disapproval lingered around me. It was with a start that I realized that the castle itself didn’t want me there, and the thought that I was no longer welcome seriously disturbed me. Unsure what to do, I placed my hand on one wall and whispered, “I’m so sorry for what I did.”

After a few moments, the discomfort flickered and left, though I still felt watched. I guess the castle herself had forgiven me, but I was on probation, as it were.

“Thank you,” I said softly before I took my hand from the wall. I had always felt as though Hogwarts was somehow alive, but I had no idea, no inkling, that it had some semblance of sentience. Mind you, I suppose having each and every witch and wizard in the country spend seven years of their lives here, casting every possible kind of magic would impart some sort of identity. Magic was, well, *magical* like that.

I had no difficulty finding the Headmaster’s office; I’d bet that if I just walked on autopilot I’d either end up at Gryffindor Tower or outside the gargoyle. The stone statue watched me carefully, but moved aside when I gave the last password the Headmaster had given me. He had obviously not changed it since.

The office itself was as it usually was, except for the absence of Dumbledore. As many times as I’d been here, I could only count a couple of times I’d been in the office alone. With a smile, I remembered the pensieve incident, and I wondered if the Headmaster kept it in the same cupboard.

Before I could even turn to look at the closed cupboard, a bookshelf on one wall swung in like a door, and Dumbledore stepped through, still dressed in his nightclothes. I was momentarily dazzled by the nightclothes he wore; the electric blue and orange stripes spun round the material like a barber's pole, though not as tasteful. The canary yellow bobble on his nightcap bounced over one ear, emitting sparkly dust whenever he moved his head. I blinked several times to ensure I didn't suffer from eyestrain.

"Harry?" he blurted, sounding delighted.

"Albus," I replied in a monotone. Hey, if he was going to ignore my request and use my first name against my wishes, I wasn't going to bother with niceties.

Dumbledore sat down behind his desk. "I must admit, I'm rather surprised to see you here. I had not expected you to voluntarily seek me out."

I leveled a gaze at him. "I came to apologise. For my behavior, that is," I clarified.

His eyebrows rose up and under the edge of his nightcap. "Indeed?"

I nodded seriously. "Yes, I severely underestimated the level of influence Horcrux would have on me."

Dumbledore looked at me silently for a long time before speaking. "May I ask how you actually acquired it? Since whoever RAB was took it, I have had no luck at all in tracing it."

I shrugged. "Ron and I stole it from a Gringotts vault the day before I threw it at you."

The ancient eyes bulged, and he half stood, looking like an idiot hovering over a chair. "What? You were responsible for the theft?"

It was rather satisfying to see the hitherto unflappable Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore flabbergasted. The scene ranked right up there with the expression on his face immediately following Ron's performance of a percussive experiment on his noggin involving a sturdy fire poker. Or even the instant when Lucius realized that blood supremacy did not stop someone using your eye-socket as a thumbhole to gain enough leverage to smash your skull on a cobblestone. Ah... Happy memories. "You heard me," I said without inflection.

Dumbledore twice began to say something before thinking better. Eventually, he simply collapsed back into his high-backed chair. "I don't know what to say," he said, obviously truthfully.

I nodded, only partially suppressing a smirk. "Stating the obvious there. Trust me, it isn't as bad as it sounds. While it is true we blew up the door to the vault to get the locket out, it turns out the vault belongs to me anyway. Regulus Black opened it before he died, and stored the locket there. He willed it to Sirius, who didn't bother opening it. I inherited it from him."

Dumbledore still seemed to have trouble accepting it. Finally, he said, "Well, it is a weight off my mind to know that you were aware at how you were being affected by your proximity to the Horcrux. More so that you appear to have completely shrugged off the affects of possessing the locket for a time. Er, sherbet lemon?" he finished lamely, gesturing towards his seemingly unending supply.

I hesitated for a second, but nodded in acceptance, more to keep him off balance than any real desire, and picked up one of the sour sweets. "I trust the locket is ruined?"

To my surprise, Dumbledore actually smiled. "In fact, no. The portion of Riddle's spirit stored within was banished in an exceedingly simple manner. At first, I thought it had been too simple, yet all tests show the same result. The locket of Slytherin is both whole no longer polluted with a portion of Tom's soul."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "Just how did you manage to break the enchantment?" I asked, popping the sherbet lemon in my mouth. It took a bit of will power not to pucker up at the initial sour taste.

Dumbledore actually snickered as he took a lemon sherbet from the ever-present bowl on his desk and popped it in his mouth with relish. "I merely opened it."

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"As you wish," he said, deliberately misinterpreting me. "However, I did not misspeak. The simple act of opening the locket released the soul fragment."

I rose to my feet. "That's it? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," he replied, grinning in a manner reminiscent of a Weasley twin.

I shook my head, but sat down. "No, it can't have been that simple."

The Headmaster composed himself. He winced at what he was about to say, with good reason. "Actually, you are correct. It was not quite that simple. I needed something that the locket would recognize as coming from Tom. I had to use some of your blood."

I sprang to my feet again. "WHAT?" I roared, startling several portraits into wakefulness.

Dumbledore held up a hand. "Please, let me explain."

I took three deep breaths before sitting again. I'm sure my gaze spoke louder than any words that I expected the explanation to be a good one.

“As you know, you have a unique connection to Riddle,” he started.

I cleared my throat. “How about you start at where you got my blood from?” I said evenly.

He nodded. “Very well. Your Potions score on your NEWTs indicates that you are aware that the potency of certain healing draughts can be amplified with the addition of the blood of the imbiber.”

My patience was beginning to wear thin. “Yes, yet you feel the need to repeat it.”

Dumbledore swallowed, and nodded having the grace to actually look abashed. “Yes, well, after your little adventure in the Chamber of Secrets in your second year, Madam Pomfrey took the liberty of taking some of your blood to use as a fortifying agent in the various elixirs that she employs. As the requirements at the time dictated, we informed the Dursleys of our actions, only to receive a rather blunt response requesting that they not be disturbed again.”

I breathed in and out deeply at this revelation. There was no point getting angry, since the incident in question had happened long before I'd established my independence from Dumbledore. But it still rankled that I hadn't been informed.

Dumbledore took my silence to mean that I'd accepted that bit of information, and was unlikely to explode any time soon, and continued. “The blood was used to great effect in the more serious of your subsequent visits. After you fell from your broom during the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff in your third year, for example. Usually, any such samples we retain are destroyed once the student in question matriculates. However, against protocol, Poppy decided to hang on to your sample. She believed that you would not be able to keep yourself out of trouble, even after leaving these halls.”

Despite my anger, my lips twitched at that. Madam Pomfrey was one staff member at Hogwarts to whom I had always held the utmost respect. “A fair assumption, given her experience,” I managed to say evenly.

Dumbledore allowed himself a chuckle. “Yes, besides Remus, you were one of her most frequent customers. That aside, with the connection Riddle gave to you the Halloween of 1981, your blood held a close enough match to his magical signature to open the locket without force. I presume each of his Horcruxes were designed to give up their soul fragment in different ways. A touch of blood on the clasp was enough for this one.” Dumbledore reached into a drawer and drew forth the heavy gold locket. “I believe that only you could possibly claim ownership to this,” he said, pushing it to me.

Despite his reassurances, I drew my wand and cast each of the detection charms he taught me, and a couple I'd learned in the meantime. The locket remained stubbornly unresponsive. “It seems you are correct.”

“Alastor would be proud of your caution. As would Aloysius.”

I nodded absently at the use of Zab's hated first name while looking directly at the locket. “Are you sure about that? Ownership of the locket, I mean?”

“Quite. The only other person who would possibly have a claim on it would be Mr. Borgin of Borgin and Burkes, since he purchased it semi-legally from Merope Gaunt. However, he would have a great deal of difficulty in justifying just how he came about it, even if he knew of its current existence and whereabouts. Since it has technically been in your possession since Sirius' death, and in his for over a decade before that, I suppose it is yours by rights.”

I shook my head, still looking at the heavy piece of jewelry. “What am I going to do with it?”

Dumbledore shrugged. “Study it, perhaps? There isn't an academic in the country who wouldn't jump at the chance to examine an artifact belonging to one of the four founders.”

I mentally shrugged. I had no real interest in studying a thousand-year-old locket. Zab may though. “Ok, thanks.” I stood up and prepared to leave, not interested in prolonging the conversation any further. With any luck, Hermione would be awake when I got home.

“There are two other matters that we should discuss before you leave, Harry.”

I stopped, but didn't turn back to face him. “And they are?” I asked.

He actually sounded ashamed. “The first is Professor Snape.”

I shrugged. “What's the problem? He's dead, but still teaching. He's no doubt still as hostile as ever to children, which in any other institution would have resulted in his arrest, or at least his dismissal. Of course, Hogwarts is supposedly the 'best' institution of magical learning in the entire world, yet can't get competent teachers for Potions, History, Divination or Defense.”

Dumbledore shut his eyes. “I was referring to your accusation of my being under the Imperius.”

I stopped still for a second. “Oh,” I said after a second.

“It is to my eternal shame that I must admit that I had been subtly subjected to it. As a ghost of Hogwarts, Professor Snape is bound to answer honestly any question put to him by the Headmaster, and he has admitted to casting it on me.” Dumbledore glanced down at his hands, unable to keep my gaze. “I held such high hopes for him, and I truly believed that he was striving for redemption. It would appear however that he was in fact acting on Tom's orders, posing as a double agent.”

I clenched my teeth together. “You subjected hundreds of students to his abuse because he tricked you into believing him?” I snarled.

He simply nodded and said, "Yes, it would appear so."

I could feel the familiar tendrils of rage building, and I deliberately stoked them into a raging fire. I forced the split in my mind, keeping my shields up and staying cool and collected as my power flared brightly. Magical objects on the shelves began vibrating as I allowed my magic to fill the air. "You gave a fucking Death Eater access to children?" I shouted. "You were so cock-sure of yourself that you allowed a murderous sociopath like Snape into my mind?"

Dumbledore did nothing to calm me down. "Yes," he admitted humbly. "Harry, no matter how angry you are, no matter what you say to me, believe me when I say that it is nothing compared to what I've said to myself over the past week."

I glared at him so hard my eyes hurt. "I'll believe that only once you've been listening to me shouting at you for a week, you arrogant, egotistical bastard!"

Dumbledore closed his eyes and lowered his head, a submissive gesture more designed to escape from my gaze than anything else. "I believe you," he said.

His posture slumped as I started swearing, not bothering to keep my voice low. More than half the portraits murmured their disapproval, but through it all Dumbledore sat still and non-threatening. "What's the matter?" I snapped, trying to goad a reaction from him. Something, anything. Anything but his calm, humble acceptance of his errors. "Nothing to say for yourself? No virtuous claims of good intentions gone bad? No self-righteous admonishment to call the dearly departed Death Eater by the undeserved honorific 'Professor'?" I spat.

Dumbledore simply sat silently and shook his head.

I growled deep in my throat, but pulled my magic back in and clamped down on my rage. It wasn't goading any sort of reaction from him. "Why?" I asked simply.

Dumbledore suddenly looked very old. Or at least, much older. "I have made many more mistakes over the past two decades than I thought possible. Decisions at the time that seemed to be the best course turned out to be perhaps the most disastrous course possible. I trusted when I shouldn't have, and didn't speak up when I should have."

I gestured wildly, the anger not entirely under control. "Yet the arsehole is down in the dungeons, still teaching!" I screamed.

Dumbledore nodded again. His passive aggressive tactics irritated me even more. "Only for the next two weeks. Just until the OWLs and NEWTs are done."

"What? Why?"

He stood slowly, pushing off the desk with his good left hand. "There is only a fortnight until the exams. Disrupting the students' preparation with a new teacher at this time would do them a disservice, even if I could have secured the services of a Potions Master at such short notice," he said softly.

I rolled my eyes. "Have you learned nothing?" I asked incredulously. "You just sat there and admitted that decisions you made for altruistic reasons tend to backfire!"

He winced. "This was not a decision I made alone, nor lightly. The Board of Governors were consulted, and the decision was made collectively. While close, the vote was to allow Severus to continue," he said softly.

"What did you vote?" I pressed.

"Harry--" he pleaded.

"No!" I snapped. "How did you vote?" I demanded again.

He slumped back into his chair. "I had intended on voting for his dismissal, but two of the governors convinced me that the disruption to the fifth and seventh year students would outweigh the benefits of exorcising him from the castle," he said, obviously expecting an explosion of some sort.

I snarled at him. "Are you sure you can throw off the Imperius? That sounds like an awfully weak-minded excuse to me," I said harshly.

"The OWLs and NEWTs are important to those taking them," Dumbledore said reprovingly.

I rolled my eyes. "Then why have you foisted people like Binns, Snape and Trelawney on us over the years? I won't even mention some of your choices as Defense Professor," I said evenly.

Dumbledore sighed. "Severus was, is, a certified Potions Master, Harry."

I gave that statement a dismissive gesture. "That alone does not a good teacher make," I replied, watching with amusement as the flash of irritation that crossed his features at my gesture.

He actually nodded glumly, but stayed silent.

I continued to glare at the silent wizard for a long time. He seemed to be waiting for something. After a minute or so, I decided to take my leave. The day wasn't getting any shorter. I rose and got to the door before remembering something.



What was the second thing you wanted to speak to me about?" I asked evenly.

"Your upcoming visit to the Vatican."

I sighed, but turned back to him and sat down once more. "What needs to be discussed? They've asked me back to speak with the Church's wizards."

Taking my non-hostile tone as being as close to forgiveness as he was likely to get this century, Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "I'm afraid the blame for your ignorance in the history of the magical world sits squarely with me. Professor Binns' fixation with Goblin rebellions, though an important part of our history, prevents him from imparting other, equally important events. May I give you a crash course first, before explaining why we need to speak of your upcoming visit?"

I nodded, waving my hand in a circle to get him to hurry up. "Ok, but I'd prefer it if you changed into something less eye-catching. I'm starting to get a headache."

He actually glanced down at the fashion disaster he was wearing before transfiguring them with a casual wave of his wand. I frowned at the glimpse of his forearm. Previously, it was only his hand and wrist that had been withered. The affliction had spread up his forearm, nearly to the elbow.

He ignored my questioning glance, instead adopting a lecturing tone. "While there is no way of determining the truth of the matter, there is a theory that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact a powerful wizard, who gathered a dozen wizards as his followers to carry on his legacy."

I held up a hand, interrupting him. "Hang on, if you're going to go back that far, we need popcorn or something."

He smiled at my quip. "Please, I promise the story shall move more quickly very shortly." At my nod, he continued. "At his crucifixion, one of his followers laced the vinegar soaked sponge he was offered with a Draught of the Living Death. Even then, he was nearly killed when the spear pierced his side. While the healer Mary Magdalene managed to stabilize him, he did die a few days later. On his death, the Catholic Church was established in Rome, where it has for most of its history been the single safest place for magical children from impoverished communities."

I frowned. "What about the witch-burnings? Or the inquisition?"

Dumbledore gave me an approving nod. "Historically, the Church has preyed upon witches and wizards who were perceived to have been involved with dark arts. Catholic parents of magical children often had priests visit as exorcists, in an effort to rid the child of the 'demons' present. Incidents of accidental magic were more often than not associated with the devil.

"Now, once identified, such children were encouraged to be indoctrinated into the Church hierarchy. They were sequestered and trained as you have been, though part of their education ensured they were fanatically loyal to the Church's ecclesiastical leaders. There were of course periods where that policy was... rethought, especially during times of difficulty. The inquisition for example, was held during one such purge."

I nodded. "There were a lot of powerful wards around the Vatican. I'm not sure how many wizards I saw there, but I defeated quite a few."

Dumbledore nodded grimly. "Yes, yes you did. Now, you are aware that I am the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards. As a sovereign nation, Vatican City has a seat on the Confederation. Initially there were some rather vocal demands for your arrest by one faction of the Church's wizards, but the revelation that the Pope does actually have a private store of dark objects, a fact that had been hotly denied for centuries, took the wind out of their collective sails rather effectively. As a result, the Vatican has been under a great deal of pressure to reveal exactly what they have stored."

I frowned, thinking about recent events. "Did this happen before or after I got the owl requesting my presence?"

"I honestly don't know, Harry. I do know that cataloguing the collection has now become a priority, now that its existence can no longer be denied."

I pursed my lips. "So they want me to go down and talk to the basilisk and stop it from eating those who want to go down there to identify the pieces?" I had a sudden cold sensation in my stomach. "No, they want me to go down there myself, don't they?" I blurted.

Dumbledore frowned. "Why would you say that?"

"The Pope can go down there any time he likes. The basilisk identifies him as his master, and won't attack. But it won't let anyone else down there, unless they are a parselmouth. Not even the Pope could bring down an escort."

Dumbledore turned grave. "That is a disturbing thought, Harry. I must ask for your cooperation though."

I raised an eyebrow. "You want a copy of the inventory?"

The old wizard nodded gravely. "To start with. But I must ask you for something else. If you identify another Horcrux, or any other object that is so dark that it has a palpable aura of evil, I must humbly ask that you bring them to me."

I forced myself to stay calm, made easier by the fact that it had been phrased as a request, and that I had fully expected it. Even so, I felt the familiar flash of anger return. "Are you asking me as the Headmaster of Hogwarts, the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot or as the Supreme Mugwump?" I asked after a short pause.

"None of the above. Harry, I'm asking you as a wizard who has seen so much death and destruction in his life that he wants nothing more than to relieve the burden on future generations."

I shook my head. "No. I still can't trust you that much. I am willing to compromise, however."

His dismay was quickly overshadowed by hope. “What do you wish?”

“Two things. A portkey from you, keyed to take myself and any dark object through the wards at both the Vatican and Hogwarts.”

The Headmaster nodded slowly. “That can be done. While the Church wizards cast the wards surrounding the Vatican themselves, they did consult me on their construction and layering. I can create a portkey to get you through both sets of wards.”

I nodded. “Good. Key it to the Chamber of Secrets,” I said, thinking of the only place the Headmaster couldn’t reach in Hogwarts.

He blinked. “The Chamber? Why?”

My eyes narrowed. “Because I still don’t know your motives in this. Putting any questionable objects there will keep them safe from others, but also from you, until I’m satisfied that your motives are in everyone’s best interest.”

Dumbledore stared at me for a long time. “Aloysius has certainly put his mark on you, Harry. Your caution and determination to examine motives before acting speaks volumes of both yourself and the lessons you have learned.”

I gave him a tight, insincere grin. “Thanks. Oh, you’d better make that a two-way portkey, like the Tri-wizard trophy. I’ll need to get back to my original location to avoid questions.”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk and gave me a sober look. “I’m not sure I can agree to that, Harry.”

I raised an eyebrow, and deliberately misunderstood him. “What? Creating a two way portkey is just as easy as a single use one,” I said.

He shook his head. “I mean that I cannot agree to your demands.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And yet if your motives were as you described, you’d have no difficulty in agreeing.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “No, I’m afraid you misunderstand. The situation would remain exactly as it was, with one person, who has no allegiance to anyone but themselves, would retain access and control over the items. Only the person in question would have changed.”

I snorted. “And you think that I should just hand them over to you?”

“Not to me, to the ICW, the International Confed--”

“I know what it stands for, old man,” I snapped. “You just said that you weren’t asking me as the Supreme Mugwump. Now you want me to just hand the stuff over?”

“I am asking you as someone who sincerely wants to destroy dark objects. The ICW are in the best position to do that. They have access to the best curse breakers in the world. Not even Gringotts have better.”

I shook my head. “You can’t expect me to place my trust in any government body, not after what we were both subjected to in my fifth year here.”

Dumbledore sighed. “The Confederation is not the Ministry, Harry.”

I sneered in a manner reminiscent of Malfoy at his best. “Yet you were given the arse by both bodies for telling the truth. Forgive me if I don’t have the same level of trust that you seem to possess.”

He leaned back in his chair again. “I suppose I cannot persuade you otherwise, but the situations were very different. Any time a Mugwump is removed from a ruling body in their own country, they are automatically suspended from the ICW, pending an investigation.”

I barked a humorless laugh. “And you want me to trust such a bunch of gullible idiots with a heap of dark objects?”

Dumbledore frowned, and I could feel his aura swirl with anger. “Harry, everything the ICW does is open to the public. We would have to announce the receipt of such a hoard, and detail what we were planning on doing with it.”

I nodded insincerely. “Riiight. Which would leave me in the lurch, since the Vatican would then know what I’d done. May I draw your attention back to your own words? Something about the Church preying on people who were perceived to have been involved in dark arts? What do you think they’d do to someone who managed to steal the darkest objects from their treasure trove?”

“We would of course offer you protect—”

I interrupted him. “For the rest of my life? I had enough of your protection as a child. Besides, it is protection I wouldn’t need if I just put the bloody things in the Chamber of Secrets.”

“I’m afraid I cannot allow that, Harry,”

I shrugged. “Fine. You don’t get the objects then.”

He sighed deeply again. “I wouldn’t have them either way if they were in the Chamber.”

“You misunderstand,” I said, mimicking his tone. “I won’t retrieve them. They can stay in the hands of the Church for all I care. They’ve been well protected for a long time now. Why should I rock the boat?”

Dumbledore actually growled. “Harry, these objects need to be destroyed. The Church will not entertain the notion, so we must take other measures.”

I clasped my hands behind my head, leaned back and lifted my feet up and plonked them on his desk, one after the other. “Then you’d better decide which is more important to you. Getting the objects out of the hands of the Church and not having direct access to them, or leaving them in the hands of the Church, and still not having access to them. Remember, you need me on this. I certainly don’t need you.”

His eyes narrowed. “You need me to make the portkey,” he pointed out.

I made another dismissive gesture, since it annoyed him so much. “Only if you pick the first option, which would mean you do need me.”

We sat silently for a few moments again, before I rose and continued. “Think about it old man. Let me know what you decide. I’m not sticking around for hours while you make up your mind.” I headed for the door.

“What was your second demand, Harry?”

I stopped just before descending the stairs. “That. You. Stop. Calling. Me. ‘Harry’,” I shouted over my shoulder.

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Somehow, Dumbledore acquiesced to my demands, and I left his office with an old sock in my pocket partially charmed as a two-way portkey. Dumbledore had decided he wasn’t prepared to create a portkey directly to the Chamber. Since he had never been in the Chamber, and didn’t know exactly where it was on his mental map of Hogwarts, he couldn’t safely set the destination. Rather than giving me a portkey that could deposit me directly into the foundations of the castle (and since I wasn’t going to take him down there myself), he taught me the charm to anchor the uncompleted portkey to the current location.

Making sure I wasn’t followed, I entered Myrtle’s bathroom and hissed at the relevant sink before she could come out to see who her visitor was. I ordered steps to appear, and walked down into the Chamber. I didn’t bother going all the way into the bowels of the grotto, this was close enough. I drew my wand and cast the charm that would anchor the portkey, completing the enchantment. I exited Slytherin’s lair, but rather than leaving Hogwarts straight away, I wandered off to Gryffindor Tower, where the sounds of activity behind the Fat Lady indicated the usual frenzied rush to gather belongings before heading down to breakfast.

Without the password, I had to wait in the hall, but it was only fifteen seconds or so before the portrait opened. Natalie MacDonald stepped out chatting with a much younger witch, probably a sister in first year, judging from their similarities. Nat had been one of the youngest members of the DA to join once we threw it open to the whole school, and the few times I worked with her she displayed quite a natural talent for dueling. The fact that she was smaller than Ginny made it damned hard to hit her with a spell from a distance. She stopped with surprise when she saw me, but smiled and proudly showed me the gleaming onyx ring on her finger. “Harry! Look! I earned this last week. I’m the youngest onyx ring in the school!”

I gave her a genuine smile. “Well done, Nat. I’m proud of you. How is the DA going?”

She smiled happily. “Great! Over half the school is signed up now, though only the NEWT level years get credit in their DADA class,” she said, grumbling the last bit.

I reached out and playfully messed up her hair. “That’s my girl. Tell me, is Ginny still upstairs?”

Natalie’s companion squeaked, “I’ll get her,” before bolting back into Gryffindor Tower.

I blinked, but Natalie laughed. “My cousin. She has always had a bit of a crush on you,” she said.

I rolled my eyes. “Boy-Who-Lived, right?” I asked condescendingly.

She actually shook her head. “Nope. She’s a Quidditch nut. She knows everything about the game. She could tell you your average time to catch the snitch against Slytherin in bad weather. was still a little tyke when she was in the crowd for your first game, but at that moment she decided that you were her favorite Seeker in the whole world,” she said, her eyes amusingly wide as she mimicked a star-struck, pre-pubescent little girl. “She didn’t even know who The-Boy-Who-Lived was. I told her, but defeating an evil wizard as a baby was nothing compared to your Quidditch skills,” she finished with a smirk.

I sighed, letting the breath out with a chuckle. “Ah, yes. It’s such an inconsequential thing, ridding the world of an evil psychopath. Well, at least I have a new generation of groupies who love me for what I can actually do,” I said mock-seriously.

We shared a laugh as another gaggle of witches exited the Tower and headed on down to breakfast. Natalie began talking about this year’s Defense Professor, and how the woman was nearly as strict as McGonagall. “She’s got nothing on Snape, but at least she is willing to answer questions in class,” she chattered happily. While her constant yammering annoyed me as a student, I now found it rather amusing to listen to someone whose ability to simply talk about everything without a care was on display.

I grinned as she gossiped away, as happy as a young witch should be. For all the trials and tribulations of my life, this was what I was fighting for. The ability of others to be themselves, to live life as they chose. To live without having to worry about your family being hunted down by an insane half-blood bigot. Or any other bigot, for that matter.

“Harry!” Ginny shouted as she exited, followed by Natalie’s unnamed cousin. Ginny gave me a tight hug, before stepping back with a frown on her face. “Have you spoken to Hermione since you kicked her out?” she demanded.

“Huh?” I said eloquently. “I didn’t kick her out!”

Ginny narrowed her eyes. “That’s not what she said,” she remarked.

I rolled my eyes. “She left of her own accord. It was her interpretation of why I killed Snape that sent her running,” I said flatly.

Ginny eyed me warily, trying to detect a falsehood. “She didn’t tell me why she left, just that she left because of you.”

I sighed. Yep, Ginny was definitely a member of the wizarding world. That sort of tortured logic that passed for free thought was well and truly entrenched in the youngest Weasley scion’s thinking. Even as a first year, Hermione noticed it, when we tried to get past Snape’s defense to the Philosopher’s Stone. Wizards just don’t have a single iota of logic in their makeup. It’s no wonder no one believed me when I said I didn’t put my name in the Goblet of Fire. Never mind the fact that my name came out after Cedric’s. I mean, if I had entered, I’d have entered as a Hogwarts student. Merlin, Crouch actually told everyone at the time how he did it. He all but confessed with Dumbledore, a skilled legilimens, in the room with him (evil bastard that he was, I’ll give him one thing, he had balls of brass the size of coconuts). But no, rather than actually think about it, let’s just alienate Harry because he obviously thought of a way around whatever protections the Goblet had.

“Yes, well, I suppose that says it all,” I muttered, speaking more to myself than Ginny. She gave me a hurt look.

“I didn’t mean anything by it. No need to get offended,” she said, her voice rising easily.

Despite the warning signs of an imminent eruption coming from Mt Weasley that would have sent any island natives searching for a handy virgin to sacrifice, I didn’t back down. “Gin, you just accused me of kicking my girlfriend out of my house. Yes, she left because she didn’t condone my actions, but saying that I kicked her out is the sort of thinking the Prophet readers are famed for.”

She coloured, her face breaking out in ugly red splotches of anger. Unlike her blushes that, while entertaining, turn her face a solid brick-red. “Don’t you dare—”

I flicked my wand at her, whispering, “*Silencio* .”

She turned from red to purple. “Gin, do be quiet. I’m not here to pick a fight with you. I just wanted to talk to you about Hermione.”

She drew her own wand and waved it over herself, managing to silently cast the counter-charm. To say I was impressed would be an understatement. It had taken Zab several hours of constant drilling before I could perform the same feat. Either she was better at charms than I was, or this year’s Defense Professor was exceptional.

“How dare you—” she started, before I flicked my wand again, cutting her off mid-rant.

“I dare, because you are acting far more like your mother than you realize. If I don’t cut you off now, I won’t have a chance later. Seriously Gin, calm down. You don’t need to turn into Molly to defend yourself against me. The twins, maybe, but not me.”

She again swished away my spell, still glaring at me angrily. “Fine. What do you want to know?”

I took a deep breath. “What has Hermione told you about her feelings? About what she wants from our relationship?”

Ginny stared at me for a while before nodding. “Why don’t you go ask her yourself?”

I rolled my eyes. “Because I don’t know how to approach the conversation. When I left this morning, she was asleep on my couch. I didn’t want to wake her because I didn’t know how she felt. Do you know if she still wants to be my girlfriend? Or even friends?”

Ginny mimicked me and rolled her own eyes. “Honestly Harry, you are the densest boy in the world. Of course she still wants to be friends. If she didn’t, she wouldn’t be on your couch.”

Something I didn’t know was there lifted from me. It was like a weight around my lungs had been removed, letting me breathe easily for the first time in weeks.

I smiled at her and simply said, “Thanks, Gin.”

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I made my way out of Hogwarts and out into the wonderful morning sunshine. I took a couple of seconds to close my eyes and hold my head up, letting the newly-risen sun warm my face. Hogwarts was a wonderful place, but even in the middle of summer, like any castle built of stone, it was damned cold at night.

An owl hooted above me, and I looked up to see Zeus, the fastest owl that roosted at Zabini Manor circling above my head. I held out my arm, allowing the horned owl to perch there. “Good morning, Zeus,” I said to him. “I assume you have something for me?”

Zeus leaned to one side and stuck out a leg. I quickly untied the tightly wrapped scroll. I stuffed it into one pocket.

“Sorry, I don’t have a treat for you,” I said before the morning sounds attracted my attention. With a grin I drew my wand and cast, “*Accio* frog,” aiming my wand towards the lake.

About a dozen frogs croaked their displeasure as they were pulled from their comfortable homes. I ended the spell before I was hit by a handful of aerial amphibians, allowing them to fall at my feet. I picked one up and gave it to Zeus, who gave a muffled hoot of appreciation before leaping from my arm and climbing high into the sky.

With a wave of my wand, I banished the other frogs back to the lake, then pulled out the scroll. Zab's old-English handwriting stared back at me.

*My contact wishes to meet with you.*

*Noon, three days time.*

*San Pietro.*

I frowned as I read the note again. The meeting was scheduled for two hours before I was to be interviewed by the Church's wizards. It certainly wasn't inconceivable that Zab knew of my upcoming visit to the Vatican (and the time of the meeting), but that meant that either he told his contact, or chose the time and location himself.

I incinerated the scroll, and prepared to Apparate.

I wondered if Ron was up for another road trip.

## Journeyman Potter And YOU want me to do what?

The Burrow was far less dilapidated than I remembered. I couldn't help but frown, feeling a sense of 'wrongness', as I looked over the main structure just seconds after I apparated there. The last time I'd visited, the only straight line in the whole bloody place was on the welcome mat at the front door, and even that was a little frayed. The rest of the house could only be described as relaxed, if only because 'bent and crooked' was rather harsh, even if the windows were decidedly rhombus shaped, rather than square.

Now, the place looked like it had been remodeled, if not torn down and re-erected after straightening the foundations. I thought back, and realized that I hadn't been here since before my apprenticeship. I suppose that during Mr. Weasley's short stint as Minister, he was paid enough to fix the house.

I walked down the path through the front garden and knocked on the door. A few moments later Mrs. Weasley answered, and even though I was ready for it, her welcoming hug still all but drove the wind from my lungs.

"Harry! Pet, oh it is good to see you!"

I succumbed with good grace to her hug for a few moments before somehow, I managed to disentangle myself from her. "Hi, Mrs. Weasley. It's good to see you too."

She ushered me into the house, offering me foods of all sorts. I tried to politely decline, but ended up with some honey on toast as a sort of consolation prize. What did surprise me was the fact that a young house elf was assisting her in making breakfast. It turns out that the idea of a Minister without an elf was rather alien to the Ministry, and a young elf born to a family who already had too many was purchased by the Ministry and bonded to the Weasley family. Mr. Weasley himself soon came down the stairs and joined his wife and I at the breakfast table. The three of us chatted briefly about inconsequential things before I asked if Ron was home.

Mrs. Weasley gave a sort of harrumph, and told me to go and wake him up. I grinned at her exasperation, since I'd bunked with Ron for five years, and knew exactly how difficult it was to get him moving in the morning. Especially on a weekend. Even Mr. Weasley seemed amused at his wife's demeanor.

The squeaky step no longer squeaked, so I was able to go up the stairs and enter Ron's room without disturbing him.

I couldn't help but grin at the décor. The small collection of puke-inducing orange posters that were usually there had been replaced with enough Cannons' advertising paraphernalia that only one item managed to avoid being overlapped by another. Ron's own marketing poster was that lone exception.

I don't think I'd ever seen a smile filled with as much pride as the one on that poster. Poster-Ron gave me a wink and a thumbs up, before going back to smiling broadly again, half turning to show off his Cannons Uniform.

I took a deep breath and shook my head with a bemused sigh. Well, at least he knows what he wants out of life. I can hardly say the same thing. Oh, I know I want to have a normal life, but I've come to the conclusion that no matter what I do, I'll always be seen by others as the bloody Boy-Who-Lived, and therefore, someone not-quite-normal.

I looked over the rest of the room's ornaments, noting the new addition of a rather large owl cage. It appears that Ron got himself a new pet. I wonder what happened to Pig. The shelves in the room were all filled to overflowing with odd items he'd collected over the years. His old broken wand, his Hogwarts acceptance letter, the DA galleon we used in our fifth year, the omniscrollers I bought him at the Quidditch World Cup, even his OWL and NEWT results. Of course, his results were simply lying there, while his offer of employment with the Cannons had been framed and looked as though it was the only thing in the room that was regularly dusted.

I gently shook Ron's shoulder and grinned with amusement at his sleepy attempts to knock my hand away. "Ron? Wake up mate."

"G' way," he mumbled, groping for my hand to push it away.

I bit my lip wondering how I could wake him up in the most amusing way. Well, he was a Weasley; he'd have certain reflexes ingrained after a while.

"Mate, Fred and George are coming," I hissed in his ear.

He all but leapt out of bed with a startling yelp, got tangled in the sheets and fell onto the floor with a resounding thump.

Yep, that was amusing.

---

Yet again, it didn't take much to convince Ron to join me. The only thing he was worried about was missing a training session. We ran an eye over

his contract and found that he was permitted to miss a certain percentage of routine sessions during the year, but not the ones right before a game.

To Ron, who had up till now been the first player to arrive and the last to depart these training sessions, the idea of missing one was rather alien. Still, he did take the time to write a note to his coach explaining his absence, and sent it with his new owl, Chudley. Pig was with Ginny at Hogwarts, apparently.

I felt mildly ill at the name. The owl looked as though he shared my opinion on his name.

Nevertheless, Ron was packed within a few minutes, and we headed back to Grimmauld Place to pick up some stuff for me.

We apparated directly there, rather than use the floo. I still wasn't as comfortable as others at using the fireplace as a means of travel. Competent, yes, but comfortable, no. We arrived just in time to hear the whoosh of flames from the fireplace behind us. Well, I guess we just missed someone.

"Dobby!" I called. Before I'd even finished his name, he was at my side.

"Master Harry called Dobby?"

"Who is still home?"

Dobby actually frowned. "Mistress Blaise is in the sitting room," he said nervously. He looked up at me submissively and softly added, "Dobby is not liking yelling."

I frowned, and reached out to put a comforting hand on Dobby's shoulder. "Hermione and Blaise were yelling at each other?" I guessed.

Dobby gave a couple of bobs of his head. Ron dumped his bag and looked at me questioningly.

I shrugged at his unasked question. "Don't ask me. I wouldn't even try to figure it out."

A door slammed, making all three of us jump slightly. Blaise stormed into the room with her student bag over her own shoulder. She started slightly too on seeing us. "Well, you just missed your precious Gryffindor," she snarled at me.

I raised an eyebrow, but stayed silent. A tactic Zab had suggested to me, for dealing with the times when his fiery great-granddaughter was being, as he called it, obstinately willful.

Not arguing back was the right thing to do, since she eventually looked down, abashed.

"Sorry Harry. Granger just makes me so *mad*!"

Now that her ire had a different target, I felt safe in joining the conversation.

"Another 'discussion'?"

She nodded with a wry smile. "She wasn't too happy with you, for not waking her up when you got home. Not to mention, leaving before she woke up."

I eyed Blaise thoughtfully. "That's not all she was upset about, was she?"

Blaise actually blushed, and hesitated in answering. "I suppose," she said evasively.

I shook my head with a small smile. "Well, Ron and I are heading over to Italy again for my meeting."

She raised a manicured eyebrow. "I thought that wasn't for a few days?"

I nodded. "It isn't, but my old Master gave me something to do in the meantime."

Her face darkened a bit. "Did he now?"

You know, seeing Blaise confront Zab now she was an adult would be a rather amusing scene. "He did. Don't let me hold you up. You're obviously on your way to work."

She smiled at me, though I just knew Zab was in for an earful at some point. She stood on tiptoes and gave me a quick kiss, then stepped over to the fireplace. "Oh, you'd better send Granger an owl. If you don't, she'll probably try to hex me next time she visits."

Ron, who knew just how skilled both witches were with a wand, smirked and said, "Can I sell tickets to that?"

Blaise tossed her hair and smirked back at him. "I said 'try' for a reason, Weasley," she said proudly, before flooing to St. Mungos.

I looked over to Ron, whose manic grin made him look like a Batman villain. He took a breath and began to say something before I held up a hand. He stopped, probably because my wand was in it.

"Don't say *anything*," I muttered.

He complied, but his smile said louder than words what he was thinking.

While Winky packed my bags for me, I sent Dobby to Gringotts to get my ‘other’ gear from my vault. If we were going back to the Vatican, I wanted every possible advantage I could get. I rather hoped the stabilization charms I cast on the acromantula silk gloves still held. It would be a bugger of a job to fix them.

“So,” Ron started as I quickly wrote a letter to Hermione. “Where are we going?”

I blinked. “I didn’t tell you?”

He shrugged. “You may have. I was too interested in that wild boar dish you described.”

I tilted my head to one side and stifled a chuckle. “You actually agreed to come overseas with me without knowing where we were going?”

He gave me a blank look as if to say, ‘Yeah, duh!’

“Yeah. Duh!” he said. He turned to Winky, who’d just entered with my packed bags. “Winky, could you get me a snack?”

“Ron, you just had breakfast,” I said.

He shrugged. “Not much of one.”

I nodded to Winky, who was waiting silently for my permission, before turning back to Ron. “Mate, you ate half a bloody pig’s worth of bacon not half an hour ago.”

“So?”

---

Ron was rather keen to experience a different method of Muggle transport this time. For some reason, the idea of traveling under the English Channel still gave him shivers. I asked him what he’d prefer, wondering just how he expected to get to Italy.

“Don’t Muggles have boats?”

I nodded. “Yes, of course, but we need to be in Italy sooner rather than later.”

“Well, how about going on one of them Muggle aeroplanes?”

I sighed. “*Aeroplanes*, possibly?”

He snapped his fingers. “That’s the one. Dad would be so jealous if I told him I went on one of those.” He frowned briefly, his emotions flickering quickly. “He might be upset though. He still doesn’t understand how they stay up in the air. He might not think they are safe”

I swallowed at his distraction. It would seem that the wounds he received at the Department of Mysteries was still affecting his attention span. “How about I ask Hermione to explain it to him when she next sees your family?” I asked.

He nodded eagerly. “Good idea.”

I jotted a quick postscript to my letter, before rolling it up and calling for Hedwig. My owl, who was approaching a modest middle age, silently drifted from her perch over to me. “Here you go girl. Could you please take that to Hermione? Wait until she gets home though, don’t bother her during her classes.”

Hedwig gave me a pointed look as if to ask me if there was anything else I wanted to tell her about her job that she already knew how to do. For a creature that can’t move her eyes around, she’s rather eloquent in her expressions, my owl.

Dobby arrived back soon after Hedwig left, and after the application of a couple of lightening charms to our luggage, Ron and I headed down to the nearest Tube station.

Buying a ticket at the ticket machine delighted Ron nearly as much as it would have delighted his father. The mere idea that Muggles could create a machine of sufficiently advanced technology that was indistinguishable from magic to him was rather alien.

The train took us to Hammersmith, where we changed over to the platform with trains going to Heathrow. At that point, Ron suddenly became nervous.

“Um, we aren’t going anywhere near Castle and Elephant, are we?” he asked.

I frowned, but looked at the tube map display on the platform. Finally, I picked out the station he was likely referring to. “If you mean Elephant and Castle, then no. Why?”

Ron glanced around nervously. The platform was rather busy this early in the morning, though the rush hour (or perhaps more accurately for London, the rush three-and-a-half-hours) was over. He leaned closer and whispered, “Voldemort attacked there the summer before you killed him.”

I blinked. “Is that a problem?”

Ron shrugged, his demeanor changing quickly. “Nah, I just promised Mum I wouldn’t go there.”



I frowned. “Huh? This is a woman whose two eldest sons have idiotically suicidal careers!” I said mindful of the Muggles around us. “Not to mention the fact that professional athletes with heavy clubs are out for your blood every time you play!”

Ron laughed. “Yeah, but I’m her little baby boy,” said the two-metre-plus Celtic berserker throwback, not without a touch of irony. “Anyway, I’m also your friend, and that means that I’m far more likely to run into stupidly suicidal situations than they are.”

I laughed at that as the station loudspeaker announced the arrival of a Heathrow bound train. We picked up our bags and clambered on, finding a pair of free seats at one end of the carriage.

The trip to the airport was uneventful, though Ron was entranced at the view. He knew London was a large city, but it never really struck him just how spread out it was. Finally, the view disappeared for a final time as we again descended underground for the final few stations before Heathrow.

While not as busy as King’s Cross Station, Heathrow airport was still a bustling mass of humanity. It was rather amusing to see the occasional red-faced would-be-passenger arguing with a check-in attendant that they really needed to catch the very flight that had just left (one person even went so far as to insist that the person who checks in the bags somehow should have the authority to call the bloody plane back).

We made our way to an information desk to ask where we could catch a flight to Italy. We were subjected to a rapid-fire verbal list of by an exasperated clerk. He didn’t even have the customer service skills to look at us while he spoke. Ron and I just shrugged, and went to the closest ticket counter, not caring which airline it was.

I paid for the tickets using a credit card Hermione had organized for me. Whenever I used it, I had to pay it off by converting galleons to pounds at Gringotts sometime in the next month. It was just one more Muggle idea Ron was fascinated by; the concept of getting something by just handing over a small piece of plastic, and then getting it *back* .

We went quickly through passport control, and once again, I had to convince (magically, naturally) the officer to ignore Ron’s overactive passport photo. As we sat in the waiting lounge, I pondered just how far out of his depth Ron would be if he ever found himself alone in the world without magic. His scattered attention would make it more difficult for him, but I think anyone raised with no contact to the Muggle world would have a hell of a time fitting in.

Once we got on the plane, I graciously gave Ron my window seat. A few seconds after take off, I had to question the wisdom of that decision, when he started panicking at the way the land below us suddenly dropped away. For someone who spends a great deal of his time at great heights, he was rather skittish at the idea that he wasn’t in control of the plane. You just can’t please this guy when it comes to Muggle transportation.

---

A few hours later, we touched down in Rome. Ron wanted to go to the place that served the wild boar dish immediately (oddly his attention problem didn’t seem to affect him when he thought about food or Quidditch, a pair of facts that had me questioning whether or not Ron was pulling a fast one on the world). He settled down once I told him that the restaurant was in Florence, which itself was a few hours on a train from Rome.

We checked into a hotel, Ron insisting on the best room they had available. For someone who grew up in a fiscally restricted household, he certainly enjoys throwing his money around. The hotel manager gave us a pair of rooms on the top floor, both with balconies.

Once I’d dumped my bags on the bed, I opened my room’s balcony doors, to find Hedwig sitting on the railing with a letter tied to her leg. Figuring it was from Hermione, I was rather relieved to see it wasn’t a howler.

*Dear Harry,*

*I can’t believe you didn’t wake me when you got home! I am so angry with you right now. I woke up with a crick in my neck to discover not only that you’d been home, but you left again even before I woke up.*

*I had intended to apologise for how I acted after we returned from Hogwarts; my behavior was atrocious, but honestly, was it too much to ask that you wake me up?*

*Not only that, but the letter you wrote is two lines long! Your postscript asking me to explain the concept of lift to Mr. Weasley was longer than the rest of your note! When you get back, you have some explaining to do.*

*Hermione.*

I frowned, thinking hard. Hermione was not the aggrieved party here, yet she sounded half-contrite, half-petulant. I crumpled her letter into a ball and incinerated it with a flick of my wand.

I’d think about how I’d approach the upcoming conversation later.

---

Ron and I spent the next few days doing the touristy thing. Ron helped me recognize the subtle signs in museums and the like that indicated a magical section that was hidden from Muggles the same way as the Leaky Cauldron. In return, I decided to take him to Trevi Fountain, though I was thinking about not pointing out the stone with the drying charm for wizards.

The morning before my meeting, Ron and I ate breakfast in the hotel’s restaurant before setting out.

“Ron, I have to meet someone at the Vatican tomorrow. He has some information for me,” I said, taking a sip of hot coffee. That’s one thing I’d noticed about Italy. Everything goes with coffee.

Ron looked up from his own cup, which given the amount of sugar he'd put into it, could only be described as containing caffeinated syrup. "Who?"

I shrugged. "Dunno."

"What information does he have?"

I shrugged again. "Dunno. If I knew that, I wouldn't need to meet him."

Ron rolled his eyes at my response. "I know that. What does he have information about?"

I sighed. "That, I can't tell you."

Rather than look angry, he looked surprised. "Mate, I am a member of the Order, you know," he said.

I nodded. "I know, but it isn't Order business." I paused with a small frown. "At least, it isn't Order business *yet*."

He picked up his toast and took a bite, chewing thoughtfully. "When can you tell me?"

I grinned. "Probably a couple of days after we get back to London," I said.

He nodded happily, but asked seriously, "Do you need someone to cover your back?"

I nodded. "Always."

---

Ron and I entered Rome's wizarding community with no real difficulty; Ron even managed to pick up that he needed to step on the magical stone before going into the waters of Trevi Fountain. I shook my head and thought about all the kinds of things I'd missed out on by being sent to live in the Muggle world. I thought our entrance was rather inconspicuous, but a great many people took one look at me, gasped, and hurriedly made their way off to do something else.

Even Ron, whose attention span didn't exactly have a stellar record when it came to things other than Quidditch and food, noticed our reception. "Something you need to tell me, mate?"

I cleared my throat. "Well, yeah, I suppose. The last time I was here, I sort of got into a fight with some punk kid."

Ron frowned, trying to reconcile the reaction we'd received, with the information I'd just divulged. "Was there anything special about this kid?"

I gave a sort of affirmative sound. "Uh-huh. He was the local mafia boss' son."

Ron slowly turned to face me. "Mafia? You're the guy who killed Falcone's son?"

I shrugged. "Sort of. How do you know about it?"

Ron snorted. "The Falcone's have been the most powerful criminal family in wizarding history. Dad heard that someone started a riot here that killed a lot of the family's most powerful wizards. He was telling me about it one night."

I felt rather affronted at that. "Hey! I didn't start a riot!"

Ron's grin didn't waver. "But you *did* kill Falcone's son?"

I winced. "Well, sort of. I sabotaged his wand. He tried to kill me with the killing curse, only it came out the other end of the wand."

Ron took a deep breath, trying to control his amusement. "So, just business as usual for you then? Just your average, everyday, hum-dum, Harry Potter holiday. See the sights, try some food, and attract some people looking to kill you." He cuffed me on the shoulder. "Merlin, were you so bored with life after you knocked Snake-face's head off that you went looking for some more enemies?"

"Of course not. I just, well, he was shaking down a shopkeeper in front of me! What was I supposed to do?"

He rolled his eyes. "You've never heard the saying, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do'?"

A small boy, probably not even old enough to go to Hogwarts, cautiously approached Ron and I. Without saying a word, he held out a folded piece of parchment. I made no move towards it, but Ron laughed and took it from the kid. He unfolded it as the scamp raced away, disappearing into the throng.

"What is it?" I asked Ron.

"Dunno," he said, helpfully as usual. "Here, what do you make of it?"

He passed me the parchment, which contained a few lines of hurriedly scribbled Italian. It was signed, 'Cerelia'.

I sighed. "Bugger."

"What?" Ron asked, curious. "I didn't know you could read Italian."

I shook my head. "I can't. But the last time I was here I had a stud in my ear that translated for me. Cerelia was the apothecarist I visited to get some things I needed. She thinks I can speak Italian."

Ron pursed his lips together in an effort to keep from laughing. "So, she has sent us a warning, but we have no way of knowing what it says. You know, I think you're right. You are the universe's spittoon."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, well, keep your eyes open. We may be... To your right!"

Ron knelt down and played with his shoelaces before muttering, "I see them."

I paid silent tribute to his subtlety. To Ron's right were four figures, three wizards and a witch. They were not acting like the rest of the crowd, but were focusing on us. Their wands were in their hands, ready and waiting.

I took in our environment in an instant. The various statues that dotted the street could be used as cover, but a wizard skilled in transfiguration could turn them into a weapon, like Dumbledore did at the Ministry.

The witch of the group disappeared. Taking Zab's lessons to heart, I knew she'd be attacking us from a different direction.

I coughed, clearing my throat. "Remember the 'bait and switch' move Angelina and Katie used to practice?"

Ron nodded as he rose to his feet, his wand in his hand. "You bet." He turned to face me, his back towards the three wizards.

I couldn't help it. A grin just grew on my face. "Ready for some fun?" I asked as I took both of my wands and placed them side-by-side.

Ron's responding grin was as evil as I'd ever seen. "You have to ask? One mark directly behind you."

I gave a curt nod, just as the three wizards behind him snapped their wands up. "Now!" I hissed.

Instantly, his wand arced up and over my left shoulder. I brought my wand up and under his left armpit. We shouted "Protego!" in unison.

Spell light splashed over our shields, each defending the other's back. With a quick step to one side, like a dance, we stepped around each other, and stood back to back, each facing our attackers. The three wizards in front of me all betrayed shock at our quick actions, which gave me the chance to toss a concussion hex at their feet.

I just got to see the result before Ron grunted and fell backwards, pushing me forward. He cursed inventively, and spat, "Turn!"

I quickly stepped to my left and spun around, allowing Ron to do the same. I was just able to deflect a bone-shattering curse into the sky, which had it landed, would have put Ron in the hospital, had he survived it.

I quickly took stock. Nothing remained of Ron's shield, but having cast my own with brother wands, it still stood, leaving him protected for now. "Take care of them," I snapped, shoving him towards the three bewildered wizards. My hex had floored them, which would give Ron the chance to neutralize them.

The witch who sent the spell was fast; I'll give her that. I don't think she even waited for her curse to reach us before she launched a pair of disarming hexes. With my attention split between Ron, the three wizards and the witch, I wasn't able to protect both of us, and she managed to neatly pluck Ron's wand from his hand. I fared a little better, even without a defensive shield already in place.

Of course, even disarmed, Ron wasn't exactly helpless. I heard him say, "Hey, you look like a Malfoy. I hate Malfoys," before launching himself across the ten metres or so separating us from them and slugging one of the rising fellows right on the chin. He obviously figured that a stunned wizard could be enervated, while an unconscious wizard could not. Either that or he had impressive levels of pent up aggression he never got to release on our favorite ex-ferret punching bag.

While I turned my full attention to the witch, Ron jumped at the guy, who was busy spitting out a tooth, pushing him back down on top of his companions, and gleefully burying them under his large mass. The witch had her wand trained expertly on my heart, and fired off another hex.

She was bloody good, I noticed as I again twisted out of the way. In fact, she reminded me a bit of Zab. She didn't speak, not even to cast a spell. Her defenses were in place before she started attacking, and were robust enough that I'd have to send my strongest spells to penetrate them. She refused to allow anything to distract her, and she didn't delay casting spells to see what affect her previous ones had. I swallowed past the thick lump in my throat and concentrated.

From the gleeful shouts from my friend, combined with the muffled, yet wet snapping of bone and pain-filled Italian swearing, I concluded Ron could look after himself for the moment.

I flicked my wands, sending some ropes out to try to bind her. She incinerated them absently, and began a series of spells I didn't recognize. My own shield flashed and wavered, and before I could strengthen it, one of her curses managed to get through, grazing my arm as I dodged. Pain lanced through me, right to the bones, and I found my muscles twitching uncontrollably.

My own (slightly off target) cutting curse forced her to roll to avoid decapitation, and I took the time to end her spell affecting my motor skills. It took a tenth of a second longer than I needed, and she managed to clip me with an odd sort of jinx that made me drop my wands. Not the usual 'expelliarmus' either, this one disoriented me at the same time. A wave of dizziness swept over me.

Despite the fact that I no longer had possession of my wands, she kept sending debilitating spells in my direction, including a pair of everbero curses that smashed the flagstones behind me to pieces. I tried to put her off by grinning at her, but she just responded by sending yet another

curse at me. With a snarl, I summoned a bright light two inches in front of her face. I enjoyed her shocked expression as I scooped my wands back up. That was the first expression I'd seen on her face besides intense concentration. With a flick, she dispelled my light and sent another hex at me. I batted the spell away

My own eyes widened in surprise as I deflected it. Man, that spell had some power behind it! This certainly wasn't a recent graduate from school in front of me; this witch was in the prime of her life, and very well trained.

She was skilled, experienced and talented. I wasn't going to win this contest easily, or quickly if I continued with the tactic of matching her spell for spell. The quickest way to win this fight was to use Zab's tactic of using an attack she didn't know I could make.

My respect for her abilities grew as she transfigured the stones near my feet into spikes, restricting my movements and my ability to dodge her spells. Immediately, she followed it with a pair of hexes and cast a shield spell on herself, all in the time it took me to erect another shield and ready myself. Not only that, she didn't try and taunt me, or waste time by throwing me off balance.

Ron's shouted, "They're down!" behind me, which caused the witch to step up the tempo.

I didn't bother counterattacking, I just focused on deflecting her spells until I got a half-second window to launch my attack. Unable to dodge well, an expelliarmus clipped me, and my wands flew to her hands, giving me my only opportunity.

My sharp, sudden *push* sent her sprawling through the air, and smashed her bodily into the granite wall behind her with an ugly 'crack'. She slid bonelessly into a heap at the base, leaving a trail of crimson blood down the wall, beginning where the back of her head had struck the stone. I saw the vacant look in her open eyes before it hit me.

I'd killed another person. I watched as her wand rolled out of her hand, seemingly in slow motion.

"You right, mate?" Ron asked, putting his hand on my shoulder. It took all my control not to spin around and *push* him away.

"Yeah," I muttered. "Damn it, I didn't mean to kill her. Coming here was a stupid idea."

Ron looked over at the corpse. "You're right. They shouldn't have."

I gave him a frown. "I meant us."

He shrugged, flashing me a grin. It was rather comforting to know that even in the aftermath of a fatal confrontation, Ron would always keep his good humor. "I know what you meant. I was just pointing out that it was an even more stupid idea on their part."

I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as the rest of the world flooded back into my senses. There was lots of screaming and shouting, with people running around everywhere. Perfect time for another attack. It just wouldn't be coming from the witch I just fought. Or her companions, I added to myself, after sparing a glance down at the Malfoy look-alike and his chums.

I shook off my stupor and stepped around the spikes on the ground. Cautiously, I approached the dead witch to collect our wands. I picked up all four, tossing Ron's and the dead witch's own to my friend. "Here. For now, use this one as a spare," I said, slipping both of mine back into my sleeves.

Ron caught the two sticks without looking at them, one in each hand. He examined his new wand with a critical eye. "Nice," he concluded, getting a spark or two with a wave.

"Glad you like it. Cover me for a second, will you?" I finished, dispelling the protective charms on the witch's clothes before rifling through her pockets. I found a bag of galleons, a document pouch and a couple of personal effects; two rings on a chain around her neck, an engagement ring and a matching wedding band, a locket and a bracelet.

I tried not to think about the fact that I'd just made someone a widower. The bag contained a few hundred galleons, and I put it on the ground beside her. The bracelet was the only other object that was obviously magical, and I wasn't about to touch that. I checked for curses on the pouch before opening it, finding a bounty notice written in both Italian and English and a couple of letters written in Italian. And one last object that sent a wave of nausea through my stomach that had nothing to do with magic.

"Anything on those three?" I asked Ron absently.

"Um, Harry?" Ron whispered.

Noting the worry in his tone, I stood up and looked around. A group of Italy's finest had their wands out and pointing at us.

I looked down again at the document pouch in my hands.

Nestled inside, was an auror's badge.

---

"You are looking at a long prison sentence, Englishman," the bulky auror sitting across from me said. He looked rather like Uncle Vernon. Except the lack of fungus on his lip.

I nodded, staying silent, keeping a neutral expression, while looking around the room. Four walls, ceiling. Wooden table, three chairs, one door. Simple description really.

Killing an auror, well, that's a good fifty years to life," he continued, louder than time. His partner kept staring silently at me. I mentally named her Bland.

I nodded amiably again. Zab's lessons on how investigators intimidate suspects to get them to reveal information was proving to be spot on. His advice on how to counter their efforts didn't seem to be doing much for their blood pressure though.

"Do you hear me? I said you are going to prison!" he shouted, half standing.

I turned my head to face his partner. "Tell your idiot friend here that I am not deaf," I said, keeping a lid on my anger. Losing it here, without backup, would help nothing. No one who killed a law enforcement officer had any friends left after the fact. I needed to keep my cool.

The partner closed his eyes for a second and sighed. "Then tell us what we want to know," he said softly.

I shrugged. "What exactly do you want to know? You haven't actually asked me any questions yet. All I've heard so far are variations on the theme that I'm going to spend some time at your Ministry's pleasure."

'Vernon' slammed his hands down on the table. "Why did you kill auror Giogi?"

I sighed. "It wasn't intentional. I just meant to push her away from me."

"So you admit you killed her?"

Again, I looked over to the quiet partner. "Do you suppose I could talk to someone who possesses some measure of intelligence? Or even someone who hasn't already made up his mind?" I snarled.

The beefy auror grabbed me by the front of my shirt and effortlessly hauled me to my feet, pulling my face towards his own. "You'll talk to me until I get the answers I want!" he snarled.

I coughed and twisted my head away from his awful breath. "In that case, at least brush your teeth," I said insultingly.

With a roar, he drew back his fist, his eyes filled with anger. His partner barked a warning, stopping him from landing the blow.

Perfect.

I stared unafraid into his eyes and concentrated, probing with my mind. In his anger, he'd let his minimal mental defenses slip. I sought memories of the auror I'd killed.

It took him only a couple of seconds to realize he was being violated, and grunted with effort as he tried to expel me from his mind. He wasn't a fully trained Occlumens, and of course nowhere near Zab's level of competence, but I only stayed long enough to grab a few memories, before leaving willingly.

"Can you spell 'Conflict of interest'?" I asked easily, with a smirk reminiscent of Malfoy at his best.

With a shout of rage he hurled me back down into my chair, swearing loudly.

His partner cast a spell, canceling the translation charm on the room before she responded in Italian, and the pair had a heated discussion, though I did pick up the word, 'legilimency'. Finally, the big fellow spat something nasty at me in his native language, turned and stormed through the door, slamming it shut. Bland then recast the charm.

"You could be charged with assaulting an auror for invading his mind like that," she said to me.

I wriggled to get as comfortable as I could on the hard wooden seat. "So you're the good cop?" I snorted.

She pursed her lips. "What happened?"

I shrugged. "He was banging the auror who attacked me."

She frowned, but obviously filed that piece of information away for further use. "I mean, when you killed auror Giogi."

"Simple. My friend and I saw a group of wizards and one witch in my peripheral vision ready their wands while looking at us. On a whim, we cast shields, which protected us from their spells. I cast a hex that knocked the three wizards to the ground, where my friend knocked them out. I blocked a spell from your auror friend, and she then attempted to disarm us. She got my friend, but missed me."

"Did she identify herself as an auror?"

I shook my head. "Nope. She didn't say a word. Not even to cast spells, which was very impressive, I must say. We traded curses and hexes for a while, before she disarmed me. I wandlessly cast a banishing charm, which came out a little more powerfully than I expected. She hit the wall behind her, hard enough to crack her skull." I took a deep breath, letting my anger at my actions recede. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry for her death."

Bland sat back, crossing her arms. "I'd be more inclined to believe you if you hadn't been found robbing her corpse."

I nodded. "That I understand. I was looking for something that would tell me who hired them. I did find a bounty notice, but didn't get a chance to look at it. At the time, I thought she was a bounty hunter. If you look, you'll see that I put her money pouch back down after looking in it."

Yet you stole her wand,” Bland said accusingly.

I nodded. “Not for any ulterior motive. Just to give my friend a second one while we were out in the open.”

She leaned forward. “Would you have kept it?” she asked intently.

I stared at her for a long time before answering. “You’ll have to ask Ron, but I imagine so,” I said honestly. “If she had been a bounty hunter, and not an auror, it would have been ours by right of conquest.”

“Not in Italy,” she spat.

I casually nodded in agreement. “Fair enough. That was an assumption on my part.” I took a deep breath. “Would you contact someone for me? I figure this will take a few days to sort out, and I’ll be late for a meeting.”

She nodded carefully. “Who?”

“I can’t remember his name. He’s the head wizard at the Vatican. I was supposed to meet him at two o’clock tomorrow.”

Her reaction was about what I expected. “Don’t waste my time,” she said evenly.

I sighed. “I’m not. The Pope requested my presence. The invitation is with my effects. The big fellow who just left should know where they are.”

She glowered at me for a few seconds. “If you’re lying to me…”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’ll what? Send me to prison for longer that I’d get for killing an auror? This isn’t a particularly bad bluff, you have the proof sitting somewhere in the building.”

She waved my comment away. “It could be faked.”

I gave her a lopsided grin. “Paranoid much? Just go and look.”

After a few moments of silence, she stood, just in time for her old partner to barge back in.

“You’re looking at life,” he barked, an evil smile on his face. “Your friend talked.”

I nodded to him amiably, not believing that Ron would turn on me in the slightest. “Righty ho, when’s my trial?”

His expression didn’t change, but I could sense his confusion. Bland stood up and whispered something in his ear before leaving the room herself.

His smile turned feral. “It’s just you and me now,” he growled, and reached out to grab me.

I rolled my eyes at his attempts at intimidation. “Does that crap actually work on anyone?”

He grabbed me out of my chair and physically hurled me against the far wall, and pressed a forearm against my chest, forcing the air painfully from my lungs. “I’m going to kill you for what you did, English scum.”

Zab’s lessons covered this situation rather well. In the wizarding world, even when in custody, when someone threatens your life, you are permitted to defend yourself. Of course, in a situation where you are disarmed, most people think they can’t be harmed.

I raised my knee sharply, finding the soft collection of dangly bits in his trousers. He gave a sort of “ghunnt” sound, doubling over. I slipped away from him, drawing a deep breath into my abused lungs.

He drew his wand and aimed it at me. I *pushed* with a sharp, dismissive gesture, sending him flying backwards. He hit the door hard, cracking the frame, but not breaking it. I moved as quickly as I could to cover the distance between us, and kicked the wand from his hand. Once free of his grip, I trod on it and twisted my heel, splintering the brittle wood beneath my boot.

He looked up at me, his eyes showing fear. I calmly took a seat, not showing any aggression.

“Attacking an auror,” he wheezed, in an octave or two higher than usual. “You’ll go to prison for this!”

I stared calmly at him. “We both know that isn’t true.”

Shouts came from outside the door, and my auror friend found himself pushed to the ground as the door burst open and three armed aurors charged in. They stopped in confusion.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?” I asked calmly.

One looked down at the auror who attacked me. “What happened?”

He pointed at me, his hand wavering a bit with pain. “He attacked me.”

One of the newcomers looked keen to curse me, but the other two frowned, taking in the scene. “How?”

‘Vernon’ paused for a moment, before saying, “He kicked me, then broke my wand.”

That confused them. “He’s sitting down,” one pointed out.

“Enough,” the obvious leader of the trio said. “Out, we’ll sort this out elsewhere. You,” he pointed at me. “Stay here.”

I shrugged. “As if I could go anywhere without your permission.”

Vernon was assisted from the room, while the more experienced auror covered me. He summoned the crushed wand, frowning at me. “This looks bad for you,” he said flatly.

“I’ll take veritaserum to prove he threatened to kill me, if you like,” I replied.

He nodded, then backed slowly out of the room and closed the door. Well, attempted to at any rate. The frame was ruined.

A second or so later, he sheepishly stopped. “Come with me, I’ll take you to another room.”

---

The unnamed auror led me to another sparsely furnished holding cell, where I waited for a while. Despite my situation, I even surprised myself at how calm I acted. My emotions were rolling around in my stomach like crazy, both anger at being attacked, and fear that I could be imprisoned for killing an auror. I took some relief in the fact that since I’d broken out of the Vatican itself without a wand, an auror station shouldn’t be too much more difficult.

Besides, if the Vatican wanted me to help them with something, then they’d need to help me first. If what they wanted me for was something only I could provide, I had some more leverage.

I smiled at the thought, wondering if this was how Slytherins thought all the time. I’m quite sure it was how Zab thought all the time.

Over the next few hours, I could hear a lot of shouting. Something was happening that seemed to be upsetting a lot of people. I grinned at the thought. It was about time something happened to other people.

Finally, the cell door opened, and I opened my eyes to see Bland and Vernon standing there with three other people. One wore a black cassock, another wore a neat suit, carried a briefcase and sported a thin moustache, while the last one wore an auror uniform with a lot more gaudy decorations.

What do you think? A priest, a lawyer and a police chief. There has to be a joke in there somewhere.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?” I asked brightly.

Bland cast the translation charm again. “Well, we--”

The lawyer coughed. “First things first. The apology?”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. Vernon cleared his throat and said, “Mr. Potter, I apologise for attacking you earlier. I have no excuse.”

I shrugged. “No problem.” Hey, if being gracious in the face of an apology gained me brownie points, I was willing to let bygones be bygones. Judging from the Chief’s expression and the perspiration on his face, either Vernon was no longer on the promotion path, or he’d been torn another one.

Bland cleared her throat. “Why didn’t you identify yourself as Harry Potter when you were arrested?” she asked.

“Like I said before, you didn’t ask. As I recall, you dumped me in a room and started threatening me with prison time.”

The lawyer turned to face the auror chief. “Indeed?”

You know, for a profession that is much maligned as evil, it is rather nice to have a lawyer on your side. Until the bill arrives, I suppose.

---

Ron was already out and waiting for me. He was sitting at an uncomfortable looking metal table outside a café, with a half-eaten pastry on a plate in front of him, and a newspaper spread out on the table. “Hey, mate. What took you?” he asked with a spray of crumbs.

I clasped my hands together and stretched them above my head. “You know, red tape and all that rot.”

Ron nodded happily, still munching on his pastry. “The lawyer the league hires to defend its players stopped by. Right nasty bugger.”

I raised an eyebrow. “He wouldn’t help me?”

Ron shook his head. “Nah, you’re not a player yet. Besides, the league pays his retainer, not me. I don’t get a say in who he defends.”

I grunted, arching my back. Merlin it felt good to stretch out after being in an uncomfortable room for a few hours. “Well, they’ve taken my statement. We can leave the city but we need to tell them where we are going. Somehow, I don’t think that will be the end of it though.”

“Oh?”

I grinned evilly. “I used Legilimency on one of the aurors questioning me. He and the auror who attacked us were having an affair. That fact put the

Investigation on the defensive. Not only that, but the three hunters you caught squealed when they found out they were hired to catch Harry Potter. They claim that the witch was their boss. Seems she thought it would be a nice supplement to her income with an illegal bounty."

"So you're off the hook?"

I sighed deeply. I still wasn't comfortable about the fact that I'd taken another life. Voldemort, fine, no problems there. Snape, I got over quickly. However, this witch, well, I don't know. Yes she wanted to either capture or kill me, but there was no malice in it. I wasn't sorry that it was her and not me that kicked it, but it was still hard to come to terms with. I instinctively felt that I didn't want to be someone who just shrugged off killing another person. That said, I certainly didn't want to be the kind of person who didn't defend themselves enough because they were afraid of killing another.

"Yeah. Apparently arresting the Boy-Who-Lived without due process wasn't a good move. I think they're afraid the press will be all over this."

Ron smirked. "That would be fun, you know."

I shook my head. "I'm supposed to be here incognito. Too many people know who I am as it is. I need to meet with this guy tomorrow, then the Vatican later on." I looked up into the darkening sky. "Well, today's a total loss for sight seeing. What do you say we go and pig out on pizza?"

Ron's answering grin was a remarkable sight.

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The next day, Ron and I made our way to the smallest independent country on earth. The elliptical plaza of San Pietro was just as busy as I remembered. Gaudily dressed tourists bustled about, snapping photo after photo, pointing out landmarks to other gaudily dressed tourists. I'd cast an obscuration on my features, which would make Muggles ignore me and make any photo that captured me would turn out blurry.

Ron had joined the queue to enter St. Peters; he had been rather excited to see the grand cathedral. While he waited in line, I sat and waited at the central obelisk.

Several people had come close, either to take a photo of the column or to examine it. I, in turn, examined them. I was sure Zab's contact would be difficult to spot. He'd probably be the most unlikely candidate I could imagine.

Noon came and went. I'd told Ron to meet me at the front of the cathedral at four o'clock, so he'd be gone for a while. Half an hour later, there had still been no sign of Zab's contact.

Just after one, a pair of Swiss Guards and a Cardinal made their way over to me. The Churchman asked, "Mr. Potter?"

I nodded carefully. "Yes?"

"You are expected. I understand that you are going to meet His Holiness. That's quite an honour, you know," he said jovially.

I shrugged, not sure what I should be revealing. "I suppose. He was rather nice the last time we spoke."

The informed Cardinal simply nodded back and said, "Well, I shall escort you inside now. There are a few security measures to go through first, which may take a while. You understand."

Suddenly, I wasn't as confident as I had been.

---

The security measures were a bit more than the usual pat down. My bag of tricks and both wands were taken from me, and I was subjected to a very uncomfortable search. Only Blaise and Hermione had been that intimate with me in the past.

"What's this for?" one wizard asked me, holding up the gloves I made.

"Spelunking," I responded. Hey, it could work.

"Caving? Why are you carrying them now?"

I glared at him. "What I'm here for isn't for you to know. Sorry, but I'm not sure how much I can tell you."

Rather than being petulant, he nodded easily, accepting my answer, while continuing the search.

The only magical item that had passed the security was the portkey sock. When it glowed under inspection, the wizards had simply nodded.

"Portkeys are allowed here?" I asked.

The wizard shrugged. "Yes, they are permitted. Too many people who visit on diplomatic grounds carry them under their own security protocols. The wards here prevent any usage, so we simply identify and catalogue them."

I nodded sagely, hoping to look more knowing than I felt. "I remember Dumbledore carrying one the last time he was here. His phoenix medallion."

The wizard raised an eyebrow, but nodded. "That's right. You know Dumbledore?"

I grinned. "I went to Hogwarts for five years."



The rest of the scan went quickly, and I was escorted into the restricted areas of the cathedral. Without the comforting weight of my wands, I felt rather naked, not to mention vulnerable.

"You want me to do what?" I blurted.

The beautifully ornate table in front of me also seated eleven high-ranking churchmen; at least seven of which were magically active. The Pope himself sat serenely opposite me, while the other cardinals and cassocked wizards sat arrayed five to each side, forming a horseshoe with Yours Truly at the focus point. A wonderfully not-so-subtle show of power and dominance. One of the wizards was glaring at me in a manner reminiscent of Snape in fine form. I would have had a *déjà vu* experience if he'd snapped 'Detention!' One of the Cardinals to my left who had up until now been silent said, "We cannot allow a creature of evil to dwell within the holiest of places. It must be destroyed."

I frowned at him. "So destroy it yourselves. You've got your own bloody magical army here," I said angrily, gesturing towards a couple of the wizards on the other side of the table.

That caused a fair few of them to shuffle their feet. "It is our understanding that you have killed a basilisk in battle before. In medieval times, that feat would have entitled you to take the title 'Serpentsbane'. You have skills and experience our organisation lacks," one of the more polite, if somewhat rotund wizards said.

I narrowed my eyes at him. Surely they knew that the idiotically simple crowing of a rooster would kill a basilisk. Admittedly, getting a rooster to crow in a dark, dank dungeon would be nigh on impossible to anyone who hadn't mastered a second-year confundus charm, but anyone who'd read about the creatures would have discovered that they had a huge weakness. Hell, even Muggle mythology said the same thing.

No, I decided, they did know that, but were betting, or hoping, that I did not. They must be after something else. Something else that only I could give them.

Or, I thought (after Zab's lessons came to mind), at least something that only I could provide at the price they were willing to pay.

"I had help!" I snapped, continuing the argument, hoping one of them would slip and give me a hint as to what they wanted. "A bloody phoenix pecked the thing's eyes out!"

The chubby wizard smiled, leaned back and spread his arms. "If a phoenix has come to you before it will come again when called. Simply call on it again to help you."

I barked a humourless laugh. "I don't exactly hold the same faith in Fawkes' master as I used to, let alone loyalty," I snapped sardonically.

The rather grumpy wizard spoke. Once I heard his voice, I remembered where I'd seen him before. I'd blasted him across the room after waking up tied to a bloody table. Well, that at least explained his demeanor. "You are a parselmouth, are you not?" he snapped back.

"So?" I challenged.

"So if you command a basilisk, it will not kill you," he nearly shouted, slapping his hand down on the marble table.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, it's true that a basilisk will not attack any being who speaks parseltongue to command it," I said in a singsong voice. "Somehow, I'm not sure I'm willing to be a guinea pig to see what action a basilisk takes if it is *attacked* by someone who speaks parseltongue," I finished in a snarl.

"Enough," whispered the Pope, his soft voice instantly silencing everyone in the room. He focused on me and said, "We were dismayed when you reported the existence of the evil creature dwelling beneath us. While centuries ago it would have been a necessary defense against intruders, the state of the art security systems we have in place now more than make up for it. It is no longer necessary for the creature to dwell here."

I crossed my arms. "So go and offer it a redundancy package, a nice pension and a sewer to live in for all I care. I'm not going to kill it for you."

The grumpy wizard spoke again, snapping, "You are The-Boy-Who-Lived, are you not?"

I snarled at the moniker. "So what?"

"Are you not interested in ridding the world of evil? It is your duty."

I kept my face emotionless at that, even if my patience was wearing thin. It appeared that here was yet another brain-dead moron who believed that because I was attacked as a baby, that fact somehow meant that I was somehow bound to clean up all evil in the world, like some prophesized housemaid for the Light. "I fail to see how a big snake living in a cellar it cannot escape from can be classified as evil," I spat. "It is only a guard, and a damned fine one at that."

That was enough for him. He rose, with an expression disturbingly like Uncle Vernon when I spoke back to him. "That's it! Either you kill the basilisk or you won't leave here again."

Silence descended on the conference table. I simply raised an eyebrow slowly and said with a smirk, "Exactly how do you intend to enforce that?"

He reached into his pocket and drew out my wands; taken from me during the 'security measures' that were required before I entered the building. "We have taken precautions this time. You cannot harm us, and I have your wands here," he said, as though that was going to help him somehow. He stuffed them back into his robes on an angle that meant that if I fired a cutting curse out of my holly wand, he'd probably be eligible for duties

requiring a eunuch.

I rolled my eyes at him. "Well done! You've taken 'precautions'," I said sarcastically, making quote marks with my fingers. "I don't suppose it entered your tiny little mind that I may have as well?" I asked him in a mocking voice. His superior expression irritated me enough that I was tempted to cast a spell remotely to wipe it from his face.

Ah, fuck it. "*Stupefy*," I cast remotely, pointing a finger at him, pantomiming a gun.

Unless you were looking for it, you would have missed the muted red flash coming from Snape's spiritual brother's trousers. The wizard, whose eyes rolled up in the back of his head as my spell stunned him, slumped forward, and incidentally, smacked his forehead loudly against the gold filigree in the table's ornate relief carvings. Hard enough that it would leave a rather nasty, if interestingly shaped, bruise. The other wizards at the table stiffened and reached for their own wands with comical looks of disbelief and confusion on their faces. The Cardinals themselves burst into a cacophony of denunciations, which I ignored as the Pope and I silently locked gazes.

He slowly raised a hand, immediately silencing the babbling churchmen. "It was not the original intention of this council to threaten you in any way, either with harm or detention." He turned to the wizard to his left. "I was assured that we would be protected from his magic," he said sternly.

Wordlessly, that wizard, who I assumed was the senior ranking magic user in the group, drew his wand and gave it a few flicks I recognized. Zab taught me to use that spell to make all invisible shields light up for identification. As expected, a magical barrier separating me from them visibly glimmered for a few seconds. I easily identified the patterns, and knew exactly which shield had been cast. It was one that needed three wizards working in unison to erect, and unlike a personal shielding spell like 'protego', it prevented all but unblockable spells from being cast through it on *both* sides.

"The shield is intact, Your Holiness. He somehow managed to bypass it, rather than overpower it."

I shrugged as ten pairs of eyes focused on me. "People have been underestimating me all my life. Don't feel so bad," I told a purple-faced wizard patronizingly.

The Pope again held up a hand, looking rather frustrated. "Assaults, threats or insults are not productive, from either of us," he said clearly, causing many of the wizards around him to cough and fidget. He gestured to the unconscious wizard. "Wake him."

With a quick enervation charm, the aggressive wizard was brought back to consciousness. He looked bewildered for a second or two before focusing on me and rising to his feet. He took a deep breath but was cut off from his denunciations by a sharp word from the Pope before he could start.

The Pope turned back to me and continued calmly, as though nothing untoward had occurred. "You are correct that we potentially have the ability to put the creature down, but equally, you have the skill and experience to do so."

I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms. "So, what's in it for me?"

"What are you, a mercenary?" snapped a Cardinal derisively. Up until now, he had stayed silent throughout the deliberations.

I laughed aloud. "What, you want me to work for free? Let's get this straight; I'm not one of your faithful. I'm not an auror, a soldier or a minion of yours. You have no authority over me in any way."

The wizard I'd stunned surged back to his feet. "I will incarcerate you if need be!"

I rolled my eyes. "Ah, so we're back to threats again. Fucking wonderful."

The Pope sighed again, closing his eyes in resignation. "Waldorf, if you cannot control yourself, you shall be removed."

The wizard dubbed 'Waldorf' threw up his arms and spat, "Bah! This council is accomplishing nothing anyway!"

The Pope calmly opened his eyes and stared at the man. "I was not referring to this council, I was referring to your post."

That brought him up short. Waldorf turned chalk white and stammered, "W-What?"

Not a single flicker of emotion crossed the Pope's face. He could have been referring to the weather when he said, "I shall remove you as the Archmage of the Holy See if you continue to antagonize our guest."

Waldorf blustered incomprehensively for a few seconds before the Pope continued. "Your role requires not only magical skill and talent, but also a willingness to learn, Waldorf," the Pope said serenely. "Not to mention a measure of diplomacy. Mr. Potter uncovered some glaring faults in your security protocols, yet instead of taking the opportunity to improve them, you have set about on a vendetta we cannot afford."

"I have improved security, Your Holiness," the wizard whined.

In the same, unrushed tone, the Pope merely replied, "Then could you explain exactly why you were rendered helpless?"

Waldorf blinked, unable to come up with an answer.

"Or even how?" the Pope pressed.

This time, Waldorf glared at me.

“This is not about Mr. Potter, Waldorf, this is about you. Leave Mr. Potter’s wands on the table, and meet me in my chambers in an hour. We will discuss things then.”

Waldorf clenched his jaw tightly as he snatched my wands from his pocket and slammed them down on the table. “You are making a mistake,” he said warningly.

Once again, the Pope’s unruffled calm impressed me. “Perhaps. It is, however, my mistake to make, not yours. You are excused, Waldorf.”

With one final glance around the table, looking for any support, the disgraced wizard stormed out of the chamber.

The Pope took a deep breath, and then coughed slightly. I wondered for a moment if he was ill. “Forgive him, Mr. Potter. He has been under considerable stress since your successful larceny. The first in the Church’s long history.”

I nodded sharply, not believing for a second that the scene that had just played out before me was random. I was far more inclined to believe that it had been orchestrated to encourage me to lower my defenses. Instead, I became more wary. “Very well. Like I said, what’s in it for me?”

The Pope indicated to an aide, who carried over a slim folder of parchment. “I understand that Albus, acting on behalf of the International Confederation of Wizards, has requested that you provide that body with a catalogue of the items in my collection of dark artifacts.”

That was odd phrasing, I thought. “*Your* collection, Your Holiness?”

The Pope actually smiled. “My... *responsibility*, rather than my property. My predecessors have all denied the existence of the cache, preferring to keep guard over it ourselves. Since you exposed it to the world, our insistence on protecting it without assistance is being questioned.”

I frowned. “You are merely offering me a list of the items in return for killing the basilisk?”

“If you require any monetary compensation, the corpse of the beast will be ceded to you. It is my understanding that the corpse of a basilisk is highly prized in your world, at least by the owners of apothecaries.”

I snorted. “No, I don’t require monetary compensation. I’m wealthy enough as it is. I don’t have any particular allegiance to the Confederation, so I don’t particularly care about getting them a list of the things you have. Personally, I’d be more than happy to leave the collection in your hands. Like you said, mine was the first successful theft from the cache. And I was only successful because I was uniquely suited to the job.”

The chubby wizard leaned forward. “Then what do you want?”

I smiled softly and shook my head. “There is nothing you have that I want. What I want, no one can give me.” Hey, if they weren’t going to come to the point soon, I certainly wasn’t going to help them.

Apparently, the Churchmen were not used to negotiating with someone who didn’t want what they offered. They shared pointed glances and meaningful expressions. It was all rather amusing from my perspective.

The Pope finally spoke up again. “What if we were to assist you on your self-imposed quest?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Quest?”

He nodded. “The destruction of the ‘Horcruxes’.”

That surprised me. I wondered just how much he knew. “Perhaps. There is only one more I need to find.”

The chubby wizard spoke up again. “Do you have any idea where it is?”

I looked blankly at him for a moment. “Maybe.”

My reaction surprised him. “Mr. Potter, I can assure you that no one at this table has any ulterior motives in this. The destruction of an evil artifact is laudable in any circumstances.”

I pursed my lips, thinking deeply. I didn’t think I needed their help in locating the final Horcrux, since I was confident that Zab’s intelligence network would be capable of that. If there was nothing they could give me that I wanted, perhaps I could get something from them that someone else wanted. I could then trade it away at a later date.

I quickly discarded that notion. There was nothing Dumbledore, the British Ministry, or even the ICW could offer me that would justify me trying to kill another basilisk. Not to mention the fact that I didn’t trust that Waldorf character any more than I would have trusted Draco Malfoy with the key to my vault.

I shook my head. “Sorry, but you’ll have to deal with the basilisk yourself. Your track record of hiding evil rather than vanquishing it means that I’m not prepared to trust you with assisting me in finding the final Horcrux.”

The Pope sighed deeply and sat back in his chair. “Very well. If that is your final word, this council is adjourned. I am sorry we could not come to an agreement, Mr. Potter. Darius, please escort Mr. Potter down into the public area of the Cathedral. Good day, Mr. Potter, I don’t believe we shall meet again.”

The chubby wizard nodded, rose to his feet and collected my wands from the table. At his beckoning, I stood and fell into step, without saying another word to anyone in the chamber.

I walked with the wizard named Darius in silence for a bit. “Um, can I ask you a question?”

He smiled jovially at me. “Of course, my son.”

I caught myself from snapping that I certainly wasn’t his ‘son’, and asked, “Why don’t you just get a rooster, and make it crow down there?”

Darius sighed. “To tell you the truth, we weren’t sure it would work. A great deal of mythology isn’t correct in a technical sense, and His Holiness wasn’t prepared to risk his best wizards on a gamble like that.”

“But he was willing to risk me?” I asked pointedly.

Darius nodded without taking my tone as an insult. “Of course. You’d survived once before, because you could command the beast. It was assumed that you would be able to perform some sort of variation on the old, ‘Look out behind you!’ trick, and land a killing blow.”

I rolled my eyes at the simplistic tactic. “Can we talk about something else?”

Darius smiled at me. “Very well. Well, that was a bit of nastiness, wasn’t it?” he asked jovially.

I raised my eyebrows in surprise at his selection of subject matter. “What, with Waldorf?”

He nodded. “Waldorf was rather put out by your actions. He was…”

At his sudden pause, I glanced around, wary. In an instant, half a dozen wizards rounded a corner in front of us, each with their wands at the ready. A quick glance behind me confirmed that a similar number were behind us, equally as ready.

“What is the meaning of this, Waldorf?” Darius snapped.

I didn’t get to hear an answer, as the corridor was suddenly filled with red light.

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I coughed myself awake, grasping around unconsciously for my wands. With a gasp, I glanced around, finding myself on a rather familiar spiral staircase. Below me, the dank air from the storehouse of evil hit my nostrils. I sat up and looked around the spiral staircase, trying to discern where the light was coming from. I slowly walked a turn and a half up the staircase, which still bore the shrapnel and stone chips from my battle there, before coming to the doorway leading to the Pope’s chambers.

Two wizards stood on either side of the doorway, each holding one side a glimmering energy barrier. The head wizard Waldorf stood behind it and glared at me. “Kill the basilisk, or you will not leave,” he said, his expression one of determination. He gestured down, pointing to my wands at the foot of the barrier.

I took stock. Waldorf didn’t appear to be taking pleasure in his actions, he simply looked as though he was doing something necessary, but distasteful.

I fought to keep a smirk from appearing. With Dumbledore’s portkey, I could escape easily. As much as it would be satisfying to shock him, it would be far better to use it where they couldn’t see me. That at least would make them uncertain as to what I could do.

In a voice just loud enough to be heard I muttered some insults about Waldorf’s mother’s obviously perverted sexual preferences, which turned him bright red. I picked up my wands, turned and stomped down the stairs. Knowing what was waiting for me this time, I didn’t bother sneaking.

Before I reached the bottom of the stairs, I dispelled the anticipated tracking charm, and erected my own wards Zab taught me, ensuring secrecy. I wouldn’t put it past these bastards to have a scrying bowl or mirror. They’d probably be sitting down in front of it and betting on the bloody outcome. Shouts of anger and frustration echoed down the long stone spiral staircase, indicating that my efforts at disrupting their viewing had been successful. I doubt I’d get points for jumping and running.

“*Someone familiar this way comes* ,” came a hissed voice from the darkened chamber.

“*Did you hear me or smell me?*” I asked as I stepped out into the dank chamber.

The massive basilisk coiled back in the almost pitch-blackness. I concentrated, and the white globe of bright light appeared above my head. Instantly, the chamber lit up and filled with crisp, dark shadowy alcoves. The basilisk reared up above me, flicking its metre long tongue out, tasting the air. “*Both, young master. It is as good to see you again as it is unexpected. I had not believed that you would ever return* .”

I swallowed, again wondering just how I managed to face down a basilisk even half this one’s size at twelve. “*I was asked to return* ,” I said simply.

The gigantic serpentine head drifted down to me, stopping a metre away from my face, allowing the very tips of his tongue to flicker over my skin, which felt disturbingly like moving cobwebs over my skin. I wasn’t about to back away though. “*How curious. You were asked to return here? Even after your larcenous attempt? The humans in command here have become lax over the centuries. There was a period when they had a thirst for vengeance. Death was not something to be avoided* .”

I winced. “*They are not exactly afraid of killing* ,” I said.

The basilisk actually sounded interested. “*Just what is it they are not afraid of killing?*”

I swallowed. "You ."

The basilisk was silent for some time, during which I didn't move. Eventually, it hissed, "*So, my tenure is to come to an end. Two millennia of loyal service, rewarded with death .*" It paused again. "*You do not carry a cockerel. How did you intend to defeat me? Are we to battle? At least grant me that, young one. Grant me a death befitting of the king of serpents. Come, let our titanic struggle commence. There shall one fewer speaker of the noble tongue at the conclusion of our fated confrontation.*"

"No ,," I said simply.

"No ?"

"No, we shall not battle. I have no interest in killing ."

The basilisk looked down at me thoughtfully, though I focused on its nostrils, not willing to look into its eyes. "*You would deny me this? You would have me perish in an ignoble manner? Should you leave this place with your quest unfulfilled, others would come, bearing a humble rooster. My death would be insignificant, rending my vow worthless. No, I beseech you, draw your wand; call forth your sorcery. Let us finish this in a glorious display of power .*"

"No ,," I repeated. "*What vow are you talking about ?*"

The basilisk hissed and thrashed around with its tail. "*I am bound by geas to defend these artifacts ,*" it hissed angrily.

I glanced around at the forgotten store of evil. A slow grin formed on my face as my mind turned over. "*What if you were able to continue to fulfill your vow?*"

The basilisk drew in a hissed breath. "*Speak your mind, young one .*"

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Thanks to my betas Patrick, Craig and Nonjon.

And to alphas jbern, IP82, Nonjon, and all those at The-Place-That-Shall-Not-Be-Named

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## Journeyman Potter

### Do not meddle in the affairs of basilisks, for you are not petrification-proof

I slowly ascended the stone spiral staircase, hearing only my ragged breathing. A bubblehead charm covered my face; a spell I quickly decided needed some refinement. While it certainly kept the unwanted stench from the corpse below out of my nostrils, it could certainly use the addition of some sort of scented air, or at least some perfume. You really didn't want to have to cast it on yourself several hours after you'd last brushed your teeth.

I plodded slowly up and around the final curve, to the energy barrier still held by the two wizards. I graced them with a snarl.

Through the translucent barrier, I could see the Pope sitting at a large desk, with Waldorf and Darius seated opposite. The friendly, chubby Darius had a small sticking plaster on his forehead, and his left wrist strapped. Apparently, he didn't exactly come off unscathed in the altercation either. Waldorf rose to his feet on seeing me, while the Pope simply turned to face me. The expression of relief on His Holiness' face was the polar opposite of the Archmage.

Waldorf looked me up and down, taking in my dishevelled appearance. "You were successful?" he asked. I detected a trace of surprise in his tone. Sounds like the prick would have preferred that I hadn't survived.

I held up the basilisk tooth I'd severed from the corpse down below. "What the hell does this look like to you, an ice-cream cone?"

With a nod, the two wizards dropped the barrier, to my relief. I stumbled out, into the room and hurled the tooth at Waldorf, whose reactions had not been dulled by the passage of time. He caught the tooth with a spell. "The basilisk is dead?"

I rolled my eyes at him as I removed the bubble charm on my face. "Surely you don't think I've decided there is a huge untapped market in reptilian dentistry, specializing in highly venomous, mythological serpents?" I asked with a snarl.

He gaped at me for a few seconds, so I turned and looked at the Pope. "So, was this your idea?" Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the slightest flicker of Waldorf's attention from me to Darius.

The Pope shook his head. "No, my son. This was not my intention. You were to be allowed to leave unmolested. Waldorf here had other ideas," he finished with an uncharacteristic tone of voice.

"Your Holiness, in matters of magical security, my authority supersedes your own."

The Pope's eyes flashed. "No Waldorf, only in times of imminent magical threat. Leave us."

I shook my head. "No."

"I beg your pardon?"

I glared at the leader of a billion Catholics over the world. "I was forced to perform a job I had no intention of doing. You *owe* me."

The Pope pursed his lips together and spared a pointed glare at his Archmage. "What payment do you require? As I offered before, the corpse of the basilisk is yours. I shall also deliver a thorough inventory of the artefacts below to the International Confederation."

I snorted. "I don't want the bloody corpse, and I sure as hell don't care if you give the ICW a blank page. All I want right now is an Unbreakable Vow from every damned wizard in the church. None of you are to contact me, approach me, or even speak to me, ever again."

The Pope frowned. "An Unbreakable Vow? What is this, Darius?"

Waldorf stared at me, obviously trying to discern my motive. Darius cleared his throat and said, "It is exactly what it sounds like, Your Holiness. A vow that, once made, cannot be broken. Every wizard educated by the church makes the vow on entering service, pledging their service and vowing to protect you, Your Holiness."

The Pope sat back. "I see. Mr. Potter, you would willingly cut off all communication with us?"

I forced my rage to spike by concentrating on the actions of the wizard in front of me. Instantly, the magical potential in the air increased, making objects in the room vibrate and pictures fall from the wall. "I'd cut this entire country off the face of the planet if I had the choice," I shouted, feeling blood rush to my face.

Every wizard in the room yelped or shouted, each of them putting me under their wands. The Pope took a deep breath and said in clipped tones, "Mr. Potter! Calm yourself."

Slowly, I let the anger subside, and the ornaments on the desk stopped moving across the wooden surface. "Yes," I said, enunciating the word as slowly and as clearly as I could. "I would cut off all communications with you. I never want to hear from you or your organisation again."

After nearly half a minute of silence, the Pope finally spoke. "Very well. I understand your displeasure, but I believe you are making a mistake."

"Ha!" I spat derisively. "The only mistake I made was coming back here, putting myself in a position to be taken advantage of."

Waldorf, who had a mind like a Slytherin, had obviously come to the conclusion that if all I wanted was something they could give for free, there was definitely a catch somewhere. "I cannot allow us to make that vow, Your Holiness," he said slowly, rolling the basilisk tooth over in his hands.

The Pope's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Exactly why is that, Waldorf?"

He swallowed. "Because the Unbreakable Vow I took when entering service to the church would be compromised."

"How so?"

The Archmage glared at me. "If Mr. Potter here breaks into the building again, we would have no way of neutralising him. Our promise to keep you safe would be broken."

I gaped at him. "You actually think I'd come back here of my own volition?" I asked incredulously.

Waldorf stood straighter, in a wonderfully pompous action. "Nevertheless, I feel it would be inadvisable for us to make such a vow," he said easily.

The Pope sighed, and looked at me. "Is there nothing else you'd take instead?"

I clenched my teeth together. I *needed* that Vow. "Two billion galleons, then," I spat, thinking of the most ridiculous amount I could which was still within the estimated net worth of the church.

That cracked Waldorf's composure. "You're mad!" he whispered hoarsely.

"Try furious," I shot back. "If you won't make the vow, then I'll impoverish you bastards."

The Pope cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, but the Church will not..."

I rounded on him, snapping, "That's exactly what I said! I said I wouldn't kill the basilisk either, but I was forced to!"

"Name another figure, Mr. Potter. A realistic one, if you would be so kind."

I took a deep breath and let it out explosively. "No. I'll take the Unbreakable Vow instead."

"Waldorf has already pointed out why we cannot make such a vow."

I nodded. "Yeah, he has. He is quite willing to force others to do what he wants, but cops out like a coward when it's his arse on the line. What a marvellous role model he is. Let me put it another way. Make the vow, or your little betrayal becomes public knowledge."

That put them on the defensive. Suddenly, every wizard in the room became a little more on edge, with more than a few hands hovering over wand holsters. "I don't believe that would be in anyone's best interest, Mr. Potter," Darius said cautiously.

Through clenched teeth, I said, "Then how about we modify the wording of the vow so that no wizard of the Church contacts, approaches, or speaks to me outside of Vatican City? Would that satisfy your prissy little Archmage?"

Waldorf reddened nicely at my insult, but shook his head silently. "No, I will not take a vow that may impede the performance of my duties."

The Pope simply sighed. "You are relieved of your duties, Waldorf. Darius here will be the Archmage in the interim, until I formalise the appointment."

I gave the recently demoted Archmage a bright, brittle smile as his colouring went from red to purple. Wordlessly, he turned and stormed out of the study. Darius looked at me unhappily.

"Mr. Potter, I apologise unreservedly on behalf of the Church for what has occurred. Are you absolutely sure that you wish to cut off all contact? What if we discover something about the final Horcrux you are seeking?" Darius asked softly.

"I'm not sure I could survive any more of your 'help', thank you very much," I said sarcastically.

The Pope sighed. "Darius, is there any reason we cannot make the vow requested by Mr. Potter?"

Darius nodded. "Waldorf did have a valid point. You would be vulnerable in your travels."

I growled with frustration. "Then make the bloody vow with an exception that allows you to protect him while outside of Vatican City, but I never want to hear from you people again."

Darius pursed his lips together, but reached across the desk, picked up a pen and began to write on a pad of paper. He finished quickly, tore off the sheet and passed it to the Pope. The elderly man glanced at the sheet, before nodding and passing it to me.

No current or future wizard sworn to the Church will contact, approach, or speak to Harry James Potter from this point forward, except i) within the borders of Vatican City, or ii) in direct defence of the Pope.

I nodded. "That's a start. Change it to any wizard acting on behalf of the Church and you have a deal."

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A little while later, a pair of Swiss Guards escorted me from the room. Darius, in his capacity as Archmage, had knelt before me, and had made the final vow on behalf of all the current and future wizards of the Church. It wasn't as neat as I'd hoped, but the vow covered all wizards acting on behalf of the Church. While we were negotiating the wording of the vow, a group of wizards had made preparations to descend into the vault below. I warned them about the basilisk corpse below, and how the corpse was putrefying quickly, suggesting that they would need to use bubblehead charms at the very least.

Both the Pope and Darius instructed the team to wait until Darius could join them. Without further ado, I had been given my backpack of goodies, and a regretful farewell from the Pope.

I was led directly down into the massive Cathedral, and almost frogmarched to the entrance. I glanced down at my watch, noting that I was over half an hour late to meet Ron. From the top of the steps, I could see the central obelisk of the piazza, and the border to Italy beyond. I just had to reach it before...

Both my escorts touched a finger to their ear, listening intently to whatever microphone they had hidden there. The instant their posture turned aggressive, I acted.

With a strong *push*, I literally threw the pair away from me. I rushed down the steps, thinking about my previous trip here, and how I created a diversion then. Hey, it worked the first time. May as well use a tried and true method.

I pointed behind me and shouted, "Stigmata! Stigmata!" I stumbled slightly, and it was all I could do to avoid tripping and falling flat on my face while running flat out down the steps and into the piazza.

For a few seconds, I was the centre of attention. At least three other Swiss Guards moved determinedly towards me, before the crowd surged forward. With the sudden tide of people trying to enter the Cathedral, the Swiss Guards chasing me from within were caught like a snowflake in a windstorm.

Once down the stairs I simply ran as quickly as I could. Intellectually, I knew I could probably cover the distance to the entrance of Vatican City in half a minute or so, but knowing that until I was past that border, I was vulnerable to both the guards and wizards in the city meant that the street that joined the piazza to Italy seemed miles away. While I'm sure I was the primary target of every armed person in the tiny country, the sheer number of tourists pressing forward to see a miracle must have been distracting, to say the least.

In less than a minute I was sprinting past the obelisk, with my backpack bouncing around uncontrollably on my shoulder. I almost shouted with relief on seeing Ron waiting there. "Move!" I said quickly, not slowing as I passed him.

More and more people looked over to see what all the commotion was about. I kept pointing behind me, calling out 'Stigmata' over and over, directing the attention of all those in the open area away from me.

It felt like an age, but I finally made it out onto the boulevard that connected San Pietro to Italy. Now that I was ready for it, I could feel it as I passed the edge of the wards. The long street in front of me was lined with restaurants and other touristy places, which meant that there were a large number of people watching the events with interest. I spared a glance over my shoulder to see that Ron was catching up with me quickly. Man, that guy could run fast! It must be the fact that his legs were nearly half as long again as my own.

I angled to one side, and ran for one of the restaurants. There were a hell of a lot of tables and chairs arrayed outside the front of the business, meaning that one person could make their way through the maze quickly, while a group would be slowed down rather effectively.

I ran up to a fellow dressed in a white shirt and bow tie, clutched theatrically at my groin and squeaked, "Toilet?"

He blinked, grinned at my pantomime, but pointed towards the back of the building. I smiled gratefully at him and pushed past. Ron at this point, had caught up, and was shouting, "Are you all right?"

I found the door to the gents, and darted through. Ron came in after me, almost wild with excitement. "What is it?" he demanded, breathing heavily.

I glanced around, noting that there wasn't a soul in the loo. I grabbed Ron's arm. "We need to go!" I hissed, gulping in deep lungfuls of air myself, and apparated back to his room in the hotel.

It was the first time Ron had ever side-along-apparated with anyone, and from his expression, he certainly didn't enjoy the experience. "What the hell is going on?" he demanded, after he gathered his wits.

I threw my backpack onto the bed and burst into laughter. "Sorry mate, but there were a lot of seriously pissed off people after me back there. We had to get out quickly." I collapsed onto an armchair and giggled, feeling more than a little light headed after my little adventure.

Ron clutched at his heart and followed suit, his armchair creaking in protest at his bulk. "What the bloody hell did you do this time?"

I waited for my breathing to get back under control. "I sort of stole a few things."

Ron glanced over at my backpack. "Like what?" he asked, sounding far more excitedly curious than angry.



I shook my head. “Well, a basilisk for starters,” I said deadpan, before bursting back into laughter.

Ron blinked at me, his face an expression of comedic proportions. “You’re taking the piss,” he said, after a few moments of slack-jawed gaping.

I slowly shook my head back and forth. “Nope.”

He half stood. “They had a fucking basilisk in that place?” he shouted.

I nodded happily. “Yeah, it’s about twice the size of the one in the Chamber.”

Ron covered his face with his hands, but I could soon hear the laughter behind them. “You stole a bloody basilisk. *You*, Harry Bloody Potter, stole a basilisk. You stole a *basilisk*.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Repeating it won’t change it.”

Ron dropped his hands, and a slow smile spread over his face. “Why?” he asked intently.

I shrugged. “If I say that it seemed like a good idea at the time, would you believe me?”

His eyebrows shot up. “Probably. We tended to get ideas like that all the time at Hogwarts, didn’t we? These days, I only get those sort of ideas after drinking a lot.”

“Or when we are trying to stop a theft from Gringotts,” I pointed out.

“Or that,” he conceded. “We did drink a lot after that though.”

I took a deep breath. “Anyway, they probably haven’t noticed that I stole the basilisk yet.”

Ron couldn’t help it, he erupted with laughter too. “Merlin’s balls, how the hell do you miss a hundred foot snake?”

“I sort of swapped it over.”

He shook his head. “What? What do you mean?”

I shrugged. “Well, they wanted me to kill the thing. I didn’t want to, and it seemed pretty upset at the idea itself.”

Ron nodded in a daze. “Yeah, I can imagine.” He paused for a second to digest that little bit of info. “Wait, you *told* it you were sent to kill it?” he demanded.

I nodded happily, as though telling one of the most lethal creatures on the planet that you were sent to kill it was not in any way unusual. “Yep. Anyway, Dumbledore wanted me to get something for him that the basilisk was guarding. He gave me a portkey that would take me to Hogwarts. The Chamber, to be exact. Where, if you recall, just sitting around and doing nothing but rotting, was this suddenly rather useful basilisk corpse.”

Ron’s eyes bulged. “You swapped a live basilisk with a dead one? And left the live one at Hogwarts?”

I nodded. “Uh huh. Mind you, it was sort of necessary.”

Ron actually looked angry. I’m not surprised, it was his sister that nearly died because of that snake. “Necessary? How?”

I reached into a pocket and pulled out the sock Dumbledore had given me. “This was the portkey. I expanded it and enlarged its interior to the size of a room.”

“What for?”

I smirked. “Dumbledore wanted me to collect the darkest, most vile objects in the collection the Vatican had amassed over the years.”

Ron’s eyes widened and his neck seemed to shrink as his head lowered to his shoulders. “You didn’t!” he said, aghast. I guess he was able to think quickly about something other than Quidditch or food.

I nodded eagerly. “I most certainly did. I pinched the lot, down to the collection of unmagical medieval pornographic paintings. That meant, however, that the basilisk had to come with me. It had been placed under a geas to protect the cache for the whole of time. Unless I wanted to try and kill it, I had to find it a new home. It is in the Chamber now, quite happily exploring, since it hasn’t been out of its own basement in two thousand years. I’ll probably set it up at one of my family’s derelict properties once we get back.” I had cast a couple of silencing charms at various locations around the chamber, so no one could use a rooster to kill my new friend, but that was information that Ron didn’t really need.

Ron swallowed, but frowned with thought. He seemed to accept that I wasn’t going to just leave a deadly serpent in a school of children. “What about all that stuff that Dumbledore wanted?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Unless he wants to try and convince a basilisk to give up something it was bound to guard, he’ll have to cross that item of his Christmas list,” I said evenly.

Ron shook his head with bewilderment, rose from his chair and went over to the basket of snacks that the hotel provided. He selected a large bag of crisps, ripped it open and started chomping. “Why did you even bother coming back here? If you were at Hogwarts, why return?” he asked with a

spray of crumbs.

I leaned back in the chair, massaging my neck. "Well, for one thing, you'd have been a bit put out having to wait for me."

"True."

"Secondly, once they finally worked up the courage to go down into the cellar to check, I'm pretty sure they'd come after me."

Ron frowned. "Won't they just come after you now?"

I nodded. "I'd be terribly disappointed in them if they didn't. But I made them make a vow that no Church Wizard could approach me outside of Vatican City. Anyone coming after me will be a Muggle, or at most, as squib. Between the two of us, I'm pretty sure we can handle anything they throw at us. Besides, they'd have to find us first." I stopped for a second, and then rose. I went over to the bed and undid my backpack, dumping the contents onto the duvet.

"What are you looking for?" Ron asked.

"Tracking charms," I mumbled.

"Would they put charms on your stuff like that?"

"Probably. I would if I were them," I said with finality, waving my wand over my property. Two items glowed azure.

"Damn it," I spat, cancelling the spells. "Keep an eye on the road below, will you?" I asked Ron.

Still munching happily, the red head grinned at me, and wandered out onto the balcony. For the next minute or so, I concentrated on removing any trace of residual magic from my bag of tricks, even after the tracking charms had been dealt with. While I wasn't as paranoid as Moody (yet), I wasn't about to take any chances if I could avoid it.

"Um, Harry?"

I looked over at Ron, who was leaning on the balcony railing. "What is it?"

"There's a lot of those car things coming down the road. They all look the same too."

I hurried out onto the balcony myself. The cars were non-descript, with no special sirens. They did have some sort of symbol on their doors which I couldn't make out from the tenth floor. There were quite a lot of them though.

I grinned tightly. "Looks like we have company."

Ron started jumping up and down like a little kid. "Can I use some Wheezes on them?" he blurted eagerly.

I blinked and raised an eyebrow. "You have some Wheezes on you?"

It was Ron's turn to roll his eyes. "Duh! I do work there. Well, occasionally, anyway, now that I've got a contract with the Cannons. Of course I have some samples." He grinned evilly at me. "I made a fortune selling some Peeping Tom prototypes to the other Cannons guys, who wanted to perv on the girls change rooms," he said with a leer, reaching into a bag and pulling out a couple of objects that looked like eyeballs on the end of a piece of string joined at the other end to a pair of spectacles.

I could feel a blush starting, so I turned to face over the balcony to cover my embarrassment. "What did Susan think of that?" I asked, looking down at the large group of men charging into the front door of the hotel.

Even not looking at him, I could hear that his grin didn't waver. "She planned it with me. She made more money selling the girls towels that were charmed to hang in a way that always covered their bits up. The other lads didn't see a thing, but the groans of frustration I recorded are going to make good blackmail material." He rummaged in his bag a bit more, but shook his head. "I didn't bother to bring any of those."

I laughed out loud. "When did Susan grow a prankster bone?" I asked while beneath the balcony the last of the guards had entered the hotel. There were a large number of Muggles gathering around, a few even sitting in the recently vacated cars.

Ron joined me looking over the balcony. "When she started being an unwitting guinea pig for Fred and George." He looked down. "Well, they're all in now. Are you sure I can't use some Wheezes on them?"

"You're not going to get a chance. They're not coming in here."

He frowned. "But they're after you," he said pointedly.

I nodded back. "Yeah, they are. But without the tracking charms and a wizard to follow them, they don't know where I am. As it is, they don't even know what room I'm in. They'll have to ask at the front desk."

Realisation hit Ron's expression like a lorry. "Ah ha! We're in my room, not yours!"

I winked at him. "Yep, but we should take some precautions." I wandered over to the door and took the 'Do not disturb' sign off the inside knob. With a few flicks of my wand, I anchored a Muggle repellent field to it. "This should be enough to cover the door, so they don't notice it," I said, placing it back on the doorknob. As a field extending out several feet, it didn't need to be on the outside of the door. You know, I could probably make a

fortune selling Do Not Disturb signs that actually work.

I turned back to Ron, who held out one of the pair of prototype Wheezes. “They’ll probably be a bit pissed that they can’t find you, you know. Here, we can watch,” he said, passing it to me. “Was there anything in your room that you need? They’re probably going to tear it apart.”

I shook my head, accepting the Wheeze. “Nope, all my important stuff is on your bed. I leaned over and slipped the fake eyeball part of the Peeping Tom under the door. Ron followed suit.

The extendible string was long enough that Ron and I could sit on the comfy chairs and watch the bafflement that was bound to occur in the hallway. I was rather happy that my room was at the opposite end of the floor.

A few minutes later we could hear the heavy booted steps of dozens of people trying to run in silence. Ron excitedly held a finger to his lips and hissed, “Shhh!” drowning out anything we could hear for a few seconds.

In the corridor, several soldiers, nearly two dozen, stormed out of the stairwell. I was rather impressed at their level of fitness, since running up ten flights of stairs in full combat gear wasn’t a trivial exercise. The leader gave the squad a few hand gestures, and a handful of men broke off from the main squad and began entering the other rooms on the floor. I wondered what they were doing at first, until they emerged again, escorting the confused occupants into the stairwell quickly and quietly. One fat fellow was wearing only a towel.

“Looks like they are evacuating the floor,” I noted to Ron. “They must have got a master key from downstairs.”

The two men that came down this end of the corridor completely ignored Ron’s door as they continued their mission. Soon, every room on the floor had been emptied, and each member of the squad took up a position near my room.

Once the soldiers were ready, one gave another signal. A big, husky fellow slipped the key into the lock and touched the door handle.

I was more shocked than they were when an eruption of magical energy flashed. Every soldier in the corridor ended up on their backs, mown down by the explosion.

“Nice trap,” Ron complimented me.

I shook my head, still watching events unfold in the corridor. “I didn’t put a trap on my door,” I said warily. “Someone else did.” I bit my lip, thinking deeply. “If someone else is looking for me, then whatever is going on, we need to be ready,” I said seriously.

A couple of the guards had managed to keep enough of their wits about them to raise their weapons at the now open door. The sound of gunfire lit up my senses. At least three of the soldiers were shooting directly at my room’s door, or at least, whatever was in the doorway. Ron and I shared a glance before leaping up out of the chairs.

It took us a few seconds to reach the door, but by then the noise had stopped. I took the opportunity to cast a disillusionment charm on us both, before we cracked the door open and peered out.

The corridor was still full of recumbent armed men, all of whom appeared to be semi-conscious. Amid the groans and heavy breathing were a few scattered words that sounded remarkably like swearing. The second universal language.

Ron and I judiciously applied a few stunning spells to quieten the soldiers who were still awake. As we approached my door, more details emerged. It looked as though it had been blown outwards, though there was no actual damage or scorch marks on the surrounding walls. Hell, even the carpet didn’t even look unruffled. The footprints in the soft carpet from the guards’ large boots were still visible.

A tall, unruffled robed figure strode from my room out into the hallway, looking at the bodies. I couldn’t help but let a grin grow on my face as I relaxed. “Hello, Master.”

Ron gasped in surprise, but to his credit, kept quiet. Zab gave me a sour expression.

“Stop calling me Master,” Zab snapped. “I’ve been waiting here for nearly three hours.”

I nodded. “You really shouldn’t have warded my room like that.”

His eyes flicked over Ron, even disillusioned as he was, before returning to me. “It was a test.”

I nodded again, still smiling. “To see if I was still being observant. I know. Still, it must have shocked these poor buggers.”

Zab looked down at the recumbent guards. “I take it your meeting at the Vatican did not go well.”

I half shrugged. “No, but exactly how badly depends entirely on your point of view.”

He looked at me intently, flicking his wand to create a zone of privacy for us. “Exactly why were they seeking you?”

I sighed. “It’s a long story.”

“Shorten it.”

I recognised the tone. This was important. “I stole the entire papal collection of dark artefacts.”

Zab assumed the expression of total blankness that made my heart soar. To cover his moment of less than complete control, he nudged one of the recumbent guards with a toe. "May I ask why?"

"They forced me to perform a suicidal mission for them."

Zab stared at me for a while. "I see," he said. I suppose he decided he didn't need to know at this instant. He'd be more than likely to figure out what happened later if he wanted to expend the effort to do so. "You must have somehow prevented the Church wizards from following you," he said evenly.

I nodded. "Yep, I tricked them into making an unbreakable vow. Basically, no wizard working on behalf of the Church can approach, contact or speak to me outside of Vatican City. Waldorf didn't want to make the vow, but the Pope demoted him and made a wizard called Darius do it."

Zab frowned. "Darius? Short, solidly built fellow, with mousey brown hair and dark brown eyes? Has one eyebrow stretching across his forehead?"

"Yes, that's him." I didn't bother to ask if Zab knew him. From his description, that was obvious. "He seemed to be a nice, amiable chap, though I did feel defensive around him."

Zab snorted. "Darius is one of the most cunning and experienced spymasters in our world. Anything that happened around him was more than likely staged for your benefit."

I raised an eyebrow, and then thought deeply. "Okaaaay, I need to think about what happened then." I looked over at Ron, who was staring at us outside of the privacy ward before turning back to Zab. "Your contact never showed up."

Zab sighed. "He was murdered," he said evenly, though I could detect a hint of tightness in his tone.

I bit the inside of my cheek. "Bugger. Did he leave any notes?"

Zab flashed me a look. "You have no sympathy for the man?"

I shrugged. "I didn't know him."

Zab looked at me for a few uncomfortable seconds. "You are becoming quite hard, Harry. Good."

That brought me up short. "Good?"

"You are not letting childish notions of assumed guilt drive your emotions. Before you came to me, the knowledge that a death was a direct result of a request on your behalf would have crippled you; filled you with self-doubt."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Was he right? He usually was, though I'd become more and more reliant on accumulating data and thinking through ideas myself rather than relying on the opinion of others recently. At the beginning of my apprenticeship, Sirius had only been dead a few weeks, and I was still consumed with guilt. In that respect Zab was right, I had been all too eager to accept a level of guilt disproportionate to my actual responsibility. Now, even though I'd requested the information from my old Master, the death of his contact didn't overwhelm me.

"Come," Zab said, interrupting my musings. "Send your friend home. Anyone with any contact with you will be a target until this is sorted out. Then pack your things. We are going *hunting*."

Zab's expression reminded me of the night we harvested Grawp's blood. That time, there was a pressing need to prevent any unnecessary deaths - giant specifically, centaur preferably.

This time, there was not going to be anything holding us back.

This time, we were going hunting for keeps.

After a moment or two, I nodded sharply to Zab. "Okay, give me a moment to get ready."

Zab nodded and cancelled the privacy charm. "You have two minutes."

I turned quickly to Ron. "Mate, pack your bags and get out of here."

That shocked him. "What?! Why?"

I sighed softly. "Because this is deadly serious now." His expression darkened, and I had to think quickly to stop him arguing. "I need you to get a message to Dumbledore. As quickly as possible. And I can't use an owl."

Ron's expression flickered rapidly, from anger, to determination, passing briefly through caution and distrust on the way. "What message?" he asked tentatively.

I knew he suspected I was making an excuse to get rid of him, but was willing to do what I asked. Thank Merlin he was maturing. "I need you to tell Dumbledore about the Chamber. And what's down there. You need to impress upon him that he not try to get down there, for any reason. For now, the stuff he wanted is safe. I also need you to tell him that I'm on the trail of the Last."

Ron frowned. "Last what?"

I shook my head. "No, just the Last. He'll know what I mean. With any luck, I'll be back a few days after you."

Ron looked at me intently. "This is that thing you can't tell me about yet?"

I nodded quickly. "Yep. I can't tell you how much you've helped me, but please trust me when I say that I need you to get that message to Dumbledore as quickly as possible. If we lose the trail for the Last now, we may not find it again in time. I promise that when we get back with it, I'll tell you what is going on."

After a tense few seconds, Ron nodded sharply. "Ok. I'll go. But you'd better have a good story for me when you get back."

I gave him a grin. "The best. Go!"

With that, we split, him going back to his room to pack, me turning back to my room and old Master.

Zab nodded approvingly. "You handled that well."

"Thanks. Let me grab my stuff and we'll go," I said quickly, entering my room. It was the work of a few moments to summon my clothes and toiletries from their temporary homes. With a few deft flicks of my wand, my bag was packed and ready. I hefted it over my shoulder and turned to look at Zab.

"Come," he said imperiously. "They are beginning to rouse."

I glanced down at the softly groaning doorstops. A slow grin formed on my face as an idea formed in my mind. "Just a sec. This is an opportunity too good to miss."

Zab frowned at me, but disillusioned himself. I bound one of the recumbent guards who had a larger than average number of decorations on his sleeve before casting an enervation charm. Slowly, he shook himself out of unconsciousness. To aid the process, I flicked the end of his nose sharply with my finger. "Wake up, Sunshine."

His eyes flickered open, but it took a few seconds for them to focus. "You!" he blurted.

I nodded. "Yes, I'm me. You're you, and he's him," I said cheekily, pointing at Zab, even though he couldn't be seen.

"Who?" he snapped, arching his neck to look to where I was pointing.

"Dumbledore," I lied easily without even hesitating.

He struggled at his bonds. "I have to arrest you," he said through clenched teeth.

I raised an eyebrow, looking pointedly down at the magical ropes holding him steady. "You are of course welcome to try."

He glared at me impotently. Zab cleared his throat. "We need to go. Now."

I nodded. "Just a sec." I turned back to the bound guard. "Look, I'm nicking off for now. I don't imagine I'll ever be back in Italy, so if you or your superiors would like to follow up this little conversation, tell them to go talk to Dumbledore here. By the time you get free, he'll be back at Hogwarts." I let a long, slow smile grow on my face. "But do give my regards to Waldorf and Darius, and tell them that it was so considerate of them to let me go down into the grotto alone. I'm not sure how I'd have managed Dumbledore's mission if they decided I needed an escort."

I rose and sniggered insultingly. "So long, and thanks," I said, throwing my backpack over my shoulder.

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We had portkeyed to Berlin before Zab spoke again. "I trust that grandstanding was worthwhile?"

I shrugged. "Misdirection for the most part. If, as you say, Darius is a cunning bugger, then it would be in his best interests to convince me to trust him. Since they wanted to force me to do something foolhardy, setting up a situation where I was pissed off with one single wizard in their organisation would have been preferable to being pissed off with all of them.

"If Darius did set that up in an effort to get cozy with me, or to deflect my ire onto a single wizard rather than the organisation as a whole, then the misdirection would be worthwhile to confuse him. If not, then it won't be." I snickered briefly. "In any case, the annoyance it will cause Dumbledore when people start accusing him of all sorts of things will certainly make up for it."

Zab gave me a long sidelong glance, which didn't quite cover his amusement. "Quite," he said carefully.

I grinned cheekily, thinking about how many protestations Dumbledore will need to make over the next few weeks. "So long as you didn't come in the front door, they won't be able to describe you, so only Dumbledore will know you were here. And he will be a bit too busy defending himself to spend time tracking you down for an explanation."

Zab frowned. "What was wrong with coming in the front door?" he asked cautiously. "I confounded all the Muggles in the mezzanine."

I blinked at him. "You just walked in like that?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "In my experience, trying to enter a premises open to the general public with stealth gets you far more attention than simply walking in. So long as the Muggles cannot identify me, my identity is still secret."

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “You need a Muggle refresher course.”

“What did I miss?” he demanded.

I took a deep breath. “Muggles now have cameras that can watch your movements. In a high priced hotel like that one, they have them at the entrances for security. Unless you disillusioned yourself, or were invisible, you were captured on film, and can be identified.”

“Cameras? They need a person to operate. If the person is confounded, they cannot use their mechanism to capture my likeness.”

I sighed. “No. There are security cameras that are attached to points in a building that constantly record who comes in and out. They don’t need a person to point them; I don’t believe they even have a person watching the images.”

Zab looked uncomfortable. “Why would no one watch them?”

“Because they have dozens of them set up around the place. I personally noticed three, but I’m sure there were many more. They’d use the footage to investigate what happened after an incident.” I resisted the urge to give Zab an evil smile. “Such as an armed conflict on the upper floors. Anyone who appears on film entering the hotel and doesn’t appear coming out will be likely to be investigated.”

Zab looked at me in horror. I guess ignorance is truly bliss.

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Zab seemed more than a little distracted for the rest of the trip. He ignored my few attempts at conversation, remaining deep in thought until we reached a building that appeared to have been built in a time where utilitarianism and functionality was far more important than artistic endeavours. The drab grey building was square, squat, and solid, yet so dreary that I felt a little depressed just looking at it.

I followed Zab wordlessly into the building and up three flights of stairs. The interior was just as drab as the exterior. I wondered vaguely what the suicide rate was here.

Zab surreptitiously erected some wards in front of an otherwise non-descript door.

“Expecting trouble?” I asked.

Zab glared at me. “Whoever killed Helmut probably knows where he lives. I would prefer not to be disturbed by anyone interested in someone they’ve already silenced.”

I nodded as we opened the door. Looking in, Zab's contact lived in what could only be described as a bachelor's dream. Rubbish littered the floor, ranging from screwed up pieces of paper to rotting food. Ample evidence existed that pointed to the fact that he survived on pizza, including a cardboard wall of pizza boxes that had been stacked over one window. The cardboard stack would act quite efficiently as an insulation layer, but it also quite effectively managed to keep the smell in too. Fermenting cabbages wasn't the start of it, though it did tickle some elusive memory in me.

My first impression was that they guy had been a major slob. The couch in front of the TV had an impressively detailed indentation in the mattress, and numerous stains on both the carpet and the couch itself left any viewer thinking that spilled drinks were a rather common occurrence. I shuddered as Zab and I walked through the room. My sneakers were sticking to the floor.

As disgusted as I was, something just didn't seem right. Everything around me was awful, but there was something about the stench of the place that made me think there was more to what I was seeing.

Zab looked at me inquiringly. "What do you think?"

I took a few moments to gather my thoughts. I ran my eye over the scene once more, looking for something out of place. Finally, I placed where I'd smelled the familiar aroma. "It's a set up."

Zab's eyebrows rose. "Oh?"

I sniffed. “There is a potion simmering somewhere nearby. It is the basis of Cole’s ward. It’s the bloody smell of cabbages gives it away.” I looked around further, noting a few other things that were inconsistent with the scene. “That will keep the Muggles away, or at least keep them from paying too much attention to this place.”

Zab raised an eyebrow, but indicated for me to continue.

“There are no dirty dishes on the floor. I've visited the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan, and dirty dishes strewn everywhere are a hallmark of unmarried male slob.”

Zab smiled. “Go on.”

I rubbed my chin. "Those pizza boxes are dusty, not just dirty. On a pile that size, new ones would be added all the time. Besides, they all look the same age."

Zab nodded. "Good. Helmut, my contact, was fastidious in his personal hygiene, and setting up an obfuscation layer of security like this was difficult for him." With that, Zab drew his wand and waved it briefly, causing a wall covered with childish finger paintings to slip aside. Behind was a

meticulously kept room; small, but obviously expanded beyond the usual dimensions.

In the far corner, the bed had been neatly made, with what appeared to be starched sheets. A desk stood against one wall, with a single wooden chair neatly tucked in. Every item on the desk had been arranged with geometric precision, including the small laptop computer.

There were no ornaments, pictures or other decorations. The walls and ceiling were painted a brilliant white, making the single bulb in the centre of the ceiling more than capable of lighting the room. All in all, the room's condition indicated that the occupant's mental state was a little past 'fastidious' as Zab had described him, and probably verging on 'irons his underpants'.

Zab cast a spell, and then looked around in frustration when it failed to locate what he was after. "Damn it, he'd better not have kept his information memorized."

I frowned. "What about the computer?"

Zab blinked. "The what?"

I pointed at the closed laptop. "That thing."

"What about it?"

I strode over to the desk, and quickly cast a spell Zab taught me for finding magical traps. There were three.

Zab wordlessly helped me remove them, watching me examine the laptop. There were no labels on the buttons like I remembered from Dudley's broken computer. It took a while, but eventually, I pressed the right thing, making the machine spring into life.

The laptop started running noisily, something inside of it humming crazily. The screen flashed to life, with information flashing up from bottom to top too quickly to read. It all looked like gibberish to me.

Eventually, a single grey square appeared in the centre of the black screen, requesting a login and password.

I stared blankly at it for a moment.

"Well?" Zab asked.

I shrugged. "Dunno."

He glanced down at the machine. "I presume the letters there are used for recording information?"

I tapped a key on the keyboard. The letter 'j' appeared in the box. "So it would seem."

Zab frowned. "Do you not know how to use this contraption?"

I shook my head. "Nope. My cousin Dudley had one, but I certainly wasn't allowed to play with it before he broke it. After that, well, it didn't matter." I bit my lip as I stared at the recalcitrant computer. "I don't suppose your contact happened to tell you what his password was?" I asked Zab.

Zab frowned, but looked around the room. "Can you see anything green?"

I gave Zab a look, but turned around to look. "No, now that you mention it." Which, given the state of the other room, I would have expected to have seen at least some mould around.

My old Master strode into the filthy portion of the home, looking around intently. "There," he said suddenly, summoning a picture from the wall.

I craned my neck to see. The picture was a riot of green hues, and now that I looked, it was the only green object in the house. "What does the green signify?"

Zab turned the picture over, before pulling it out of its frame. "Use your brain, boy," he said sharply. "I'm still not going to answer questions when you have the information to figure out the answer yourself."

I bit back sharp reply and looked over his shoulder at the denuded picture. On the back of the canvas, a few lines of text were written, though it was a language I'd only ever seen in History of Magic lessons, and then only sparingly. "You have a procedure with your contacts. If they disappear, information you need is stored on something green. Writing it in Gobledygook means that few humans could understand it, even if they found it."

Zab nodded absently and ran his finger over the text, running right to left. Mumbling to himself, he wandered over to the laptop, and began tapping a few keys. He paused in his efforts. "How do I enter text into the password area?"

I shrugged, but joined him. We tried a few keys before finding one that swapped the blinking box to the password area. Zab tapped a few more keys.

"Now what?" he asked.

I reached over and pressed the return key. Immediately, the screen changed. "Looks like we are in," I said uncertainly.

Zab again looked down at the text. "I hate translating on the fly," he grumbled, before entering another line of text that appeared to my untrained eye to be meaningless characters and spaces. A new box appeared on the screen, filled with dense text. I ran my eye over the first few lines, unable to make out any meaning. It had obviously been written in a code of some kind.

"This is his journal," Zab said intently. After a minute of intense concentration, he glanced down at the keyboard, then up at me. "Is there a way to get to the rest of the text?"

"Probably," I said with a shrug, looking down at the keyboard again. After a few moments and false starts, we discovered that hitting a key with an arrow pointing down made the text move up. How bloody idiotic is that? It seems that wizards aren't the only ones with no logic.

As Zab scanned through the incomprehensible text, a muffled voice came from within his robes. He frowned, reached into an inner pocket and withdrew a familiar mirror.

"What?" he snapped, holding it on an angle so I couldn't see who was calling.

Blaise's voice snapped back. "Have you found him yet?"

Grumbling, Zab threw the mirror at me, spinning it through the air like a frisbee. "Entertain her. I don't have time for this," he said as I caught it between my palms.

Blaise's dark expression lightened considerably when she saw me. "Sweetie!" she squealed with an overly saccharine voice, designed specifically to annoy her Great-grandfather.

The muscles along Zab's jaw bunched and twisted, indicating success. I had to bite the inside of my cheek not to laugh at the reaction his Great-granddaughter's tone had on his demeanour. "Looking for me?" I asked brightly.

"Do you mind?" Zab snarled. "Take that infernal device out into the other room if you must, but leave me in peace to decode this."

Blaise frowned in confusion as I moved out of Zab's immediate vicinity with alacrity. "What's up with him?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "I'm not sure how much I should tell you." At her darkening expression, I hastily added, "It's not my information to give. If he doesn't want you to know, I can't tell you."

Blaise sighed deeply, but nodded. "What have you been up to then? I got home a few days ago to find your luggage missing." She pouted. "If I was less confident, I may have thought that you'd left me for Granger."

I rolled my eyes at her kittenish act. "Last time I checked, Hermione still has a bedroom at home too."

She grinned at me wickedly. "True, though the bed is getting dusty."

I smiled back. "Was there anything in particular you wanted to talk about?"

"What have you been doing? You haven't sent an owl or anything."

I looked around for somewhere to sit, only to discover that it would be easier to stand for a while than try and clean my clothes afterwards. "Well, let's see. I convinced Ron to join me as camouflage, and we went to Rome. We wandered around a bit, got into a fight with some bounty hunters, killed one of them, then talked our way out of prison. I visited the Vatican, got forced to attempt to kill a basilisk, stole a few hundred dark artefacts from their most secure vault, and I've just begun a lifetime's worth of dodging their agents."

Blaise blinked, then lowered her head, looking at me dangerously from under her eyelashes. "You did all that in just three days?" she asked incredulously.

I nodded. "Pretty much. Sorry, but I just haven't had time to send an owl."

Her own jaw bunched in a manner very similar to Zab. "So it would seem. If anyone else told me they'd done all that, I wouldn't have believed them. Or at least, I'd have thought they were over exaggerating. With you, I'm wondering what you aren't telling me. Why don't you come on home and we'll talk about locking you in your room for the next fifty years. Hopefully that would stop the chaos and mayhem that seems to follow you around."

I shrugged. "You sure you wouldn't prefer to just tie me down on the bed?"

That actually brought a slight blush to her cheeks. "Don't tempt me, Buster."

I gave her a pout. "So, anything interesting happening at home?"

"Great-grandfather thought you might be in danger, so he stopped by to ask me a couple of questions before heading off to find you. I hope you don't mind, but I gave him that mirror."

I shook my head. "Why on earth would he think I was in danger?" I asked rhetorically.



Because that's your ground state of being, perhaps?" Blaise answered.

I blew her a kiss. "You know me so well."

She turned serious. "Look Harry, Granger is starting to unravel. She stopped by here the day you left, and kicked up a stink."

I thought for a second. "Don't tell me, she didn't believe you when you said that you didn't know where I was?"

Blaise cocked an eyebrow. "And here I was thinking you'd need at least three guesses. Seriously though, she's freaking out. She stopped by today and basically accused me of hiding you, then of orchestrating the rift between the two of you. Using logic against her just made her even more hysterical. She's missed classes and hasn't eaten in days. You need to get back here and talk to her soon."

I nodded. "I'd really like to, but if what had happened here is any indication, the people I'm trying to track down know someone is looking for them. I can't afford to give them too much of a lead."

"Is what you're doing that important?"

I nodded slowly. "Yes it is. Hermione knows that. If you see her soon, tell her I'm looking for the last one, and that I'll be home as soon as I can after that."

Blaise sighed, but nodded. "She's not going to believe me, but okay. Can you keep the mirror on you? If she can talk to you soon, even with you overseas, that would help."

I nodded. "I can't promise that I can talk the instant she calls, but I'll do my best."

"That will have to do. Tell me, are you sure you are safe now? I know Great-grandfather is with you, but is there anyone else who knows where you are who wants to kill you?" she asked cheekily.

I nodded. "We've taken some precautions. I won't say we're safe, but we are ready for action."

"Harry?" Zab called.

"Be right there," I replied, before looking back to the mirror. "Sorry Love, I've got to go."

Blaise winced. "Go. I'll see you soon."

I ended the call and wandered back into the spartan room. "You rang?"

Zab frowned, not sure what I meant by the phrase. "I haven't managed to interpret all of Helmut's journal, but I have some details for you." With that, he launched into a detailed description of his contact's information.

Zab's man had spent a long time tracing foreigners travelling east, noting which had links to the families of known Death Eaters. He had whittled the list down to a handful of people who had travelled from Britain to Albania in the months after Riddle's death, and had managed to identify all but two.

Zab's lips pursed as he read the final entry. "Well, you will be following up on this yourself. I cannot go with you."

I looked at my old Master, who was still crouched over, reading the laptop's screen intently. "You're going back to try and clean up your mess at the Hotel," I guessed.

He nodded. He reached into a pocket and produced a small piece of parchment and a quill. Scribbling a few words, he then handed the note to me. "Go here. That is the last place Helmut mentioned in his journal. I will need more time to translate this document."

I took the parchment and looked around the small home. "I presume you are going to take care of this place now that your contact has been found?"

Zab flashed a look at me. "What I need to do here is not your concern. I have assisted you to the limit of my ability in this matter. Take your information and go."

I took a deep breath, bit back a retort, turned and left. Zab had lost a valuable asset due to my request, and if I was any judge of him, a friend as well. He had been exposed to the Muggle world in a way that may jeopardize the secret of his existence, and had a great deal of work to do cleaning the mess up. I could accept that he would probably be short with me for a while.

Hopefully, he'd calm down before I managed to find the last Horcrux.

## Journeyman Potter A hunting I will go

I didn't look back as I left. Zab was hunched over the laptop computer with an expression of extreme concentration, and his demeanour told me that interrupting him again any time soon would be a bad idea. As much as I wanted to demand that he not blame me for his loss, I couldn't help but think that I'd be just as angry with someone who asked me to do something that caused the death of someone close to me.

I was out the front door and half a block towards the train station before I recalled that laptops ran on batteries or something. The closest thing to an expert on the subject of Muggle power storage that I had seen in the magical world was Mr. Weasley, and let's face it, even if he had a battery in his collection that was both the right size and fully charged, I wouldn't put any money on him actually being able to replace the bloody thing without some sort of unnatural disaster. With this in mind, I had no illusions that Zab would be able to find a replacement once this one died.

With a sigh, I turned to go back. I knew that I had no idea how to fix a problem like that, but Zab was probably ignorant about his level of ignorance. I looked ahead to see two chaps walking behind me duplicate my move, turning as one and walking the other way. That normally wouldn't have attracted my attention, but the fact they did it in perfect synchronisation, without even talking to each other, sang out to me like an opera singer hollering an aria in my ear.

A slow flush crept over me, and I realised that I was being followed and that I was rather exposed. The wards that Zab had erected at Helmut's door would only have activated if someone tried to cross the threshold. They wouldn't have noted anyone watching people come and go. On anyone else's part, I would suspect it was an oversight (with the exception of Moody, perhaps), but Zab had a level of understanding of his surroundings that I doubt I could ever match. If the wards he cast were deficient in some way, then he more than likely knew about it, and was prepared to exploit it in another way. It was a pity that his exceptional situational awareness didn't translate all that well into the modern Muggle world, but I could understand it.

Oddly, even with the potential danger I was in, I felt a surge of anticipation. I found myself searching not for an escape route, but for a defensible battle site.

I shook my head to clear it of the idea of ambushing my followers. To make anyone watching think that I'd just forgotten something, I patted my pockets, and then nodded with satisfaction, as though confirming that my keys were still with me. With that little display of amateur theatrics, I again turned and continued away from the building. Zab should be able to take care of himself (even if he doesn't get all the info from the computer before it runs out of power), and I needed to make my unwanted tails think that I had no idea they existed.

I made liberal use of public transport as I travelled deeper into Berlin, acting like an aimless tourist with time to spare. I marked both the two who followed me from Helmut's place, as well as another two. The second pair appeared to be nothing more than a loving couple out for a walk, except they had followed my shadows and I onto every tram we took for the past fifteen minutes.

I kept my eye out for a useful public place, somewhere with a heap of people and lots of corners to get lost around. A convenient shopping area filled with milling Muggles fit the bill. I stepped off the tram and wandered around, looking for the public toilets. A WC had been useful the last time I had been followed, and this time I didn't need to side-along apparate a massive red headed stomach on legs. It only took a few minutes to locate them, set into an unimaginative square, red brick building just one story high.

In the reflection of the last shop window before I entered, I caught a single glimpse of the two men who had been following me since leaving Zab making their way directly towards me, but the brief glance showed no sign of the other pair. Once inside the toilet, I scanned for threats and escape routes. The short, fat, balding moustachioed chap at the urinal hardly qualified as the former, but his presence certainly precluded apparition as the latter. And since the vents in the roof were only small enough for me to stick my arm through, that pretty much ended the list of exits.

Fortunately, he didn't suffer from any prostate problems, and promptly finished his business, before ambling out of the room without so much as a glance at the basin. With a shudder at the lack of hygiene, I reached into my backpack and pulled out my invisibility cloak. There wasn't enough time for me to put on the robe. Once fully invisible, I stepped into one corner and waited. It wasn't long before I was joined by a pair of men who, on seeing an apparently empty toilet block, seemed a little pissed that they'd lost something.

I stood there watching with amusement as they went through various stages of confusion, bewilderment, shock, and finally anger, with a bit of self-recrimination thrown in for good measure.

"Shizal!" One spat. From the tone, I'm pretty sure I didn't need a German-English dictionary to translate.

The rapid-fire German conversation went well over my head. To start with, they hissed at each other in low tones, but neither had the discipline to keep that up for long. One had the presence of mind to cast a spell on the door, presumably to keep from being interrupted by an unsuspecting Berliner with a full bladder.

I took the opportunity to examine the pair. Both were well dressed, in good quality clothes which wouldn't look out of place in Uncle Vernon's staff meetings. The one with the wand was slender and lean, tall and almost whip-like. His voice was harsh and ragged, emanating from a throat with a

Very prominent Adam's apple, but I got the sense he was far more dangerous than his larger companion. That fellow was a brute of a man, filling the suit to bursting. The dark shadow on his scalp indicated he shaved his head, hinting at his less-than-civilised prejudices. The swastika tattoo on the side of his neck was another clue to his personal politics. From the pointing and increasingly raised voices, I'd guess they were trying to determine just which of them was to accept the blame for their failure to follow me after I disappeared from a room with only one exit.

While I was examining his large partner, the slender one waved his wand around, silently casting a spell. Instantly, I felt a light pressure on me, as though I was being buffeted by a light breeze on all sides. His eyes widened suddenly, and he snapped something unintelligible, and then tried to point his wand towards me. I dropped him with a stunner quickly, taking him down before he could bring his wand to bear, but the other one roared like a bull and charged blindly. I barely managed to duck sideways and evade his groping arms, but he had far too much momentum for someone of my build to dodge completely. I was roughly slammed into the wall behind me, but I managed to twist out of the way. One meaty hand snatched at me, only succeeding in grabbing a corner of my cloak. He pulled it from me halfway through my manoeuvre. I reflexively attempted to snatch it back while jumping out of the way, ending up twisting the material and losing my balance.

I managed to duck under a meaty fist swinging at my face with the unstoppable force of a meteorite, only to discover a booted foot rising sharply into my field of vision. It only glanced off my cheek, but with my teetering balance, it was enough to knock me completely over.

My breath exploded from my lungs first when I hit the tiles, and then again as the human elephant body checked me. Oddly, I didn't feel fear, or even panic throughout the pain, I simply focused my mind, and *pushed*.

Instantly, I could breathe again, as the fellow's ugly mug was sent skyward at a tremendous rate. He hit the ceiling, leaving a serious dent in the plaster, and looked damned confused at the sudden reversal of gravity. I stopped *pushing*, and rolled out of the way to my right. He descended back to earth with a rather rapid finality, though he did perform a pretty good impression of someone flapping their arms and legs in an effort to achieve flight. He hit the tiles elbow first with a crunch, a yelp and a wet snap, his shoulder suddenly bulging and misshapen.

I rose to my feet quickly, though I was still winded and a little foggy from the sudden attack. I gave my wand a wave and banished him into the urinal, hard enough to leave yet another body-shaped dent somewhere in the room. The impact set off the cistern, covering him with cold water.

He pushed himself into a sitting position with his good left arm. He scrabbled under his jacket for a second but froze when he saw me raise my wand. "Keep going," I said encouragingly, even though my jaw hurt like blazes from where he connected with his foot.

He grimaced, but slowly extracted a handgun from his waistband. I gestured towards the opposite wall with my head, and with a sigh, he slid the weapon along the floor.

"Who are you?" I asked him.

He refused to answer, simply sitting in a flushing urinal, clutching his shoulder, breathing threateningly through partially blocked nostrils and glaring at me with hatred, but absolutely no fear.

I raised an eyebrow, and lowered my wand to point at his genitals. "At present count, you have two testicles. You honestly don't want to make me ask twice."

He swallowed, his eyes finally showing some semblance of apprehension. Funny how a threat to a pair of nuts always seems to gather some attention from males of the species. He still stayed silent though.

I shrugged, and began a few threatening wand movements. He held up his good hand with a panicked look in his eyes. "Wait!"

"Yes?"

He slowly pointed over towards the first fellow I stunned. "Him," he said in a thick German accent.

I frowned. "Him what?"

"Him pay me."

I glared at him for a moment. "Pay you for what?"

He swallowed. "Look to see who come after dead man."

I nodded. It made sense; I'd already deduced something along those lines, but I wasn't so sure I was correct that I was going to take his word for it. For all I knew, he was faking his skill in English and picked a story I was likely to believe. "Who does he work for?"

"Person called Malfoy," he said, making a piece of a puzzle click home in my mind. "Tall, blond," he added.

I took a deep breath. Narcissa Malfoy had been captured travelling to Albania, and she had been carrying a piece of Tom Riddle Sr's skeleton. If she had placed people on her path to watch for anyone following her, or asking questions about her, then it's no wonder Helmut paid terminally for his curiosity.

Sensing my preoccupation, the gorilla shifted his weight slightly, and I didn't need any sort of skill in Legilimency to tell what was coming. The thug knew he was in no position to tell me enough, and that his only chance to escape was to take me down. Trelawney would have been proud.

He leapt to his feet and lunged forward in the one fluid motion. For such a big guy, he sure moved like a cat. If I hadn't been expecting and waiting for it, I may have been caught with the speed of his attack. As it was, even with only one good hand he still managed to knock my wand out of alignment. Fortunately, I didn't need it. I stepped to one side, and gave his back a sharp *push* as he overbalanced.

I was a little too enthusiastic though. He was launched so hard his feet left the floor. He flew the short distance across the room into one of the mirrors above the basins. The glass shattered, as did his nose, I suspect. He collapsed, hitting the basin hard with his jaw. Predictably, given the bone density exhibited by his skeletal structure, the jaw won that little contest. Porcelain shards skittered across the tiled floor as he fell to one knee, supporting himself with his good hand.

There must be some sort of link between the belief in your superiority over others of the human race, and gross stupidity. If he had magic, this fellow would make a great Death Eater. Some sort of Goyle or Crabbe, maybe. He wobbled to his feet and lunged unsteadily at me once more, with very little coordination this time. I took the opportunity to prepare properly.

He crashed hard into my right fist, which I amplified with an even stronger *push* through my knuckles. The inertia his body possessed kept everything from his bull neck down coming forward, while his head snapped back sharply. His legs came up and his body went down, crashing with finality into the floor. The whole room shook with the impact.

Not that I really noticed. I was too busy jogging on the spot with my hand under my armpit, and my mouth open in a silent scream.

Fuck, that *hurt*!

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It took a few minutes before the pain in my hand subsided to merely agonising levels. I gingerly touched the back of my hand it with my left fingers, probing the bones. Judging from the pain, I'd probably cracked a few. I had a few generic pain relieving potions in my bag, but no healing draughts specific enough to repair bone damage. And I wasn't about to willingly imbibe Skelegrow, either.

Someone tried the door handle, and found it magically locked. I felt a prickling on my skin as someone outside the door started casting some spells. I recognised Muggle repellent and Notice-me-not charms. Cursing to myself about my lack of luck in this endeavour, I moved as quickly as I could while hindered by an agonising hand and the requirement to remain silent. I snatched up my bag and once more threw my cloak over my head, and crouched down in one corner of the room.

The male of the second pair who had followed me entered the now opened door. He looked around the toilet, at the two unconscious bodies, the plaster shards and dust, the smashed mirror, broken basin and the dented urinal. I aimed my wand at him as carefully as I could with my left hand, ready to drop him at the first sign of danger. Then he did something completely unexpected.

He laughed.

"Partridge!" he shouted. "Get in here!"

The woman who I saw with him earlier appeared in the doorway. "Wha- whoa."

He chuckled softly. "Yeah."

"Potter did this?" she asked, causing my heart to skip a beat. Were they after me too? I wondered if I could cast two stunning spells with my off hand fast enough to drop them both.

The man grinned. "So it would seem."

"Bollocks," she said heatedly, proving she was British. "He had no clue he was being followed," she argued.

The man knelt down beside the first fellow I stunned and rifled through his pockets. "He looked like he didn't. Apparently he did. Kingsley said he was good, and old Mad-Eye once told me he wished Potter had gone into the Auror Corps when he graduated."

"Pfft," the woman blew though her lips. "A spoiled rich kid like him wouldn't have lasted two minutes at the academy."

The man, an Auror I assumed, looked up at his partner. "Do you think any first year recruit at the academy would be able to pull off something like this? Draw Kellermann here and his hired muscle into an ambush and take them both out? No, whatever you think of him, there is more to him than meets the eye." He waved his wand over the thud he identified as 'Kellermann'. "He's just stunned. Check the other one."

The Auror called Partridge grumbled a bit, but carefully stepped around Kellermann and checked on the shaved gorilla. She cast a few diagnostic charms over his blood-covered face. "This can't be right."

"What?"

"This one isn't stunned; he's been knocked out cold. He's got a broken nose and jaw. Potter looks like he could be knocked over in a strong wind. There's no way he could toss this fellow around to do this sort of damage," she said plaintively, gesturing around at the damage to the room. I resisted the urge to *push* her through the wall.

Her partner looked at her intently for a few moments, then shook his head. "Right. The kid faced down the Dark Lord more often than any of us, but couldn't take down a Muggle? You don't think there's anything wrong with this picture?"

Rather than look insulted, Partridge just gave a shrug. "I suppose. Are we just going to leave these guys here?"

Twigg's eyes narrowed. "No. Secure the scene. These guys are coming with us, back to England."

Partridge blinked. "Rendition?" she blurted. "If there is even a hint of our involvement--"

Twigg nodded. "If we move quickly, there won't be. We came in here under repelling charms. Any witness out there will tell the same story. A young man that may have had a scar on his forehead entered, then two men followed. All three disappeared. There is nothing they can trace back to us. Now move! The window of opportunity is closing." With that, Twigg withdrew his wand, tapped a ring on his finger, and disappeared with the fellow called Kellermann.

Auror Partridge muttered a few choice oaths under her breath before casting a few spells with casual competence. I recognised them as the standard procedure for Aurors to magically secure a crime scene. I pursed my lips together in frustration. The spells would cut off any magical means of escape, as well as locate me even under my cloak.

With my skill severely hampered by having to use my off hand for casting, I figured simple would be best, so I sent a first year charm. It's always amusing to catch a big, bad Auror out with a simple petrification.

Partridge fell over backwards in a beautiful arcing sweep, landing hard enough that I winced at the impact. Leaving my cloak in place, I stepped over to her, sending a stunner into the evolutionary throwback Kellermann hired on my way past.

"Good afternoon, Auror Partridge. I don't mean to cast aspersions on your abilities, but you really didn't follow standard operating procedure did you?"

Her eyes flickered around the room, looking for me. I prudently stooped to relieve her of her wand. She was an Auror, supposedly one of the better trained wizards around. I would expect her to be able to break my simple charm. I placed her wand in full view on the unbroken basin.

True to my expectations, she shuddered slightly, breaking my jinx, and scrambled into a crouch, her eyes darting, searching.

"Now, now. Don't be alarmed. I do not intend to harm you, but I couldn't have you inadvertently stopping me," I said as I gingerly stepped around her positioning myself between her and the door.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

I gave a soft chuckle, and placed the tip of my wand into the crook of her neck. "When you are holding your wand at my neck, you can ask the questions, yes?"

Her eyes widened, and she visibly stiffened. "What do you want?"

"That man Kellermann. You had him under surveillance. Did he contact anyone before following Potter?"

She swallowed, and said, "I can't release information on a current investigation."

I snorted, drawing my yew wand and placing it side by side with my holly one. "Oh, so now you follow procedure? *Imperio* !" I cast. Even using my off hand, my wand was so close she had no hope of dodging.

Her features assumed the familiar blank look that I remembered from when Crouch Jnr. cast the curse on my fourth year DADA class. She fought the spell, but cast from brother wands made it far more difficult for her. "Tell me if Kellermann contacted anyone before following Potter," I said, phrasing it as a command, rather than a question.

She nodded dreamily. "Kellermann sent an owl to someone before following Potter, but I don't know to who it was addressed."

I cancelled my spell, shouldered the door open and ran for it, fighting a grin all the way.

"Shit!" came a voice from behind me, as I dodged through the thin, but convenient crowd. Well, convenient for me, anyway. If there was one thing I learned from that little adventure, it's that swearing sounds much better in German. Probably a lot more satisfying too.

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I leaned my head against the train's window, feeling the vibrating pane with my skull. With the exception of the Hogwarts Express, I don't think there is a public transport service in England that runs with the same Teutonic efficiency as the trains in Germany. The service for the first leg of my trip to Albania left exactly on schedule, leaving a couple of Antipodean tourists who arrived fifteen seconds too late stranded on the platform.

From the encounter in the toilet, I had made my way back to the International Portkey Terminal, and found a small shop that sold healing draughts in the nearby Magical community. The quality wasn't anywhere near Madam Pomfrey's standards, and especially not Snape's, but it was sufficient for my needs. My hand was stiff and would ache for the next few days, but I had full mobility.

As the train thundered through the night into Austria, I thought back on what had happened in the last day. It had been rather eventful, even when compared to my expected daily levels of excitement and life-threatening peril. It had covered three countries so far, four if you include the short stop to Scotland to deposit a biblical age serpent and his collection of Halloween goodies. In the next few days, I'd have travelled through another handful on my round-about trip into Albania.

Despite the trump cards I was accumulating, like an entire secret chamber of dark artefacts every major organisation in the world would like to get its hands on, I was certainly limiting the amount of the planet I was able to travel around at will. Vatican City speaks for itself, but having a magical Mob Boss out for my blood wasn't going to make things any easier. The less said about using an Unforgivable curse on an Auror the better.

An elderly chap with a cap and a leather harness around his shoulders entered the carriage, asking for tickets. I reached into a pocket to retrieve mine, and waited patiently as he made his way steadily along the rows of seats.

It was oddly reassuring, I reflected as I handed my ticket to him to be checked, that as famous as I was in the magical world, the Muggle world couldn't care less about me. I accepted my ticket back, and stretched in my seat. Even though it was only early evening, I was tired all the way to my bones.

From inside my clothes, a voice shrieked "Harry?"

I jumped about a foot into the air, which considering I was sitting down at the time was a remarkable feat. Several people turned around to look at me. Thinking quickly, I turned around and looked at the person in the seat behind me. All eyes swivelled to look at him. The poor bugger looked as though he had been asleep until someone shrieked my name a few feet away, and he wilted under the stares of the rest of the carriage like a Hufflepuff first year under Peeves' attention.

I put on a pensive expression and moved seats. No one gave me a second look; they were too busy staring at the poor bugger who looked as though he'd just been woken up by someone shrieking a name in his ear.

With as much care as possible, I drew my wand and erected a notice-me-not field around my new seat. My hand was still a little stiff, but the wand movements weren't too complex.

I pulled out the mirror and looked in. "Hermione?"

"Harry!" she exclaimed. "Where are you? What are you doing? Why are you--?"

"Stop!" I commanded.

Oddly, she obeyed, though looked as though she was in the process of hyperventilating.

"I'm on a train," I said, answering her first question. "I'm heading to Albania." As she absorbed those little nuggets, I took the time to examine her. The bags under her eyes were puffy and dark, and her hair was even more of a mess than usual. Even more than mine. She looked as though she hadn't slept in days. Her hollow cheeks showed that she hadn't been eating properly. "Are you alright?" I asked her. "You look terrible."

"Please come home, I need to talk to you," she begged, ignoring my question.

"What about?" I asked curiously. Was she going to apologise, or even want to get back together?

She burst into tears. "I don't want you to hate me," she gulped between gasps.

That shocked me. "Hermione, I don't hate you. I don't hate you at all."

"But you do!" she wailed, sounding completely irrational. "You keep avoiding me, and won't talk to me any more. Harry, please, come back!"

"You left me," I pointed out.

Her face screwed up into a caricature of anguish. "I tried to come back to talk to you, but you- you- you," she stammered, hiccupping and crying enough that she couldn't finish the sentence.

I sighed. "Hermione, please calm down. I didn't know what to say to you. I didn't want to say the wrong thing. You have been one of the most important people in my life; I still want you to be a part of it."

"Really?" she asked timidly.

I nodded. "Really. But this isn't the time for this discussion."

"Then come back home!"

"I can't."

That set off a fresh wave of tears. "But why?"

I frowned, and looked around the carriage. No one was obviously paying me any attention, but I wasn't about to take that for granted. I erected a silencing charm around me.

"I'm looking for the last piece of Riddle's soul," I whispered.

She blinked. "You found another one?"

I nodded slowly, and checked my surroundings again. "Ron and I found the locket, and I'm going to see if I can find the goblet."

Her eyes bulged. "You found the locket? Where?"

I smiled softly at her. "In a Gringotts vault that Regulus left to Sirius." So long as she talked about Horcruxes, I could keep my voice steady. As many times as I'd practised this conversation in my head, I wasn't ready to actually have it. Blaise's words came back to me. Hermione had hurt me, she had hurt me badly. And as much as I loved being with her, making love to her, I wasn't sure just how much I could trust her. I could only imagine what Hermione's reaction would be if she found out that I'd instigated the death of a Mob Boss' son, let alone pilfered the Vatican's embarrassingly large collection of evil detritus.

Regulus left the locket to Sirius?" she exclaimed.

I shook my head. "No, he put it in a vault. When he died, Sirius inherited it. I have no idea what Regulus' motives were."

Her cheeks flushed. I tried not to grin. In the past, that sort of logic argument would have had the same effect on her as a copy of Playwizard would have had on Ron. It would appear that she still loved me for my mind, if not my actions.

That, in and of itself, answered the questions I still had over our relationship.

"Hermione, please go and get some sleep. I will talk to you when I get back."

"Promise?" she asked, her voice wavering.

I nodded. "I promise. I'll be back soon, and we will have a long talk then."

She didn't look happy, but at least she wasn't hysterical. I broke the connection with a tap from my wand, and put the mirror away. Checking to see that my belongings had their aversion charm in place, I pulled my hands inside the sleeves of my sweater, leaned back and closed my eyes. I'd worry about the future later.

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For a country on the Adriatic Sea, Albania wasn't exactly my idea of a good holiday destination. While the few beaches I saw on my travels looked gorgeous, it didn't have the party atmosphere of some other European destinations, but my real aversion came directly from the low grade headache I got about an hour after entering the country. Since the pain was centred roughly on my scar, I figured that I was probably near the place that Riddle hid for all those years after he killed my parents. It wasn't debilitating as some of my Voldy-aches had been, but it was uncomfortable, like an unscratchable itch. None of his Horcruxes had this effect on me, so I assumed it was due to the fact that Riddle had spent a dozen or so years haunting the area as a sort of low-grade spectre.

Not speaking the local tongue meant that getting around took some doing. A large number of locals spoke English, but distrust too widespread for people to be overly helpful. It didn't help that the place was awash with refugees from Kosovo; yet another in a long list of places where one group of people committed atrocities on another group, seemingly in the belief that committing atrocities against other human beings was morally acceptable.

It was nearly two full days later that I'd managed to reach the location in Zab's note. The directions led me to a small village, hardly more than a large collection of houses at a junction of two minor roads at the edge of a wooded area. From his notes, Helmut had apparently located the people travelling towards Albania, and extrapolated several locations from their associates. This place had the highest correlation. Hardly rock hard evidence of the last Horcrux's location, but enough to start.

With all the refugees in the country, I hoped to at least have a chance of fitting in, but gave that up as a lost cause when I attracted every bloody pair of eyes in the village after getting off the bus. Narcissa Malfoy was bound to receive the news of my presence sooner rather than later, which meant that I had a small window of opportunity to track the information flow. That was all right, I had a couple of ways of becoming invisible at my disposal.

I found a small lodging house, and successfully negotiated a room for a few nights, employing several hand gestures and producing some local currency. Once alone in my room, which was hardly larger than the smallest bedroom at Privet Drive, I dove into my backpack and extracted my invisibility robe, my acromantula gloves and my portkey sock. After teaching me how to anchor the portkey, I had learned how to recharge one in my own time. I wouldn't want to personally test that it would go through the wards of the Vatican again, but it would be able to take me to the Chamber of Secrets with a word.

I bundled the rest of my possessions into the bag, and cast an aversion charm and a particularly nasty (not to mention illegal) warding jinx. The first would prevent Muggles from locating it to rummage, the second would prevent the first wizard to rummage from being located. Well, that's not entirely true. It would prevent the whole wizard from being located. Bits and pieces of him would be fairly obvious.

The Zabini family library was full of interesting things like that. Of course, while the aversion charm could be sustained for several years, the jinx was only temporary, and would collapse in a day or so, which should be plenty of time.

With the robe on, and my wands in my sleeves, I left the room as silently as I could, and began wandering through the village, conducting random Legilimency sweeps of the populace. Someone here must have seen something odd, like someone whose dress sense was a few hundred years out of date.

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I came to an uneasy conclusion that the people of this anonymous town lived in a state of fear. As it was, the town was the quietest, most subdued place I had ever seen. Everyone spoke in whispers. Children didn't play outdoors. Even dogs were silenced quickly when they barked, usually at me. I was invisible to humans, but to dogs, I was an invisible patch of air that smelled like an unfamiliar human. Despite modern schooling and access to science and news from around the world, there was a deep set belief that vampires lived in the ruined manor house to the north of the town. From the memories I examined, there were occasional stories of people going missing for decades, though recently the number had risen to almost one a month. All kidnapped from their beds during the night. Police investigators sent here left shortly afterwards with a befuddled expression and never returned.

Well, that was a big clue.

I took the time to do some preliminary scouting of the old building, quickly finding evidence of brand new wards and other magicks. Hogwarts had sophisticated, almost poetic charms in place to make the castle look like a crumbling ruin to Muggles, but the charms around this place were blocky

â€“ inelegant. They overlapped when it wasn't necessary, wasting both power and maintenance effort. They had been cast with extreme security in mind, but if I was to trip a place where the wards overlapped, those inside wouldn't be able to tell where they had been breached. It was the equivalent of comparing a squat, square red brick building to a cathedral.

I paused in my reconnaissance. Something just didn't seem right. Not just with the wards, but the whole situation. Without casting some detection spells, which ironically were trivial to detect by others, I had no real way of examining the wards in more detail. But for all my expectations, I had one big question.

Why?

Why would Riddle, or his minions for that matter, pick such an obvious place to keep the last Horcrux? Given the fact that Kellermann contacted someone before following me, I had to assume they knew I was coming. That at least was fair to assume, given the recent nature of the defences. But was it fair to assume they knew I assumed they knew I was coming. Ugh, thinking like made my headache worse.

As blocky as the wards were, I could think of three different ways to bypass them, and only one involved forcibly bringing them down. If someone thought Harry Potter, idiot Gryffindor, was coming to try and steal a valuable item, I couldn't imagine a better trap.

With night closing in, I gave up my reconnaissance for the day and returned to the hostel. Breaking into the Vatican had been difficult, but I had assumed they were competent. Ditto with Gringotts. But this place, I felt the impatient urge to just blast my way through the inadequate defences and stun anything with a heartbeat. Two years of learning at the wand of a powerful, intelligent and cautious wizard easily enabled me to ignore that childish whim. I was sorted into Gryffindor for a reason, but I was enough of a Slytherin at heart to recognise a setup.

If I was in charge of the security here, I'd have moved the Horcrux a long way away. But making the assumption that these people would do the same was egotistical in the extreme. I had no idea what sort of limits on their travel they had. I didn't know what other governments had this place under surveillance. Hell, for all I knew, the big potion that Wormtail used to resurrect Voldemort after the Tournament might take months to brew, and may need the Horcrux to be nearby while it simmered. That thought gave me pause.

I had no real knowledge of the details of the rituals it took to restore a soul fragment to a body, Horcruxes and their usage not featuring prominently in Zab's curriculum. But from personal experience, the owner may well require some sort of long term exposure to the Horcrux in question. Before I started my forth year at Hogwarts, Frank Bryce was murdered by Riddle. That meant that he and Wormtail were present at Little Hangleton at least a full nine months before I was kidnapped. It seemed logical to assume Nagini was with them. Since he waited until the end of the year to complete the ritual, did he either wait for my blood specifically, or did he need that time for something else. Did he take my blood for any other reason than to get past my mother's protection? What else could have made him wait nearly a full year while he was so vulnerable?

I ate the meagre meal offered by my temporary landlady, and retired to my room early. I dispelled the traps around my bag, and sorted through it again. If I was to be successful in this next heist, I needed to think more about how it could be protected. Or perhaps, I should think about how Zab would protect it.

Of course, when designing traps, most people only thought about how to capture or contain their prey, making sure the could walk into the trap, but not out. I smiled and tossed an item from my bag up and down in my hand.

Such limited thinking.

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## Journeyman Potter 'Crux Finale

Before the sun broke over the landscape, I was in a tree, surveying the outer edges of the wards surrounding the property. As the light slowly filtered through the morning fog, filling the sky with a beautiful palette of oranges and reds, I double checked my belongings while waiting patiently.

I could have simply attacked the wards. With my brother wands and innate magical strength, I could easily bring them down in maybe five minutes, though it would be draining to do so. The problem with using that tactic lay with the after effects; it would be like kicking over an anthill. Every witch and wizard in the area would swarm out with the intention of defending the place. Given the simplistic, if strong layout, I had to assume that there were some more, unseen defensive measures.

I'd done some thinking in the privacy of my room last night. One of the conclusions I'd arrived at was that as strong as the wards were from assault from without, the way they were layered meant that it would be an all but trivial exercise to bring them down from within. I suppose like any good defenses, they should hamper those attacking, but not those defending, but if even one attacker got behind them, they could be nullified. If I was going to use that particular layout, it would be to slow down a small group of intruders, with the intention of setting off another trap.

And since I couldn't take the time to slow down, I had to get behind them quickly. And that meant bringing them down quickly, to get behind them.

The air was biting cold, and my breath clouded in front of my face. I took a deep, steadying breath, and prepared to enter the lair.

Even though I was sort of expecting it, the detonation from the far side of the manor startled me. It wasn't particularly powerful, but in the still morning air, it shattered the peace like one of Ron's thunderous farts at four in the morning in Gryffindor Tower. The shouts and swearing coming from the various parts of the manor amused me no end.

I slowly climbed down the tree, wishing not for the first time that I'd brought along my Firebolt. It would have made this sort of foray so much easier. I reached the base of the tree and checked to see that my invisibility robe was in place. I was taking my backpack with me on this little jaunt, so the last thing I wanted was for part of me to be visible in an effort to keep my belongings invisible. I took out my Gryffindor scarf and wrapped it around my head, covering my mouth and nose. If it wasn't for the hood of the invisibility robe, the scarlet and gold material wouldn't exactly do much for my sneaking around, but it would keep the vapour from my breath from being noticed.

As I expected, the wards on the side closest to me flickered and died suddenly, and I took that opportunity to race through the boundary. The tiny cemetery on the other side was ancient, with several headstones completely covered with moss and fungi. I spared a thought for those who had gone before, wondering if their ancestral property had been subverted by the current occupants, or if this had always been a magical household. I shook my head to clear it, and continued on.

Now that I was through that first defensive layer, I became rather more cautious. I kept to the stone path where I could in an effort to avoid any soft ground that could give my footsteps away. I managed to make it to a sheltered niche in the manor wall before a dozen men in various states of undress converged on the cemetery with wands drawn and sleep in their eyes.

A rapid-fire conversation in German followed. I couldn't even make out the only swear word I knew in their language, they were talking so fast. Eventually, a consensus was reached, and the group split up. Three left to go back to the source of the detonation, while the rest stayed behind to re-erect the wards. I found it interesting that the semi-clothed ones didn't even take the time to transfigure their underwear into robes in the brisk morning air. That in and of itself told me that preserving the outer defenses was a priority to them.

I left the main group, and tailed along behind the trio. They led me away from the cemetery, and around the side of the manor itself. It was rather nice to have them lead me directly to the source of the explosion. I had wondered briefly how I was going to find the place without help, but apparently I've developed a rather sizeable karmic debt.

I followed my unwitting guides to the far side of the property, where another dozen or so more wizards were examining the site of a recent bang. The site itself was trivial to identify; there was only one part of the garden that had a scorched earth look going. The grass around ground zero was blackened and flattened angling away from the epicentre. There didn't seem to be any other damage, to either the nearby buildings, or to any living being.

Given the sheer number of detection spells they were casting, I kept my distance and observed the group by sticking my head round the last corner. With a nod, I reached into my robe and withdrew the object around which my entry plans had been developed.

I gave the time turner a small-twist, and was immediately sent back maybe quarter of an hour in time. I closed my eyes to avoid the sensation of disorientation, and when I opened them, the morning light was all but gone, the ground was pristine, and the place was silent again.

Hey, if the goblins don't think in the fourth dimension, these guys certainly wouldn't.

I stepped over to the grassed area that had been blackened less than a minute ago in my personal frame of reference. I pulled out one of the louder Wheezes I owned from my backpack. One thing Neville taught me about potions was that with a little applied incompetence, you could make even the simplest magical brew explode.

It was the work of a few moments to gently prise open the cardboard collar of a firework Wheeze and pour in a few drops of Potensavenenum. The powder inside congealed into a thick, ugly looking paste. The instant the paste started to smoke, I dropped the whole mixture into one of the healing draughts I kept in my bag as a matter of course. I put it gently on the ground, and bolted back round the corner. In a few moments, it crackled, spat, then went bang. With extreme alacrity.

Well, that was fun.

This close to the detonation, my ears began ringing, but there was not a lot of damage done to anything but the lawn. I carefully made my way back to the cemetery, and drew my wands. With the distraction on the other side of the house, there were no prying eyes to interfere with my work. I gave the wards a small prod and poke, doing the magical equivalent of pulling on a thread, unravelling them from behind in an instant. The cascade failure was rather colourful too.

I stepped back to one side and tried to see if I could make myself out in the steely dawn light. The only thing I noticed was some of the taller strands of grass waving briefly in a non-existent wind, but unless I was looking for it, I'm sure I wouldn't have spotted it. I couldn't even make out a shimmer as my younger self took up the aforementioned spot in a handy niche.

It was interesting to see the same group of wizards approach the cemetery from a different perspective. This time, I was on the other side of the cemetery to the manor, hiding by leaning against one of the larger headstones. I was tempted to stick around to see what sort of techniques they used to put the ward barriers back up, but I figured that would push the limits of my luck. I carefully crept off around the manor in the opposite direction to where the other version of me went, hoping to avoid most of the excitement.

I wondered just how confused the inhabitants would be as they tried to figure out how someone got in behind their wards before they actually came down. I was banking on the main theory being an inside job, which would mean that there would be a great many fingers pointed for at least the next hour or so. Someone focused on defending their actions and preventing being blamed tended to be a little more distracted than usual.

With my acromantula gloves on, I climbed up the side of the main building, and looked around at the grounds from the high vantage point. The main building was connected to three smaller structures, each accessible by a covered walkway. I spent the next half hour watching the comings and goings of a lot of seriously pissed off wizards. It didn't take much to observe the security techniques they used to enter the building at the various

entrances.

I didn't see Narcissa Malfoy though. I'd had time to think about that too. She was supposed to be in Auror custody, and I suppose she may well still be. Kellermann may be working for her, but I had no way of knowing exactly when she had retained his services. If she had done so before trying to get here, then it was logical to assume she was still safely in custody. However, I knew that keeping a pure-blooded princess of the bigoted world in custody was somehow difficult for people obsessed with who your great-grandparents were. For all I knew, she was out and about, footloose and free.

Eventually the furore below died down. Most of the wizards went back to whatever they were doing beforehand, though a fair sized group disappeared to destinations unknown. If they were bringing reinforcements, I'd have to hurry.

I clambered down the side of the building again, and went straight for one of the doors. It was time to get this party started.

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Once inside the building, it didn't take too long before I found something interesting. As a matter of fact, it took such a short amount of time not even Ron would have accepted it as lucky.

As a matter of fact one of the first rooms I entered was a vast hall. Though a far cry from the magnificence of Hogwarts' Great Hall, for a rural manor house in , it was impressive. Two stories tall, the ceiling was a thatch of thick, criss-crossing wooden beams. A U-shaped balcony, supported by six sturdy columns, ran around the left, far and right walls of the room, allowing access to the rooms on the second level. The wall behind me, above the double-doors I'd just entered, was lined with portraits. Two spiral staircases in the far corners of the hall stood from the ground to the balcony.

At the far end of the hall, between the staircases, a golden goblet sat on a plinth.

Yeah, that's not suspicious. Not suspicious at all. Someone here thinks I'm still the same impulsive Gryffindor I was as a child.

I could almost feel the people behind the doors of the second level, just waiting to burst out and spring the trap around the goblet. Well, let's give them a show.

I stepped to the side of the door, and slowly climbed up the wall, avoiding the numerous portraits. It took a few minutes, but eventually I managed to grip the main ceiling joist, and hauled myself into the nest of wooden supports. I carefully threaded my way through them until I was about half-way along the hall. While I wasn't an architect by any stretch, there seemed to be many more beams up here than strictly necessary. More than one shifted treacherously as I put my weight on it, making any forward gains exciting to say the least. Bloody incompetent carpenters.

Finally, I was in position to make an initial survey of the defenses in the building. I drew my holly wand, and took aim at the goblet. One bludgeoning curse later, and around a dozen or so magical defenses flared to life, exploding with a wonderfully colourful display of impotent power. Of course, anyone standing next to the goblet would have been severely inconvenienced, but I was too far away to suffer anything other than afterimages from the flashes.

As I expected, about a third of the doors on the second level balcony burst open within a few moments of the trap springing, and several wizards stood along the balcony with their wands pointing downwards into the main hall. Nine, I counted. The main doors to the hall proper burst open too, admitting another quartet of wizards, all of whom were wearing the same style of robes.

I smirked as I mentally ran through the spells I knew that were colourless and were within my ability to cast silently. One came to mind quickly, and with a quick flick, I sent a mild concussion hex at the feet of those who had just entered. It didn't do anything to them directly except frighten them, but that was enough to crank their paranoia level up to eleven. That's the thing about ambushes. If you turn the predators into prey, they tend to get rattled easily. Judging from the expressions on the faces I could see clearly, their morning just wasn't going well at all. Every wizard in the room

except for Yours Truly was shouting something or other.

I silently cast the spell again, this time aiming for one of the wizards, rather than the floor in front of them. His thigh shattered under the assault, staining his robes with blood while his scream drew the attention of everyone in the room. Instantly, bedlam ensued.

Under the cover of the noise and confusion, I tossed a more powerful hex at the support columns for the walkway, shattering the trio of columns holding one side up. The six wizards on that side of the balcony fell to the floor amid a hail of woodchips and sawdust. I couldn't help but grin; this was going so well.

Someone shrieked in English, "He's invisible! Activate the secondary defenses!"

That caught my attention. The wizards below who were still mobile sprinted away from the centre of the hall, putting their backs against the walls. They then started sending curses at the ceiling, which worried me briefly, until I saw that the spells was not aimed at me.

It was aimed at the beams. The useless, loose beams that I'd carefully climbed over, then ignored.

All along the ceiling, timber flared and exploded, sending a mass of kindling hurtling downwards. I thought for a second I'd unwittingly managed to evade their trap by being in the wooden supports, but with a stomach-jumbling shift, the whole mess detached from the roof and fell towards the floor. With nothing to grab hold of, I was taken along for the ride. I managed to get a single cushioning charm off at the floor below me which undoubtedly saved me from being killed on impact, but a piece of aerial firewood caught me behind the ear, knocking me out.

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A very familiar drawl intruded on my enforced nap. "Well, well, if it isn't Saint Potter."

I stiffened briefly, knowing the impossibility of that voice. "You appear to have me at a disadvantage," I slurred as I blinked my unfocused eyes open and looked up, playing for time. As my vision cleared, I counted at least five wands pointed at me from various directions, making any thoughts of aggression wait in line until I'd done some threat assessment. I lay on the floor of the hall amongst shattered pieces of timber, remnants of my snipers nest. From the extent of the wreckage, anyone not against the wall when the whole lot came down would have been in serious danger. I swallowed and focused as I took in the visage in front of me. "You do look vaguely familiar, though." I slowly reached up and gingerly touched my head. There was a sticky mess behind my right ear.

Draco Malfoy frowned slightly, not expecting that answer. "Have you been obliviated?"

I shook my head, managing to keep from wincing, while looking at him intently. I hadn't seen the ferret since I'd blown his hand to pieces. Blaise and Hermione told me that he had died at the battle of Hogwarts, after creating a diversion for the teachers. Obviously, someone was either mistaken or covering for him. It appeared that he hadn't exactly got off lightly from the battle either. It had been a year ago, and yet faint scars covered Malfoy's forehead, and crossed one side of his face, down his cheek, and gave his left eye a nasty squint.

It also gave me a new view on just who the skinhead in the toilet was talking about. I had assumed it had been Narcissa Malfoy he had referred to, being the only Malfoy I knew at the time who was still counted among the living. Obviously, the ferret had managed to pull a fast one on the world. Rather impressive really. Rilifa's comments on the inconsistencies of Draco's will now made a bit more sense. I probably should have followed up on that.

"Wait," I said, with a theatrical expression of recollection, trying to drag the conversation out to give me time to get a bearing on where everyone was. "Fal-something or other, right? Falmoy? Falboy? Didn't you go to Hogwarts?" I asked, while examining my surroundings.

Draco spluttered. “Malfoy!” he roared at me. “Draco Malfoy!”

I pursed my lips together for a second, as though thinking deeply, then shook my head, gently this time. “Nope, doesn’t ring a bell. Are you sure we knew each other?” I assumed an expression of superiority, aiming for an insulting level of patronisation. “Or were you one of my groupies that used to hang around and wait for a glimpse of your hero? I could sign something for you if you like?”

Fuck, it was easy to push his buttons. The only thing Malfoy ever really had going for him was his name. He had no special skills or magical ability, just his family’s influence. The idea that his arch-enemy from childhood wouldn’t remember him just sent him into a pants-wetting tantrum. I steeled myself to *push* my way out of this.

As delightful as it was to poke the ferret into a frothing apoplexy, a second voice entered the conversation. “Idiot boy, he is distracting you. Keep your wits about you,” the voice said in a German accent.

I turned to face the second voice. It was familiar, but unless the British Aurors were completely incompetent, he shouldn’t be here either. “I don’t recognise your voice either, Mr...?”

“Kellermann.”

“Oh,” I said. Yep, I may as well rename the Ministry’s law enforcement arm the bloody Keystone Kops. They can’t even conduct an illegal rendition properly. “Nice to meet you. Wait, weren’t you found in a toilet block in Berlin with a gorilla? What sort of sexual perversions do you people practise?”

Unlike Malfoy, Kellermann didn’t react in any way to my taunting. He just stunned me. How bloody inconsiderate, not giving me the opportunity to escape.

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The next time I was conscious, I found myself sitting on a polished wooden floor, with my back against a thick wooden column, wide enough that my shoulders. My arms were shackled above my head at my wrists. The room itself was light and airy, which was confusing to say the least. Seeing that I was awake, Malfoy stepped in front of me with a trademarked smirk, and kicked my ankle.

“Well, Potter, finally I get to break you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You call this a dungeon?” I asked, looking around the room. The way the roof sloped, I’d say we were in an attic. “Malfoy, you really need to get your sense of theatrics looked at. Merlin’s balls, you lived in a dungeon for seven years, couldn’t you come up with something better than this?” I noted the position of two guards on the inside of the only door to the room. Both had their wands at the ready, but not aimed at me. It would appear that competence isn’t absorbed by association, if Malfoy was any indication.

His grey eyes flashed dangerously. “Shut up! Dumbledore’s not here to protect you this time. I’m going to enjoy this. I think I’ll slice off your hand,” he said, running my own damned wand along the inside of my shackled wrist.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m sure any pre-pubescent Hufflepuff would be terrified right now. Perhaps you could tell me which of the seven thousand or so times I humiliated you that I needed Dumbledore to come rushing to my aid?”

He made a fist and backhanded me across the cheek. It stung, but his sudden need to hide that fist behind his back and flex his fingers sort of ruined the action as far as I could tell. I did note that it was his left hand. All through school, he’d used his right hand for everything: wandwork,

writing, reaching in vain for the snitch, everything. I wondered briefly just how badly damaged his fine motor skills were on his repaired hand.

“Actually, I do remember something. Didn’t you die?” I asked pointedly, fishing for information.

Malfoy smirked. “That’s what I wanted people to think,” he said, still trying to pretend his hand wasn’t hurting. I learned that lesson less than a week ago. If you are going to hit someone with your fist, hit their body. Use a rock if you want to hit them in the head. “Unlike you, I know how to plan.”

I reflected deeply on Malfoy’s idiotic posturing throughout our mutual time at Hogwarts, specifically on the times he failed to account for the fact that he was outgunned during his taunting episodes on the Hogwarts Express. “Historical evidence to the contrary notwithstanding,” I interjected. “How many times did you need assistance getting off the Hogwarts Express?”

That earned me a kick in the side. I hissed as I drew breath through clenched teeth.

The glee on Malfoy’s face at his tormenting was fairly disturbing in its mindlessness. He crouched down, smirking at my position. “It was easy enough. I knew that we had been given a suicide mission. The Dark Lord expected us to be captured. But it wasn’t hard to cast the Imperius on a few of the Slytherin traitors of your Dumbledore’s Army idiots. I made them hit me with minor spells, and then take me to the Infirmary. I’d cast the Imperius on Pomfrey beforehand. She treated me first, gave me a Draught of the Living Death, and kept me in a separate ward while claiming I had died.”

I was impressed, despite myself. “You actually thought ahead? And took into account the fact that you might fail? Malfoy, I am impressed. You’ve actually come to terms with your own inadequacies. Well done! I honestly didn’t think that you’d ever recognise the limits of your admittedly very meagre abilities.”

Malfoy’s mauve features contorted into a mask of insane fury as he stood, and he once more slammed his booted foot into my side. I felt a rib give way with a sharp sliver of pain. He raised my wand and took aim at my heart. “*Crucio* !” came the expected spell.

I stiffened, tightening every muscle I could. The pain lancing through me was intolerable, but not a patch on Voldemort’s effort. It still took my entire will not to scream. After a century, the pain stopped.

I gasped, my broken rib making even breathing difficult. But after being subjected to that curse, the white-hot knife sensation felt almost cleansing. I slumped down, letting my shackled arms support my weight.

“What?” Malfoy demanded, sounding incredulous. I’d obviously missed something while exercising my vocal chords.

One of the guards spoke. “I said enough. He needs to be able to speak, and he can’t if he bites through his tongue. Kellermann said we need to question him.”

Malfoy snarled at him. “Shut up, kraut! I give the orders here.”

Both guards stiffened, but kept their expressions neutral. “No, you don’t.”

Malfoy twirled my wand around in his fingers, looking like a petulant boy trying to intimidate two seasoned wizards. Funny that. “Potter here knows nothing.”

"He knows what the Master's Horcrux looks like. He knew where to find us. He also got past our wards without tripping them. That alone should tell you that we need to extract more information."

Malfoy actually stamped his foot with toddler-like petulance. It was all I could do not to laugh at him. "Fine, get Kellermann. We'll ask him whatever he wants to, and then I get to turn his brain to mush afterwards. I've waited too long for this."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at his immaturity, settling for remaining in my current position. The two German guards shared a pointed look filled with contempt, then nodded to Malfoy. One turned and left through the tiny door, bending over to fit through the five-foot tall doorway.

Well, that just improved my odds dramatically. I kept my eyes closed while I gently drew in a breath, ready to *push* Malfoy through the wall and out over the grounds. His expression ought to be pensieve-worthy. If after this I happen to run across Narcissa and find myself in a position to assist in shuffling her off the mortal coil, Dobby may just be diagnosed with the first house-elf case of pensieve-addiction.

"Potter?" he demanded. I ignored him. "You hear that, Potter? I'm going to make you wish you had never been born!" Malfoy said, proving yet again that inbreeding limits mental development past the age of twelve.

I mentally sighed. Even in my current predicament, I still maintained a fundamental level of control of the situation, merely by retaining the ability to manipulate Malfoy's emotions. The idiot seemed too easy to enrage. He seemed too easy to push into a frothing frenzy. I was about to *push* him away when a thought occurred to me.

I blinked. I wonder...

"Malfoy?" I croaked, my throat not having recovered completely. "That Horcrux you're carrying? It's making you stupid."

His eyes narrowed, but his hand did go to a pocket in his robes. How the hell did this guy ever get sorted into a House that prized subtlety? Still, it was nice to know where the bloody thing was. "How would you know what I'm carrying?"

I started laughing, beginning with a soft chuckle, building up to a full belly laugh, only stopping when the pain in my side flared again. "Well, perhaps *stupider* would be a better term."

Once more, my holly wand came to bear, but before Malfoy could utter a curse, Kellermann stormed in, holding my belongings. "Malfoy! Enough!"

Once more, my old Hogwarts' chum turned purple at being ordered about. "I give the orders! I pay you, remember?"

Kellermann ignored his outburst. "Leave. Now," the whip-like man said in a tone that brooked no argument. Malfoy looked on the verge of an apoplexy before he spun on his heel and left, but not before gracing me with a threatening sneer.

I yawned at him.

Once Malfoy had left, sporting what could only be described as an imminent aneurism, Kellermann stood over me, simply looking down. With the second guard back in the room, my window of opportunity to attack only two wizards had been closed. I could try to push all three away, but I still had to get my hands free afterwards. Think, Harry, think!

Kellermann casually waved his wand, conjuring a dust cloth-covered table to my right. Once magically in place, the German emptied the contents of

my backpack onto his creation, and began sorting through them.

The first thing he held up was my yew wand. "Where did you get this?"

Seeing no purpose in lying, I simply said, "From your Master's headless corpse." Well, there was no purpose in lying, but that didn't mean I couldn't try to crack his composure.

Nothing, not even a flicker of emotion. He was too experienced to become angry no matter what taunting he received. He slipped the wand into his pocket and held up my homemade gloves. "These?"

"I made them."

That at least got me an appreciative nod. He put them down and fingered my invisibility cloak and robe. "This robe is interesting. Did you make it too?"

"Not exactly," I replied, wondering where this was going.

He grinned humourlessly. "I suspect that means that you had an invisibility cloak sewn into this, then."

"Two, actually, and I did the sewing," I said, wondering if he was going to go through every item I owned. If so, my chance to escape would come very shortly.

"You owned three?" He sounded surprised at that. I suppose they are rare enough that an older family may only own one.

"I inherited one. That's the one that's still whole. I stole one from a Death Eater in Hogsmeade during the last battle there, and the other was given to me by someone called Falcone for not hurting him," I said, trying to be Mr. Helpful. Kellermann was too experienced to be fooled, but the two guards at the small door may relax.

Kellermann stared at me for about twenty seconds before he nodded to himself. "I see. You have an interesting collection here. This, for instance, is a restricted item in every country in Europe," he said holding up the timeturner.

"I found it in a vault," I said flatly, glancing at the rest of my gear. I grinned tightly. The portkey sock was on top of the pile.

With a slight *push*, I sent the sock tumbling off the table. Kellermann frowned, but bent over, still holding the timeturner. "A sock?" he asked, picking it up and turning it over in his hand. It must have looked out of place in the middle of high quality gear.

"I got it from the Chamber."

"What Chamber?" he asked, before vanishing as the portkey activation word whisked him away. I tried calculating the probability of him fairing well against a two thousand year old basilisk even with a timeturner, but gave that up quickly. I can't do mental arithmetic with numbers that small.

The guards gaped mutely at the space their boss had recently resided, before I shoved them hard into the wall with a sharp *push*. The sound of



their skulls hitting the wall echoed loudly in the confines of the attic. One slumped down directly under the indentation he made in the wall, but the other must have had an internal support behind him, because he bounced part of the way back to me, lying just a metre or so away from my feet. Finally, some luck goes my way.

I kicked off my sneakers and shuffled my feet forward, hanging painfully from my wrists. My side was on fire, but I managed to grip the fallen guard's sleeve with my toes. With a massive, ineffective effort, I slowly dragged him close enough to gingerly pick up his wand with my toes. Looking like a drunk doing yoga, I carefully tried to raise the pilfered wand up to my hands. I failed three times without even getting close, only to discover that my time had run out.

The short door opened and two wizards entered. The first stopped and stared at the scene in shock while his friend was still ducking into the room. The lead chap was blocking his partner's view, but I knew that wouldn't stay the case for long. As he went for his wand, I gathered my strength and *pushed* him as hard and as sharply as I could. Exhibit A smashed into Exhibit B, sending them both careening through the open door. There was obviously a stairwell right behind them, because both disappeared amid the very familiar sound of someone falling down a flight of stairs. Alarmed shouts hinted at the fact that my life was about to get even more interesting very soon.

I finally I managed to grip the wand with my fingertips on my next attempt. Despite the fact that the wand was very difficult for me to use, I was quickly free of the shackles and rising to my feet like a bad-tempered kraken from the depths. Damn, it felt good to get angry again. It distracted me from the pain in my ribs.

I cast a charm that slammed the door shut, and finished up with the strongest locking spell I could manage. Both were pathetically underpowered, and probably wouldn't delay any wizard more than a few seconds. I grabbed a single healing potion from my cache and threw it down my throat in a single gulp. I threw the empty glass vial at the door, shattering it and paving the entrance with painful shards. I quickly stuffed everything else into my bag. I didn't notice anything missing, except for the timeturner and my wands, one now residing with Kellerman's corpse in the Chamber of Secrets, the other held hostage by Malfoy.

The door was blown off its hinges, showering me with splinters. I blindly threw a cutting curse at about knee height at the door and threw myself behind the pillar, putting my back against it. The shriek of pain told me that I'd hit something, and the sound that followed may just distract the others who were trying to attack me.

Despite how difficult it was to use, I waved the wand and threw a blob of acid over my shoulder towards the door. It was a particularly dark spell, one when cast properly would dissolve the flesh from your bones, but it was tailor made for when all your targets were within a small area. More screams ensued, sounding a mite more urgent than immediately before. I clenched my teeth and thought quickly. I needed cover, or at least concealment. My gear was in my bag, on a table not three feet from me, but to get there meant that I had to expose myself to at least three hostile wands. The pillar was wide enough to cover me, but once it was gone, so was I.

One of the buggers kept his wits, since the pillar, which up to now had been nearly two feet square, was transfigured into sand. I swore to myself and dove to the floor, cushioning my side as best I could. Two spells flew through the air I had just vacated. I rolled onto my back and looked at the pile of sand that was the only thing standing between me the chaps who were displaying a pressing need to have a detailed discussion over some of the finer points of magical combat.

Figuring that offence was probably more useful at this point than defense, I cast the strongest heating charm I knew at the sand, making it glow a reddish-white. I then *pushed* it hard, sending a wave of tiny, burning missiles towards my attackers, who could only be described as standing within a funnel.

A cacophony of yelps, shouts, swearing and pitiful wails followed my actions, all of which sounded quite delightful to my ears. I cast a quick shield, rolled to one side and got to my knees. Each wizard in the doorway I could make out was slapping, at the hundreds of burning pinpricks in their eyes, their hair, their robes. The lead fellow was rubbing his hands violently across his face, doing even more damage to the burned tissue.

A sudden groaning registered on me, and I felt the world shift sideways. My eyes widened at the site of the floor buckling around where the support pillar should have been, before the whole attic shuddered, and fell.

There was an instant of weightlessness, during which even the agonised screams of the sand-covered wizards didn't register on me. The entire world seemed suspended for an instant of sheer terror. Then, time and sound returned.

I couldn't even keep my wits about me enough to cast a shield spell, or even a cushioning charm, even if I did know where I was going to land. Amid the timbers, furniture, dust and other assorted detritus, I landed hard on the timber floor below the attic, my rib sending a sharp wave of pain through my side that threatened to render me senseless. I curled into a ball and simply *pushed* in all directions, doing all I could to keep from being killed by the falling material.

Finally, there was a lull in the unwelcome activity. I blinked my eyes open and looked around. The room I now inhabited was filled with broken wood, tiles and other building materials, interspaced with ruined tables, cabinets and picture frames. I was in the centre of a relatively clear area, with only the items I'd fallen onto remaining nearby. I pushed my way off the pile, nearly swooning in agony. Blood from a cut on my scalp blinded me, and I felt like I had more bruises than a crate of apples used by trainee jugglers. I couldn't see my gear amongst the debris, meaning that I had little more than an unfamiliar wand to my credit.

I did, however, have a relatively unique opportunity to get the hell out of here.

I swayed back and forth unsteadily for a few moments, before my mind began functioning again. I cast a disillusionment charm, and proceeded into a less damaged part of the building.

Almost immediately, I heard the petulant, shrill tones of someone whose plans have gone awry. I just had to smile at the tantrum Malfoy was throwing. It took me a few minutes to find my way through the damaged rooms to a part of the house that was undamaged, from where I could follow the adolescent whining. I carefully peeked through an open door and found them standing on the undamaged portion of the balcony around the main hall.

Malfoy and a pair of goons stood at the door leading directly to the ruined portion of the manor. Even here in the hall, the effect of removing a section of the supporting structure was evident. Part of the room was lopsided, making it trivial to spot where the attic that had doubled temporarily as my prison had been located. Even from here, I could see the temporary charms supporting the structure. I suspect that the fact that the supports for the ceiling were currently on the floor below meant that the remaining load-bearing pillars were more necessary than usual. Looks like this manor is coming down.

Rather than leap out and attack like a Gryffindor, I took the time to perform some threat assessment. I wanted to make sure that any path I took to attack would be covered. I spent a few seconds calculating angles and whatnot, erected an anti-apparition jinx, and then launched my attack.

My two bone-shattering curses careered into the backs of Malfoy's two lackeys, shattering their spines. Without imminent medical attention neither of them would walk again, even if they lived. My juvenile sense of fair play protested weakly at my actions, but my sense of pragmatism drilled into my skull unmercifully by Zab over two years overruled it. Stunning was for when you had backup, and were prepared to take and care for prisoners. Not for when your life was in danger, and especially not for when you were alone.

Malfoy looked down at his fallen comrades, and then finally decided that he was in danger and should do something about it. He spun round to face me, raising his wand and silently conjuring a shield. Whatever he had done in the past year, he had certainly managed to hone his skills. It was such a pity for him that I could ignore shields when I wanted to. Not to mention that if he had the misfortune to aim my wand at himself at any point, I'd shock the hell out of him.

I held my stolen wand out at Malfoy, deliberately swaying slightly to suggest I was nearly out on my feet. A shallow scalp did wonders for that perception. I needed him to think he could easily take me in battle. I couldn't risk him escaping with the Horcrux by portkey. My anti-apparition jinx would stop him from retreating that way.

"Hufflepuff's Goblet, Malfoy. Give it to me. Now," I said unsteadily. I wanted him overconfident.

Malfoy seemed to take the bait, smirking as he raised his wand in one hand, while waggling mine in the other. "What are you going to do, Potter? Kill me?" he taunted from behind his shield.

By raising his arms, his robes billowed away from his sides. An object in his pocket distorted the fabric enough that I could tell what it was. Well, there's the Horcrux. Now, I just need to get it.

Malfoy took the initiative. With a horizontal slash of his wand at neck height, he cast, "Sectumsemptra!"

I didn't recognise the spell, so rather than try and deflect it I simply sank to one knee, allowing the dark curse to flash overhead. From my lower position, I threw a bone-breaking hex at his shield, battering it lightly. A bludgeoning spell like that didn't do much damage to a shield that was designed to fend off precision curses; the strength of the spell was spread over too much area. What that hex did was make the shield opaque for a second, allowing me to identify it.

"Is that all you've got, Potter?" he blathered, throwing his arms wide. "Try again. I'll even give you the next shot for free"

The shield he was using was useful in one-on-one duels. Powerful protecting the centre mass, but weaker at the edges. With his arms out wide, his robes billowed out.

Thank you!

I cast, "Concidio!" as precisely as I could. The curse sped between us, cutting through the weaker edge of the ferret's shield. Oddly, he hadn't even moved. He kept his cool enough to let a potentially lethal spell get close to him.

Idiot.

"Your aim is pathetic!" he shouted, before casting an esoteric curse, followed by a disarming charm.

From my genuflecting position, I had no way of painlessly avoiding it, so I conjured a shield, as powerful as I could make it. Malfoy's first spell hit my shield hard, leaving a small window for his second to flash through the weakened shield. Damn, he had gotten good. He snatched the wand from the air, and sneered.

It's not like I actually needed a wand anyway. Now that I had what I wanted, I simply *pushed* him away before he could begin monologuing. Malfoy found himself and his shield launched backwards through the air, his hands and feet trailing behind. He looked as though he was travelling backwards in an invisible plane, and was just waiting for some tea and biscuits. He hit the far wall, and fell onto a part of the balcony that was decidedly unsound and rolled down the slope. With shock clearly evident on his features, he ended up hanging off the newly created edge of the balcony, holding onto a creaking floor for dear life.

I stepped forward, bent down and picked up the scrap of cloth that had once been part of Malfoy's robe. "It would appear you had no idea what I was aiming at," I said easily, as I extracted the Horcrux from the ruined material. Hufflepuff's goblet looked smaller than I imagined, but weighed much more. "Your ego has always been your weakness."

Malfoy was about to splutter a response when a tortured groaning above us drew both our eyes. The charms holding the roof in place were failing, and the ancient wooden supports were complaining loudly. Bugger, one of the wizards I knocked out had been holding the damned thing up.

Showing a great presence of mind, Malfoy simply let go and fell to the floor of the hall below, initially screaming for help. After he hit the floor, he just

screamed. A few heads appeared around the hall, taking an unwelcome interest in the proceedings. I left in the opposite direction, back the way I came. Our little encounter hadn't lasted more than about ninety seconds. A few hopeful spells hit the walls around me as I ran, but the casters were too far away to manage to hit a moving target. I ducked through an open doorway and made my way out of here.

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Eventually, I stumbled through a stone archway, and out into the grounds of the manor. The broken rib in my side felt like an ice cold branding iron on my lung, but I didn't wait. I staggered slowly towards the place where I'd set off the Wheeze earlier today. Malfoy had gone totally berserk at losing the Horcrux; I could hear him shriek orders from the other end of the house. It didn't take long for a search party to come looking for me, but the fact that some effort had to be expended holding the manor up meant that I didn't have to face as many wizards as I could have been.

I wiped the sweat from my eyes and took a look around the area. Above, thick, dark clouds cast the area into gloom, even though my watch indicated that it was only mid-afternoon. I must have been unconscious for longer than I expected. There was one wizard guarding the main exit, through a rather decrepit ivy-covered gatehouse. Even without being able to confirm with a wand, I knew the wards around the building had been increased since my capture. So long as I stayed nearby, I was likely to be discovered. I had to get through the wards, and away, but breaking them down would indicate the direction I was escaping. I remained as concealed as I could within the shadows of the building's niches, but steeled myself for cold-blooded murder.

I *pushed* the guard through the gate, and examined the results.

Hmm, interesting.

Well, I didn't kill him, but he probably needs to be taken to the local equivalent of St. Mungo's. With all the spell damage from the wards, he looked like a love child of John Merrick and Quasimodo. The wards themselves had collapsed, though. I suppose they were single shots, designed to take out anyone passing them, and then failing so the pursuers weren't inconvenienced.

I shrugged and pulled myself further into the shadows. The gloom, in making visibility poor, made it hard for me to see what was going on, but it also made it harder for my pursuers to locate me. I wasn't about to escape that way. Not with a great big clue available for those I'd left behind. Not just yet, at any rate.

True to form, about a dozen wizards arrived, some by apparition, other running from the main manor house. To a man, they all charged out through the open gate, ignoring their fallen colleague. I allowed myself a tight grin. It was probably safer in here now than it was out there. At the very least, there were fewer people looking for me within the grounds.

I shook my head in disbelief as not one remained behind as a guard. Were they were simply incompetent, a fair enough assumption if Draco was in charge, or were they setting a trap?

I hunkered down in the niche, determined to wait for full darkness before escaping. If they were incompetent, then they would spread their efforts wider, making my escape easier. If they were setting a trap, the fact that I hadn't sprung it may make them think I had bypassed it. Either way, I had the ability to push my way out of trouble here, but travelling in the open would be safer for me in the dark.

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It had been a trap after all.

Kellermann had trained his men well. I'd been lucky to spot a startled bird before I attempted to creep through the gatehouse exit, which drew my attention to an odd distortion on the other side. An hour or so of intense scrutiny identified three other similar mirages, which indicated to me that there were probably many more.

Even as sunset arrived, the hidden wizards hadn't moved. They'd just waited patiently.

When I decided to make my move, it was in the opposite direction. There had still been perimeter patrols, showing a level of discipline I had found admirable. Not enough to stop myself from *pushing* one of the patrolling pairs through the wards at my original entrance, but admirable none the less.

Even though all the wizards had been out hunting me, they had converged on my new ward breach very quickly. Once more, the vast majority had started from the breach, and worked forward, working as a group to try to locate me.

Idiots.

I had stepped through the downed wards, and turned sharply to my right. I had moved a fair distance away from the manor before allowing myself to feel relief.

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I leaned back against the rough bark of an old tree, and tried to catch my breath. Until dawn came, I wasn't about to attempt to apparate anywhere. I didn't know any place well enough within my range to be sure I'd arrive without splinching, and I wasn't about to try and use line of sight apparating in the dark. Having a magical method of transport right now that didn't have the potential drawback of splinching would be a damned wonderful thing. Another flare of pain from my rib made me ponder on the possibility of deliberately splinching in an effort to leave it behind during apparition, but that thought may have just been my brain running low on endorphins.

I risked a glance behind the tree and gasped to try and catch my breath, absently patting the goblet in my pocket to remind myself it was still there. At least this little debacle ended with me capturing Riddle's last Horcrux. I didn't have a wand, and my gear was on the other side of a group of pissed off wizards, but I was free, and that counted for a great deal. Even with the rib.

A dark silhouette against the sky flew near. One of my trackers had found a broom and taken to the skies in an effort to sniff me out. I long, slow grin spread over my face at an idea. If Riddle could hear what I was about to try, despite the fact he'd loathe me, he would certainly appreciate the irony.

Locking eyes on the broom, I began chanting a stream of jinxes I'd found in Zab's library when researching magic I had been in contact with in my life. A very personal jinx to me.

Instantly, the broom started bucking wildly. Without another slimy arsehole of a Potions Master muttering the counter-jinx, the poor bugger up there didn't have the same chance to hang on that I did back in my first year at Hogwarts. The figure above removed one hand to fumble for his wand, but was rudely ejected before he could bring it to bear. Without human intervention, both the wizard and the broom fell to the ground, too quickly for even a hurried cushioning charm. The broom at least landed intact, which was much more than I could say for the wizard. His despairing shout ended very abruptly.

Not waiting for anyone to check out what the noise was, I covered the ground separating us as quickly as I possibly could, given my less than pristine state. I grimaced at the sight of the broken wand, but quickly covered the extra ten metres to the now ownerless broom. It wasn't a patch on my Firebolt, but it was a damn sight better than running.

I drifted into the air, feeling much more comfortable with height. I looked around intently, looking for any movement in both the air and on the ground. It took me a few moments to gain my bearings, and I resisted the urge to swear. My bag of tricks was still somewhere inside the building, and I had no intention of heading back that way with the Horcrux in my pocket. It was a wrench to think about leaving my wand behind, not to mention my father's invisibility cloak, but I didn't really see an alternative. Once I was back in I had access to my other one, anyway.

I slowly drifted away from Malfoy's hidey-hole. The broom's guidance charms were obviously damaged; it kept pulling down and to the left. I used brute strength to stay on course, and kept beneath the tree canopy, so as not to be spotted by anyone looking at the skyline. With my ribs throbbing badly, I had trouble breathing, but not having to exert myself made travelling much easier. Eventually, I reached the outskirts of the nameless rural village I passed through earlier. With Mad-Eye's motto ringing in my head, I circled the place once, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

I spotted one small figure, creeping along the road leading from Malfoy's hideout in a furtive manner. Someone really ought to tell these guys that creeping along under the light of an almost full moon really stands out. Whoever it was, they were tiny. But they might have a wand.

I drifted up, keeping an eye on the moon, making sure I didn't stray between the lunar orb and my quarry. In my school Quidditch days, I remember deliberately putting myself between the sun and the opposition's beaters, just so they couldn't target me. The moon however, didn't have the same effect.

Despite my caution, the figure spun round to face me as I drifted closer from behind. I took in the tennis ball eyes, the diminutive stature and the trembling knees. The house elf gave a sort of "Eep!" and disappeared with a snap of his fingers.

"Oh, bugger," I breathed. "Dobby, I wish that was you," I finished aloud.

"Master Harry called Dobby?" came a voice behind me.

I mimicked the elf that had just left, giving out a rather feminine "Eep!" I spun round to see Dobby standing on the road below. "Dobby?" I asked, clutching my heart.

Dual apparition cracks echoed through the night. I *pushed* out towards the newly arrived pair in a hurry, sending a one of the wizards tumbling. The second raised a wand and took aim.

"You will not harm Harry Potter!"

Dobby's own attack took all three of us by surprise. He must have gone easy on Lucius after I freed him, because the poor bastard who took the enraged elf's blow to the gut flew backwards at least three times as far as Malfoy Senior had. From the subsequent sounds of retching, he wouldn't be playing any further part in the proceedings.

With only one target left for me, it was relatively simple to finish the fight. I simply closed quickly on the broom, and kicked the fellow in the head as he struggled to his feet.

I dropped off the broom and snatched the wand from the man's hand. I quickly stunned him for safety, and bound Dobby's victim with conjured ropes. Stunning him mid retch may well kill him.

"Dobby, you are a sight for sore eyes. What are you doing here?" I asked.

Dobby wrung his hands together. "Master Harry called Dobby," he explained.

I took a deep breath, grunting with pain as my ribs reminded me that adrenaline was only a temporary pain reliever. "I didn't think you could hear me from this far away."

“Dobby hears Master Harry wherever he is.”

I nodded. “I’ll remember that. Can you take me to the other side of the village?”

Dobby shook his head sadly. “Elf magic not be able to take wizards.”

I nodded. “Never mind. But we need to go; these guys have friends, who’ll soon be here to see what happened. Go to the other side of the village and I’ll meet you there.” I said as I stooped to relieve the other wizard of his wand. Dobby nodded, but looked as though he wanted to say something. “What is it?” I asked.

Dobby wrung his hands together. “Can Dobby ride on the broom with Master Harry?” he stammered.

I blinked. “Uh, sure,” I said as I mounted the broom once more. “Jump on up.”

“Master Harry really let Dobby fly with him?”

“Of course,” I replied, grinning at his incredulous expression.

I didn’t have to say it again, as Dobby literally jumped onto the broomstick with an excited “Whoop!”

We flew around the collection of houses until we were on the other side of the village. “Dobby?” I asked.

“Yes, Master Harry?”

“Can you hide something for me?”

Dobby turned to face me. “Dobby can put something in Harry Potter’s vault, if Master Harry wants.”

I shook my head, thinking that Gringotts wasn’t secure enough for this job. “No, I mean, can you hide something somewhere where only you can get it?”

Dobby slowly nodded. “Yes, Dobby can do that, but doesn’t Master Harry want to get it too?”

I shook my head again. “Nope. I don’t need to know. Here,” I said, reaching into my pocket and pulling out the decorative goblet. “Take this, and hide it where no one but you can get it. I’ll be back in soon to get it from you.”

Dobby bowed his head mournfully. “Dobby does not like hiding Master Harry’s property from him.”

I gripped his shoulder firmly. “I know. But this is important. If something happens to me, get Blaise to take you to my old Master, and tell him about it. You have my permission to give it to him if I don’t come back. Understand?”

Dobby still looked ashamed. “Yes Master Harry. Dobby does what youse wants.”

I figured he needed a bit of a pick me up. “Thank you Dobby. You are the only one I can trust with this.”

That brightened his bulging eyes up. He snapped his fingers and disappeared with a shimmer.

I took a deep breath, wincing again at the sharp jab of pain. First, I needed to go and get my backpack. Then, I needed to go and get my wands. Hopefully, in between, I would find the time to kick Malfoy’s arse. Again.



## Journeyman Potter Mopping up

The bark was rough against the skin on my hands as I leaned away from the trunk of the tree as far as I felt safe. Finding something to climb that was both easy for someone with a bruised rib and had a good view of my target had been difficult, especially in the dark. The tree I finally settled on had thick foliage, making it difficult to be spotted by those doing the looking. Peripheral vision was a problem, however.

I had convinced myself that I would be an idiot to even think of charging in again. I just told myself that I was just taking the time to scout out the defences before leaving for good. But looking at the sheer chaos that was the anthill that I'd kicked over, well, opportunity knocks rarely. Through the leafy canopy, I could make out Malfoy's platinum head, and I could just hear some of his shouted instructions. From the looks of things, they were abandoning their little utopia, collecting everything they could before leaving. I couldn't imagine why. After all, they've only been broken into and attacked, had a prisoner escape, lost their Master's last remaining Horcrux, and suffered significant losses of manpower. All in one day.

The little ferret had obviously blindly accepted Snape's repeated denunciations of my talents over the years. With a few notable exceptions, my Slytherin contemporaries always underestimated me. Actually, it would probably be far more accurate to say that my they always overestimated themselves. Those who believed in the superiority of blood almost always came second in talent. Instead, they got the gold medal in self-delusion. Hermione always did find that amusing.

Despite the favourable conditions, I still wasn't sure I had the ability to survive another attempt at forced entry. Even though as a group they were severely weakened, it would not take much coordination to completely overwhelm me. I had relied on stealth and surprise to enter the first time; I wasn't going to get the same chances this time around. I watched for a while, trying to get an idea of the manpower Malfoy still commanded, and how he was directing them. Before, the guards had a competent wizard directing security. Now they had to deal with a pure-blooded ponce frothing at the mouth. Where there was once a crisp pattern to their rounds, now the guards were ill-directed and undermanned. Not exactly world's best practise. Oddly, perimeter defense seemed to be pretty low on their priority list; Malfoy had nearly all of his hired muscle reinforcing the structure of the manor and salvaging what they could.

I gave a tight grin. Looks like Malfoy's old view of 'Daddy will pay for anything I want' was getting a beating. The little bastard was being forced to recover everything he could. He was definitely preparing to abandon this base of operations. Zab or Moody would have a backup base prepared well in advance; several of them, most likely. Was it underestimating Malfoy to assume that he wouldn't have the same level of backup?

I frowned in thought. Being underestimated was very helpful, and I didn't want to fall into the same trap as Malfoy had. Sure, he had been carrying the Horcrux, which would have had an effect on his thought processes, but even left-handed, he was far more competent with a wand now than he had been back at school. It would be the height of arrogance to assume that no one else could have received my level of training in the past few years.

A few distant shouts captured my attention. I watched one wizard as he accidentally brought down the roof on an exposed section of the manor. Malfoy and a pair of other wizards ran to the scene, waving their arms and screaming. I didn't bother stifling a grin as the ferret lost whatever cool he retained and shrieked a colourful, painful-looking curse at the offending fellow.

Ooh, bad move, moron. Instantly, wands were drawn all over the place. Perhaps I was giving him too much credit. The Horcrux seems to have made him believe that he was a Dark Lord himself, or at least that he commanded the fear and respect a Dark Lord should. If Voldemort had cursed a follower like that, the rest of his Death Eaters would probably have stuck around and watched with interest, if not disdain, while hoping to not attract their Lord's attention. But Riddle was insanely powerful, something little Draco was not.

While disappointing that no more spells were thrown, my chances of regaining my property were increased dramatically as almost half of the remaining wizards thought their local equivalent of "Bugger this for a game of soldiers" and disappeared. Malfoy kept heaping abuse on the remaining stooges, only to have another smaller group call it quits.

Maybe I did have the opportunity to get my property back. If I waited long enough, Malfoy's stunning personality might just ostracise his entire entourage.

After another ten minutes of appallingly juvenile behaviour, it became apparent that the last members of his private army were either made of sterner stuff, or figured that getting their ex-comrades' share of the contents of Malfoy's wallet made a great deal of financial sense. I suppose greed will win out over prudence eventually.

With Malfoy's forces now reduced to a quarter of their numbers of just an hour ago, I guess I had my only real opportunity to recover my property. With Malfoy being essentially dead to the Ministry, he could take my stuff anywhere. I made up my mind. Taking note of the perimeter guards - the lack of them, actually - I drifted down out of the branches of the tree. I briefly debated the merits of flying in on the broom, but discarded that tactic quickly. I leaned the broom against the tree's trunk, and carefully made my way closer to the outer wall. In the colourless early morning light, I leaned against the crumbling brickwork and breathed deeply to steady myself. I took out my stolen wand and made preparations to ambush the wizard guarding the gatehouse. Ward detection spells indicated that there had been rudimentary defenses erected since my escape.

The recognisable wards were little more than alarms, though it would be disorientating to step through them without preparation. There was a linked pair that I didn't recognise, which was annoying, but not really surprising. Wardcrafters kept their creations secret for all sorts of reasons, not the least of which was that it made them more difficult to bring down, requiring special skills. Bill Weasley, for one, made a career out of bypassing or bringing down unknown wards. As for me, given enough time, I could bring down most non-reinforced, generic wards. But specialised wards outside of my experience? I wouldn't want to try.

Of course, Zab hadn't exactly neglected this area of my education. When we discussed the theory behind wards designed around allowing movement only by certain parties, Zab took great pains to explain just how carefully and deliberately they needed to be set. When placed in haste, errors were often made unwittingly.

The wards here had been placed quickly. It was only a few seconds before I found a weakness.

They had been placed along the wall. Not behind, or in front of, but along. That wasn't unusual, in and of itself - in nearly every instance, a ward on a property was placed along the boundary. But they were usually placed with a little more care. Anyone climbing over this stone wall would trip the magic. Anyone going under, however...

I transfigured a handful of stones at the base of the outer wall into sand. I grinned and crawled through a new hole with a beach motif. The wards placed along the top of the wall remained undisturbed. Once through, I checked to ensure that I'd been undetected. Nothing seemed amiss.

Still kneeling, I stretched, wincing as my partially healed ribs protested. Time to move. I could only see two wizards from my position, so I figured that my next target was spoken for. With them out of the picture, I had a relatively clear run at the building proper. I gingerly crept forward, letting the long grass cover my movements somewhat.

The pair of wizards I marked were nervous. Very nervous indeed. I couldn't follow their conversation (being both distant and in German), but they almost seemed on the verge of panic, gesturing wildly and speaking in the kind of loud whisper that carries a long way. Time to stop that.

From a crouch, I dropped a silencing charm on them, and then *pushed* them up and away. They were launched at a forty-five degree angle, and flew soundlessly for a good five or six metres before crashing into the turf. The impact with the ground was silent, due to my first spell, but I *could* make out their expressions. It didn't look pleasant at all. One was knocked out cold, the other temporarily unable to breathe.

I quickly moved forward and stood over the downed wizards, wondering what the hell I should do with them now. While taking every opportunity presented was good for accomplishing short-term goals, I really should have thought about things first. Killing was becoming, if not a habit, then at least familiar. But deliberate murder of helpless individuals was something completely different.

The conscious wizard of the pair lay on the ground winded, his breath coming in gasps and his arms held protectively over his head. He tried to scabble backwards, but his drooling comrade prevented him from moving too far. Unsurprisingly, the scene reminded me of the Falcone scion's attempted supplication. I ran my options through my head. I could just kill them, but I really didn't want to do that.

I could stun both, but the next person to come along could enervate them and that would defeat the purpose. Same with ropes, petrification and silencing. Transfiguration was a possibility, but if I forgot where I left them, it would be tantamount to killing. Magic was great, but when your opponents had the same ability, it became a real bugger. I thought back on all the times I had been incapacitated, and began sifting through the memories, to find one that would work in this situation.

I grinned at one particularly vivid memory, causing the poor bugger who was awake to whimper even louder. "Oh, shush, you big baby," I chided.

He swallowed nervously, still not able to breathe well. "What are you going to do?" he mouthed. At least, that was what I assumed he was trying to say. It fit the situation well.

I raised an eyebrow. "Do you really want to know?"

That really scared him. Paranoid visions of torture marched in front of his eyes, and he nearly panicked enough to try and attack an armed opponent in a position of strength. I really needed to buy Zab a nice bottle of firewhiskey. His lessons went well beyond standard Hogwarts curriculum, but were damned useful. ‘Always leave threats open-ended’. Nothing you could threaten them with would be half as bad as what they could dream up. After all, their imagination would draw upon their own catalogue of fears.

“Relax, I’m not going to hurt you.”

“No?” he said silently, hope blossoming forlornly in his eyes. It was almost pitifully easy to destroy it.

“No,” I said serenely. “Hold out your hands.”

Predictably, he held them closer.

I shook a finger at him. “Look, either hold them out or I’ll blow them off. I’ll then move onto other extremities.”

My blasé threat was enough for him. Tentatively, he held out a pair of trembling arms. I took aim with my wand; he clenched his eyes shut and turned his head away. One Lockhart special later, and my captive had no bones below the elbow.

There, try casting spells now, bastard.

I stunned him before he’d even noticed his bones had been vanished. He wouldn’t be using a wand anytime in the next day or so (assuming he happened to have a handy measure of Skele-Gro nearby), but I didn’t have to kill him in cold blood. I wasn’t ready to give up that much of myself just yet. Maybe in a century or so. I repeated the spell combination on the unconscious wizard, before reversing both their wands. Anyone incautious enough to use a wand deliberately left on a downed foe deserved whatever curse they got hit with.

I finally disillusioned the bodies and moved onward. With any luck, anyone who missed them would assume they had deserted.

I covered the open ground quickly, and got to the relative safety of the main building without incident. My heart pounded solidly in my chest in a way that had nothing whatsoever to do with exertion. I was in mortal danger, I had a grin on my face that nothing would shift, a wand in my hand, and was about to do something completely (and, I suppose, stupidly) unexpected. And I was looking forward to it.

And that’s me, in a nutshell.

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It was easy to find my quarry. His whiney voice carried rather nicely in the morning air. No active defenses were in place, besides the single patrol lying invisible somewhere on the grounds. They definitely weren’t expecting company, and were in the middle of shutting down their hideout.

I kept away from the more structurally unsound portions of the property, quietly making my way through to the main hall. At one of the side entrances, I surprised one wizard who was carrying an armful of parchment. We looked at each other, me with distain, and him with shock. He dropped the sheaf of parchment and grabbed his wand.

Unfortunately for him, my wand was at the ready. I dropped him as he tried to bring his wand to bear. A long time ago, I wouldn't have felt comfortable using something I mentally associated with Malfoy and his ilk. Now, even though the idea of ambush was uncomfortable, prudence demanded that I make some changes to my ethics. I removed his arm bones and stepped over the prone form, made my way unhindered into the building. The passageway took me directly to the main hall, still covered with beams and splinters from my earlier visit.

No one had heard the small crunch made by my victim's skull hitting the flagstones, since they were in the middle of a rather heated argument.

Malfoy stood facing a pair of wizards who appeared to represent about nine tenths of the experience of those left. The one with a larger build had short-cut, steel-grey hair, while the other was lean and whip-like. While I couldn't see their expressions from my position, I could imagine them easily enough.

"Damn it!" Malfoy whined, pausing from filling a large bag with valuables. "Are you sure?"

The largest of the robed pair nodded. "Yes, the Master's Horcrux is definitely not here." I could hear the unspoken 'like we told you hours ago' in his voice. "Potter has taken it and gone."

Malfoy shook a familiar backpack. "He'll be back for this." I froze at that, wondering if I was truly that predictable. I breathed deeply, pushing my doubts out in a silent sigh. I couldn't afford to second-guess myself at this point.

The big German wizard snorted and shook his head. "I doubt it. He could sell the goblet to your Ministry for ten times what it would cost him to replace everything in that bag." I grimaced at that. I couldn't replace my holly wand. Ever. It was too uniquely suited to me.

Malfoy almost whined. "He'll come back, and we'll get the Horcrux from him then," he said with almost painful delusion, putting the backpack on and picking up another sheaf of paper.

The slender wizard growled with frustration. "You're an idiot. He's gone and the Horcrux is not coming back. Now, where's our payment?" he asked.

Malfoy spun around to face him. "Shut up, kraut! You'll get your money when we're gone from here. Now get to work!" He turned back to face the obvious leader. "Even if you're right, Potter knows where we are, and he'll have Dumbledore and his idiotic lackeys here soon. Perhaps I should leave you here to meet them," he threatened.

The wizard who had demanded cash drew his wand with a hiss, but his large companion reached out quickly and grabbed his arm. "No!" he said clearly, holding the man's wand away from Malfoy. The aggressive wizard stared at his comrade as though he'd suggested mating with a unicorn.

Malfoy looked as though his birthday had arrived early. "You think you can take me?" he threatened, thrusting his scrawny chest out in an attempt to appear threatening. If one doubted the theory of evolution, one merely had to look at this pitiful example of biped attempting to intimidate others by puffing out his chest. It might have worked on a four-year-old.

The big fellow drew his wand in one smooth action and sent a bludgeoning curse towards my old school chum. The look of surprise on Malfoy's face was another one I'd have to put into my pensieve. His platinum blond head lurched forward as he folded in two with the force of the spell, the armful of paper cushioning the spell somewhat. "He's mine!" the larger wizard told his companion redundantly, letting his wrist go before sending another curse at the stricken idiot.

Despite the sudden attack, Malfoy let stack of parchment go and managed to deflect the second and third curses sent his way, all the while trying to avoid choking on his vomit. The fourth curse opened up a massive cut on his shoulder, which sent him stumbling backwards whimpering. What a pleasant sight that was, Draco Malfoy, pure-blooded scion, performing a manoeuvre known in military parlance as 'get the fuck out of here'. Well, the Malfoys were from French aristocratic stock, originally. It probably came naturally to him.

The offended wizard turned to his companion. He rumbled something to him; the only words I recognised were 'Potter' and 'Hamburg'. He then turned and began Operation Ferret Hunt.

I couldn't believe my luck. Dissension in the ranks was always good, but an active mutiny was more than I could have hoped for. I raised my wand and sent a stunner straight at the last wizard. Exhibiting far more skill and talent than any of the others I'd seen, he turned at the sound of my spell, and tried to dodge by hurling himself to his left. Unfortunately for him, on his left was a rather large pile of broken timber. He managed to land on a splinter the size of my arm. I stunned him quickly; there was no need to draw his suffering out. He might be fatally injured, or he might not. Either way, he would need medical attention before he could take any further part in the proceedings. With all the chaos and disorganisation, taking the bastards down one or two at a time was relatively easy. If there had been any sort of cohesive defense, I'd have had a much harder time of it.

I quickly took stock, noting that there wasn't anything valuable or usable anywhere in the room. It had been thoroughly looted by Malfoy and his cronies. I grinned at the thought of the great Malfoy having to scrounge for his supper. Sweet Schadenfreude.

The spell battle between the blonde idiot and his seriously pissed ex-employee was noisy enough that following it was a simple matter. The secondary bangs and crashes acted like homing beacons, and I followed carefully, keeping an eye out for anyone with the same idea as me. I didn't want to end up the proverbial meat in the sandwich.

It only took a minute to catch up with them. On the surface, Malfoy was doing a very good impersonation of a rabbit, showing that he could run very well when needed. His mantra, which I could make out in bits and pieces occasionally, amounted to something like "oh shit, shit, shit", with occasional variations on the theme. While it was like an angelic harp to my soul, I had to wonder why the ponce didn't just apparate away. He knew how, and it would make his life a lot easier, yet he was stringing his attacker along. Either he was exhausted, or he couldn't gather the mental capacity required, or he had another plan. That though made me take that little bit extra caution in my pursuit.

He had managed to invoke a similar level of caution in his pursuer, though, whatever his scheme. Ahead, the stern-faced German had a deep gash on his thigh, around which his robes were crimson, heavy and damp. He limped tentatively around corners, with a shield already in place. The spell work was not all one way, and he had to duck back several times to avoid some dark curses. Three corners and two doors later found Malfoy in a room with no physical escape route, except through his assailant. It was here, as the confident German strode through the only doorway, that Malfoy's sudden lack of skill disappeared.

With a word, the ferret set off two small explosive devices, attached to the doorframe on the inside of the room. The German was knocked forward in an uncontrolled manner by the shockwave. Malfoy's sudden change in demeanour gave him the advantage, and the experienced wizard went down to a well-executed spread of spells. Very Slytherin, I mentally applauded.

Rather than continue in a professional vein and regroup, Malfoy reverted to type and began kicking the prone German. "How do you like that, traitor?" he asked the downed man, before using his wand to continue the torture. He sent an Everberus curse into the German's spine. Even from where I was, I could hear the bones shatter under the ugly purple flash of light.

I took a second to make sure I wasn't being followed, before readying to attack. I mentally ran through the curses I wanted to use, shielded myself, then rose and jumped into the doorway. There was no way I was charging into a room after what just happened. In a second, I took in the décor (predominately green and silver -- surprised, I was not), the layout, (bed to my left, wardrobe on the far wall, my backpack and an open chest of belongings in the middle of the floor, near a dead German) and the occupant (injured, panting and off balance).

Malfoy was even more surprised to see me than when he had been attacked by his cronies. Nevertheless, he kept enough presence of mind to fire off a quick spell at me, just as I hurled one at him. His spell struck my shield and was almost totally dissipated. My spell struck and broke at least half his ribs, judging by the way his chest sort of deflated.

As he fell backwards onto the chest, an expression of intense confusion crossed his pointed face. I cast a final stunning spell at him, hoping to end his resistance as soon as possible. His lips moved however, and he wheezed something, triggering a portkey. Both Malfoy and the chest beneath him disappeared, just before my spell hit the floor.

I spun around in a tight circle, ready for an attack from a different direction.

Nothing.

After a few seconds, I realised that he had really gone. I grimaced and clutched at my side as the adrenaline in my veins faded. The rudimentary healing I'd managed to perform with my pilfered wand prevented any further damage from occurring, but it wasn't up to protecting my abused ribs from a bludgeoning curse; even one that had most of its sting taken out by my shield. Well, that would change.

I dropped the wand that I'd taken from some nameless German, and scrambled through my backpack for my own. My searching became more and more frenzied, before I finally had to accept the evidence.

Malfoy hadn't returned my wand to the backpack. My invisibility cloak and robe were there, along with my acromantula silk gloves. A few potions, a wristwatch and my passport made up the remainder of the inventory. I knew that Kellermann had my other wand, the timeturner and my portkey sock, and I suspect Malfoy had taken my money pouch, but there was one missing item I wanted back above all others.

The idea that that disgusting waste of flesh had my holly wand sent waves of nausea through me. The thought that Malfoy would use my wand on someone else the way he used it on me... I just felt sick. I took a deep breath and screamed with frustration at the ferret's escape.

Well, I thought as I bent over and retrieved the recently discarded wand, anger seething within. It's time to clean up the scraps.

I threw on my invisibility robe. This time, I wasn't going to be so nice.

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I'd done it. Veni, vidi, er, victoria. I came, I saw, I won.

Well, nearly.

I only found three more wizards in the place, and as angry as I was, it was a simple matter to injure them enough for them to give up the fight. I only killed one of them, and even that was only because the idiot wouldn't back down and scarper. Once I was sure I was alone, I put up some wards of my own and did a thorough search of the property. There wasn't much left.

Every documented Horcrux of Voldemort's was either destroyed or within my sphere of influence. I really should hunt down Nagini, just in case though. Perhaps I could stake the bloody snake to whatever's left of the front door of the Gaunt hovel, on the off chance that Tom Riddle Junior does somehow manage to make a comeback. Yeah, that's a nice idea. "Welcome home, Tom. Recognise this?"

My mind kept drifting back to my wand. It was remarkable just how attached I'd become to it without realizing it. Now it was in Malfoy's hands (the thought still gave me chills), and could be in any country in the world. However, I knew where his mother lived, and with my memories of him casting an Unforgivable on me, I had all sorts of legal options. I knew the Malfoys were a very wealthy family, probably more so than the Potters and the Blacks combined - at least, until the Big V started draining their coffers in the name of the Cause. I'm sure Malachi would be delighted to take the money that would surely come from the inevitable legal action, but so long as I got my stuff back and struck the name Malfoy from the rolls of the 'prominent citizens' list, I'd be satisfied, no matter how many Galleons it cost me.

I'd scavenged a grand total of one galleon and eight sickles from the bodies lying around the grounds of the Manor, which wouldn't even come

close to being enough for me to get a portkey back to England. I could apparate back to Grimmauld Place once I was in the country, but I still had the challenge of actually getting there while effectively broke. To do that, I needed to find a Magical community large enough to house an Embassy, or at least a representative from the Ministry, and in my entire time in Albania, I'd seen nothing of the sort.

That meant that I had to get back to Berlin the Muggle way. Berlin was the closest Magical community I knew of where I didn't have a Death Mark from a local crime boss, and that wasn't anywhere near the guards of a seriously pissed off mini-Nation. At the moment, my inventory consisted of a slightly malfunctioning broom, a small collection of wands, none of which were particularly attuned to me, and a backpack of equipment exceedingly well suited for illicit activities. Even without my wand, I could bypass pretty much any Muggle security system you cared to name.

I was in the process of planning out my return when I finally got a visitor. The look on his face was simply perfect.

I smirked as the ghostly visage of ex-Professor Snape scanned the building and grounds. "Why good afternoon, Snape. Fancy seeing you here," I called out, letting my tone speak for me.

He spun to glare at me. For some reason, the fact that his spectral robes billowed out around him intrigued me. His ego must be causing it, since there were no air currents in the world that would affect a ghost. "Potter!" he snapped.

I rolled my eyes. "I just can't get rid of you, can I? I leave Hogwarts, and you're still around. I throw you down a flight of stairs and break your neck, and you're still around. I leave the fucking country, and you're still around. What do I need to do to get rid of you?"

Even in a uniform shade of silver, I could see him flush with anger. "I was going to assist your escape, so I could finally leave this life," he hissed, his tone letting me know that the decision was most definitely under duress.

I frowned. How had he known that I was here? I doubted that Dumbledore knew. At least, I doubted he knew I was here when I had been captured. It was possible that the old man had somehow persuaded Dobby to divulge my location, but I'd already escaped at that point. Only Draco and his cronies had known.

And there was my answer. "Malfoy actually told you?" I blurted. "I don't believe it! He actually told you that he had me prisoner?"

Snape turned back to look at the remains of the building as another section fell in. "He believed I would be interested in watching you perish."

I couldn't help it. I just laughed. "And you came drifting over the continent to help me escape, to pay off your debt to the Potters. Only I didn't need your help. I don't need your help, and I never will need your help. I guess you're screwed."

The sheer number of expressions that flickered over the ghost's face was impressive. Unable to do anything in the face of reality, Snape turned his back on me and faded, leaving me alone with my mirth. It would appear that the life debt was the only thing binding him to this world. I wasn't about to give up something as useful as that. Hell, if the guy had treated me with respect, or even just without disrespect, I'd have happily released him from his obligation. But because of how he treated me as a child, the debt was an asset I would take advantage of when it suited me.

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It was early afternoon when the bus I'd arrived on came back to the village on its return leg. I tagged along behind it while invisible on the broom. It was a major struggle to keep the damned thing on line for seven and a half hours, but we eventually got to a city with a train station. Physically exhausted, I slumped on the uncomfortable station platform waiting for the relevant train. Once onboard, I set up some Muggle repellent wards to stop anyone bothering me for a ticket. With that, I cast one more healing spell on my side, and then simply fell into an exhausted sleep.

The trip back to Germany was uneventful, though I did have to listen to my stomach issue complaints for a full day, which made the trip seem so much longer. I hadn't been truly hungry since I'd left Privet Drive for my apprenticeship two and a half years ago. I could honestly say I didn't care for the experience, no matter how familiar.

I swapped trains twice, and finally found myself in Berlin. Slipping through customs at the various borders was fairly easy, since I arrived the Muggle way, but I headed straight for the magical community just in case I was marked.

It was late in the afternoon by the time I stepped through the barrier, noting that a great many people were in the process of finishing the business of

the day. I made a few enquiries of one of the shopkeepers, and headed towards the British Ministry of Magic's Consulate. Judging from the number of brass plaques on the façade of the building, a great many countries shared the space inside for their diplomatic functions. Either the inside of the building had been thoroughly expanded, or they operated on some sort of timeshare arrangement.

Definitely the former, I thought as I stepped in and blinked at the grandeur. Someone had gone to great lengths to make sure that anyone entering the rather drab building (on the outside at least) was suitably impressed at the internals. Gold leaf filigree in the walls and ceiling sparkled in the light of the massive crystal chandelier hanging unsupported in the centre of the mezzanine. I'd guess that nearly a ton of crystals floated serenely near the ceiling, rotating gently in the slight breeze.

I shook my head with a slight smile at the sight. Whatever faults the wizarding world has, they definitely have their artists. There was beauty in magic that the Muggle world missed out on, to their eternal detriment. Of course, the way the Wizarding world was going, they were going to be missing out on the great technological leaps forward the Muggle world was making every year. It didn't seem to me to be a fair trade.

Finding the British Embassy was a simple task, though it did involve a bit of a trek up several flights of stairs. The witch manning the reception desk did a reasonably good impression of maintaining an air of imperturbability in the presence of a celebrity, only giving me a lingering look before leaving to announce my arrival to the on duty official. I did notice that on her return however, her lips were distinctly redder, her makeup had been touched up, and her hair was a lot tidier. She had also undone a couple of buttons on her blouse. *Real* subtle, lady.

I was shown to a waiting room, which was sparsely appointed, but comfortable. Obviously, the Ministry didn't go in for the whole 'pampering of paperless citizens' thing, at least not those who managed to find themselves with no money and no passport while outside of the country. Several old, well-loved armchairs and couches lined three of the walls. There were several older publications slowly disintegrating on the bookshelves on the fourth wall, but the Daily Prophet from the last few days was available. I took the time to read through the paper, just so that I had an understanding of what the majority of the British Magical population had been told they were thinking since I left the country. A few minutes after settling down, my new fan appeared once more with a tray of refreshments large enough to supply a small army.

I thanked her from the bottom of my stomach (earning a wonderfully rosy blush and an inviting, "You're welcome"), and fell to the biscuits, chocolates, cake and tea much like a man who hadn't eaten much in the past three days. As the flavours hit my tongue, I just knew that the selection here had to have been taken from the VIP refreshments cupboard. I couldn't imagine that the Ministry would cough up for Belgian and Swiss chocolates for your everyday bumbling tourists.

Eventually, once I'd gorged myself stupid, a harried looking bureaucrat hustled through the secure door, muttering to himself while carrying a sheaf of parchment. "Right, Mr, um..." he started, looking down at the top paper. Suddenly, his eyes widened, and his head snapped up and around to look straight at me. "Mister Potter!" he exclaimed with a startled squeak.

I looked around the room, carefully noting the absence of anyone else. "Yes," I said redundantly. I guess the receptionist neglected to verbally tell him who was waiting.

He suddenly went from harried to flustered. "I, um, well, er..."

I rolled my eyes, wondering not for the first (or, I suspect, the last) time about the Wizarding World's fascination with an event that happened almost two decades ago. "Can we get on with this?"

That seemed to snap him back to the present. "Right! Yes! Um, you, er, you need a portkey back to England?" he stuttered.

I nodded slowly and deliberately, thinking that if he stopped at my name on the form he was holding, he probably didn't get to the reason for my visit.

His eyes narrowed at some inner thought. "I can organise that, but it usually takes a few hours to process. Please bear with me, and I shall do what I can to expediate your return."

Without waiting for my answer, he trundled away, without giving me the opportunity to tell him not to bother. I sighed, thinking that it may have been quicker, if not easier to just pawn off my invisibility robe and bought a portkey home. It had taken nearly two and a half hours last time I'd tried to transfer money from Gringotts, and that was with Bill's help. The goblins were notoriously difficult when it came to withdrawing money from a vault when the owner was not present, which I suppose I should be grateful for. But it was damned inconvenient on occasion.

The unnamed Embassy minion stuck his head through the door. "Um, I'm just going to make a firecall to see if I can get authority to create you a portkey now, Mr. Potter, rather than going through the official channels. We should have you home within half an hour."

I blinked in surprise, and nodded gratefully. Perhaps there was an upside to fame. But even if being famous for an event beyond my control managed to get me home in one second, it wouldn't be worth the sort of crap I've had to put up with over the years. Once more, the man waddled off in search of someone to say 'Okay'.

In fact, he took a bit longer than that. It was nearly two hours after his first firecall that he finally came back and handed me a small piece of string. "I'm so sorry for the delay, Mr. Potter. Arrangements have been made at the portkey terminus for your arrival. There are several people anxiously waiting to see you," he said with a conniving smile and a gleam in his eye.

I mentally groaned. I was right the first time. Fame is a fucking inconvenience. I wondered just how much the bureaucrat would be paid by the inevitable gaggle of press and politicians who would no doubt be waiting for me at my destination.

Still, I didn't want to hang around here any longer than absolutely necessary. While travelling around Europe had been fun for the most part, I'd succeeded in my goal of locating Riddle's remaining Horcruxes. I reached out and took the portkey. As it activated, I thought that I didn't really want



to Journey around for a while.

Perhaps I did have some talent for divination after all...