

## **Midnight Duel, Midday Love Mars is Bright Tonight**

Mars is bright tonight.

A lean, robed figure slowly made his way through the dark, twisted trunks of the trees in the Forbidden Forest. His soft footfalls could barely be made out in the silent darkness. The dark-haired wizard moved steadily and with a sure confidence, a silent, yet obvious warning to even the terrible and powerful horrors of this forest. This was someone well equipped to handle whatever the darkness could throw at him.

The almost full moon hung low in the night sky, bathing the forest floor with minimal silvery light, while making the leaves at the top of the trees almost glow with a pearly radiance.

The figure made his way unerringly to a forest clearing. A familiar creature stood proudly on the gently sloping ground. A powerfully muscled torso sat upon the body of a stallion. The centaur turned to face the visitor without surprise at his presence.

"Mars is bright tonight." The centaur intoned formally.

The dark-haired wizard nodded. "I know. It is why I am here."

"It has been some time since you last visited us."

Another nod. "I did not expect to meet you, Firenze. How have you been?"

The centaur picked at the ground with his front foreleg. "I have been, satisfactory."

The wizard slowly moved forward on silent feet. He held out his hand in greeting. After a moment's hesitation, Firenze grasped the hand and the pair shook. "It was good to see you, Firenze, but my goal tonight is further on."

The centaur nodded and looked up. "Mars is very bright. You need to do what you propose. You must not fail."

The dark-haired wizard nodded a third and final time. "Till we meet again."

The odd pair separated, and the lean wizard continued his way, deeper into the Forbidden Forest.

Twice tonight he had been forced to defend himself. A large forest troll would be cautious the next time he tried to waylay a wizard, once he regained consciousness and stemmed the flow of blood from the stump of his arm. A vampire had also made an appearance, but had been driven off, several small wooden stakes protruding from its chest.

For another half hour, the lean figure made his way further into the dark and dangerous forest depths. A loud skittering, echoed on every side signaled his arrival at his destination.

"Aragog. Hagrid sends you greetings."

The enormous black arachnid, his eight dark eyes covered in cloudy cataracts, moved his ponderous bulk slowly from his lair and towards the figure.

"Ahhh, friend of Hagrid. You return to us."

The wizard smiled. "Not by choice. I came to bring you a warning."

"A warning?" the deep, grating voice of Aragog said.

Out of the corner of his eye, the dark-haired wizard could make out scores of large, hairy creatures moving to block all his escape routes. "Yes. A wizard called Voldemort is looking to recruit creatures to his side."

Aragog drew a rasping breath. "Why would you come to warn me of this wizard?"

"I didn't. I am here to warn you of the folly of joining him."

The massive blind arachnid paused, surprised at the lack of fear shown. "You dare to threaten me? In my own lair?"

The wizard shook his head. "He will offer you much. Perhaps even the chance to feed your children on the bodies of the students of Hogwarts."

"I would risk much to give my children such a feast."

"I warn you once, and once only. Do not support this wizard. You and your children would not survive the alliance."

Once more, the huge spider paused. "I make my own choices, for my own reasons, friend of Hagrid."

"If that is your final answer, then I will leave you."

"I think not. You escaped my children once, but the wheeled creature who saved you is not nearby." Aragog made a noise that sounded like Moaning Myrtle's sobs through metal pipes. The old arachnid was laughing. "It is time for you to finally feed my children."

As one, the huge arachnids skittered forward to tear the intruder to pieces.

Calmly, the wizard removed a golden object from his robes. He smiled viciously.

"I think not." Harry said.

With a flick of his wrist, Harry opened the golden egg. The egg he had snatched from the Hungarian Horntail's nest during the tri-wizard tournament.

Instead of the usual ear-splitting cacophony, Harry could only hear an eerie hum. The only effect Harry could feel was the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

The effects he could see were much more dramatic. Harry had charmed the egg to emit the mermaid's song at ultrasonic frequencies. Frequencies that drove spiders away in agony.

Like a breaking wave in reverse, Aragog's children skittered away from the wizard as fast as they could; climbing over each other in a desperate attempt to escape from the intense pain. Aragog himself shuddered in agony, but his ponderous bulk prevented him from running.

After only a few seconds, Harry closed the egg. The hum stopped, and the frenzied, pain-filled movement stopped.

"As I said, your children would not survive the alliance, Voldemort will want you to attack certain people and places, Aragog. Should you or any of your children leave this forest, you will die."

"Again, you threaten me."

Harry smiled evilly. "No, that was not a threat. Merely a statement of fact." Harry held up the golden egg. Aragog visibly flinched and pulled away. "The charms on this have been merged with the wards on Hogwarts. Should an acromantula set off a ward..."

Aragog regarded the young wizard for a long time. "Very well, friend of Hagrid. My children and I will not support this wizard. We will never attack a human. Is that enough for you?" he asked sarcastically.

"That won't be necessary." Harry replied as he turned to leave. "I didn't say anything about not attacking that wizard's representative."

Albus Dumbledore looked up from his desk and looked at the blood-red phoenix that perched on his high windowsill. "Any luck?" he asked.

The phoenix blurred, and Harry sat on the ledge. He lightly jumped down, and landed in a crouch. With smooth, graceful movements, Harry rose and made his way over to the headmaster's desk.

"Yes. The acromantulas won't be joining Voldemort. In fact, I think they'll try to eat the messenger." he said with a smile.

"I see. Now perhaps I should begin chastising you."

Harry's smile vanished. "I told you my reasons for going out there tonight."

"No, you wrote me a note explaining your reasons."

Harry shrugged. "Same thing. I didn't want you to forbid me to do it."

Dumbledore sighed. "We call it the Forbidden Forest for a reason."

"Hagrid took me into it in my first year."

Dumbledore passed a weary hand over his eyes. "True, and I won't belittle your achievements tonight by saying that you shouldn't have gone. I will say that you shouldn't have gone alone."

Harry gave the headmaster a long stare. "The only people who would have willingly gone with me can be separated into two groups. Those I wouldn't have put in danger like that, and those who have the authority to forbid me going."

Dumbledore again sighed and wryly shook his head. "I know you prepared yourself for the acromantulas, but there are other dangerous creatures in the forest as well."

Harry smiled. "Yes I know. A forest troll who strayed too close to Hogwarts will now have trouble counting over five, and a young vampire is going to have difficulty resting comfortably with several tiny stakes in his chest."

Dumbledore looked deep into the emerald eyes of Harry Potter. The boy, no, the young man had changed significantly since his stint in Azkaban.

The Harry Potter who first came to Hogwarts would not have made such a flippant joke about such dangerous things."

Harry blinked slowly. "That Harry was naive. I miss my innocence, but I don't mourn it. I have gained too much to wish the past had never happened, and I'll defend my sanity any way I can. If I have to make jokes about danger, I will."

Dumbledore nodded. "I just wish you didn't remind me so much of your Defense against the Dark Arts professor."

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I remind you of Professor Moody?"

"Yes. But only after he had been an auror for several years, not when he was a student here."

Harry tilted his head to one side, trying to fit his DADA professor into a mental image of a carefree student. "Professor Moody as a student. That is something I just cannot picture."

A low chuckle escaped the headmaster's lips. "He didn't spring into the world fully grown you know."

Harry chuckled too. "I know. It's just, difficult. If I hadn't seen him in your pensieve, I don't think I could have imagined him in any other way."

"Please, sit down. I would like to spend some time discussing other things."

Surprise registered on Harry's face. He flowed into one of the armchairs, moving with that silent grace he had attained.

"First of all, how is the preparation for your OWLs coming along?"

"Fine, excellently even. I keep getting offers of last year's notes and tests from people in my old year level to study with. I find it amusing that even Hermione has offered to lend me her essays from last year. Normally, she wouldn't let us see her work until our own had been graded and handed back."

Dumbledore nodded. "Miss. Granger does strike me as that type of student." he chuckled. "You realise that what you are actually receiving from most of them is an unconscious request for forgiveness?"

Harry nodded. "I know. That is why I feel bad about declining the offers. I don't need them though." he said pointedly.

Dumbledore nodded. "I know that you felt you could have taken your OWLs after your trial and readmission to Hogwarts. I'm sure you would have excelled at Charms, Defense and Transfiguration. Perhaps even potions too. In all likelihood you would have gained more OWLs from those subjects alone than most others in your year level attained in total. But you have spent a year without using magic. I want you to have the best opportunity to get as many OWLs as possible."

Harry smiled. "If I get more than Hermione, you will have a life-long enemy you know."

Dumbledore laughed. "Yes, Miss. Granger's total of eighteen was extremely impressive. Do you think you will beat her record?"

"I intend to."

"Excellent. Speaking of Miss. Granger, how are you handling fitting in with your old group, as well as your new classmates?"

Harry leaned back and pressed his fingertips together. "The situation in the dorm room is fine. Seamus, Dean and Neville were a bit nervous when I met them for the first time after stunning them all, but now we are fine. It is just like how it was."

"And with your new classmates?"

Harry sighed. "Ginny has made it her duty to make sure I'm accepted by the other fifth-years."

"You have some reservations?"

Harry winced. "Cho and Ginny aren't getting along. When they worked together to try to save me they got along OK, but now, I sometimes think Cho sees Ginny as a threat."

"Have you told Miss. Chang to ease her fears?"

"Of course. I don't think she is afraid that I'm going to leave her. I just think that she is jealous of the amount of time Ginny gets to spend with me. Of course, to others, that comes across as jealous of Ginny."

"Has Miss. Weasley herself given up on her pursuit of you?"

Harry blushed. "I think so, but sometimes I can't tell. Ginny has been a great friend, and I've been trying to treat her as I would treat Ron or Hermione. Most of the time she is all smiles and helpfulness, but she sometimes, um, brushes up against me." Harry stopped, too embarrassed to continue.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Surely she apologises."

"Yes, she does. But she has this, I don't know, this 'smile'. It's like she enjoys making me embarrassed."

"Perhaps she is just getting you back for all the times you made her blush."

Harry sighed deeply. "Maybe. I hope so. She has done so much for me that I don't want to push her away. But I don't want Cho to even start to suspect that I no longer want to be with her."

"Speaking of Miss. Chang, how is her NEWTs preparation going?"

"Good. I understand that everyone, especially the Ravenclaws are glad that she has come out of her shell. I've been helping her with a transfiguration project."

Dumbledore smiled. "I wonder what that could be?"

Harry smiled too. "Hopefully, she will be an animagus by the end of the school year."

"Does she have any idea what animal she wishes to become?"

"I hope Fawkes doesn't mind being gawked at, since she wants to try to duplicate my feat. I think she wants to study and document the different requirements to becoming a magical creature, opposed to a normal animal."

"A worthy study. I presume you have informed Professor McGonagall?"

"We are going to visit her and request permission this weekend."

"That only gives Miss. Chang a little over eight months to accomplish the feat. Will that be enough time?"

"We think so. Cho is amazing. It took me that long simply because Transfiguration is not my best discipline. Cho picks things up much quicker than I."

"Have the two of you rejoined your respective Quidditch teams?"

"No. I have, since Natalie insisted on letting me be seeker in her place. Cho declined a similar offer, because she didn't want to take over for only a year. She has said she would be the reserve seeker though."

"I understand that Miss. McDonald didn't have a very good season last year."

Harry nodded. "She only managed to catch the snitch once, but at least that was against Slytherin."

Dumbledore laughed softly. "I see your interhouse rivalry with Slytherin is still as strong as ever."

"Did you expect that to change?" Harry asked with a grin.

"It certainly didn't with your father and Sirius. There is another thing, what are your plans for Christmas?"

"You mean in regard to where I want to spend the holidays?"

"Yes. Since your escape from Azkaban, the Dursleys are unable to take you in."

"'Unwilling' you mean."

"No, 'unable'. Mr. Dursley is still in custody, and his charges of child abuse are about to be upgraded to murder."

"Murder? How?"

"Well, for all intents and purposes, you disappeared that night. The muggle press is making the assumption that your uncle had you killed to avoid having you testify against him."

"I'd better fix that. I don't want him charged with murder."

"If you wish, I can organise for you and a wizarding lawyer to visit your uncle."

"I'd appreciate that."

"So would your uncle, I daresay."

"That reminds me, has Sirius been officially pardoned in the muggle world too?"

"Yes. That caused a bit of a stir too. But back to my original question, what are your plans for the Christmas holidays?"

"I honestly don't know. I have always spent them at Hogwarts. I'd love to go home with Sirius, but I'm not sure I'd feel comfortable at the Malfoy's old manor. I spent some uncomfortable times there."

"You are of course welcome to stay at Hogwarts. I simply wanted you to start thinking about it, since for the first time the decision is entirely up to you."

"It is a rather novel experience, I must say."

"Take your time. Speaking of novel, Professor Flitwick has approached me with a rather strange suggestion."

"Oh?" Harry said, grinning.

"Apparently, he let slip that the wards around Hogwarts had been supplemented with an object which tracks the location of people within the castle. A fifth-year student of his snorted and suggested that the tracking charms in question could be improved."

"Fancy that." said Harry, his grin widening.

"When did you figure out that the Marauder's Map was being used with the wards around the castle?"

"Just recently. The night I escaped, Fudge contacted you through the fire. You told him that tracking charms had been used with the wards. The Map is the only thing of mine that I have not been able to account for its whereabouts. When Professor Flitwick mentioned the combination of object and wards, something just clicked."

"Excellent. You said you had some improvements?"

"Yes. We've been making our own version of the Map."

"We?"

Harry laughed. He withdrew a piece of parchment from his robes. "This version doesn't have the annoying repartee of the original, and fixes some holes in the security of my Father's. It isn't quite finished yet though." he said, passing the sheet to the headmaster.

"How do I activate it?"

"Anyone can. Just concentrate."

Dumbledore leaned over the parchment and his brow creased in concentration. A swirl of ink appeared.

**Messrs. Bambi, Bookworm and Bluey  
are proud to present  
B-3'S IMPROVED MARAUDER'S MAP**

"Bambi, Bookworm and Bluey?" Dumbledore asked with a smirk.

"Apparently, in Australia, red-heads are called 'Bluey'. Not too many people would be able to figure out who they are." Harry replied.

Dumbledore returned his attention to the parchment, drawing back in surprise as the ink left the sheet, and began forming a three-dimensional model of Hogwarts in the air. In seconds, the pair were looking at a stunningly detailed translucent model of the castle.

"We noticed that the charms my father and his friends used took the identity from the person's mind. That was why when Crouch, Jr was in Professor Moody's form, he still appeared as Crouch on the map. However, if someone had been obliviated, and then placed under the imperious curse, they could enter Hogwarts undetected." Harry explained.

"Fascinating. But that is a rather obscure set of circumstances. Why do you think that is a problem?"

"One of the original map's creators is still working for Voldy. It's probably not the best security practice to use his work."

"Point taken. What else needs to be done to this before it is finished?"

"Just a few stabilising charms. We were going to also put in a magnification feature, but that probably isn't necessary if you are just going to link it to the wards."

Dumbledore watched in facination as the tiny named dots travelled around within the floating model. "I see you have different colours for different people." he said.

"Yes, black for students, blue for teachers. We decided on white for ghosts, and yellow for visitors. People with no identity, obliviated or not, have flashing red dots."

Dumbledore looked up from the map. "How long until you have completed this? I'm very interested in using it instead of the current map."

"A week. Hermione and Ron are double-checking the charms we used to make sure it will work with the castle's wards correctly. You can have it then."

"Excellent. Would you like the original map back?"

Harry smiled. "Yes please. The Marauders left it here to be used by the students. It would be a shame if future generations of rule-breakers were denied its help."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled with amusement. "I doubt any other student would have dared to make that arguement in order to have something returned."

Harry shrugged, still smiling. "You wouldn't have believed me if I'd said anything else."

"True." Dumbledore said, and he turned his attention back to the floating castle map. "I shall get Fillius to assist in your research for this if you wish. He is instrumental in maintaining the wards around Hogwarts."

"Good point. I'll have him give it to you once we have finished it. Is there anything else you want to discuss tonight? I'd like to get some rest."

"Just one more thing. I'd like your assurance that you will not attempt another meeting like you did tonight without some sort of backup."

Harry regarded the old wizard thoughtfully. Finally he nodded. "Alright, but only if you promise to look at my proposals on face value, and not from the point of view of a teacher entrusted with my safety."

"You know I can't promise you that. But I will take it into consideration."

Harry nodded. "OK, I can live with that."

"That is the idea, Mr. Potter."

Harry grinned, stood up and pocketed the map. "I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast."

"Good night, Harry."

"Where in Merlin's name have you been?"

Harry sighed. "Justice." he said.

With a huff of indignation, the Fat Lady opened the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. Three figures were asleep on the couches. Ron had his arms around Hermione, while Ginny slept alone, her cheek lying on the armrest of the couch.

Ron's eyes flickered open as Harry tried to make his way silently to the sixth-year dorm.

"Where in Merlin's name have you been?"

Harry sighed again. "I was just asked that. Do you mind keeping your voice down?"

But it was too late. Both girls had been roused from sleep by Ron's exclamation, and they jumped up, ready to berate Harry.

Harry held up his hands in supplication. "Before you all go off, Dumbledore knew where I was."

"That's not what he told us." retorted Hermione.

Harry dropped his hands. "OK, he didn't know exactly where I was. I had to make sure that Voldy didn't get some allies too close to Hogwarts."

"You could have invited us along. We'd have helped." Ron insisted.

Harry gave him a wry smile. "I'm sure Aragog would have been pleased to see you again."

It was not often that Ron's skin turned any colour other than red, but now he went chalk white. Hermione looked from Ron to Harry.

"Aragog? Hagrid's acromantula pet?"

Harry nodded. "He's now about half the size of the Hungarian Horntail I went up against."

Ron made a whimpering sound and sat down heavily.

Harry looked at his oldest friend. "I know what to make you for Christmas."

"What?" Ron whispered.

"You'll see. In any case, I'm going to bed. You can all yell at me in the morning."

The three friends looked at each other as Harry disappeared up the stairs. "Since he got back, he is becoming too reckless." said Hermione.

"Yeah, I miss the old Harry." said Ron.

Ginny looked at the stairs that Harry had just climbed, her lip caught between her teeth. "He always took on too much." she said. "Now with his success against You-Know-Who, I think he is more afraid of accepting help than before."

"I think you're right, Ginny. I just hope he doesn't take on too much." Hermione replied, before making her way up to her own dorm.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Clean and Dirty

Clean and Dirty.

Slowly, Harry woke up. This late in the year, the sun wouldn't be up for another hour, but Harry always woke at the same time. No matter how late he went to bed.

With a groan, he reached over and fumbled on his bedside table for his glasses. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes with the back of his free hand and put the glasses on. Above him, the roof of the dorm swam into focus.

Harry sighed and rolled out of bed. Looking around, Harry noted that only Neville was already up. Neville had been the only student in living memory to attain three OWLs in Herbology, and as such had been working with the seventh years preparing for their Herbology NEWTs; that meant that poor Neville had to be up and about hours before the rest of the world a couple of times a week. Since Neville would still have to take his NEWTs next year, it didn't seem to be a good decision, at least to the other Gryffindor sixth-years. Harry made his way over to one of the windows that looked out over the grounds of Hogwarts and could make out Neville's figure wrestling with an overactive plant behind one of the greenhouses.

Harry grinned wryly to himself, and was about to turn away from the window when his attention was captured from a different direction.

Seven figures in Slytherin green were hiking from the castle to the Quidditch pitch. Even from this distance, Harry could easily make out the platinum blond head of Draco Malfoy.

According to Ron, Draco had been surprisingly quiet ever since his parents had been killed at Harry's ambush. Not that it was surprising that he had been subdued, but the Slytherin had actually avoided Harry's friends.

Not that they didn't enjoy not being annoyed, but Hermione was a bit curious as to Malfoy's complete change in personality. Ron of course had been waiting with barely concealed glee since he had first heard the news of the Malfoy's reversal of family fortune, and had desperately wanted Draco to try to bait him about how poor he was. Ron had been disappointed however, since the only surviving Malfoy had not said one word to anyone outside of his house.

Sirius had told Harry that when he first arrived to take possession of Malfoy Manor, Draco had also been there, frantically stripping whatever valuables he could from the house, just as long as they could be carried. Draco could have been charged with theft, but Sirius had allowed him to take any items of sentimental value. After they had been checked for dark magic of course.

Harry sighed deeply. Sirius had a home and was now, sort of, accepted by the wizarding world. His last letter to Harry had been upbeat, but contained an unwritten tone of sadness, and loneliness. Sirius had joked about the size of the house, now named 'Black's Pad', but Harry knew that he would not be comfortable in such a large, empty home.

Sirius had apparently been flirting outrageously with any female reporters desperate to get his story, which brought a grin to Harry's face. He had declined to give any exclusive interviews about his relationship with James and Peter, out of respect to Harry, but had been quite outgoing with details of his life since Azkaban. As such, he had a very full calendar, and Harry had not been able to visit him.

Harry in no way begrudged his godfather this, in fact, Harry was overjoyed that Sirius was again free and enjoying himself. He did miss the older marauder though.

Harry shook his head to clear it. He stretched and yawned, feeling his muscles come alive. Looking over to the slumbering form of Ron, he grinned at the memory of Ron's face when he had mentioned Aragog.

Harry grabbed a towel and prepared to go and have a shower. A thought stopped him, and he went back to his trunk and extracted the improved marauder's map. Concentrating, he activated the map, and discovered something that brought a wicked smile to his face.

Harry stuffed the map into a bag, and grabbed his invisibility cloak and all he needed for a shower. Still grinning, he left the dorm. Seconds later, he was outside of Gryffindor Tower.

Over the last few weeks, Cho had continued to rise early. Even though her skin was again as unmarked as an infant's, she had enjoyed starting her day early with a long, relaxing shower. Perhaps having everyone gawk at her for weeks had a productive side, the knowledge that she could shower for half an hour alone if she wished.

Cho reached the female prefect's bathroom quickly, and whispered the password. The door swung open to reveal the beautifully decorated room. The enormous bathtub cut into the very floor, with its marble lined sides was large enough for at least a dozen people to bathe together without touching one another.

Several shower cubicles extended along the far wall. Cho made her way over to one and began to undress.

Less than a minute later, hot water was spraying over Cho's lithe body, and she closed her eyes in bliss.

The young witch missed the sound of the door to the bathroom opening. Harry closed the door and whispered a locking charm. Some witches were still uncomfortable enough with the changes happening to their body that a locked door should not attract undue attention, he hoped. Harry put away B3's map, wiping away the evidence of his discovering the female prefect's bathroom's password.

His grin had not faded since leaving Gryffindor Tower. Harry quietly made his way over to Cho's shower and ran his eyes over his stunning, naked girlfriend. He carefully assumed a stance of casualness and ease, his bag slung over one shoulder.

"Good morning." he said brightly.

Cho let loose a small scream and spun round to face him, one arm covering her breasts, the other hand cupping her groin. Recognition flooded her face, and shock was replaced with irritation.

"What in Merlin's name did you do that for?" she demanded.

Harry still smiled, completely nonplussed. "I thought I'd offer to wash your back this morning."

"I bet. You come in here, breaking rules left and right, just to offer to give a seventh-year witch a back rub?"

"You make it sound as if I'd do this for any seventh-year witch, not just a very special one."

Cho couldn't help a grin from forming on her face. "Your godfather told me that no male would need an excuse to spy on a teenage girl in the shower."

"Did he just?" Harry mused. "When did he tell you this?"

Cho grinned. "He was standing right where you are now. I was in the shower at the time."

Harry's grin faded and he stared at Cho in shock. "Sirius spied on you while you were in the shower?"

Cho nodded. "I broke his nose. He didn't do it again."

Harry's grin returned. "I think we should get a better revenge than that. What do you think?"

"That sounds wonderful. What do you have in mind?"

Harry's eyes traced up and down his girlfriend's figure. "You think I can come up with a respectable retaliation while I'm this distracted?"

Cho's perfect features broke into their own evil grin. She stepped out of the shower and grabbed the front of Harry's robes. She dragged the surprised boy under the hot water.

"Gack!" Harry spluttered. He threw his bag outside the shower and desperately tried to disentangle himself from both his sodden robes and his vengeful girlfriend without swallowing any more water.

"Are you sorry?" asked Cho.

"Yes!" he managed, his glasses covered in water.

"Good." said Cho, and let her boyfriend go.

Harry stepped back and removed his glasses. He looked like Peeves had been using him for water-balloon target practice for a while.

Cho smiled and moved closer. She slipped her wet arms around Harry's chest and kissed him passionately, her nude body pressed against him. Even through the sodden robes, Cho could feel the rather obvious physical effect she was having on him.

With a shuddering sigh, Harry broke the kiss and stared into her deep dark eyes with his brilliant emerald ones. "I need a cold shower now." he said.

Cho smiled, her love and affection for this young man evident to all. "How about a hot and steamy one, my love?" she asked, gently helping Harry out of his wet clothes.

"That sound's even better."

Hermione covered her eyes with the back of her hand, trying to stop the sun's morning rays from disturbing her slumber. No luck.

She sat up in bed, listening for any sounds coming from her roommates. Nothing but light snores. They were all still asleep.

Wiping the rough grains of sleep from her eyes, Hermione swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood up to stretch.

"Still tired." she murmured to herself.

Hermione looked longingly at her bed, but decided not to waste such a wonderful Saturday by sleeping in. She turned and opened her wardrobe,



and selected a dressing-gown. She put on the thick garment over her sheer, light nightdress, and grabbed her toiletries bag.

Moments later, Hermione was walking down the corridor's of Hogwarts towards the female prefect's bathroom.

Cho's nude, slippery body writhed against Harry's own in a successful attempt to get Harry gasping with desire. His mischievous grin sent her insides squirming, and her heart racing. Cho grabbed the back of Harry's neck and brought his warm, soft lips to her own, and kissed him deeply.

Distracted as they were, neither of them noticed the door to the bathroom glow blue, as Harry's locking charm prevented entry to another student.

"Damn." Hermione said, after finding the door locked. She whispered the password again, and once more, the door glowed softly blue, indicating someone from within had locked the door.

Hermione's face grew set. Locking the door to one of the many communal bathrooms was considered acceptable, but locking the door to the only prefect bathroom, used by only twelve people in the entire school was not. She withdrew her wand and took aim.

A rather steamy room greeted Hermione as she entered the prefect's bathroom. The sight of the empty bath just made her more irritated. Each shower cubicle could be self-contained, why bother locking the door?

In fact, only one shower was running, and there was obviously someone in there. Hermione was about to speak up, berating the person, when the showering prefect's voice gently floated over the stall.

"Mmmmm, oh, yes." came the whispered voice.

Hermione's jaw dropped, and she blushed furiously, the reason for locking the door becoming apparent.

In a boarding school for adolescents, it was not incredibly uncommon to discover a fellow student hiding in private while exploring their own body, though generally more privacy than this was sought before doing so.

Hermione was just about to clear her throat when a second voice, definitely male, joined the first, groaning in pleasure. Hermione's blush intensified.

As a prefect, Hermione had been unlucky enough to catch students together while on her rounds, and deducting points had seemed a relevant punishment at the time. But here, this time, a prefect was one of the guilty parties.

Assuming a stern face, Hermione gathered herself. She stepped up to the shower, and turned to face right. Regardless of who it was, she didn't really want to see it. Hermione was about to clear her throat when out of the corner of her eye, she recognised Cho Chang.

Cho's head was thrown back, her mouth open in joy. Her arms were thrown around the neck of her partner, who was nuzzling the side of her neck. Cho's back was pressed against the rear wall of the stall.

The male student had his back to Hermione, and the shocked prefect could clearly see Cho's taut legs wrapped around his slender waist. His hands were cupped beneath Cho's buttocks, supporting her while he kissed her neck, and leaned against Cho's small frame.

It was obvious from the pelvic movements from both students that more than innocent petting was going on. Hermione had never in her life been more horrified and intrigued.

For what felt like an eternity, Hermione watched in blank-minded voyeuristic fascination. The uncomfortable feeling of intrusion couldn't overcome the shocking feeling of curiosity and betrayal.

Cho was making love to another man! Harry would be devastated if he found out.

Hermione's eyes swept over the frame of the man in front of her. He was of short stature, with long, dark hair, but his musculature bespoke many hours of physical training. His lean, toned frame continued down, his tight buttocks clenched, down to his superbly defined legs. Hermione could understand Cho's attraction, but she was supposed to be going out with Hermione's best friend! How could Cho do that to Harry?

Hermione had no idea how long she had been watching the pair, but when Cho's voice began to rise in ecstasy, and the pace of their coupling increased, Hermione finally managed to force her attention away from the scene.

Tears of hurt in her eyes, Hermione ran across the bathroom and wrenched the door open. She ran through it and slammed it shut before sprinting towards Gryffindor Tower.

Neither Harry nor Cho noticed the sound of the slamming door, as they both reached their climaxes at the same time, their mouths devouring each other.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Misconceptions

### Misconceptions

Cho emerged from the prefect's bathroom with an uncharacteristically large smile on her delicate features. Anyone watching her may have been struck by the fact she looked so happy, enough that such a watcher may miss the fact that she held the door open as though letting someone else out, someone unseen.

"See you at breakfast in an hour, you sexy witch." a disembodied voice whispered, and Cho felt an invisible hand give her left buttock a gentle squeeze.

Her dark, almond-shaped eyes widened in appreciation. "Stop it, or I'll drag you back in there." she whispered, her smile never disappearing.

After a short pause, Harry's disembodied voice returned. "I'm trying to think of the downside to that."

Cho giggled and slapped his hand away. "Go get dressed, we have to visit Professor McGonagall today."

"I love you." was all the reply she got.

"I love you too." Cho said under her breath, as she made her way to the Ravenclaw dorm rooms.

Hermione lay curled up on her bed, the curtains all drawn closed. Some of the other sixth-year girls had risen, but none had interrupted her silent tears.

The scene had been burned into her memory, Cho's perfect face fixed in an expression of joy, as she had sex with another man. Harry was Hermione's best friend, well, had been before he went to Azkaban. Since his escape and subsequent exoneration, he had been friendly, but slightly distant.

Yes, distant. That was the word. Harry's old cheerfulness and joy only surfaced now when he spent time with Cho.

He still spent time with her and Ron, though. Over the last few weeks the trio had spent the majority of their time together recreating the Marauder's Map. It had been a fun project, and both Hermione and Ron intended to use it as one of their Charms NEWTs next year. They had offered to let Harry take credit for himself for his OWLs, but he had declined, and given them a look of disbelief. "I came up with the idea, but we all made this. Why should I be the only one to get credit?" he had asked.

Same old Harry, yet different. He still had his innate nobility, and generosity; but he no longer had his hesitancy and indecision. The old Harry would have been doubtful on the trio's chances of re-creating the Marauder's Map, but the new Harry simply jumped in, with a determination Hermione had never seen in him, and the new Map had been designed and built in less than a fortnight.

The Map! Hermione sat straight up in her bed. With the Map, she could see whom Cho was cheating with. Though it was unlikely, the pair may still be in the bathroom.

Hermione pulled apart the curtains, and started rummaging through her trunk. She soon found her copy of the Map, and climbed back into bed to use it, closing the curtains behind her to ensure her privacy.

Sighing in relief that the trio had decided to each have their own copy, Hermione concentrated.

Seconds later, a translucent picture perfect model of Hogwarts Castle had formed above the sheet. Peering into the depths of the castle, Hermione muttered a curse under her breath when she saw the bathroom empty. It took Hermione a minute to locate Cho's dot, deep within the Ravenclaw common room, surrounded by dots of the other seventh-year Ravenclaw witches.

As always, Hermione's eyes sought out the dot labeled Ron Weasley. Not that it was difficult for her, since she had made one minor, tiny, inconsequential modification to her copy of the map. Ron's location was highlighted by a pink heart.

There he was, still on his bed. Hermione frowned, and wondered if there was any way she could start an argument with him about his laziness. Something distracted her before she planned further.

Harry wasn't in the dorm with Ron. A quick scan of the model Gryffindor Tower pinpointed his location in the common room.

Hermione clenched her fists with indecision. Should she go down and talk to him, tell him that the first love of his life was cheating on him? The last thing Hermione wanted to do was hurt Harry. But was Cho the one hurting him? Would Harry blame the messenger?

Hermione? Are you still asleep?" came Ginny's voice.

Hermione quickly wiped the map and looked up as Ginny parted the curtains. "Gin? What do I do?"

Ginny frowned. "What do you mean? What's happened?" The youngest Weasley took in Hermione's red eyes and soulful expression. "What has my git of a brother done now?" she demanded, as she sat down on the bed.

Hermione smiled and gently shook her head. "Nothing, this time."

"Then what?"

Hermione closed the curtains and took a deep breath. "I just saw a pair of students having sex."

Ginny relaxed. "Is that all? Did you give them detentions?"

"No, that's just it, I didn't. I ran away shocked."

Ginny laughed. "Why? That doesn't sound like you."

Hermione looked straight at Ginny, weighing up what she should tell the younger witch. "The girl is going out with someone else."

Ginny's eyes widened. "Who?"

"Never mind. I don't want to start any rumours. But what should I do? Should I talk to the girl, or her boyfriend? Should I just butt out?"

"Do you know them? Know them well, I mean."

Hermione shrugged. "Sort of. I thought I did. I think so."

Ginny giggled. "Do you want to try and make less sense than that?" she asked impishly.

Hermione smiled despite herself. "OK. I do know the girl. Not too well, but I do know her."

"OK. What about the boy?"

"He's not in my year, but I know him a little better." Hermione replied, hoping Ginny wouldn't figure it out.

Ginny looked thoughtful. "OK, What are your choices? Do nothing, Talk to one of them, or talk to both."

"I don't want to hurt him."

Ginny raised her eyebrows. "It may be a little late for that."

Hermione nodded her head reluctantly. "I know. I just wish it never happened."

Ginny gave her friend a calculating look. "I didn't think you were so close to anyone else outside your year here that you'd feel so bad about this."

Hermione almost panicked. "Um, I just, I wouldn't want to think that Ron was cheating on me."

Ginny's expression softened. "I understand. But this is not about you and Ron. Go and talk to the boy, it will just make it harder for him if you wait, and if he finds out that you knew all along, he may blame you."

Hermione gave Ginny a thankful look. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"I just wanted to know if I could borrow your essay notes for your potion assignment last year about the various antidotes and the common ingredients. Harry and I have it due next week."

Hermione nodded. "Help yourself, I'm going to get dressed, then go and talk to that poor boy."

As Hermione opened the curtains around the bed and got up to get dressed, Ginny made her way over to Hermione's desk and selected the folder marked **Potions - fifth-year - assignments - essays - notes** . You had to give Hermione credit, Ginny thought; she was the most organised person anyone had ever met.

Hermione left to go downstairs as Ginny took out the required notes. Out of the corner of her eye, Ginny noticed the Map.

She had seen it before, and had even felt a bit left out when she found out the trio had been spending their time together making it. With a curious grin, Ginny activated the map and looked deep into the model of Hogwarts, searching for Hermione's dot. "Who is she talking to?" Ginny wondered.

One second later, Ginny covered her mouth in shock. She wiped the map, quickly stood and closed the curtains around Hermione's bed.

Ginny stood still quietly for a few seconds, breathing deeply and trying to slow her heart rate. Slowly and deliberately, she walked out of the sixth-year dorm and into her own. She climbed onto her bed, and closed the curtains. A flick of her wand, and a silencing charm had been placed on the curtains.

Ginny grabbed a pillow and covered her mouth with it, then let out an enormous shriek of joy, and started jumping on the bed in delight.

Cho was cheating on Harry!

Hermione left Ginny to find the requested notes, and made her way into the common room to talk with Harry. Her heart was beating wildly as she slowly descended the stairs.

This early in the morning, there were few people in the common room. Harry was one of them, he was lying stretched out on one of the long couches, reading a book.

That was another one of Harry's changes. He was quieter now, that was an achievement in itself, but also more studious. Hardly surprising, since with a couple of months preparation he had taken on and almost single-handedly destroyed every dark wizard in the country. He now knew the benefit of planning and organisation.

Hermione almost faltered, wondering just how much the news she had would hurt her friend. Silently, she cursed Cho, for putting her in this position.

She crept up on her friend, and looked at him thoughtfully. He lay on the couch with the back of his head facing her. "Harry?" she said softly, hoping no one else would overhear.

"Mmmm." he said distractedly.

*I need to tell you something, and you are going to freak out.* "How are you?"

"Fine, yourself?" he said, not looking up from his book.

*Awful! I just saw your girlfriend bonking another man.* "I'm OK. Um."

"Um? You don't sound sure." For the first time, Harry seemed to be paying attention to the conversation.

"I'm not sure." she blurted.

Harry frowned, put the book down on his chest, and arched his neck to look at Hermione upside down. "What's up?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "I just walked in on a pair of students... In the shower." With that sentence, Hermione blushed furiously and looked away from Harry.

She missed Harry's cheeks turning their own bright red. Harry quickly looked back to his book to hide his face. "Did you give them detention?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"One of them was a prefect."

Harry's heart was racing, his cheeks flaming red. He shifted and brought his book up to keep his red face away from Hermione. "That must have been uncomfortable for you."

Hermione was embarrassed enough not to notice Harry's rather flippant answers. "You have no idea." she muttered.

Harry's mind whirled. "Did you recognise this prefect?"

"Yes. Harry, what I'm going to say is going to hurt you."

"Really?"

"I saw Cho, making love to someone in the shower."

"I see."

Hermione snapped her attention to the top of Harry's head. How could he take this so calmly?

"I remember the last time someone wanted to hurt me. They used poly-juice potion to do so." Harry continued, his nose still in his book.

Hermione felt a weight lift from her heart.

Ron was thoroughly enjoying himself, running through the kitchens at Hogwarts. He had a large tub of butterscotch ice-cream in one hand and a bottle of chocolate sauce in the other. Hermione ran from him laughing, clad only in her skimpy lace underwear, her hair and skin smeared with whipped cream and other delicious foodstuffs.

Hermione slipped and fell into a shallow vat of strawberry yoghurt. She sat up and looked at her boyfriend with a sultry, seductive pout.

Ron stood at the edge of the vat, his sauce bottle aimed and ready to cover his sexy, half-naked girlfriend with liquid chocolate.

Hermione slowly extended her tongue, and carefully licked her lips. With a deep throaty growl, she lay back and spread her long silky legs, and ran

her hands up and down her body. Beckoning to her boyfriend, she whispered, "Wake up you lazy bugger!"

"Wake up you lazy bugger!" Hermione told Ron, and hit him with a pillow.

Ron moaned in protest, desperate to cling onto his dream.

Hermione whacked him with a pillow again. "Will you wake up!"

With a final groan, Ron looked up at his girlfriend. "Huh? 'Mione? W'ssup? S'matt'r?"

Hitting him with the pillow one last time, Hermione jumped off the bed. "Get up, I need to talk to you."

With what felt like an heroic effort, Ron sat up. Through his sleep-blurred vision, he could make out his girlfriend, enough to tell that she didn't have any food splattered on her. Ron groaned in disappointment. "What?" he asked.

"I think someone is trying to break up Harry and Cho."

Ron collapsed back onto his bed. "S'ok, they'll still be trying in a couple of hours."

"Ron!" Hermione ripped off the covers. "Will yo-" she started, before the sight of her boyfriend distracted her.

Ron had just enough presence of mind to cover the tent in his boxer shorts with a pillow. "Do you mind?" he asked, now fully awake.

Hermione blinked and shook her head. "Yes, no, I mean..." she coughed. "Just meet me in the common room, OK?"

Ron watched as she raced out of the dorm. He looked down at himself and collapsed back on the bed, groaning in frustration.

"You really should tell her not to come in here." Seamus said, his head peaking out from between his own curtains.

"Would you want to tell her she isn't allowed to do something?" he snapped back.

"She's not my girlfriend."

Ron grunted, and stood up. "Just two more minutes, would that have been too much to ask?" he mumbled.

Harry motioned to Cho as he entered the Great Hall. Her smile seemed to light up the entire room. He almost ran over to her and gave her a hug.

"I need to tell you something, and you are going to want to be alone when I do." he whispered in her ear.

An intensely curious look graced her features and she led him from the hall. Arm in arm, they wandered through the corridor's of Hogwarts, and made their way out onto the grounds.

Once they had walked halfway to the Quidditch pitch, Cho turned to Harry and said, "Well?"

Harry blushed. "Did you notice that there was no locking charm on the door when we left the bathroom this morning?"

Cho's smile disappeared. "Yes, I did, as a matter of fact."

Harry swallowed. "I put a locking charm on the door when I first came in."

"Then-"

"Yep, someone walked in on us."

"Oh, my!" Cho covered her face with her hands. "Do you know who?"

Harry nodded. "Hermione. She confronted me afterwards. I think she was going to give us detention, but was too embarrassed at the time. I gave her a reason not to."

"What reason?"

"Poly-juice potion."

Cho looked at Harry for a second before understanding dawned. "You are a genius!"

Harry blushed. "Hardly. I would have used a stronger charm if I were that clever. But by suggesting that it was possible someone may have been using poly-juice potion, Hermione now has an honourable excuse to avoid handing out detentions. She was really embarrassed. We do need to be more discrete in future."

Cho nodded and put her head on his shoulder. "I'm really embarrassed myself. Hermione saw us in the shower together."

"Just deny you ever lock the door, and her excuse has even more weight." Harry sighed. "It's weird, she never mentioned me. I guess she was shocked at seeing her best friend nude."

“Hmm, maybe. But now, I’m not the only one to have enjoyed looking at your backside.” Cho slipped her hand down and caressed Harry’s bum.

“Wicked girl!” he said, laughing. Harry leaned over and gently kissed Cho’s soft lips. “Shall we go back for breakfast?”

“Mmm, sounds good. I worked up quite an appetite this morning.” she replied, and the couple turned and made their way back to the castle.

“No!” a group of forth-year Gryffindor witches said together.

“That’s what I heard.” confirmed Ginny, a smug expression on her face. “I don’t believe a word of it though, so if anyone asks you about it, just say you don’t believe it.”

Nodding like puppets, the gaggle of witches broke up and dispersed.

Ginny smiled to herself. Nothing travels faster than gossip, except denied gossip.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Round and Round the Grapevine Goes

Round and round the grapevine goes.

As was his newly created custom on weekends, Harry sat at the Ravenclaw table for breakfast. Cho's house had welcomed him openly, even warmly. The discussions on the tactics and inventions he had used to decimate the Dark Lord's forces had been deep, long and loud. The thirst for knowledge that typified a Ravenclaw manifested itself in many different ways, but all were interested in the practical methods Harry had used to defend himself and what he had learned as an apparent follower of the Dark Lord.

Harry enjoyed his time with the Ravenclaws. In all his time at Hogwarts, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw had so few classes together, making it difficult for him to form close friendships. Now that he was spending as much time as he could with one special Ravenclaw in particular, he had become a familiar face to the rest of the house.

"You still haven't told us how you survived falling from the cliff!" Padma Patil said, bringing up for what felt like the hundredth time a topic Harry kept trying to avoid.

"How would you have done it?" Harry asked for what felt to the listeners as the hundredth time, a grin on his features.

Several students seated around Cho and Harry groaned at this, one of Harry's favourite ways of diverting attention.

"I don't know! That's why I asked you!" Padma replied, a mixture of frustration and amusement on her pretty face.

"Surely you can figure it out." Harry stalled. "Just go over everything I had on me at the time. Tattered robes and a pair of glasses. Plus all we have learned at Hogwarts."

One of the younger students Harry hadn't met shook his head in disbelief. "You had to have had more on you than that. A wand at least."

Cho smiled. "No, David. His wand was handed back to him later that evening."

David crossed his arms, a speculative look on his face. "I didn't say 'his' wand, I said 'a' wand." he said carefully.

Harry smiled. "No, I didn't have a wand."

Padma interrupted. "Cho, do you know how he did it?"

Cho nodded. "I didn't at the time, and he knew something else besides what we normally learn here. I managed to finally figure it out, no thanks to Sirius."

Harry put on a faintly outraged expression. "Hey! My godfather was just protecting me! It's not his fault that you didn't work it out sooner. He never lied to you, you know."

This was new. "You met Sirius Black before he was exonerated?" the awed Patil twin asked Cho.

Cho blushed slightly and nodded. "He is very charming, but at the time he was very scary. I thought he was going to kill me, and less than five minutes later, I was sobbing into his robes."

"Well, the first time I saw him, I fell over backwards, I wasn't sure what he was." said Harry, remembering the night he blew up his Uncle's sister.

"Have you visited him since his exoneration? I bet the mansion he got off the Malfoys is pretty cool."

"No, I haven't seen him since the party. But the house isn't cool at all."

"What do you mean? If you haven't visited him since, when have you seen the house?" asked a confused David.

Harry gave him a sad smile. "Voldy took me there sometimes, for training. For rituals. It wasn't something I care to remember if I can help it."

All the students within earshot looked at their plates as if examining in minute detail what they were eating. Some of them gave a shiver.

"Why do you call him that?" Padma whispered.

Harry turned to look at her directly. "Because it shows just how silly it is to keep up calling him 'You-know-who'. Don't fear his name, just say it."

Padma gave her own sad smile. "I'm not brave like you."

Harry snorted. "Don't sell yourself short. Your twin sister is in Gryffindor, so unless you are the only identical twins who are totally unlike each other, you do have courage." Harry looked over his shoulder at the Slytherin table. "The Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin when I first put it on. Just because it isn't your dominant feature, doesn't mean you don't have it."

The distinctive sound of Professor Moody's leg intruded into the conversation. "I didn't realise that Hat wanted to put you in Slytherin, laddie. You'd have done well there."

Harry smiled up at the scarred visage. "That's exactly what the Hat told me."

Moody smiled and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "My old house would have been just the place for a devious mind like yours. Not that you don't seem to have developed it yourself. By the way, that toy we were waiting for has arrived. I was thinking I'd put it through its paces later on. Interested in helping out?"

Harry's eyes lit up. "Count me in! When?"

"After lunch, since we still need to find somewhere to put it."

"I'll meet you at lunch then."

Moody nodded. "Enjoy your breakfast, boys and girls." he said as he turned to leave.

"Thank you, Professor." Harry replied, and his thanks were echoed by several at the table.

Cho's face was alight with curiosity. "What 'toy' are you talking about?" The rest of the table nodded with shared interest.

Harry looked abashed. "Sorry, but I can't tell you just yet. I need Dumbledore's permission first. I can say that you will all find out soon, by next week at the latest, and it is going to be used in our DADA lessons."

The students at the table resumed their breakfast at this.

"Well, Potter. Even with fame and all my family's money, you still can't keep a girl satisfied." came a familiar drawl.

Harry turned in his seat and looked up at Draco Malfoy. "How are you holding up?" he asked politely.

Harry's apparent concern completely threw the only surviving Malfoy off. He paused for a while before continuing his teasing. "Didn't you hear me? Your girlfriend has apparently got someone else to scratch an itch you haven't been able to."

Cho's face coloured, but Harry didn't even blink. "Not too well then, it seems." he sighed.

The younger Malfoy sneered. "Why do you care anyway?"

Harry shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry, Draco. For everything."

Malfoy's face grew as red as Ron's hair, and he turned and stormed back to the Slytherin table.

"Why were you being so nice to him? Did you hear what he said?" hissed Cho.

Harry turned to her with a surprised look on his face. "You once told me to change the way I dealt with him to what ever he could handle the least."

Cho calmed down somewhat. "That's right, I remember."

Harry smiled at her. "If you'd jumped up and yelled at him, he would have succeeded to rile us."

Cho nodded, and looked around at her fellow housemates, all of whom also nodded in agreement. "But why were you so nice to him?"

Harry smirked. "Back in Diagon Alley, when we first started going out, he tried insulting us. I was jovial and outgoing, and he couldn't handle that. Now, since his life has changed, the only thing he has left is pride. The thing he could handle least is pity."

Cho's colouring returned to normal, and a smile appeared. "You know, if everyone just said, 'You poor thing' when he tried to insult them, it would drive him crazy." she said thoughtfully. Nearly every other Ravenclaw within earshot also nodded, a smirk appearing on not a few faces.

Harry gave her hand a squeeze. "That's my girl."

"Ron!" said an exasperated Hermione. "Someone is trying to break up Harry and Cho."

Ron shook his head. "So you saw Cho in the shower with another guy. Which is more likely, Cho is cheating and doing it with someone else, or someone took poly-juice potion to look like her and hope someone caught them in the shower together?"

Hermione paused to think.

"For all you know," Ron continued, "This fellow may have a crush on Cho. He may have persuaded his girlfriend to take the poly-juice to look like Cho so he can act out a fantasy."

Hermione wrung her hands together. "I wish we had made it possible to rewind the new Maps."



Ron gave her a smirk. "As I recall, Harry suggested that when we were designing them, and you quite quickly shot the idea down." He watched in amusement, as his girlfriend blushed red.

"I didn't want anyone to be able to, well..."

"Find out where our favourite 'hiding' spot are and discover what we do there?"

Hermione shot him a look, one he had learned long ago meant he was coming dangerously close to a period of enforced celibacy.

"Ron, you know Cho." Hermione continued, her voice as if nothing had happened, her face still hard. "Do you think she would cheat on Harry so soon after they got back together?"

Ron sighed deeply and shook his head. "I guess not. But the idea of someone using poly-juice potion just to break them up..."

"Harry suggested it actually."

Ron nodded absently, then blinked and gave Hermione a look of horror. "You told Harry that Cho was cheating on him?"

Hermione nodded, her face showing her shame. "He didn't even blink. He just sounded as if what I said was impossible. He trusts her so much. I can't believe how much, considering."

"Why? Why even tell him in the first place?"

"You don't think he has a right to know?"

Ron gave her a look of complete surprise. "Of course he does, but have you spoken to Cho about this at all? In passing even?"

Hermione shook her head. "We thought it would be better if I spoke to Harry first."

"We?"

"Ginny and I."

Ron closed his eyes and put his face in his hands. "You told Ginny that Cho was cheating on Harry." came his muffled voice.

"No! I just said I saw a couple having sex, that the girl is going out with someone else, and that I know that person better than the girl."

Ron's shoulders slumped. He looked up in disbelief. "You think Ginny won't be able to work that out? She still isn't over Harry you know."

"Oh, Ron! How can you say that? She has been nothing but a friend to him since he came back to us."

Ron gave his girlfriend a look of defeat. "I've known Ginny longer than you, I watched her grow up. There is less than a years difference in our ages." He looked down at his feet. "Of all us Weasleys, only the twins are closer to each other than Ginny and I." Ron paused, collecting his thoughts.

Hermione waited for Ron to continue. He raised his head and looked into her eyes.

"I see her, even now, looking at Harry; in the common room, at meals, in classes. She is all smiles, but for something, something in her eyes. She still wants him, 'Mione. She has all her life. Two weeks is not enough time by a long shot for her to get over him, to realise he is not available. If you've put the idea in her mind that Cho and Harry might break up, she is going to stop trying to get on with her life, and go back to chasing Harry." Ron looked down at his twitching hands. "I just don't want Ginny to be hurt again."

Hermione moved forward and hugged her boyfriend. "You are such a wonderful person, Ronald Weasley."

Ron put his arms around her. "I really don't want Ginny to be hurt 'Mione, she has been through too much pain already."

The pair stood together for a while. Finally the growling coming from Ron's stomach brought a wry smile to Hermione's lips. She turned her head and placed a soft kiss on Ron's cheek. "Let's go to breakfast, to shut your tummy up. Honestly, it's like I'm going out with two people sometimes." she said with a smile.

Draco sat back down at the Slytherin table, his face flaming. Damn you Potter, he thought to himself.

Draco let his mind drift back to the visitor he had after he had been caught at Malfoy Manor. There was a way for him to restore his family name and honour, he had been told, but it would mean putting his life in a certain amount of danger.

Putting his life in danger was not something Draco had habitually considered doing.

When Potter had killed his parents, Draco's entire world had changed. The illusion of respectability his family's fortune had surrounded him with had been torn asunder, revealing to the world just how far the Malfoy family had fallen to the Dark. Draco had initially assumed that he would be able to simply pay off the ministry officials, or distract them with donations to charities, much like his father had done, but for the fact that all his family's gold was now piled in Potter's stinking Gringott's vault.

He himself was not poor, as the trust funds his father had established in his name had performed adequately. But that money would not support him in the lifestyle to which he was accustomed.

For the first time in his life, Draco had seriously considered risking his life. The unnamed visitor had given him a plan, an outline on how he could restore honour of the name Malfoy. It would be dangerous, and even foolhardy, since many would be expecting him to do something.

The blond Slytherin looked up and stared at the back of Potter's head. He has everything, and now I have nothing, Draco thought.

Well, that would change.

Not too long after breakfast, Harry and Cho made their way along one of Hogwarts's many twisted corridors. The pair walked directly up to an ornate door, the frame covered in gold leaf. Harry knocked and waited.

"Enter." came the precise, clipped voice of the deputy headmistress.

Harry opened the door, and allowed Cho to enter first. He followed his girlfriend, and closed the door behind him.

"Ms. Chang. Mr. Potter. Please take a seat."

Harry smiled, and offered Cho the closest armchair. Professor McGonagall took her seat behind the large oak desk. After both witches were seated, Harry smoothly reclined into another chair.

"I must admit, I am curious as to why you felt the need to organise a formal time to speak with me. I have a suspicion, but I think it would be best for all concerned to let you explain."

Harry took a deep breath. "Cho and I would like to get your permission to undertake a special transfiguration project."

A series of almost undetectable twitches at the edges of the deputy headmistress' mouth betrayed her amusement. "A special transfiguration project?" she asked innocently.

Cho smiled. "I'd like to attempt to become an animagus, Professor."

"I see." Professor McGonagall replied, no surprise evident in her voice. For a long moment she regarded the two students. "I trust you are not being compelled to do this against your better judgment?"

"Of course not!" Cho blurted, then blushed slightly and continued in more civilised tones. "Animagi are very rare, and I don't believe that a full study of the procedure has been conducted." Cho took a deep breath. "It was once thought impossible for a witch or wizard to assume the form of a magical animal. Rather obviously, that is not the case."

Harry spoke up. "We would like to try and document the entire process, from the point of view of attempting to become a magical creature. To try and determine whether it is possible for any mage, or if only some select few have the potential."

For the first time, McGonagall looked interested in their proposal. "The procedure for someone to follow to become an animagus is fairly well documented. The way the person in question decides on the animal form is not." The professor stroked the tip of her chin in thought. "Have you thought about the impact this project will have on your studies? On your preparation for your NEWTs and OWLs?"

Harry and Cho nodded. "If possible, I'd like to use this as my final Transfiguration project for the year." said Cho. "Merging it with my schoolwork will make it less of a studious burden, and allow me to study with my friends, not keeping it secret."

"I'd also like to point out that this project will have little to do with me beyond some interviews and perhaps a medical examination. I'm more than willing to aid Cho in any way, but this project is unlikely to take up much of my time at all." Harry added.

"Do you have an animal in mind, Ms. Chang?" asked the Professor. "Normally you don't need to decide before a certain stage in the procedure, but for this project it may make a difference."

Cho blushed slightly and nodded. "I'd like to attempt to become a phoenix too, Professor. With that common point of reference, I think it will make it easier to identify the requirements of becoming a magical creature."

The stern professor slowly stood and began pacing behind her desk. "Ms. Chang, I have a long standing guideline that doesn't allow a seventh-year student to attempt something like this, especially as part of the NEWTs. The success rate for people who attempt to become animagi is so small that most don't even consider it, even if they have the aptitude."

Cho tried to keep her face neutral, but couldn't help but feel tears of disappointment form.

"However," McGonagall continued, "your premise has much merit, and such a study, if successful, would add immeasurably to the knowledge of the wizarding world. You may undertake this project with my blessing, with one condition."

"Yes, Professor?" asked Cho, expending all her discipline just to keep from jumping in joy.

"In three months, you will report to me your progress. If I deem it necessary, you will choose a different project for your final Transfiguration NEWT. If you appear on track to succeed, you may use the project for your final grade."

"No, I don't believe it." Ginny told yet another student as Ron and Hermione sat next to her at the breakfast table.

"Don't believe what?" asked Ron absently, as he started filling his plate with bacon, sausage and hash browns.

"That Cho is cheating on Harry." said Ginny simply.

Ginny watched with glee as Ron dropped his plate and Hermione started coughing. "What? Do you two know something we don't?" Ginny continued, capturing the attention of every Gryffindor within ten meters.

Both Hermione and Ron sat still, their faces betraying that they did in fact know something.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Why do these things happen to me?

Why do these things happen to me?

"Cool!" exclaimed Harry, dropping his backpack on the tiled floor.

"No' bad, eh?" came Professor Moody's growl. Harry had noticed that unlike the fake Moody, the real Moody's Scottish accent got thicker the more excited he was.

The gleaming statue-like object that stood before the group was indeed a sight to behold. What looked like a cross between silver and mercury had been molded into the form of a muscular man. It closely resembled Michelangelo's 'David' in physique, though only two meters in height and it was clothed much more modestly. Around the neck was a simple pendant, with a single stone on a gold chain. Harry's attention was drawn to the stone occasionally, when it flashed with inner fire. In each hand, a single block of the same material was held tightly. These blocks gave the figure an unfinished look.

"So this statue can fight?" Harry asked almost breathlessly.

"Golem, Mr. Potter, not statue." came the clipped, precise tones of the Transfiguration Professor.

"Sorry, Professor." said Harry.

Snape sneered at him, while the headmaster waved the distinction away. "Since golem creation theory and usage is not taught until seventh-year, don't worry about your ignorance in these matters Harry. You of all people should know there is a vast difference between ignorance and stupidity." said Dumbledore.

"An' t' answer ye question, aye, it can fight." added the grizzled DADA teacher, his good eye gleaming with excitement.

"It can do more than that, Alastor," said Dumbledore. The headmaster turned to Harry with a smile on his face. "The golem also has the ability to cast spells, certain curses, hexes and charms. Mostly combat focused, I'm afraid."

"Why is that a problem?" asked professor Sprout.

The headmaster gave her a sly look. "Because one of our number here has proven to be fairly effective in magical combat with only simple, common, non-combative charms. Enough so that the Dark Lord is now the Lord of a lot less." Dumbledore turned to face a fiercely blushing Harry. "Remarkably effective, really."

Professor Snape coughed and drew his wand. "Regardless, we should test its capabilities now, rather than just talking about them." The oily professor gave Harry a glare. "Is there a reason a student has been invited here? Whatever happened before, luck or planning, Potter here still hasn't gained the experience we have."

The assembled faculty turned to Dumbledore for an answer, only to find the headmaster looking to Professor Moody, obviously waiting for the same answer.

The DADA teacher stomped up to Professor Snape, until he was almost broken-nose to hooked-nose with him. "Aye. Having a golem that only teachers can face isn't going to help much. I'd like to test it by putting a student against it, but I'd also like that student to be one that is likely to survive, should something go wrong."

Snape swallowed nervously, Moody's magical blue eye staring straight into Snape's dark ones, seeming to read his life story from the back of his skull. For almost a full minute, the pair of Professors were caught in the strange tableau, animosity radiating from both.

A discrete cough distracted attention. "Alastor, Severus, please." Dumbledore said.

Snape and Moody both moved backward, easing the palpable tension in the room. "Since you seem to be quite confident of your 'experience', why don't you try it first, Snape?" growled Moody.

At this, all the spectators present stepped back, leaving Snape and Moody in the middle of a ring of observers. With an evil grin, Moody also made his way out of the circle, then turned back to face the ex-Death Eater. "Whene'r y' ready, laddie."

Harry had rarely been so engrossed in any magical proceedings as he was that afternoon. He had watched Professor Snape duel magically with the golem, awed at the aptitude the Potions Professor displayed in that art. The one time Harry had seen Snape duel was against Lockhart, and that had hardly been a test of capability.

Snape had again started with the disarming spell, which did nothing to the golem. One of the blocks in the golem's hands had formed itself into a vague wand-shape at the beginning of the duel, and since the wand it now held was part of the whole, the disarming spell failed.

The golem's responding spell had been deflected by Snape's hurriedly erected shield, but that was the last time the golem had the upper hand.

His almost serpentine movements gave Snape an aura of grace that was subtly hypnotic. Twice, Harry had to shake his head to clear away the slight feeling of drowsiness.

Professor Snape had quite quickly and effectively put the golem on the defensive, testing the limits of the golem's magic. Once the duel was called to a halt, the silvery golem was brought back to its original position, ready for another teacher to take a turn.

Professor McGonagall had taken over from the Potions master, and Harry had been stunned at his head of house's tactics.

Transfiguration was quite obviously Professor McGonagall's strength, as she transfigured items to restrain, attack, trip and distract the golem. Time after time, the golem would counter the attacks, but after each attack, it was in a worse position than before.

This sort of magical combat was one Harry had never even considered, had not even thought existed. With a shudder, he thought back to his duel with the Death Eaters, and realised that if even one of them had tried some of these tactics, the result would have been much different.

While the rapid-fire transfigurations were non-lethal in nature, the effect of them was astounding. Snape's assaults had left the golem with some damage, (which it had healed itself) but McGonagall's dueling tactics had distracted her opponent to such a degree that she had not found it necessary to defend herself from a counter attack.

Hagrid had been brought on next, holding a massive quarterstaff in one hand with which to test the golem's hand to hand fighting capabilities.

The half-giant made it seem that the golem didn't in fact have any such capabilities.

While Harry was thoroughly enjoying the proceedings, Professor Moody was getting grumpier and grumpier.

"What's the matter, Professor?" asked Harry, as Professor Flitwick dueled the golem, using only charms, no curses or hexes.

"This thing cost more than your godfather's house, and it hasn't even made one of the teachers break out in a sweat." he said disgustedly.

"Why don't you give it a go?" asked Harry.

The smile Moody gave Harry was easily the most evil Harry had ever seen. "Because it cost more than your godfather's house, Potter. The headmaster would like to get more use out of it."

Harry watched the tiny Charms Professor battle the golem with interest. The stone in the golem's necklace continued to flash occasionally. Harry turned back to his DADA Professor.

"Professor Moody?"

Moody continued to watch the duel, but his blue eye swiveled around to look at Harry.

"What is the necklace around the golem's neck for?"

"That's its focus. The stone holds instructions, powers and information the thing uses."

"I assume that is what made it cost so much."

That statement drew Moody's full attention. "Aye. How did you come to that conclusion?"

Harry shrugged, and looked back to the battle in front of him. "There are plenty of similar objects at Hogwarts, like the suits of armour in the hallways. They don't have the capability of adjusting to attacks like this golem, so I'd say that the development of the focus stone, including tactics, knowledge and power, would be the most costly item by far."

Moody grinned again. "What about the golem itself? You don't think that it would have cost a pretty galleon?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm sure it in itself was expensive, but I studied elemental guardians when staying with Voldy. The magic required to shape and reshape something like water into human form is complex, but embedding it into an object is inexpensive. Only the material the golem is made from would have had a major impact on the cost. Since the obvious magical material such an object should be created from is orichalcum, even if the golem was made entirely of that, it wouldn't cost one tenth of my godfather's house."

The DADA Professor shook his head in despair. "Damn, I wish you were in Slytherin. We'd have won the house cup the last five years if you were there." The grizzled professor looked up at Harry again. "Don't take that personally."

Harry grinned with delight. "Not at all. I often blame some of my thoughts on my inner Slytherin."

"I didn't think any student here would have recognized orichalcum on sight. It is very rare."

A sudden thought struck Harry, and a realisation clicked in his mind. "Is there any left from what you impounded after the raid?" he asked with a grin.

Moody's grin disappeared in a flash. Both eyes stared straight at Harry. "Please tell me you just figured that out now."

Harry's grin vanished just as quickly, and he swallowed, then nodded, his heart beating rapidly.

Moody closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. He leaned over and whispered into Harry's ear. "Good. Only fo-, five people know where the orichalcum for this golem came from. I thought for a second there may have been a leak." He leaned back.

Harry thought he heard something like '...wasted on a Gryffindor.' muttered by the teacher. His lack of faith in coincidences once again validated, Harry smiled.

Each of the teachers had their turn against the golem except Professor Moody. Disappointment was evident in nearly all faces. While Harry thought he had learned a remarkable amount from just watching the proceedings, it was obvious that the Hogwarts' staff felt that the golem had not been a worthwhile investment.

Madam Pomfrey had left less than a quarter of the way through the proceedings, stating that she had work to do, and could make better use of her time than watching a mindless object getting beaten up.

"Your turn, Laddie." said Moody, his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Show us what you can do."

Harry grinned and stood up excitedly. He opened his backpack and extracted a long bundle, wrapped in cloth. With deft fingers, Harry quickly unrolled the bundle, revealing two sheathed swords.

Harry reverently ran his hands over one, a long, thin sword sheathed in a lacquered scabbard. With a sigh, Harry picked up the other blade, and unsheathed it. The saber he had used for much of his training with his unnamed instructor under Voldemort sat in his hand comfortably.

"Does the golem have the capability to-, oh, never mind." Harry stammered, as he saw one of the blocks of metal in the golem's hands extend to form a similar blade.

Rolling his shoulders to loosen them up a bit, Harry stepped up to the golem. The comforting weight of his wand rested in a wrist sheath, Harry had bought the item as soon as he saw it. No matter the situation, his wand could be in his hand with a single thought.

Harry assumed a sparring position, one foot in front of the other, standing on the balls of his feet, twisting slightly to one side to present a smaller profile. He and was pleasantly surprised to see the golem take a similar stance.

Professor Snape sneered at the boy as he took guard before the golem. It was becoming harder and harder for the Potions master to keep up his obvious veneer of hatred for Potter.

That boy had been a constant pain in his life. Ever since he had first laid eyes on him, September 1st, 1992, sitting at the Gryffindor table, it had caused Snape pain to look at him.

The only child of the greatest witch in history. Not the most powerful, but the greatest. Lily Evans had been Snape's first crush, his first girlfriend and lover, and the person who saved his soul from the darkness of Voldemort. It had been Lily that brought him back from the Dark Lord's clutches, her sparkling green eyes an anchor to the light. Her love for such a wretched man as himself had forced Snape to reevaluate his life.

She had married Potter just out of school, and even Snape had to admit the two of them were madly in love. Snape still had nightmares of the pain he felt in his heart when he heard the news that she had died at the hands of his former master.

Died protecting this boy.

That first instant he heard Potter's name called five years ago at the welcoming feast, he had looked in desperation, hoping to see Lily's beautiful features in her son.

Fate had obviously overlooked him, since the only thing of Lily's in the boy was his eyes, taunting him with the memories of his love, framed by the youthful face of his greatest rival. In one irrational moment, the Potions master of Hogwarts had decided that the son of Potter had no idea of just how special his mother was, and that he obviously took for granted her sacrifice to him.

For years, just looking at Potter would cause him pain. The boy probably felt hard done by, probably felt that he was being treated unfairly. It hadn't mattered, it was a way of covering the pain those emerald eyes brought to his heart, and he would do it for as long as Potter was a student.

Then he had been framed, and sent to Azkaban.

It had taken both Dumbledore and Pritchard to restrain Snape from charging down to the dungeons and killing the boy with his bare hands. While the incident had been glossed over as extreme stress on Snape's part, Vincent had been a member of his own house after all, he knew it had nothing to do with who had been killed.

Snape had thought that Potter had betrayed Lily's memory.

Now, the thought that he would have willingly killed Lily's innocent child sent shivers of dread down his spine.

Being forced to work with one of his boyhood enemies had initially been painful for Snape. At the time, he had hated Harry more than he thought possible. It had been Sirius to bring him down from his rage, who forced him to focus on what needed to be done.

Slowly, and reluctantly, Snape had found himself first respecting Black, then, surprisingly, even starting to like him. The grudges from their school

years had faded to a point that they could even share a small laugh at the pranks they had pulled on one another.

When Dumbledore had proclaimed Harry both innocent and lost to the dark on the same day, Snape had felt curiously empty. The fact that the boy had eluded him at his muggle relative's house had baffled him. As he made his way out to release the headmaster from the muggle devices on his ancient wrists, a strange feeling had crept into Snape's heart.

It had taken a while, but he had eventually identified it. Pride.

On discovering that Harry was spying for Dumbledore, the feeling had grown slowly, but surely. The boy had been a very effective agent, had even saved Sirius from capture without giving anything away to the Dark Lord.

Then, he had escaped Voldemort's clutches, and literally eviscerated the Dark Lord's forces.

It was after that that Snape discovered that Potter and Granger had in fact been instrumental in his embarrassment a couple of years before, aiding Black's escape from the top of a Hogwarts' tower.

At the time, the rumours were right, the loss of an Order of Merlin had hit Snape hard, but what really rankled was the fact he had no idea how Potter had managed to thwart him. The thought that a Gryffindor had outsmarted him was almost intolerable.

The fact that he had been outsmarted by Potter was more tolerable now, since the boy had outsmarted Voldemort himself, not to mention escaped from Azkaban and ejected the then Minister Fudge.

More and more, Snape was having to force himself to appear to dislike Harry. It amazed Snape that he was now thinking of the boy as 'Harry', not 'Potter'.

The first potion lesson he had with him since his exoneration (Harry was again sitting next to a Weasley! Was there no end to them?) had been a mixed affair. The two had had a lively debate on the various properties of a particular potion, a debate that the rest of the class had watched in horror.

To his initial horror, and eventual delight, Snape had found that Potter was in fact a talented potion brewer. During the debate, Snape kept having to remind himself to keep up his usual mask of disdain.

Snape had insisted that Harry stay behind after class and stop interrupting the class, but instead of giving Harry a detention, he had given him extra work. While he had sneered and told the boy that *If I get you up to the level of your old class mates I won't have to deal with you for as long*, the thought of having such a skilled assistant for his experiments had him flexing his long fingers with excitement.

Harry had not disappointed. Between them, they had improved a half-dozen standard potions, in either duration, effectiveness or cost to brew. Though their debates had been loud and long, Snape had been surprised to discover he was enjoying his sessions with Harry, and the boy didn't seem to mind them himself.

It took all of his considerable discipline not to smile with pleasure when Harry had given him some of the texts Narcissa Malfoy had taught him from. Harry had not been aware that some of those books were single copies, thought lost.

Professor Snape shook his head, and focused on the present. Harry stood in front of the golem, in a stance from which he could launch an attack or defend with equal ease. They had been standing like thus for several moments.

Finally Harry spoke up. "Why doesn't it attack?"

Before Snape could offer a sarcastic reply, Moody responded in his gravelly voice. "Because it is up to you to make the first move."

Harry frowned. "Why, that makes no sense. A student here is more likely to be attacked, not attack first."

Snape spoke up. "Look, Potter. If you don't" he was interrupted by a bright flash of light from the focus stone.

A distant voice, hollow and sounding like something from past the grave followed the light. "**POTTER?**" it exclaimed.

The golem's head snapped to attention, and with a blur, its sword arm flashed around at neck height to Harry.

Harry flinched at the sound of his name and crouched down, preparing to either transform or leap clear. A sensation of movement and a blur overhead distracted him from doing either.

The golem stepped forward in an attempt to slice at Harry after its failed first strike. Harry launched himself backwards and out of range of the flailing golem.

Three spells struck the golem in the chest from different angles. Spells that had brought shudders and disorientation to the creation before, simply had no effect now. Harry scrambled to his feet while each and every teacher in the room launched an attack.

The combined forces of every professor knocked the golem backwards, though it managed to keep its feet. With a hollow growl a shimmering wall of light rose from the floor. It rose in the shape of an ellipse, cutting off any help. In less than a second, Harry was trapped within a force field which surrounded both him and the golem.

Harry crouched down and rubbed his chin, thinking furiously. He had watched with fascination at every tactic the other teachers had come up with, and was probably now a better duelist than he was the last time he and Voldemort met.

Only now, he didn't have his 'toys'.

In his peripheral vision, Harry could see the teachers desperately trying to dispel the shield around him. No sound was coming through, so he had no idea what spells they were trying. Looking directly at the golem, Harry coolly took in as many details as he could.

The golem was striding towards him, and Harry again leapt away, this time to the left. The golem's sword crashed down on the stones where Harry had been crouching a couple of seconds later.

*There's the first thing.* Harry thought. *He may be fast, but his reactions are bad. Any competent swordsman would have compensated for my movement before dulling his blade on the stones.* He groaned as the chipped edge of the golem's blade healed itself.

Harry stepped forward into the golem's range, his mind noting with dry amusement that from their expressions, all the Professors outside the shield all seemed to think that was a bad idea. With speed rather than damage in mind, he flicked the edge of his sword along the face of the golem, then slashed at the golem's right arm, nicking its wrist. Harry quickly stepped back and watched as the golem's sword blurred through the places he had stood a second before.

*Slow to react to assaults, but blindingly fast in offense,* Harry thought. "Pity my saber doesn't do much more than mark it." he muttered to himself.

The focus stone in the necklace was now glowing constantly. Thought and action occurred simultaneously. Feinting to his right, Harry paused to wait for the golem to strike there before darting to the left. With an almighty heave, Harry swung his sword down onto the golem's unprotected neck, aiming at the chain.

With a pearly ring, the blade connected to the golem's neck, and Harry used the immobile golem to push against, putting even more distance between them.

Harry turned and watched with dismay as the golem flashed its blade through the air. The focus stone still attached to the unbroken chain around the golem's neck. "Unbreakable charm." Harry muttered to himself.

**"Yes, boy. You cannot stop this automation."** the hollow voice sounded. Harry realised it was coming from the focus stone.

"Perhaps not, but you haven't come close to killing me, and your shield is losing power." Harry taunted, desperately hoping it was true.

**"True. I will stop wasting time."** said the voice, and the blade in the golem's hand shrunk to the size of a wand. The golem pointed it straight at Harry.

"Bugger." said Harry, with feeling. As the first spell was shot at him, Harry duplicated his actions on the night he crept into Gryffindor Tower.

Ducking to the side, Harry then leapt forward in a crouch, closing the distance between the dueling pair. Lashing out with his sword, Harry deflected the golem's arm so the next spell crashed harmlessly into the glowing barrier. Still crouching, Harry pivoted and lashed out with his leg at ankle height, striking the golem exactly where he struck Dean Thomas.

Where Dean had his ankles smashed together and then crashed to the floor, the golem merely staggered a bit, and took the opportunity to again point its wand at Harry.

With an inventive curse, Harry managed to roll out of the way enough that the hex fired at him simply grazed his arm. Not knowing how else to distract the golem enough to put more distance between them, Harry threw his sword at the focus stone.

Predictably, this did nothing except distract the golem enough that his next attack was directed at the sword, which shattered. Harry rolled to his feet gracefully, ignoring the protesting he received from his now damaged foot.

"Don't kick the golem, right, got it." he grimaced to himself. with a thought his wand slipped into his waiting hand.

Figuring that Professor McGonagall probably used the most effective tactics, Harry started casting restrictive spells at the golem. A quick *Serpensortia* created a large snake that Harry directed to entangle the golem's legs. Harry removed a piece of string from his pocket and threw it at the golem. With a flick of his wrist, Harry had transfigured it into a rope, and managed to use levitation charms to tie the golem's hands to its side.

With each and every attempt at restraining, the golem simply used brute force to extract itself. The poor snake had been torn into pieces, and the rope simply snapped.

The vines Harry conjured were withered and broken. The impedimentia charm slowed the golem only momentarily. A localised mini tornado had little effect, and a swarm of insects were initially ignored.

Surprisingly the last spell gave Harry more time to think than the others. While the insects themselves could not do any damage to the golem, they could blind it with their bodies. Harry gained a precious few seconds to think of another plan.

Watching the golem flail about at the insects, Harry thought back to the lessons he had learned at Hogwarts, the lessons on unbreakable charms.

*An unbreakable charm on a piece of glass will make that object very durable. It cannot be bent, crushed, stretched or twisted.* Professor Flitwick's voice came to him.

Harry remembered the lesson well, since Ron had cut his finger on one of the unbreakable glass objects Flitwick had brought in. To ensure it didn't happen again, Flitwick had...



Harry leapt to his right just as one of the spells fired randomly by the golem sped through the space he had been occupying.

With a grin, Harry stood and faced the golem. He hoped this would work.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Death by Tickling

### Death by Tickling

Snape was almost incoherent with rage and fear, magically slashing at the shimmering shield that separated him and the other teachers from Harry and the out of control golem. With each new assault on the golem's shield, it became thinner, and less vivid. Slowly but surely, the barrier was coming down.

More than one of the teachers had almost had a heart attack when the golem first struck out. Not even Moody had reacted to the strike until it had reached the end of its arc, yet somehow, Harry had managed to duck underneath it, then leap back out of range.

Spells from Moody, Flitwick and Snape had smashed into the golem's chest within a fraction of a second, yet didn't do so much as distract the automaton. The combined magic of the faculty was, in theory, enough to drop a flight of dragons, yet the golem only staggered as spells from every direction struck it at once.

It was at that point the shield was raised. In one heart-wrenching moment, The-Boy-Who-Lived had been separated from his teachers.

Nothing in recent history had been subjected to such a magical barrage as the glimmering shield the golem raised. Dumbledore and Moody in particular had all but opened gaping holes in the barrier. It was only the self-healing property of the shield that it took energy from an unassaulted area to patch damaged areas that the faculty of Hogwarts had not yet managed to get to Harry.

Not that the boy seemed to want to be saved. In one instant he had calmly stepped into the golem's range and slashed at its face and arm. Every voice outside the barrier had shouted "**NO!**" simultaneously. If it had been a spell incantation, nothing on earth could have withstood the combined assault. As it was, Harry just as calmly stepped back and dispassionately watched as the golem's sword blurred through the area he had been standing not a second before.

Moody's sergeant major's voice had brought the teachers back from their shocked state and put them to task, attacking the glimmering shield. "Attack! Ignore wha' happenin'. He can take care o' hi'self!" Moody had yelled.

In between spells, Snape had watched as Harry focused his attacks on the focus stone's chain. His heart dropped as it became terribly apparent that there had been an unbreakable charm placed on the slim gold chain.

The golem must have understood the danger in Harry's new line of assault, as it ceased trading sword blows with Harry, and started launching spells.

Once more, the teachers had shouted their disapproval of Harry's actions, as he leapt at the legs of the golem. With a flick of his wrist, Harry deflected the golem's wand, which sent a spell straight into its own shield. In a crouch, Harry spun and extended his right leg, kicking at the golem's ankle.

While that kick didn't knock the golem completely off balance, it did cause the golem to stagger. Not enough though.

The golem had aimed its wand directly at Harry's heart and fired off a powerful hex. Harry had managed to roll quickly enough that it only struck his arm, but was still in a poor enough position that he had to sacrifice his sword to make it clear of his attacker.

Professor McGonagall's scream of terror at Harry's apparent defenselessness was cut short as the boy's wand dropped from within the sleeve his robe into his waiting hand.

For the next few seconds, many of the teachers were shocked at the speed and accuracy of Harry's attacks. While not attacking the golem directly, preferring to use the Transfiguration Professor's tactics, Harry managed to distract, temporarily restrain, and blind the golem, all within a few heartbeats.

Harry leapt to Snape's left as the golem fired yet another curse in his direction. The predatory grin on the boy's features stunned Snape to his very core. "You're enjoying yourself!" he whispered to himself in disbelief.

"*Accio focus*" shouted Harry, his wand pointed directly at the glowing focus stone.

Instantly, the stone setting was straining against the unbreakable gold chain, desperately trying to reach Harry's waiting hand. He stood on the tips of his toes, and held his wand over his head, still pointing to the focus stone, trying to change the angle of the summoning charm.

The chain of the necklace slowly rolled up the back of the golem's neck, threatening to come loose over the top of the golem's head. In a flash, the still-blinded golem moved out of offensive mode, grabbing the chain, holding it steady on its metallic neck.

While the golem was distracted, Harry busied himself casting several minor transfiguration spells at the material remains of his restraining spells. Once the golem realised the stone was no longer under attack, it turned its partially blinded head towards the boy and again fired off an attack.

Gracefully, Harry rolled and twisted out of the way of the new assault. With a well-practiced swish and flick, he cast the levitation spell Ron had used to knock the troll out and save Hermione in their first year.

The necklace started to leave the golem's neck, and once more the golem struggled to maintain its grip on the object from which it drew its powers.

Again, Harry used the golem's distraction to change the composition of the rubbish left on the floor.

"Try again, Harry!" Professor McGonagall shouted to her unhearing student. She again lashed out at the rapidly thinning shield.

Moody gave her a disgusted look. "You think he's doing anything more than distracting the thing?"

Without looking, the stern professor replied, "If he manages to get the focus off, the golem will stop working. It is the best tactic for success." Again she launched a magical barrage at the golem's shield.

Moody shook his head. "You don't see what he is really trying to do, do you?" he growled.

McGonagall blinked and turned to face the DADA professor. "What are you talking about, Alastor?" she demanded.

With an evil grin, Moody replied, "With us attacking the shield like this, the golem can't use all its power, since it needs most of it to keep the barrier up. That's the only thing that has kept Mr. Potter alive. He is distracting it by trying to get the focus, nothing more. He has a plan."

"Distracting it? Why? What plan?"

Moody resumed his assault on the shield. "Just look for yourself. Only think like a Slytherin."

Moody's sharp ears caught McGonagall's whispered response, and the language she used brought a smile to his face. "Let's just say, it's going to get hot in there." he supplied.

Finally changing the last shreds of rubbish on the stone floor into flammable kindling, Harry crouched and started banishing it all to the feet of the golem. The insects he summoned had all but been squashed, hundreds of tiny smears on the head and face of the golem testimony to the tiny critters.

Again, the golem started firing curses and hexes in Harry's direction, ignoring the objects piling at its feet.

Harry dived to his right, his shoulder scraping painfully on the hard floor, as several curses slammed into the shield behind where he was standing. Leveling his wand at the pile of kindling, he shouted, "*Incendio!*"

The pillar of fire that erupted around the golem was satisfying to say the least. Rolling to his feet, Harry kept his wand trained on the fire, forcing the flames to become hotter and hotter, beyond what was normal for the type of fuel the fire consumed.

A hollow laugh came from the golem, deep within the fire. **"Thank you for the idea, boy. Taste your own fiery death."**

Harry's eyes widened in realisation. He desperately started mouthing a new charm before the fire in front of him burst out in all directions. In less than a second, the entire space within the failing barrier was consumed in fire.

Even through the shield, the teachers could feel the heat from the fire. Each and every one covered their eyes as the bright flames roared behind the cursed barrier. Only Moody was able to see what was going on inside the billowing flames, by only covering his human eye. The pale blue orb darted between two obvious lines of sight.

With instincts that had served him well over the last sixty years, Moody spun and rapidly banished every teacher to the other side of the room, before diving away from the disappearing shield.

The implosion of fresh air on flame sucked the oxygen out of everyone's lungs. With the final collapse of the conjured shield, the magically intense fire spread out in all directions.

Several "*Finite Incantatem*" spells from the pile of teachers kept the fire from spreading too far, cutting it off from its magical inducement. With no ordinary fuel to burn, the flames died out quickly, only a couple of tiny fingers of flame surviving by clinging to the remains of Harry's initial kindling pile.

Where the barrier had been erected was painfully obvious. A large oval of blacked stonework on both floor and ceiling gave mute testimony to the power and restrictions placed on the fire.

In the middle of the charred area, the golem still stood in all its glory, unaffected by the flames. The only difference was the fact that several drops and liquid runs of gold could be seen on its chest and neck. The focus stone lay on the floor in a small puddle of rapidly solidifying gold, no longer glowing.

A large pile of charred and smoking robes lay on the floor. Professor McGonagall gave a heart-wrenching shriek, and ran to where she had last seen Harry Potter.

"That wasn't funny, Harry." said the headmaster, while gently trying to revive his deputy.

"It wasn't my fault, Professor." claimed Harry. "I wasn't sure the golem had been stopped."

An evil cackle escaped the DADA professor. "You stopped it alright, Potter. Some of your tactics gave the spectators heart attacks, but you did well."

"Alastor!" Dumbledore gently chided. "Pretending to be dead was not a tactic that should be praised when others are worried about you. Harry, you should apologise."

"I wasn't!" Harry said, frustration evident in his voice. "The fire-freezing charm we learned was only supposed to be used when a witch was put on a bonfire. Not a magically enchanted and heated fire. Do you have any idea how ticklish it was in there?" Harry turned to face the other disapproving teachers. "I had to hold my breath anyway, there was no oxygen for me to breath inside the shield."

"I think the headmaster is referring to your greeting of Professor McGonagall when you realised that she was not the golem." supplied Moody.

"Oh." said Harry, thinking back.

*Still desperately using all his discipline holding his breath, the merciless tickling Harry received from the intense fire ceased. Deciding to feign death, Harry let his mouth flop open and let his eyes lose focus. Seconds later, strong hands roughly turned him over.*

*Harry let his head flop loosely to one side, unsure exactly who had grabbed him. If the golem was still active, only a transformation would let him escape from this trap.*

*With no glasses on and a deliberate non-focus, the blurred shape hovering over his was difficult to make out. His hearing was slowly returning after the roar of the flames temporarily deafened him.*

*"No! Harry, no!" the figure was shouting. Harry recognised the voice of his head of house.*

*His head snapped up, his eyes regained their focus. His slack jawed mouth closed shut, then Harry smiled and said, "Hello, Professor."*

"I guess I could have been a bit less shocking, I'm sorry." Harry apologised.

Dumbledore shook his head, and conjured a levitating stretcher for his Transfiguration teacher. "I mean, apologise to her, Harry."

Cho looked up from her essay, and saw her boyfriend sit down opposite her. Taking in the details of his appearance, her eyes widened in horror as she took in his torn and still smoking robes.

"What in Merlin's name happened to you?"

Harry sighed. "We're not sure. Dumbledore thinks that Voldy managed to attack me again."

Cho did her best to remain seated and calm. "OK. I'm sure you love making these little statements."

He gave her his special smile. "No, I just don't want to make a big deal out of things."

Cho stood, and slammed the library book she was referencing shut. "Come with me, now."

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise at Cho's unusual outburst, but stood to follow her anyway. Cho quickly gathered her study gear and marched out of the library, Harry following close behind.

Cho led Harry through the many twisting corridors of Hogwarts, and into a room Harry had never seen before.

The small room was as bare as any room could be. Not a single piece of furniture or artwork could be seen. Cho dropped her books on the floor, then sat down cross-legged. She rested her elbows on her knees, and put her face in her hands.

Harry looked at his girlfriend's back in confusion, until he saw her body shake with tears. Dropping to the floor beside her, Harry wrapped his strong arms around Cho's thin frame and hugged the crying girl.

After a few minutes of making soothing noises, Harry was still at a loss as to what had caused Cho such grief. Cho looked up at Harry, her beautiful face stained with her salty tears. She reached forward and grabbed a double handful of Harry's ruined robes and buried her face in his chest, her cries beginning again.

"What's the matter, Cho?" Harry whispered in her ear.

Cho finally pulled herself away from him, but kept a death grip on his clothes. "I, I, I thought-" she stammered between sobs.

"Take a deep breath, my love." Harry said gently.

Cho nodded and drew a lungful of air, then let it out. "I thought we'd be safe here, at Hogwarts. But you are not safe, and you keep getting attacked, and I don't want to lose you and I don't want you to die, and..."

"Shhh." Harry interrupted her, placing two fingers on her lips. "You're babbling, my love." He placed a gentle kiss on her moist lips. "I understand. I don't want to be in danger myself, but I am, no matter where I go."

For long minutes, Cho and Harry clung to each other, both taking comfort from the other's presence. Finally with a sniff, Cho asked, "What happened?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Dumbledore and Moody managed to get a golem for the students to train against in Defense classes. The teachers had a go dueling it, and it seemed to be fairly tame. As soon as Moody gave me a go, it really came alive and attacked. I managed to defeat it."

Cho's blood-shot eyes looked directly into Harry's emerald orbs. "That sounded highly edited."

Harry nodded. "Dumbledore thinks that Voldy somehow managed to corrupt the golem's focus. Either that or had a hand in creating it in the first place. The stone was supposed to be imbued with a great deal of power, enough that the golem should have been able to function as a dueling partner for all the students for at least a year.

"Whoever took over the golem forced it to expend all that power trying to get me. I personally think it was Voldy, and not one of his remaining Death Eaters."

"Why do you think that?" Cho asked, her voice trembling slightly.

Harry shrugged. "Because he took the first opportunity to attack me. Someone like Wormtail or Pritchard would have waited until only one teacher was in the room to launch the attack. His High and mightyness wouldn't let that bother him." he quipped.

Once more Cho let her hands cover her face. After a minute she said, "I need to think about this, Harry."

Harry's face betrayed his confusion. "Think about what?"

"This, us, everything. I need to go." Cho stood up abruptly, surprising her boyfriend.

"Cho, wait!" Harry said, grabbing Cho's arm gently as she started to leave.

"No, Harry. I need to be alone." Her tear-filled eyes looked deep into his own. "I can't think clearly when I'm with you, Harry. You make my heart race, and my insides tremble. I love you dearly, but I'm not brave enough to just take attacks on you in my stride. I need to think about us."

Harry just stood there silently, unable to think of anything to say, and watched as his beautiful girlfriend walked away.

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## **Midnight Duel, Midday Love Encounters of the Snape and Dursley Kind**

Encounters of the Snape and Dursley kind.

Dumbledore took a pinch of powder from the velvet bag hanging on his mantle and threw it into the fire. "Arthur Weasley." he said clearly.

It took several minutes for the Minister's head to appear in the fire. "Albus! Sorry to have kept you, I've got some rather bad news, I'm afraid."

Dumbledore nodded. "Likewise. Perhaps you'd like to give me your bad news first."

"A few of the captured Death Eaters have managed to escape."

"Really?" said Dumbledore, no surprise evident in his tone. "Including a Miss Allison Sanderson?"

The fiery image of Arthur Weasley looked down at some unseen paperwork. His head snapped back suddenly. "Yes. As a matter of fact one of the Death Eaters that escaped was Miss Sanderson. What do you know?"

Dumbledore sighed. "You should have been informed already. Miss Sanderson is now working for us. The Death Eaters that escaped were the less important ones, those whose loyalty was still questionable. We are hoping that Voldemort is desperate enough to give them more authority and knowledge than before."

The Minister sat back, a thoughtful look on his face. "I hope you are right. Who was supposed to have informed me?"

"Someone in the Order, from the Department of Mysteries."

"I see. I'll look into it. Your turn."

"Harry was attacked again. Under my very nose."

"Is he OK?" asked Mr. Weasley, concern filling his face.

"He is fine Arthur. If I believed in fate, I'd say fate was taking an active hand to ensure that nothing is able to get to the lad. The golem we received apparently had its focus tampered with, enough so that someone could remotely take control. On recognising Harry, it launched into him, driving the rest of us back. Harry dueled it to a standstill before managing to remove the focus from the golem."

"It drove the rest of you back?"

"It erected a shield between the faculty and Harry. We couldn't get through it."

"But, ho-"

"Arthur." Dumbledore interrupted softly, his gentle voice somehow overpowering Mr. Weasley's objection. "I will have a report on the incident delivered to you this evening. In the meantime, I need your help."

The Minister looked slightly upset, but nodded. "What do you need."

"Harry was going to visit his Uncle next weekend, to organise the murder charges to be dropped. I was hoping we could advance the visit to tomorrow, to throw off any planned attack on him."

"Royston won't be ready. He had to clear his client schedule for next weekend just to accommodate Harry."

Dumbledore nodded. "As much as I respect Mr. Royston's legal prowess, I have someone different in mind to accompany Harry."

A light went on behind Arthur's eyes. "You think it is time the Dursleys discovered they weren't the only ones looking after Harry." He said the word 'Dursleys' with a sneer.

Dumbledore nodded, a twinkle in his eye. "I would dearly love to see the look on their faces when they discover that Arabella is a witch."

Severus Snape gently tapped the base of the folded piece of parchment he held, slowly coaxing the greenish powder off the fold in the parchment and into the simmering potion he was preparing. The instant the potion started glowing blue, he stopped adding the powder.

Snape ran a finger down his notes, finding his place in the potion recipe. The Wolfsbane potion was difficult for even an experienced potion brewer to create; since it depended on the time of the month it was brewed to determine the volume of the various ingredients.

The dungeon door creaked slightly as it opened, and Snape saw Harry walk in, obviously troubled about something. The boy looked up and started slightly.

"Professor! I'm sorry, I didn't expect you to be down here."

Snape forced a snarl. "I do believe these dungeons are the domain of the Potion Master of Hogwarts. Unless you are far denser than I imagined, you are aware that I hold that position."

The barb in his words seemingly had no effect on the boy. "I'm sorry, Professor. I expected that you would still be in discussion with the aurors who came to examine the golem. I just came down to check our version of the poly-juice potion, to make sure that your absence at your scheduled time didn't cause a failure."

Snape's irritation at being interrupted vanished. The boy obviously took his responsibilities to their joint project seriously. "I just checked it a few minutes ago. It needed a dash more powdered cobra fang, but it seems to be stable."

Harry nodded and made his way over to the table where the pair's version of the mimicking potion gently simmered. "I had a thought. If we were to raise the temperature of the potion after adding the boomslang skin, and float a sliver of elemental ice on the surface, the mimicking properties of the chameleon skin will be intensified, while the overall rate of evaporation will remain constant." Harry looked up at the Professor. "I think it may increase the duration of the potion's effect."

Snape raised his eyebrows in both surprise and excitement. "Interesting theory, Potter. The ice would need to be wrapped in some sort of cocoon though. One that would allow the cold to reduce the temperature of the potion, but not allow the potion to come in direct contact, since that would freeze some of the liquid."

Harry nodded distractedly. "A sea-sponge would probably work, but I'd want to test it with some other potions first. We still have nine days until the boomslang skin needs to be added anyway." Harry's voice sounded distant, as though he wasn't focusing on the matter at hand.

Snape looked at the boy curiously. Something was wrong with him. As inconspicuously as possible, Snape withdrew his wand and pointed it in Harry's direction.

"I meant to ask you, where did you get your ideas for extending the duration of Poly-juice?" Snape asked casually.

The boy blushed, but still didn't turn to face the Professor. "Umm, I once saw what happened when someone took the potion with cat hair added instead. The duration was far longer than an hour."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "From your notes, it is obvious that you have brewed this potion before, but now that I think about it, you barely had enough time to do it while a guest of my former master. When did you brew it?"

Harry closed his eyes and winced as if in pain. "I brewed it a while ago." Snape kept quiet waiting for more detail. "In my second year here."

"Y-you brewed Poly-juice potion in only your second year?" Snape shouted, absolutely flabbergasted.

Harry nodded, still not looking at Snape. "We were trying to find the heir of Slytherin. What we tried didn't work."

Snape grinned evilly. "So you did raid my personal stores. The boomslang skin I saw in your ingredient's bag was taken from me, just not that year, but two years previously."

Harry shook his head. "I told you the truth, I have never raided your stores. Neither for that or for the gillyweed."

Snape looked at Harry curiously. In truth, he was incensed that someone had raided his stores, though it was certainly not the first time, or the last time it would happen. Barty Crouch had pilfered Snape's stores himself, posing as Alastor Moody. However, Harry's distraction was very out of character, enough so that Snape was starting to suspect that the boy in front of him wasn't Harry Potter.

"What's the matter with you, boy?" he demanded, now outwardly pointing his wand at Harry's head.

Harry snorted. "I doubt it would be anything you would be interested in." At this, Harry finally turned to face the Potion Master. Harry opened his mouth to continue when he noticed the wand pointed his way. With a yelp, he dived to one side, behind a stone desk. Not quickly enough though.

"*Imperio!*" cast Snape who was ready for such a reaction, the unforgivable curse hitting Harry in the leg as the rest of him disappeared behind the desk. "Stand up!" he ordered Harry.

A couple of seconds later, it became apparent that it was indeed Harry Potter, since the boy didn't appear. "Who are you?" came Harry's voice from behind the desk.

Snape gave a sigh of relief. "It is I, Potter. I was merely making sure it was in fact you."

Harry slowly crept out from behind the desk in a crouch, his wand pointing directly at Snape. "OK, so you know that I'm me, because I threw off the imperious curse. How do I know if you are you?"

Snape lowered his wand. "Ask me something only I would know then, you have a habit of finding out things you shouldn't."

With a wry grin, Harry said, "In my first year, you organised to meet somewhere with Quirrel. You asked him if he had found out how to get past 'that beast of Hagrid's' before telling him that he didn't want you as an enemy, and that you'd have another chat after he had time to decide where his

loyalties lay." Harry watched with amusement as Snape's expression seemed to indicate that he was choking on something. "Where did the pair of you meet for that 'discussion'?" Harry finally asked.

It took a long time for Snape to answer. His face turned several different colours in the meantime. Finally, between clenched teeth, he said, "What in all the lower hells were you doing in the Forbidden Forest, Potter? Where were you?"

Harry relaxed and lowered his wand. "I was sitting in the tree above you, I'd flown there on my broom. I was trying to find out if you were going to steal the Philosopher's stone or not."

Snape's expression turned to one of disbelief. "Me?"

Harry nodded. "All I knew about you then was that you hated me, my scar hurt when I looked at you the first time. What was I supposed to think?"

Snape ground his teeth together in frustration. "Is there anywhere you don't go to eavesdrop on people?"

Harry sighed. "I saw you out of the corner of my eye, and I followed. That's all. I didn't just sit there assuming that I would be able to overhear a threatening conversation between two Professors at some point."

"You broke any number of school rules by doing so, Potter."

Harry nodded. "I know. I'd do it all again without hesitation if it went some way to stopping Voldy gaining power."

Snape looked deep into Harry's, no, not Harry's, Lily's eyes. For the first time, Snape considered Harry's past actions using Lily's motivations, not James'. "Yes, you would, wouldn't you," he whispered, finally realising that it wasn't fame and glory that drove the young man standing in front of him. "So, Mr. Potter," he said, more gently than he had ever spoken to Harry before. "What is it that is bothering you?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "You really want to know?"

Snape nodded. "It is not entirely altruistic, Potter. I need an assistant with a clear head when dealing with the experimental potions we are working on."

Harry sighed and sat down. "Cho. This morning, everything was going wonderfully. Now, after the golem's attack, she sounds like she doesn't want to know me."

Snape had seen the effect Harry had had on the female population of Hogwarts over the years. He too raised his eyebrows in surprise. "The great Harry Potter has girl problems?" he said incredulously.

Harry's face coloured. "Forget it." He stood to leave.

"Wait!" said Snape. Taking a deep breath, he shocked himself by saying something he had never thought he would ever say. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter. Harry. You didn't deserve that."

Now it was Harry's turn to be shocked. He shook his head in disbelief. "I think I may have to ask you another question about your past, Professor."

Snape felt the edges of his mouth curl slightly. "I don't blame you, I sort of feel that way myself." With a deep breath, Snape continued. "I am probably not the best person to speak to when it comes to women. There is only one woman I have ever loved. I'm sure you feel the same, that you will only ever love one person too."

Harry nodded, completely bewildered by what was happening.

"Given your rather special situation, I'd say that any person who is in a relationship with you will need a rather large dose of courage in order to handle the rather violent and chaotic events that are sure to surround you."

Harry gave Snape an appraising look. "You are in the same situation, aren't you?"

Snape nodded. "Yes, but not to the same degree. Since my old master's return, I have fended off over a dozen assassination attempts. Since your escape however, I have only had to defend myself once. While Voldemort would not be unhappy if I were to die, he is currently focused on destroying you." Snape reached out and gently gripped Harry's shoulder. "Anyone intimately involved in your life will need to have that fabled Gryffindor courage. Miss Chang may be pretty, smart and talented at Quidditch, but she has never struck me as being brave."

Harry nodded. "When she was taken with us back to Voldy's palace, I tried to keep his attention from her. She babbled a bit and pleaded to be set free. I had to silence her to make sure she didn't give away the fact that I wasn't torturing her." Harry thought about the other two close female friends in his life. "I can't see either Hermione or Ginny pleading like that."

"Perhaps I need to break it off with Cho. She already has had one boyfriend murdered. It took her a few months to get over him, even though they weren't particularly close."

Snape let him go. "You don't think that it is her decision? Give her time to think, then go and talk to her. Don't make a decision for yourself that affects both of you." Snape closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You will live to regret it," he said with absolute certainty. "Believe me, you will."

Vernon Dursley absentmindedly picked at a loose thread on the sleeve of his prison issue uniform, more depressed than he had ever been in his life. In the months since his arrest, he had applied for and been denied bail twice.



Those blasted freaks! he thought to himself. The first thing he had told his lawyer, Mr. Rollands, was the existence of wizards all over the world. Vernon would never forget the look of disbelief on the face of his legal counsel. Rollands, hired by Grunnings, had promised to look into his claims.

The next time Vernon had seen him, Rollands had a rather peculiar blank look on his face, and claimed to not remember anything about their last meeting. With an astounding leap of intellect, Vernon realised that the wizarding world protected its own.

Instead, Vernon now had to try and explain why there were no records of a child in his care being sent to secondary school. Or taken to a doctor, besides an optometrist when Harry was seven.

Rollands had told Vernon that Dudley had been questioned by the police, and had told them everything out of fear for himself. About the broom cupboard being Harry's bedroom until he turned eleven. How Harry had never been thrown a birthday party. How Harry had been locked in his room for weeks at a time, and fed cold soup through a hole in the door.

Then there was the testimony of the police officers who 'rescued' Harry themselves. Their description of a pale, almost skeletal boy in overlarge, dirty clothes was confirmed by the child psychologist Mabel. What happened to him that night was a mystery, no one could remember exactly, but all involved had testified that Harry disappeared that night.

Now, Vernon sat opposite Rollands, desperately trying to convince the man that Harry was alive and well, and probably at that school for freaks.

"I'm sorry, Vernon. But unless we can find the boy, murder charges will be brought against you. Give me something other than this fairytale of magic schools."

As Harry's Uncle opened his mouth to respond, a voice from behind his lawyer interrupted. "I wouldn't worry about being charged with murder, Dursley."

Both Vernon and Rollands turned to face the newcomer, a bailiff of the court. Rollands spoke, "This is a privileged conversation, you must leave or my client has grounds for an appeal."

The bailiff gave the lawyer a snarl. "I have to give you these papers, directly from the court. Young Mr. Potter has been found."

Rollands snatched the folder filled with a sheaf of papers from the court's representative, and hurriedly began leafing through them.

"Showed up to the local police station an hour ago, and made a statement." Continued the bailiff. He gave Harry's Uncle a look of contempt. "He seemed quite concerned that you are in prison, Dursley. I can't for the life of me imagine why."

"Your job has been done, sir. You may leave." Rollands said, terminating the conversation.

With a shrug, the bailiff turned and left the pair.

"Excellent!" said Rollands, slamming the folder shut. "I'll have you out of here within the hour. Don't move." The lawyer stood and made his way out of the meeting area.

Vernon couldn't keep the grin off his face at the thought of imminent freedom. Couldn't wait to get a hold of that brat of a nephew of his. It was all Potter's fault.

"Hello, *Uncle* ." came a most unwelcome voice.

Vernon snapped his head up and found himself staring at his nephew. Standing a little way behind him but taking great interest in the proceedings was someone who, had Vernon been in a more focused frame of mind, would have recognised as none other than Mrs. Figg.

Ignoring the old lady, Vernon lurched to his feet. "You!" he thundered.

The boy in front of him rolled his eyes. "Observant. So very observant." he said scathingly.

With a roar like a bull, Vernon Dursley leapt at his nephew, the one person responsible for his incarceration for the last few months. His large, beefy hands outstretched, desperately wanting to find a grip around Potter's neck.

But the boy seemed to have other ideas. A split second before his hands closed round Harry's neck, Vernon felt off balance. A split second later his nose broke as his face slammed rather ungently into the floor.

Harry watched dispassionately as his large Uncle lunged at him. At the last second, Harry took a half step diagonally to the left and forward. With a quick flick of his right foot, Harry kicked his Uncle's right foot behind his Uncle's left. With a tangle of limbs, Harry's beefy relative crashed ingloriously into the linoleum floor. A muffled crack indicated that Vernon Dursley's nose would need medical attention.

The look his Uncle gave him almost had Harry in stitches. Like all bullies that get pushed back, Vernon Dursley looked as if he was expecting to wake up from a dream where the sheep had suddenly turned and started rounding up the dogs.

"Don't try that again. I may not be allowed to practice my 'abnormality' out of school, but I have learned to defend myself in other ways."

"What are you doing here, boy?" his Uncle snarled, trying to stem the flow of blood from his ruined nose.

Harry sighed. "Making sure you were not charged with murder. Seemed to be a bit premature, since you just tried to strangle me."

Vernon stood and did his best to tower over his nephew. "I'll deal with you later. Right now, my lawyer is getting me out of here." he said condescendingly.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I know. It's my statement that will allow him to get you out, idiot."

Harry desperately tried not to hurt himself trying not to laugh. His Uncle's face had turned a rather impressive shade of deep purple.

"What did you call me?" Vernon roared.

Harry blinked and, to Vernon's surprise, stepped forward, his face filling with rage. "I called you an idiot, you moron. Perhaps it has escaped you, but I no longer fear you. You are nothing compared to what I have faced."

Unconsciously, Vernon took a step backwards, trying to get away from his nephew's anger. Harry continued to move closer, refusing to let his Uncle out of range.

"I just wonder how your precious reputation has withstood your stay at Her Majesty's pleasure. You were always so careful to make sure that everyone thought you were normal that you treated my like dirt. Just think; how different everything would be, if you had just treated me with respect while I was growing up. Not love, I know that you are incapable of loving anyone you consider abnormal, but respect. If you'd have given me my own room, my own clothes. Had you done that, you wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have let the police take you away."

Vernon finally found he couldn't back up any further, since his back was now pressed firmly against the wall.

"How does it feel, knowing that your own intolerance for what you fear has ruined your own life so completely?"

"Ah, I take it from your statement that you wouldn't have let the police take your uncle away that he wasn't responsible for your appearance that evening?" came the voice of Rollands from the doorway.

Harry turned to face the man, his anger seemingly vanished. "Of course not. I put that in my statement."

A look of delight crossed the lawyer's face. "Then perhaps my client and I should discuss filing a suit against you for defamation."

Harry smiled. "Would you mind? I'd love to testify at that suit that I was locked in a broom closet for the first ten years of my life." Harry turned to look at his Uncle. "When I was exonerated for murder, my Godfather and I were each given half the assets of both the man who framed me and the man who ordered me framed. I now happen to be one of the wealthiest people in the United Kingdom. According to my bank, my assets are in excess of a billion pounds." Harry turned back to the lawyer, who had turned pale. "Do you think you could file it soon? I'm sure my own lawyers would love to file a counter-suit."

It was Vernon's turn to go pale. "Godfather? Exonerated? A billion pounds?" he babbled.

Harry nodded and gave his Uncle the most evil smirk he could. "Just think, if you had treated me with respect. I'd probably have given you some of that money for raising me. Probably at least ten million."

"Ten? Million? Ten million? Pounds?"

Harry nodded, still smirking. "But not now though. I did what I came here to do. Stop murder charges against you. The child abuse charges, you will have to sort out by yourself." Harry turned to his companion. "Can we go now, I'm sick of the stench of him."

As she nodded, Vernon finally recognised her. "Mrs. Figg! What are you doing here?"

The old witch looked at Harry's Uncle with barely concealed contempt. "I brought him down here as my client. I'm a retired lawyer, Vernon. Harry's headmaster asked if I could accompany him here, in case you got... difficult. You see, I also have Harry's... abnormality."

The witch and student wizard watched in amusement as this final revelation caused Vernon Dursley to babble incoherently to himself.

It had been a long time since he had laid eyes on the boy. Now, crouched next to the fireplace of the house he had broken into, he waited patiently. Malevolent eyes gleamed in low light, just waiting for Potter to show his messy head.

The fire flashed red, and the most recognisable wizard in the world stepped out gracefully.

With a low growl, the intruder leapt at Harry, trying to bear him to the ground.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Giving Karma a Helping Hand

Giving karma a helping hand.

Harry gracefully stepped out of the fire at Mrs. Figg's house in Little Whinging. Harry supposed that traveling by floo was similar to muggle escalators. If you didn't know how to get on and off, you often made a fool out of yourself.

Harry crashed to the floor anyway, throwing himself down as, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a large black object launch itself at him from the side. Harry rolled to his feet in less than a second and had his wand in his hand ready.

Being deprived of its target, the huge black creature flew through the air where Harry had been and, with a startled yelp, crashed ungracefully into a table and chair, both loaded with books and other objects. Harry took his opportunity and, with a flick of his wand combined with a summoning charm, caused an enormous bookshelf to crash down upon his attacker.

It was at this moment that Mrs. Figg stepped out of the fire. She took one look at Harry's determined face and drew her own wand. She too aimed it at the fallen bookshelf, and the muffled groans and swearing emanating from underneath.

Harry recognized that voice. He lowered his wand and grinned. "Sirius, are you alright?"

With a final grunt, Harry's godfather's head appeared from underneath the pile. "Fine, never better." he spat, disgustedly. "How are you?"

"Just fine. I always feel fine when I disrupt a prank on me." Harry said with a smirk. He strode over and offered his hand.

Sirius grunted and waved away Harry's offer of assistance. "It is becoming a real chore to be your godfather, you know." he grumbled as he slowly extracted himself from the literary pile. "It was so much easier when you were a baby."

"Being a godfather has more responsibility involved than playing jokes on your godson." Mrs. Figg said sternly.

Sirius snorted. "Don't be silly, Arabella. Look at him. He doesn't need me to look after him, or protect him." Sirius ruefully rolled his left shoulder, wincing. "He definitely doesn't need protection. He does need to have a laugh occasionally though."

Harry's smile never left his face. With one bound he caught Sirius up in a hug. "I've missed you Sirius." he said. "How are things at Black's Pad?"

Sirius returned the hug gleefully. "Just fine. The house elves are still getting used to the fact that they don't get hit with each instruction, and there are a lot of dark objects I'm finding, but other than that, it is a great place."

Harry grinned. "Have you checked under the secret chamber under the drawing room floor?"

Sirius blinked and stepped back. "How did you know about that?"

"Ron told his Dad about it in our second year." Harry replied.

Sirius shook his head. "Then how did he find out about it?" he asked pointedly.

Harry gave his godfather a superior smile. "Oh, we just went into the Slytherin common room in our second year to try and figure out who the Heir of Slytherin was. Malfoy told us that his father's manor had been raided that week, but there were plenty of valuable dark arts objects in the secret chamber under the drawing room floor the ministry had missed."

Sirius looked at Arabella with a smirk. "See! I told you he was a Potter!"

He turned back to Harry. "You tell me your way, and I'll tell you mine."

It was Harry's turn to look surprised. "You got into the Slytherin common room too?"

Sirius put on a long suffering look. "Of course. But it was in our fifth year, so you beat us there."

"Why did you try to go there in the first place?"

Sirius gave an evil smile. "Snape wouldn't come out to be pranked, that's why!"

Harry and Sirius spent most of Sunday afternoon lazing away at Mrs. Figg's house, chatting about what had happened since they had last seen each other. They discussed their past pranks, debated the various methods of getting into the Slytherin common room (with a view to play pranks on them), and caught up on the latest inventions of WWW.

"James' son with his own joke shop. I cannot imagine a single thing that would bring a bigger smile to his face." said Sirius, as he and Harry sat on armchairs in front of the fire, each nursing a large, mildly alcoholic beverage.

Harry smiled and closed his eyes, luxuriating in the sensation of belonging to a family. "You remember the bouncing ferret wheezes, don't you? The ones Fred and George released at our party?"

"Oh, yes. People kept laughing when I asked what they meant. I never did get to find out the reference behind them."

Harry's face split into a massive smile at the memory. "Crouch, as Moody, interrupted an argument Malfoy and I were having. I turned to leave after a parting shot, and Malfoy sent a curse at my back. Crouch promptly transfigured him into a white ferret and made him bounce around the room."

The sound of Sirius' roar of laughter sent shivers of delight down Harry's spine. Though recently he had become more aware of what it was like to have a real family, the simple pleasure of joking and laughing with someone who loved you as family was still new to him.

"Ok, you two. It is time for Harry to get back to Hogwarts. You can use the fire, dear." said Mrs. Figg from the doorway leading to the kitchen.

"Not just yet, Arabella." said Sirius. He turned to Harry with a wide, calculating grin. "I'm sure your Uncle would be home by now..."

"Sirius!" said Mrs. Figg in a stern, level voice. The two wizards ignored her and, seconds later, a large black dog and a blood-red phoenix raced through the front door of Mrs. Figg's house.

Vernon Dursley had been home for an hour and was starting to finally relax. Petunia had fussed over him on his arrival, clucking over his awful appearance, bemoaning the fact that he had obviously been mistreated in prison. Right now, his wife was cooking him an enormous meal and he was sitting in his favorite chair watching TV, a half-full sniffer of brandy in his hand.

Suddenly, the TV flickered, and changed channel. Vernon frowned in confusion, and looked around for the remote. Discovering it wasn't within reach, he stood and hunted around. After a few minutes he found it on top of the television itself. He picked it up and changed the channel back to what he was watching, then returned to his seat, wriggling his large body to get comfortable. Again, after a few seconds, the channel changed to a different station.

Vernon grunted as he got to his feet. Moving over to the television set, he did what most people who know nothing about sensitive electronics do when confronted with a misbehaving appliance and performed some percussive maintenance.

"What are you hitting the TV for, Dear?" Petunia asked.

"Damn thing keeps changing channels." he replied, giving the TV one last thump.

He went back to his chair and picked up the remote. Aiming it at the TV, he tried changing the channel back. The batteries promptly dropped out of the control.

Vernon growled in frustration and bent over to pick up the batteries. A crash then a shriek from the kitchen startled him.

"Petunia! Are you alright?" he yelled running into the kitchen. His dinner was splattered all over the floor; his wife standing in shock with her bony hand over her mouth.

"I'm sorry, Vernon. I guess I must have put the pot on the edge of the bench." she said, a confused look on her horsey face.

Before Vernon could reply, the light in the kitchen flickered and vanished with a pop.

Growling louder, Vernon stormed out of the kitchen and went to find a spare light globe. He opened the cupboard under the stairs rather roughly. Roughly enough that the door came off the hinges in his hand. "Damn it!" he yelled, tossing the small door to the floor. He looked around in the cupboard and located the small box with spare light globes.

Instead of fumbling for the correct globe, Vernon grabbed the whole box and stood up, grunting in pain as he banged the back of his head on the top of the now-empty door frame.

Rubbing the back of his slightly balding head, he took a couple of steps towards the kitchen before tripping over the recently discarded door.

The box flew out of his hands and landed on the floor with a little tinkle emerging from within. Vernon's blood pressure elevated into dangerously high territory when he examined the inside of the box, noting that only the globes that would have fit the kitchen light were broken.

It would have taken a canine's sharp ears to hear the whispered conversation coming from just outside the Dursley's front window.

"How long does the bad luck charm last?"

"Depends on how much they deserve it."

"Another few hours at least then."

Another shriek from the kitchen brought Vernon running. He misjudged his path through the lounge though and managed to run into the hand rest of an armchair, causing both man and chair to end up on their respective backs.

Turning purple with frustration, Vernon got up and rushed into the kitchen. The light coming from the lounge was enough to see his wife sitting in the

middle of a casserole covered floor. A rather obvious skid mark in the thick sauce gave mute testimony to what had occurred.

"Petunia! Are you alright?" he asked, reaching down to assist his wife to her feet.

"I'm fine, I just can't see properly in this dark kitchen." she snapped. Deciding to leave his wife and her sharp tongue alone for now, Vernon retreated cowardly from the kitchen. He bent over to pick up the armchair he knocked over.

As he started righting the chair, the TV switched channels once again and the sound of incredibly loud gunfire filled the room.

Petunia screamed. Vernon jerked up, pulling the heavy chair up with him. His eyes crossed, he grabbed his groin and collapsed on the carpet, groaning to himself.

Never before in Harry's memory had so many Gryffindors laughed themselves sick. The story of Vernon Dursley's welcome home had been told and retold. Each time, more and more people had to leave the room to recover before returning to hear the rest.

"They had three separate accidents on the way to the hospital." laughed Ron to some second year students who had just come back from detention with Snape.

"Dursley kept screaming in pain from his hernia, while his wife kept screaming at the people she crashed into."

"Did they make it to the hospital?" asked one of the potion-stained second year students.

"Oh, yes. That's when the real fun started."

"More bad luck happened to them?"

"Yep." said Harry. "My Uncle slipped and landed face first in the spilt contents of a patient's colostomy bag."

Several muggle born students either winced in sympathy or laughed with glee. The students from wizarding families frowned in confusion, then looked slightly sick once Hermione gave them a rather clinical explanation.

"Bloody hell! Do muggles really let doctors do that to them?"

"They often don't have a choice." Hermione explained.

"Mione! You're interrupting!" complained Ron.

"Sorry."

"Now, where were we?" Ron asked his audience.

"What accidents did they have on the way?" asked a third year witch who had finally managed to compose herself for another round of Dursley stories.

Harry grinned from ear to ear. "My Uncle has a car that he made me polish every few days during the last few summers. My Aunt misread a turn and managed to squeeze the car down an alleyway. That got rid of the paint down both sides. When she tried to reverse out, she ran straight into a parked police car."

All the students in earshot all gave an "oooooooouuuwwwwww" sound at this.

"That can't have been good." said Natalie McDonald, shyly. As Gryffindor's reserve Seeker, she held Harry in awe not for his reputation as The-Boy-Who-Lived, but for the unbelievable skill he displayed on the Quidditch pitch.

Harry's grin widened. "Especially when you find out that the police car they ran into belonged to two officers called Barry and Carter, the very pair who arrested my Uncle in the first place."

"I bet they didn't believe what they saw."

"Not at first. I'm quite sure it wasn't the only time they checked inside a car and found a panicking person behind the wheel trying to get their spouse to the hospital with the spouse in the back seat groaning in pain while holding their stomach." Harry took a deep breath, desperately trying to keep his laughter under enough control so he was understandable. "I am sure it was the first time they saw the wife behind the wheel though." he continued.

"Which accident was that?" asked Neville, after he recovered enough to actually make sense.

"The second one. The first was just getting the car out of the garage. My Aunt just pushed my Uncle into the car and jumped in the front seat. She started the car and slammed her foot on the accelerator. She neglected to open the garage door."

It took the muggle born students a few moments to collect themselves enough to explain exactly what an accelerator was and how not opening a garage door was not generally considered a good idea.

After a while, the third accident became the topic of conversation. The benefits of having ABS installed on a car was discussed by several of the students. Obviously, the Dursleys didn't.

"How long were the skid marks?" asked Dean.

"And then Barry organized a special crane to extract their car from the canal." finished Harry for the third time, finally able to control his laughter enough to tell the story without interruption.

"But I thought that you said that the fun started when they got to the hospital!" whimpered Ginny, holding her stomach, the muscles there hurting like crazy.

Harry again broke out in giggles. "Yep, let's just say that Sirius managed to get into their room. The sudden appearance of a black dog the size of a bear had a definite effect on their composure."

"Did anything else happen to them in the hospital?" asked Ginny.

Harry nodded. "What do you want to know about first? My Uncle's accidental stumble that sent him face first into a vending machine, my Aunt's complete loss of control, resulting in her being handcuffed by security, or when they were mistaken for escapees from a local asylum and both taken away in straight-jackets?"

The students of the three other houses watched with curiosity as each and every Gryffindor student gently made their way to their table for breakfast the next morning. Without exception, every Gryffindor looked like they hadn't slept and had stomach aches.

Occasionally one of them would giggle, then clutch at their stomach and groan in pain.

Unsurprisingly, several accusatory glances were sent towards the Slytherin table by the present Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. Even Professor McGonagall was sweeping her stern gaze over the Slytherin students, looking for a sign of guilt.

Cho sat with her back to the Gryffindor table for the first time since Harry returned. She had been true to her word and had spent a great deal of time thinking about her relationship with Harry, but still needed more time.

With the daily mail delivery, a snowy white owl dropped a letter on her plate. Cho sighed, opened the envelope, and read Harry's letter. It was surprisingly short and concise.

*Dear Cho,*

*I realize why you need time and distance to think about us, and I want you to take as much time as you feel you need. I will be here for you when you feel you are done.*

*All I ask is that you don't make a final decision that affects both of us. For something so important, we both need to agree.*

*I love you, I always will.*

*Harry*

Cho took a deep breath, desperately trying to prevent the tears forming in her eyes from falling. She stood quickly, gathered her things, and made her way early to her classes.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love The Art of Procrastination

The Art of Procrastination.

Harry ducked as the sharp blade flashed through the space his head just vacated. Standing upright again, he lashed out defensively with his own blade, blocking his green opponent's counter strike before it gained any momentum. Harry took a half step back, pivoted on his left foot and kicked out, slamming his right foot into Green's midriff. Green crashed to the floor, just managing to maintain hold of the sword.

Harry ignored the results of his kick, spinning in time to catch the blade of his second opponent on the incredibly sharp daikatana he wielded. Deflecting two more strikes in a row, Harry stepped past his white opponent and struck to the side, catching White's sword. With a deft twist of both his blade and body, Harry forced the now vulnerable White to stumble into White's ally.

The-Boy-Who-Lived took a second to wipe the perspiration out of his sparkling green eyes before launching a blistering attack on his two remaining opponents.

White desperately tried to hold off Harry's renewed assault long enough for Green to regain his balance, but failed to prevent Harry from savagely kicking Green in the head, stunning it once again.

At that point, White threw caution to the wind, and dropped his defenses to simply flay at Harry wildly.

Harry's daikatana, held in two hands, seemed to waver in the air as it deflected two strikes aimed at his head. Harry stepped inside White's guard and slammed his elbow into the golem's nose, before stepping back enough to blur the Japanese sword in a tight circle and bury the fine blade between White's eyes.

One swift kick later, and the new golem was off Harry's sword and he turned to face Green. The automation drew on its focus' programmed knowledge of combat, and promptly dropped its weapon and surrendered.

Harry took deep gulping breathes, feeling the muscles in his body catch up from their oxygen starvation. It was almost with regret that he sheathed the razor sharp blade in the lacquered scabbard. As his taut body calmed and relaxed, a hot wave of disappointment flooded through him. Even though he had taken on six golems at once, he still hadn't worked off his frustrations.

A clapping of a single pair of hands caught his attention, and Harry spun round to see the headmaster standing in the doorway applauding his efforts.

"Well done, Harry. Excellent. You have shown significant improvement since your return."

Harry took a deep breath, held it for the count of five, then let it out explosively. "Thank you, Professor."

Harry turned and waved his wand. "*Reparo* ." he cast.

The half dozen golems repaired themselves and stood to attention. White, Yellow, Red, Blue, Green and Black arranged themselves along the far wall.

Dumbledore walked forward and put his hand on Harry's shoulder with a fatherly gesture. "I did not think that you had the skill to take on all six of Professor Moody's golems at once. Even with magic. Without is an extraordinary achievement. Twenty points to Gryffindor, I think."

Harry gave the headmaster a wry grin. "Thanks again. But the focus gems are not learning as quickly as we had expected. The combat skills I imbued in them are not being augmented with new knowledge." Harry shook his head. "Not quickly enough at any rate. I did notice some improvisation by Red and Blue, but I expected more from them." Harry hung his head. "From myself." he said under his breath.

"Ah. Well you did imbue Red with more courage, and Blue with more intellectual consideration. If any of the golems were to show signs of improvement before the others, it was always going to be those two."

Harry nodded. He turned and looked up into the twinkling eyes of Albus Dumbledore. "I wish they picked things up quicker, I could have done with a greater challenge today."

Dumbledore gave Harry's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "I know that there are many rumours flying around about Ms. Chang and your relationship with her. You seem to shrug it off when around people, but it is now rather obvious that you let your frustrations out while alone." Dumbledore stroked his long silver beard with his free hand. "Don't let yourself fall into the trap of feeling that you need to act violently to feel better. Sometimes, just talking to someone can ease your tensions."

Harry gave the headmaster a small smile. "I know. It's just that the one person who I feel I can talk to about anything is still unsure about our

relationship. Cho hasn't spoken to me in over a month." Harry sighed. "I told her to take her time and I'd wait for her. It would be much easier if I didn't hear ten times a day how she is shagging everything with a pulse." Harry snorted with amusement. "Easier for her too, I'd imagine."

Dumbledore smiled, not the least perturbed by Harry's language. "Ms. Chang is going through a difficult time herself. Her NEWT preparation is taking up much of her free time, and the rumours about her are no doubt adding to what is already a monumentally stressful time. But I'm sure she'd like to talk to you. Perhaps you should approach her yourself?"

Harry shook his head. "I've tried more than a few times. I greeted her in the library only yesterday, and she just sighed and walked past me. She was carrying a pile of books larger than Hermione's during our third year, so I didn't feel upset. I just wish I could help her somehow."

"Was she with anyone at the time?"

Harry frowned in thought. "Yes. She was with a couple of Ravenclaw seventh years."

"Then perhaps you should try to find her alone. She may not know if you believe the rumours or not. Perhaps she didn't want a confrontation."

Harry nodded thoughtfully for a moment, then raised his eyebrows questioningly. "Was there anything you wanted to see me about, Professor? I don't imagine that you were just walking past this rather out of the way classroom."

Dumbledore nodded briefly, "Professor McGonagall has informed me that Ms. Chang's animagus progress is not going well. Ms. Chang's understanding of the theory behind the transformation is almost letter perfect, yet she still struggles to make the changes to her body. Did you have any such difficulties?"

Harry shook his head and picked up a towel from inside his large backpack. "Not at all." he said, wiping the perspiration from his face and neck with a towel. "I don't mean to sound egotistical, but the practical changes were the part I found easiest."

Dumbledore nodded. "It has long been a theory that the animal a mage transforms into is less a conscious choice, and more derived from the mage's own personality. There are so few animagi that trying to get a true statistical study done on the subject is difficult. It is possible Ms. Chang's difficulties stem from the fact that her personality is not suited to a phoenix."

Harry nodded, unsurprised. "We are very different people, Professor. Cho's mind is extraordinary. She understands almost anything she is taught instantly, and remembers everything she has ever learned. But she doesn't have the courage to risk herself for others. It may be that lack that is preventing her from progressing in the transformation."

Harry sighed. "One thing we do have in common is a love of flying. I was hoping that would help her past whatever obstacles she would face, but it obviously hasn't."

Harry looked up at Dumbledore, a strangely passive expression on his face. "It was her flying skill that first attracted me to her, and her physical beauty didn't hurt. But I've found that her mind is far and away the most beautiful thing she possesses. She is absolutely remarkable, and I would do anything for her."

"Even something as hard as suggesting that she may fail at her attempt to become an animagus, and to let go?" asked the headmaster.

Harry nodded without hesitation. "Yes, but I haven't given up on her yet. It took me ten months of constant study and practice. She has only spent a month to get where she is."

"Very well. I understand that Professor Snape and yourself have developed a particularly potent version of poly-juice potion."

"Yes, well, we hope so. The potion should be ready tonight."

"Splendid. Have you any idea by just how much this version surpasses the original?"

Harry shook his head. "We are expecting that a single dose will last between ninety and ninety-five minutes. Long enough to be useful, including convincing people that the person is not using poly-juice potion, but not so long that form stability and potion toxicity become a problem."

"Sounds like a fine line to walk. Was that a difficult problem to overcome?"

"We came up with a rather innovative way of improving the potency of the potion, but apart from that, it wasn't too difficult. Actually, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that because of that, it wasn't too difficult.

"Your floating elemental ice and increased heat?"

"Yes, I didn't think you'd be too interested in the details."

"My dear boy, when a member of my staff and a student manage to develop a method of improving an aspect of a potion that has been brewed for centuries, I'm always interested."

"Well, if this one turns out as we expect, we're going to look at some other potions that convention states are as good as they get."

"Do you have any idea which potion you'd like to work on next?"

Harry shook his head. "None at all. If you have one in mind, by all means let us know. I'd like to pursue something that would be useful immediately."



Dumbledore nodded. "I shall consider it. Well, on to more lighthearted matters. The Yule Ball is going to be announced soon, but I was wondering if I could get you to use your stake in Weasley's Wizard Wheezes to acquire some, surprises, for the staff and students. At a reduced cost of course."

Harry's face split into a broad grin. "Of course. I'm sure you have a purchase list. Give me the order, and I'll get it for you at cost."

"Capital. I shall get to it immediately. I shall see you at dinner."

Harry nodded farewell to the headmaster and started to put on a shirt. He paused, and looked back to the far wall, to the six arrayed golems there. Originally, they had been training bodies for medical research and mediwizard practice exams. They had bones and cartilage, and their surface felt just like flesh. When struck, they deformed exactly as a human body would be expected to. This made them ideal for not only medical training, but combat training too. Professors Dumbledore, Moody, Flitwick and McGonagall had created a set of focus stones for these golems, in an effort to ensure student safety. Harry had been asked for suggestions to be added, since he had direct experience in what Death Eaters were being taught, but had ended up assisting in the creating and imbuing of the stones.

Harry had suggested giving each golem a separate 'personality', to better simulate combat between two groups of people. Rather facetiously, Harry had imbued the four coloured golems with the primary attribute of the four houses at Hogwarts, and the white and black golems with honourable tactics and dirty fighting skills respectively.

The result was a set of minor 'human' golems that needed 'charging' every week or so, but in terms of teaching, represented a good cross section of what a student was likely to face.

Harry dropped his shirt and drew his blade. "One more time." he muttered to himself, as he activated the golems. He took a deep breath and launched a blazing attack on the unsuspecting golems.

This time, the Slytherin Golem didn't get a chance to surrender.

Later, in the dungeons below Hogwarts, Harry gently siphoned off a small measure of the rather lumpy potion. Given the fact that Professor Snape was looking over his shoulder, he was calmer than any other student had any right to expect.

"Excellent." said Snape crisply, his long fingers flexing with excitement. "Are you sure you want to test it on yourself?"

"Absolutely." said Harry as he deposited the siphoned potion portion into a small flask.

"Well, Potter, unless you wish to go to dinner with someone else's face, I'd suggest waiting until later."

Harry looked at the watch Sirius gave him. It used to belong to Sirius' father. Harry had left it set to tell the current time, but it could also be set to display the current weather (both at the holder's location and the weather at home), the current planetary alignment and a few other things that Harry didn't quite understand.

Not being a gambling man, Harry had no idea what odds were, or why they were applied to different horses, or even why Sirius' father would need them displayed on a watch face.

Harry picked up the vial and nodded to Snape. "I'll take it either tonight or tomorrow morning. I'll have a report on the effects to you on Monday."

Snape nodded. "I meant to ask you, Mr. Potter, just why you wince each time you move your left shoulder."

Harry sighed and rubbed his wrenched shoulder. "I was practicing with the golems Professor Moody uses in Defense. One got inside my guard and struck at my shoulder. I defended, but pulled a muscle doing so."

Snape smirked. "Getting blasé?"

"No, just tired. I'd been fighting them for the past hour."

Snape frowned. "Them? Did you fight each of them?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"What 'manner'? Did you fight them one after the other?"

"No. I fought all of them at once."

Harry watched as Snape blinked in shock, his mouth open. It felt good to be able to stun the potion master.

Ginny sat back in contentment having finished her dinner. Next to her, Harry took a sip of pumpkin juice and continued eating. Ever since he defeated Voldemort's forces, he had an appetite to rival Ron's.

Ginny watched as his eyes again latched onto Chang's back. The rumours that Ginny had been spreading had turned Cho's reputation to mud. Her tactic of denying the validity of a particular rumour was incredibly effective, since she invariably had to tell someone what the rumour was before denying she believed it. You could make up all sorts of things if all you were going to do was say you didn't believe it.

Yet Harry still kept looking at her. Why? Cho hadn't spoken with Harry for over a month now, yet he still mooned over her.

Ginny sighed to herself. She turned to face him. "Harry, are you done with the detentions Snape has been giving you?"

A pair of emerald eyes turned to regard her. Those eyes still sent a shiver down her spine each time she looked into them.

"I haven't been doing detention with him, Gin. We have been working on enhancing a potion. With any luck, it will have turned out." he reached into a pocked and extracted a small vial, which he wiggled back and forth between his thumb and forefinger. "I'm going to test it tomorrow."

Ginny raised a copper eyebrow, and mulled this new information over in her mind. She, and all the other fifth year Gryffindors, had thought that Snape had been particularly cruel to Harry, and had assigned him a month of detentions. Harry hadn't bothered denying that fact.

Now, it turns out he had been helping Snape with a potion. Which one? How had it been enhanced?

"Harry, do you mind if I borrow your notesheet after dinner? I want to rewrite my herbology notes, since I spilt water on mine today." she lied.

"Sure, Gin." he said, reaching into his pocked and passing the dragonhide bound notepad to her.

The rest of the meal passed quietly, with only one argument between Ron and Hermione to entertain the rest of the Gryffindors.

The headmaster gently rapped his knife against his wine glass and stood up. "Ladies and Gentlemen, please forgive me a small interruption to your mastication." Except for the twinkling in his eyes, Dumbledore appeared to not notice several people in the Hall shoot pumpkin juice out of their nose. "With all the good news recently, it has been decided that a Yule Ball will take place in the Great Hall on Christmas eve.

"As expected, the male half of the student population look a little wild at the news." he continued. "Therefore, following the splendid success of the trial last year, only the female members of the student body may invite a date. There will be no age restriction either, though third year students and below will still observe curfew."

With one last smile at the chattering students he added, "And boys, you must go with the first person who asks. No date, no go." With that he sat down.

Ginny watched Harry through the announcement, and saw him desperately look in Cho's direction. Grinning to herself she grabbed his hand. "Harry, please go to the ball with me."

Slowly, Harry turned to face her, a forced smile on his face. "Sure Gin. I'd like that."

Ginny smiled to herself, very pleased with the evening's events so far.

They both missed Cho turning in her seat to face Harry.

Cho clenched her eyes tightly together, desperately trying to stop the tears building there from running down her cheeks. She buried her face deeper into one of the pillows on her bed and silently wept.

"Cho?" Hermione's unexpected voice called out from behind Cho's bed's curtains. "Are you alright?"

Cho cleared her throat. "I'm fine." she said unconvincingly.

The curtains round the large bed separated slightly to allow Hermione's head to poke through. "Will you just go and talk to Harry already! The longer you leave it, the worse it will be."

Cho shook her head, still with her face against the pillow. "I can't! What if he hates me."

Hermione parted the curtains further and sat on Cho's bed. Leaning over, she placed a comforting hand on Cho's shoulder. "He doesn't hate you. Trust me."

Cho's tear-stained face emerged from the pillow. "B-but I see him everywhere with Ginny. And he's going to the ball with her. And all the rumours going around about how I'm a slut, how can he not hate me?"

Cho buried her face in her pillow again, and started crying anew. Hermione looked down at the sobbing girl with sympathy.

"Cho, he is with Ginny all the time because they have classes together. They have identical timetables. And if you were actually facing Harry at dinner tonight, you'd have been able to catch his eye. It's not your fault that Dumbledore set the rules so only females could ask someone to the ball again. He doesn't love her. He loves you."

"You didn't see what happened after dinner." came Cho's muffled voice. "Ginny came up behind me in the library and patted me on the shoulder and told me 'bad luck'."

"She didn't!" Hermione said, horrified.

"Yes she did. Anyway, what about all those horrible rumours?" came Cho's still muffled voice.

Hermione sighed. "Do you remember in your fifth year, the Tri-wizard Tournament?"

Cho again emerged. "Of course I do!" she said, pain evident in her voice. "I lost a friend because of that damn tournament!"

Hermione grimaced. "Sorry, that wasn't what I was referring to. Did you ever read the Daily Prophet while it was on?"

Cho swallowed and nodded. "It started out printing good things about Harry, but then it got mean."

"Exactly." said Hermione.

Cho managed a small smile. "I remember reading that you were his girlfriend and that you were playing Victor Krum off against him."

Hermione grimaced again. "Yes, well..."

Cho continued. "I remember thinking bad things about you. All the girls who were falling over themselves for his attention. Just because he is The-Boy-Who-Lived." Cho summoned a tissue and blew her nose loudly.

Hermione nodded. "It was just silly. I mean, at that point, I hadn't even kissed Harry." Hermione's eyes widened and her hand flew to her mouth.

Cho gave her a look mixed with confusion and betrayal. "You kissed Harry? When?"

"Oh, Cho, I didn't, I mean, that came out the wrong way."

Cho's eyes narrowed dangerously. "When?" she asked levelly.

Hermione sighed and looked down at her hands. "At King's Cross, on the platform after we arrived in London at the end of that year. I kissed him on the cheek to try and keep his spirits up." She looked at Cho. "Harry wrote to me a lot that summer. I could read between the lines that he managed to avoid falling into a depression. He told me later that he had been writing to you, and after a while I realised that it was your letters that kept him sane."

Cho's face showed her relief, then screwed up with self-loathing. "What am I going to do?" she wailed.

Hermione let her cry for a few minutes. "You are going to go and talk to Harry. You are going to tell him that you are afraid for his safety, but that you can handle it, as long as he takes steps to stay safe. You are then going to tell him you love him, and that you miss him terribly." Hermione smiled gently at Cho's disbelieving expression. "He will say that he loves you and then he will give you a hug and everything will be OK again."

Cho shook her head and once more, buried her face in her now damp pillow. "I can't. I just can't. What if doesn't? What if he says he doesn't love me anymore?"

"What if he says he still does?"

"How could he? Everyone here says I've slept with..."

"Stop!" Hermione ordered. "Listen, Harry doesn't believe what he hears as rumours. Remember we were discussing Skeeter's articles? Rumours about how stable he was? Harry ignored it. It made him mad that people believed it, but he didn't himself. Trust me, Harry doesn't give rumours any credence."

"But that's rumours about him! What about rumours about others?"

Hermione sighed. "Harry doesn't believe anything bad about someone until he sees proof. Don't worry. You just have to go and speak to him."

Cho took a steadying breath and looked down at her trembling hands. "Why are you here?" she asked quietly. "You said last time that you didn't like coming into a different common room."

A small smile touched Hermione's lips. "I'm here because I want you and Harry to be happy. Both of you have a stressful seven months ahead, and you need to be able to talk to each other to relieve stress."

Cho frowned in thought. "But the password was changed yesterday, and I didn't tell you what the new one was. How did you..."

"Professor Flitwick is also worried about you. He asked me to talk with you."

"Did Harry ask you to talk to me?" Cho asked, her tone carrying both hope and an accusation.

Hermione shook her head. "Harry hasn't spoken to me about you since the day the out of control golem attacked him. I keep trying to talk to him, but he is more stubborn than you."

"They why do you think he still loves me?"

"Because of the way he looks at you. You have been sitting with your back to the Gryffindor table recently, but Harry still looks for you every single meal. The look on his face can only be described as adoring."

Cho wrung her hands with indecision. "But..."

"That's it!" decided Hermione. "Get dressed, put on your best robes if you need to, but you are coming with me to Gryffindor Tower. You are going to go up to Harry's dorm, talk to him, and after that the pair of you will not be seen until tomorrow morning. Thank goodness today is a Saturday."

Cho sat up and rolled to the side of the bed. She stood and went to part the curtains, but then collapsed back onto the bed. "I can't. I've taken too long. He's left me."

Hermione hissed in frustration. "OK, how long have you been meaning to talk to Harry? He told me that you said you needed some time to think. Did you finish thinking about your relationship? Have you made a decision?"

Cho nodded. "After a few days, I'd decided that I needed to be with him, but I wanted him to take some precautions. But I took a few days to get my courage up, and then a few more.

Hermione nodded "Then it seemed that you'd taken too long to think about it, and you took a few more days."

Cho nodded, giving Hermione a wry smile. "Exactly. I told myself that I didn't need the stress because of the amount of work I had. When days had turned to weeks, I just couldn't face him. How can I face him now? I've treated him so badly."

Hermione looked down at Cho's small frame. "Get up. Now." she said quietly. "Get dressed. I'll wait for you in the common room. You have ten minutes." With that, Hermione left.

Cho slowly obeyed. Heart thumping wildly, she moved at a studied slow speed, and began to dress herself. Never in her life had she been so nervous.

Cho and Hermione made their way towards Gryffindor Tower. Two prefects out after curfew was not too unusual, and the pair had managed to talk their way past Filch.

"No, I'm not ready, I'll talk to him tomorrow, I promise!" said Cho for the tenth time.

Hermione didn't respond, she just grabbed a hold of Cho's robes and continued walking towards Gryffindor Tower. She had been almost amused at watching Cho get steadily more and more nervous the closer they got to the Tower.

Finally, the pair stood in front of the Fat Lady's portrait. Hermione was almost supporting Cho as she later babbled quietly to herself.

"Voldemort." said Hermione clearly. Cho started slightly and looked at her friend in confusion.

"It makes everyone in Gryffindor get used to saying his name." said Hermione as the portrait swung open. "With any luck, it will catch on."

Cho looked around the Gryffindor common room for the first time. It wasn't so different to the Ravenclaw room, except everything was in various shades of red. It gave the room a warm, comforting feeling. She found herself relaxing slightly.

A couple of sixth and seventh years were still up, doing some late night study. Pavati looked at Cho in surprise. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "My sister said that you didn't come out of your dorm except to study."

Cho swallowed nervously while Hermione answered, "She is here to talk to Harry. Hopefully it will stop both of them moping about."

With that announcement, the other Gryffindors smiled in understanding and acceptance. "I'd wish you good luck, but you won't need it." said Pavati. "He has been so lonely without you."

Cho blinked in surprise as the rest of the assembled students nodded in agreement. Hermione put her hand on Cho's shoulder. "I told you." she whispered.

Knees trembling, Cho followed Hermione's directions up the stairs to the sixth-year boys dorm rooms, and to see if she could salvage her relationship with Harry.

Harry lay in bed wide-awake. He somehow had to find Cho without her friends around and talk to her. Dumbledore's words resounded in his mind.

Harry lay flat on his back, his hands clasped behind his head. Even though still in bed, he still wore his glasses, and looked unseeing at the ceiling.

A creaking from the floorboards signaled someone was standing behind the curtains at the foot of his bed. Even though he was at Hogwarts, in Gryffindor Tower, his hand still slipped under his pillow and gripped his wand there.

No one opened the curtains, but Harry could just make out the soft footfalls of someone trying to make as little noise as possible move towards his left bedside table. There was a faint clink of glass on metal and then silence. Harry frowned, and pulled out his wand.

A distinctly feminine hand appeared between the curtain gap and gently pulled the curtains apart. Harry gasped in surprise as he looked at his girlfriend's beautiful, but worried face.

"Harry? Can I talk to you?" she whispered, nervousness in every syllable.

Cho smiled and climbed onto Harry's bed. Almost reverently she reached out and touched Harry's cheek. He took her hand and gently kissed her palm.

Cho closed her eyes and gasped with pleasure. Steeling herself she crawled forward and kissed Harry's lips. He returned the kiss with fervour.

A part of Harry's mind dispassionately told him that Cho kissed him differently when nervous, but he didn't care. He traced kisses down her jaw to the base of her ear, and was pleasantly surprised at the purring that emanated from Cho's throat.

"Did you want to talk, my love?" he whispered in her ear.

With a sigh, she shook her head and started frantically undoing her robes.

Harry smiled at her fervour and helped her remove the clothes. Once more, in what felt like an eternity, he was looking at his naked girlfriend. He

started tracing his initials on her chest again, but she stopped him.

"Make love to me, Harry." she whispered. "Please. I need you to love me."

Harry cupped her cheeks and kissed her again. "I do love you, Cho. I always will." He kissed away the tears that appeared in her eyes. "Never doubt it." he said, and lowered her to the bed.

Cho threw her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply, then relaxed and allowed Harry to touch her in any way he wished.

Hermione watched as Cho went up the stairs, looking more frightened than if she was entering a dragon's lair. The other Gryffindors nodded to themselves and went back to their study.

"I hope they figure things out." said Dean to Hermione. "Harry has been looking like crap in the mornings recently. I don't think he has been sleeping too well."

Pavati smirked. "Well if all goes according to plan, he won't get much sleep tonight either."

Hermione smiled and in mock shock pressed her hands to her cheeks. "Pavati! How could you think that?"

The laugh shared by all was cut short as Cho burst into the common room, almost blind from the tears in her eyes. She bolted for the exit, sobbing uncontrollably.

Hermione sighed and drew her wand. With a casual wave, she cast a full body bind at Cho. The tiny Asian witch stiffened and fell to the floor.

Hermione walked over to Cho and rolled her over. "I'm sorry Cho, but you are going to talk to him toni-." Hermione's chiding froze on her lips from one glance at Cho's horrified expression. Quickly, she dispelled the binding charm.

Cho grabbed a fistful of Hermione's robes and burst into tears.

"What happened Cho?" Hermione asked gently, as the rest of the Gryffindors gathered round to comfort the girl.

But no words could escape the sobbing girl. Cho simply trembled with grief.

Hermione turned to Pavati. "Take care of her." she said simply, then stood and marched towards the sixth-year boys dorms. The look on her face reminded those present of McGonagall in a particularly bad mood.

Less than a second after entering Harry's dorm, Hermione understood what crippled Cho. The muted sounds emanating from behind Harry's curtains gave testimony to what was occurring behind them. With a snarl, Hermione stormed over and ripped the curtains open, then grabbed a double handful of the sheets and tore them off the bed.

For an instant, Hermione wondered why the strange, athletic man she caught Cho in the shower with was in Harry's bed. The same man of short stature but muscular appearance was lying on top of a girl, obviously in the middle of copulating. When the man spun his head around, Hermione stared into the eyes of her best friend.

*It was Harry after all.* she thought to herself in shock. She mentally shook herself and took a deep breath. "Harry!" she shouted. "What do you think you are-?"

Harry had rolled off the girl and into a crouch, ready to launch himself at Hermione in an instant. But it was the sight of the girl he was making love to that stopped Hermione's tirade. Lying there, too shocked to cover herself, was Cho.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Love is Blind

Love is blind

Harry lay under the covers next to his naked girlfriend and lightly flicked his tongue over Cho's taut right nipple, eliciting a moan of appreciation. He covered the dark flesh with his mouth and suckled gently, knowing that Cho's nipples were too sensitive to accept harder stimulation without pain.

The lithe body beneath him strained under his ministrations. Cho placed her hands round his neck and pressed his head firmly against her small breast.

"Harder, harder." she panted softly, surprising him. Ignoring the faint feeling of unease, he complied, pulling more of her small breast into his mouth. Harry swirled the tip of his tongue around the hard nub of flesh, and began to wonder if he should put silencing charms around his bed as Cho's voice rose in ecstasy.

Harry's right hand stroked down Cho's side, gently tickling her. She jerked beneath him, obviously reacting to his touch more than usual. Well, it had been a while for both of them.

Without removing his mouth, Harry ran his hand up along Cho's flat stomach, and gently squeezed her other breast. He lightly dragged his finger in slow circles around her dark nipple, all the while giving the other plenty of attention with his tongue.

Cho's smooth thighs ground together, and she writhed on the bed under his attention. Harry released Cho's nipple from his mouth and looked up at his beautiful girlfriend's face, her eyes closed, her enjoyment evident. "I love you Cho." he whispered.

Cho's eyes flickered open and she gasped faintly. Looking down at him, she whispered, "Harry, don't talk, just love me."

Harry grinned wickedly. "I love making you feel like this." he said, before lowering his right hand to Cho's groin, and gently cupped her pubic mound.

He grinned as Cho gave another gasp and thrust herself against his palm. He again lowered his mouth to her breast. In seconds, the state of his girlfriend's arousal became physically obvious, as he felt moisture on his fingers.

Harry shifted his oral attentions to Cho's other nipple. Her moans of pleasure grew more intense. Harry was glad that all the other sixth-year Gryffindor boys were out of the dorm.

Harry pulled his palm away from Cho's center, and explored her intimate area with his fingers, looking for that special spot. Just... there...

Cho threw her arms around his neck and bucked wildly beneath him, quivering violently for long seconds. After what seemed like a fortnight, her uncontrollable thrashings calmed, and she gulped in huge lungfuls of air.

Harry smiled at the sight, feeling very pleased with himself. Eventually, Cho managed to calm down enough to speak. "Make me yours Harry." she said. "Now."

Without any hesitation, Harry positioned himself between Cho's legs. She grunted in pain as he gently pushed, but grabbed his buttocks with both hands and forced him further onwards.

Harry frowned in concern. Cho had only been in pain once since they had taken this next step, and that was on the beach. He looked deep into Cho's eyes, silently asking if she was alright.

Cho's dark, almond shaped eyes stared back, filled with joy, dispelling his worries. Harry started with a slow rhythm, intending to make this a night to remember.

A gasp of horror from behind the curtains could not penetrate the pair's loving embrace. Harry dimly heard the door to the room open and slam, but it was the woman of his dreams beneath him that attracted all his attention.

Less than a minute later, the sound of curtains being savagely opened caused his heart to skip a beat. The sheets were torn from them a second later, the cool night air causing goose bumps to appear on Harry's damp skin.

Harry whipped his head around to see who had interrupted them, half expecting to see the dread sight of Professor McGonagall. Instead, the silhouette of someone shorter stood there, looking down on the lovers. The person paused, as though in shock, before shrieking, "Harry! What do you think you are-"

Midway through the verbal explosion, Harry rolled off Cho and prepared to leap at the intruder. The tirade stopped once Harry's movement exposed Cho. With a powerful leap, Harry threw himself at the silhouette, ramming his shoulder into their stomach.

A distinctly feminine grunt escaped the person as Harry bore her to the ground. With a slight twist, Harry changed his fall so he rolled off the person, rather than crush her underneath him.

Quicker than a blink, Harry was back on his feet and dropped himself down on the intruder, each of his knees pinning an arm beneath him, and he sat on her chest. With the speed of a striking snake his left hand closed around his opponent's throat and squeezed, while he drew back his right fist, ready to flatten his captive's nose.

Hermione looked up into the eyes of her best friend, willing him to recognise her before his fist landed. "Harry?" she croaked.

The speed of Harry's attack had stunned her. She had been shoulder checked and crushed beneath him before registering pain from the attacks. Upon landing on the floor, her breath had exploded from her lungs, winding her badly. Now, her arms were pinned painfully beneath Harry, each of his knees pressed agonizingly into her biceps. He sat on her chest stark naked, his manhood both aroused and uncomfortably close. His hand round her throat prevented her from breathing or speaking normally.

In the space of two heartbeats, Harry had gone from distracted and vulnerable, to holding a position from which he could kill her.

Slowly, Hermione watched as the fire in Harry's eyes died, and he looked down at her in shock.

"Hermione?" he whispered.

Suddenly, he couldn't get off her fast enough. As his weight left her chest, the pain from all his assaults swept over her at once. Hermione rolled onto her side and vomited the contents of her abused stomach. Her lungs felt as though they had burst, her arms as if they had been torn off.

"Harry?" croaked his captive.

Recognition slowly dawned on Harry. Hermione's petrified eyes stared straight into his own. "Hermione?" he whispered.

Unthinking, he leapt of his friend. She rolled over and vomited through her groans. He bent over and cupped her head, making sure she didn't drown in her own bile. "Cho!" he shouted. "Get my wand, and give me a robe."

Cho sat on the bed, unhearing, looking down at Hermione's battered form. Hermione tried drawing a breath, but her battered lungs refused to cooperate.

"Hermione! Harry said in her ear. "Your lungs are winded, don't try and breathe in. Breathe out!"

Hermione looked at him incredulously, her face turning purple.

"Trust me, breathe out. It works!" said Harry desperately.

Hermione swallowed, and forced the meager remains of the air left in her lungs out her mouth. Tiny remnants of her vomitus dribbled down her chin. It worked though.

Hermione drew a shuddering breath, filling her lungs. She let it out and drew another, then started crying from pain, shock and oxygen starvation.

Harry cradled her in his arms, whispering soothing noises into her ear. He looked up at Cho again. "Cho! Please pass me my wand and a robe!"

Cho finally shook herself out of her insensibility, and leapt of the bed and grabbed Harry's wand from the bedside table, knocking off a small vial there. It landed on the hard stone floor and shattered unnoticed.

Harry gratefully accepted his wand and robe, struggling into it without noticing it was inside out. With his wand, Harry cast several minor healing charms on Hermione's arms and stomach.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I'm so sorry." he whispered, doing what he could to ease her pain. Finally her sobs subsided.

Harry looked up at his girlfriend. "Cho, stay here. Close the curtains around the bed and wait for me. I'll be back as soon as I can." He bent over and gently picked Hermione up, one arm under her knees, the other under her shoulders. "I'm taking her to the hospital wing. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Cho looked at Hermione, her face screwed up in desperate thought. "Can't she go there herself?"

Harry looked at his girlfriend in shock. "Cho!" he scolded. "She's hurt! I'd no sooner let her make her own way there than I'd let you go by yourself." he said angrily.

Cho looked abashed. "Ok." she said meekly, and quietly drew the curtains closed.

As Harry turned to leave, he could hear quiet sobbing from his bed.

Everyone in the common room heard Hermione's outburst cut off suddenly. The assembled Gryffindors gave each other questioning looks, wondering what was going on. Cho was still crying piteously to herself, wriggling in a vain effort to get away.

A few moments later, heavy footsteps on the stairs signaled the arrival of someone from the boys dorm. Everyone turned to see Harry carrying Hermione down the stairs, her arms gently crossed over her chest.

Harry!" shouted several students. "What happened?"

Harry grimaced. "Hermione surprised us, I reacted without thinking. She is Ok, but I need to take her to the hospital wing."

Pavati looked from Harry to Cho, who was now silently lying on the floor out of Harry's sight, obstinately not looking at him. "Us, Harry?" Pavati asked, an uncharacteristic edge to her voice.

Harry looked at her surprised at her tone. "Cho and I."

Harry appeared surprised at the snarls and sneer of contempt he received from his fellow Gryffindors at this announcement.

He snarled back. "I don't care what you all think of her, whether you believe all those rumours flying around. I love her. If you don't approve, tough. You can all bugger off." Harry started storming towards the portrait exit.

"Oh, that's not it, Harry." said Pavati. "We don't care who you spend time with, but don't lie to us."

Harry frowned. "I'm not lying. Cho is upstairs."

"Oh really?" replied Pavati sweetly, and grabbed Cho's wrist and lifted her to her feet. "You lying sack of sh-

"He's telling the truth." said Hermione, still in Harry's arms. The bushy-haired girl looked over to the group. "There is a Cho upstairs, and one here. One of them is a fake." she coughed, screwing up her face in pain. "I saw her, with Harry. Upstairs."

Harry looked at her in confusion, turning to face his tear-stained girlfriend standing in front of him, surrounded by his housemates. Then he looked up the stairs towards his dorm room. "Then- then who- who is up there?" he stammered.

Dean bolted up the stairs, which prompted the rest of the Gryffindor group to follow suit. Cho was left alone. With a cry, she ran from the common room and out into the corridors, ignoring Harry's frantic, "Cho! Wait!"

Harry looked down at Hermione in his arms. He couldn't chase Cho while carrying her, and couldn't leave her alone. With a sigh, Harry decided to take his friend to the hospital wing.

Hermione struggled. "Don't be silly, Harry. Go after her."

Harry shook his head. "Not until you are safely in the hands of Madam Pomfrey."

Harry had just made it to the exit, when Dean appeared at the bottom of the stairs. "Harry, man, you'd better come and see this."

Harry sighed, and began carrying Hermione back up the stairs to his bedroom.

Hermione had recovered enough to stand with assistance after a few minutes, which was fortunate. On their arrival, a few things became terribly apparent.

One, the Cho Harry had made love to was gone. The bloodspots on the sheets were all that remained of her presence. Harry's trunk lay open, and had obviously been rummaged through. Even without Harry's help, Hermione could identify an item that had been taken. His invisibility cloak.

Harry had seen the broken vial next to his bed, and had fallen to his knees. "The potion, the potion." he said, over and over.

"What potion, Harry?" Pavati asked, still not sure what had occurred.

"P-polyjuice. My version of polyjuice." he said.

It didn't go unnoticed that the vial had been empty when it smashed.

Pavati looked confused. "What does polyjuice potion do?" she asked Hermione.

Hermione gave her a look. "It allows the drinker to take the appearance of someone else for an hour." She looked at Harry with pity. "Someone took it, and tricked Harry into thinking that they were Cho."

Dean Thomas swallowed loudly. "Harry, are you alright?" he asked.

Harry just knelt at the side of his bed, the shards of the empty vial in front of him. "That wasn't Cho." he whispered, over and over again. A second pile of vomit landed on the sixth-year dorm room floor.

Ginny sobbed into her pillow, still sore and tender. On reading Harry's notes on his new potion, she had realised that there was a window of opportunity for the one thing she had dreamed about as long as she could remember. But once Harry had left with Hermione in his arms, she knew he wasn't coming back in time to finish what he had started. Voices from the common room told her that she would have been noticed if she had gone down then, so she had rummaged through Harry's trunk, and borrowed his invisibility cloak, then cast a silencing charm on herself.

She had crept down the stairs to find Cho was actually in the common room. The one chance she got to make love to him, and Cho just happens to be in the common room. She swore to herself, glad that the silencing charm was strong enough to cover her voice. Harry had just declared his love for Cho, and had with no room for doubt expressed his feelings for those who believed the rumours Ginny had been spreading.

Ginny looked from Harry to Cho, and realised that her efforts to discredit Cho had hurt Cho only. Harry was noble enough to not give them any



credence.

She'd have hated him for that if she didn't love him so much.

When he looked back up the stairs, almost straight at her, she quickly ran past the group, and up the stairs into her own room.

*Damn that girl!* she thought. *Damn them all!*

Harry's touch had been electrifying. Her skin had never felt so alive, so sensitive. Ginny had never swooned before, but when he kissed her palm, she had almost lost balance. That one violent orgasm she experienced had just been a taste of what was denied her. His kisses had been so passionate, his mouth had played her body like a musician plays an instrument. That was what Cho got to have, just because Harry noticed Cho before he noticed Ron's ickle sister.

Ginny lowered one hand and gently touched herself. He had been amazing, better than she had expected, better that she had hoped.

And he had stopped too soon. For less than one minute, they had been gloriously joined. It had felt both like an eternity and an instant. With her busy fingers, thinking about that magic moment caused Ginny to climax again, but it was a very pale shadow of what she had experienced just minutes before. Her hand came away moist and slightly bloody.

Ginny groaned in frustration, and thrashed on the bed in anger. *Why is he not mine? I've loved him forever, Cho hasn't. I kept myself pure for him, Cho didn't. Why do I have to wear Cho's face, just to accept what should be mine?*

For a long time Ginny sobbed silently, the charm she cast on leaving Harry's dorm room still in effect. Finally, she looked at her hands. They were still tiny, with smooth even toned skin. Not a freckle, not a mole, not a damned blemish anywhere.

Ginny grabbed her hair, and looked at the handful of straight, silky, beautiful dark hair. How long was this potion going to last? For a moment, Ginny was horrified at the notion of being stuck in the form of her hated rival. She started to hyperventilate, panicking with that thought. It had been almost an hour, and she was still wearing Cho's face. Cho's beautiful, perfect face.

Ginny viciously clawed at Cho's face leaving deep, oozing gashes; desperate to remove the mask she had so desperately wanted to wear an hour ago.

Draco crept as quietly as he could down one of the many dungeon corridors underneath the castle. He was amazed that his new acquaintance knew these old, abandoned passageways so well. Though he had never removed his mask while in Draco's presence, Draco was sure he would soon discover the identity of this mysterious man.

Draco wasn't stupid, but he was a Slytherin. Knowledge is power. And the knowledge of this man's identity would give Draco much power. If there was one thing Draco craved, it was power. With enough power, he could regain what had been taken from him.

The tall man even refused to give himself an alias for Draco to call him by. The blond Slytherin could understand this; nearly all code names described some attribute of the person so named. By refusing to give himself a name, Draco learned little more about him, just one thing.

He was clever. And that meant he was dangerous to have as an enemy.

What Draco was doing on behalf of this man was dangerous in itself. Having heard tales of the aftermath of his target's temper, he knew that he needed more influence over his 'benefactor'.

"Report." a calm, clear voice whispered from just behind him.

It took all of Draco's considerable self-control to avoid yelping in fright. He spun around to find his masked contact standing silently behind him. Swallowing in an effort to ensure his voice was steady, Draco spoke.

"It is working perfectly, as you expected. She was cautious at first, since I was offering her something she hasn't been able to attain for herself. She was delighted to wear the ring though, once she knew what it did."

The mask nodded, the shadows playing over the mask surface making it look like it was alive.

Draco continued. "I doubt she has the skill to notice the real effect the ring will have on her."

"I doubt it too, given what I know of her talents."

Draco's heart flipped. He secreted away in his mind this subtle piece of information.

"Since she will know when Potter is next in Hogsmeade..."

The mask held up one hand. "Enough. The amplifying charm on the ring is subtle enough to escape her notice and will do its job. With any luck it will also escape the notice of those around her. You have done well. The amount we agreed upon has been placed in your account. I have arranged for documentation from one of your trust funds to account for the increase, should you be investigated."

Draco raised his eyebrows in surprise. He had expected to have to hide the money somehow. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

The mask seemed to regard him for a moment. "You are worth it. We will meet again soon." he said, then turned and silently made his way deeper into the bowels of the labyrinth.

Draco smiled to himself, and wondered to what he would treat himself, with his new wealth. He was particularly happy with himself as he quietly made his way back to the Slytherin common room.

"Albus! Come in. What can I do for you?" asked Professor McGonagall, her thin hand clasping shut her thick woolen night gown.

Professor Dumbledore entered his deputy's room and sat down in an armchair with a deep sigh. "I have just come from the hospital wing. Two Gryffindor students were admitted earlier this evening."

McGonagall's eyes widened in shock. "Oh my goodness. Who? Are they alright?"

Dumbledore sighed again. "Ms. Granger and Mr. Potter. Ms. Granger has severe bruising to her neck, arms and stomach."

Dumbledore looked up to see the deputy headmistress already dressed and ready to go. He got to his feet and followed her out of her rooms.

"Were they assaulted by the same person?" she asked, setting a brisk pace through the hallways.

"No. Mr. Potter is not physically harmed, and we know who assaulted Ms. Granger."

"Who?"

"Mr. Potter."

Minerva McGonagall spun to face the headmaster, her hand covering her mouth, muting a gasp of disbelief. "I find that very hard to believe, Albus. Those two are like brother and sister."

"I know," replied Dumbledore. "But I am incredibly worried about him."

"Why? What has happened? Was he attacked again?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Not in the way you think." Dumbledore paused, not elaborating for several moments as they made their way towards the infirmary. "According to Ms. Granger, he was violated."

"Violated? You mean raped?" whispered McGonagall, horror evident in her voice.

"Yes. Someone apparently disguised themselves with polyjuice potion, appearing as Ms. Chang. Harry and his attacker were rather intimate before being interrupted by Ms. Granger. She admitted that Mr. Potter was the person who assaulted her, but wanted it known that she did startle him, and he acted instinctively. She also wanted it known that on realising what he had done, he immediately tended to her injuries and started transporting her to the infirmary."

McGonagall was speechless. Finally, as they reached the domain of Madam Pomfrey she spoke up. "Does anyone have anything to tell us about the attack on Mr. Potter?"

"No. According to Ms. Granger, she was the only person at the scene, besides Mr. Potter and the person imitating Ms. Chang. After Harry realised who it was he was attacking, he immediately ceased and began performing first aid. He also insisted on taking her to the hospital wing himself."

"Still," replied McGonagall. "Mr. Potter needs to explain his actions."

"Agreed, but do give him your support for now. Ensure his is given enough time to recover before chastising him for his behaviour."

The two Professors entered the infirmary, and immediately made their way to Hermione's bed. Hermione was sitting up, arguing with Madam Pomfrey. She turned to face the new arrivals.

"Professor Dumbledore! I didn't get to tell you everything before you left."

"You have more to add, Ms. Granger? Information on who it was who violated Harry's trust?"

"No. I invited Cho to the Gryffindor common room to talk to Harry, since she couldn't work up the courage herself. She walked in on Harry and the person in Cho's image. She ran out of the common room in tears. She needs to know what happened, that Harry has not left her. I'm worried that she may do something stupid."

"I will look into it immediately. Your wonderful map will be of much use locating her. Excuse me." Dumbledore spun on his heel and left.

Professor McGonagall pulled up a chair next to Hermione's bed. "The headmaster has informed me of the major events of this evening. If you feel able, I'd like the details."

Hermione nodded, but first turned to Madam Pomfrey. "How is Harry?"

"Sleeping. As should you be."

"How on earth did you get Harry to sleep? He was all but lashing himself for betraying his girlfriend."

Madam Pomfrey looked slightly abashed. "Never mind. He took his potion, you need to take yours."

Not just yet, Poppy." McGonagall said primly. "I need some more details from Ms. Granger."

Hermione almost laughed at the dark expression on the nurse's face.

Cho sat rocking back and forth at the top of the Astronomy Tower, arms hugging her legs, her knees pressed against her chest. She looked up at the heavens, the few visible stars twinkling through the cloud cover failing to distract her from her misery.

Again and again, two voices moaning with pleasure ran through her mind. Her imagination supplied her with cruel images of Harry in the arms of another girl, his expression one of lust. She screwed her eyes shut in a futile attempt to shut out the scene.

No tears fell, she had cried them all. There were none left.

"Do you wish to be alone, my dear child?" a voice said softly behind her.

Cho knew without looking who that soft, yet powerful voice belonged to. "Yes Professor."

The headmaster sat down on the stone floor next to her. "But should you be left alone?"

Cho sighed deeply. "Probably not."

The pair sat quietly together, looking into the heavens. Cho was honest enough to herself to admit that the headmaster had a most calming presence.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked finally.

"Ms. Granger was worried about you. You ran off so suddenly, she didn't get a chance to talk to you."

Cho snorted. "Like there is anything she could say."

"She is currently in the hospital wing. She was attacked tonight."

Cho looked up in alarm. "Is she alright?"

Dumbledore nodded. "She is more worried about a fellow Gryffindor also in the hospital wing who was raped tonight."

Cho paled. "Oh my God. Who was raped?"

"Your Mr. Potter."

"What?" she shrieked, startling the headmaster.

"Yes Ms. Chang," he said. "Some people will disagree with my interpretation, and say rape is too strong a word."

"What happened? she asked, jumping to her feet.

Dumbledore regarded her thoughtfully. "Are you sure you want to know?"

Cho swallowed, and nodded.

"What I am going to tell you is a secret, one that not even the Department of Mysteries is aware. Professor Snape has been working on improving a powerful potion, one that if successful, could well turn the fight against dark wizards in our favour for a long time. Harry has been assisting him in his research."

Cho's jaw dropped. "Was he attacked because of his work with Professor Snape?"

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. "Perhaps indirectly. The potion has taken over a month to brew, and was completed before the evening meal-"  
Dumbledore paused to open a pocket watch. "-yesterday. Harry volunteered to test it, and extracted a single dose. According to Professor Snape, he was going to test it when he woke up this morning."

"What does this potion do?"

"It is one Harry is familiar with, since it was used successfully to frame him."

Cho gasped at the realisation. "Polyjuice."

"Exactly. The evidence suggests that someone entered Mr. Potter's dorm, and drank the potion sample. That person took your form, and sexually assaulted Mr. Potter."

Cho's eyes filled with tears she didn't think she had.

The headmaster continued. "After being interrupted by Ms. Granger, Harry initially reacted violently. Ms. Granger was injured. On recovering from being startled, Harry tended to her, and began carrying her to the infirmary."

Cho nodded. "I remember him carrying Hermione, but I don't remember what he said. All the Gryffindors let me go, and I just ran here."

Dumbledore nodded and took Cho's tiny hand in his own. "No one could blame you for your reaction. But there is an explanation for what happened. Mr. Potter needs your support now. After your departure all the nearby students went up to his dorm. They discovered the shattered remains of the potion flask, and his invisibility cloak was missing. Whoever it was, knew how to get away undetected."

"Is he Ok?"

"Ms. Granger said that when he realised that it was not you he was with, he threw up, and became almost catatonic."

"Can I see him?" asked Cho, already moving to the exit.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love A Very Rude Awakening

### A Very Rude Awakening

Harry was roughly shaken awake, a pair of hands holding fistfuls of the front of his bedclothes. Distant voices became clearer. One in particular was shouting his name, while at least three other voices in the background were screaming at him to stop.

Stop *what*? Harry thought blearily to himself. *What am I doing?*

A sudden sensation of disorientation was almost instantly accompanied by a sharp pain in his cheek. The unexpected pain helped drive the potion-induced sleep from his mind. As the darkness in his vision receded, Harry could dispassionately make out Ron holding him by the scruff of his robes in one hand, and another drawn back in the shape of a fist.

Dreamily, Harry watched it slowly descend and strike him in the face again, this time into his left eye. Time sped up.

Madam Pomfrey, Hermione, Cho and Ginny were all screaming at Ron to let him go, clawing at the tall, bulky red head. Ron himself was shouting something incoherent at Harry while drawing his arm back for a third blow.

Harry lashed out first, still not thinking clearly. He drove the tips of his rigid fingers into Ron's throat. The unexpected reaction shocked Ron into letting Harry's robes go. A second later, Ron's already red face turned scarlet as he struggled to breathe through his damaged esophagus.

With Ron's attention elsewhere, Madam Pomfrey was able to finally drag the larger young man off Harry. She immediately cast a quick healing charm on Ron's adam's apple, allowing Harry's friend to draw a ragged breath.

Before Ron had a chance to launch another attack, Madam Pomfrey stunned him. With a sigh the nurse checked that Ron was breathing without assistance then stood and surveyed the damage he caused Harry.

Harry tasted blood in his mouth and raised his hand to his cheek. There was a trickle of blood running down his face from a small cut above his left eye. That eye itself was starting to stream with tears.

Madam Pomfrey clucked her tongue. "You'll survive. You've had worse. Much worse." The nurse said, and then waved at Ginny to follow her.

He blankly looked from his stunned friend to the girls present. He focused on Ginny and gasped in shock. "Ginny? My God, are you alright? Who did that to you?"

Ginny's face was a mass of deep, criss-crossed, oozing scratches. Several appeared to extend down the sides of her neck and below the robes she wore, since the pale material was stained red in places. Harry woodenly looked down to her arms, and saw trickles of blood emerging from gashes on her forearms.

Ginny turned her head so her vibrant hair blocked Harry's view of the worst of the damage. She lowered her eyes and responded, "It's not important, never mind." She allowed Madam Pomfrey to walk her over to a hospital bed and helped her slowly climb in.

Harry was about to object when Cho lightly cupped his cheeks and gently forced Harry to face her. She then covered his face with kisses, avoiding his left cheek and eye.

"Oh Harry, you're awake. I wish I was here for you." she said between kisses.

Harry pulled away, nervous. "Um, What's going on?" he asked Hermione.

Cho looked heartbroken, but stayed silent as Hermione answered. "Ron got back from his detention with Snape to find us both gone. He went to ask Ginny if she knew where we were, and found she'd been attacked."

"Who attacked her?" Harry asked.

"We have no idea, Ginny won't say. Ron brought her here in a panic. I called out to Ron to let him know I was behind a curtain, and he rushed over. He was panicking even more about what happened to me, and kept asking who hurt me. I asked him not to get angry and I told him what happened. That's when he rushed over to your bed and started hitting you. I'm sorry Harry."

Harry rubbed his cheek. "Don't worry about it, Hermione. This is something Ron and I need to discuss. You'd better get back to bed."

He turned to watch her go, then steeled himself to look at Cho, but failed.

"Are- are you my Cho?" he whispered, looking down at her hands.

"Yes Harry, I am. I'm so sorry that I took so long to think about us. If I hadn't..."

Harry leaned forward and cautiously placed a kiss on her lips. Though surprised, Cho responded and they shared a long, but chaste kiss.

Harry pulled away and his face immediately lit up. "You are my Cho!" he said excitedly, and pulled her into a tight embrace. "I recognise your kisses."

Cho smiled and hugged him back.

"I recognise your kisses." said Harry, holding her tightly.

Relief flooded Cho, as she wrapped her own arms around him. His next words shocked her to the core.

"Please forgive me."

Cho froze. She pulled back to look Harry in the eye, but he refused to meet her gaze. "What do you think you need forgiveness for, Harry?" she asked softly.

Harry swallowed and didn't answer for a while. "For betraying you." he finally whispered.

"Oh, Harry." she said, holding him close again. "Dumbledore and Hermione told me what happened. It isn't your fault."

Harry shook his head and tried to pull away. "But whoever it was kissed differently to you, and, um, reacted differently too. I should have known."

Cho didn't let him go. "It is not your fault, Harry. Not at all." She waited until he stopped trying to get away. "Hermione told me you threw up when you discovered it wasn't me. That tells me all I need to know. You were ill at the thought of betraying me."

Harry's voice grew thick. "I never-, I-" he started, but couldn't finish. His body started shuddering.

"Shhh." Cho said, rubbing his back. "I'm here now."

Harry's convulsions died down. Cho finally pulled back. "To think Hermione was forcing me to go to you tonight and apologise."

Harry looked blank. "What for?" he asked, his voice still thick.

Cho gave a small wry smile. "For not talking to you sooner."

"But I told you to take as much time as you needed."

"I know, and you are wonderful to do so. But I thought I'd waited too long. I've been a miserable wreck for the last month."

Harry lay back in the bed. "I never want you to feel you can't talk to me Cho." he said, his voice getting slightly slurred.

Cho smiled as she watched the sleeping potion Harry had taken before reclaim him.

"Miss Chang, I rarely express my admiration at a student's progress, but I must say that I'm impressed. You have improved dramatically over the last fortnight. I was afraid that I'd have to suggest you give up the notion of becoming an animagi."

Cho smiled at the Transfiguration teacher. "Thank you professor. I believe I have more to add to the theory behind transforming into a magical creature."

Professor McGonagall smiled. "I'd be interested in hearing it."

Cho gripped Harry's hand tighter and looked at him briefly. His trusting smile warmed her, and she turned back to her teacher. "The difficulty I encountered less than two months into the transformation process coincided with our, that is Harry and my estrangement. I was petrified at the thought of talking to him and discovering that he didn't love me anymore.

"After the night in the hospital wing, my loyalty was restored, after I initially thought that, well-"

"That I had been unfaithful." finished Harry uncomfortably in a whisper.

Cho squeezed his hand. "I'm sorry Harry, I keep seeming to bring that night up."

Harry swallowed and nodded. "It's Ok." he whispered.

Cho turned back to McGonagall who looked uncomfortable at the change in topic. "Even since that night, my achievements in my animagus attempt have surged. Since loyalty is one of the most documented traits of a phoenix, we are adding more evidence that for someone to obtain a magical creature's form you must have that creature's traits."

McGonagall nodded thoughtfully. "It is a low statistical sample, but I do tend to agree. Given this assumption, I'd like to ask you a question Miss. Chang."

Cho nodded.

"Do you still think you can become a phoenix animagi?"

Cho shrugged. "I honestly don't know. Harry believes in me." Cho gave him a thankful smile before continuing, "But I do have a few doubts."

"Would you care to explain? Or do you feel this is too private?"

Cho took a deep breath. "A phoenix is loyal, noble and brave. Harry seems to think I have these traits, but I don't think I am courageous enough.

McGonagall nodded gravely. "Should this theory of yours hold an element of truth, I'd suggest that any doubts that you have will only be impediments to you on your road to success. As such, I suggest that before expending any more effort on this endeavor, you conquer your doubts and fears. Getting to the final stage and not being able to finish because of a nagging insecurity would not be to your benefit."

Cho nodded and gripped Harry's hand harder for a second. "Thank you Professor. I believe I'm ready to study the animal's form. While Harry has offered to model for me as a last resort, we both think that observing Fawkes would be a more rewarding activity."

A slight smile graced the features of the Transfiguration Professor. "I shall see what I can do. I'm sure the headmaster would allow access to his familiar for you to study."

McGonagall stood, indicating the tutoring session was at an end. Harry and Cho both stood, thanked the Professor one last time and left.

The pair held hands as they walked down the twisting corridors.

"Do you want to go into Hogsmeade today, Harry?" Cho asked timidly.

He shrugged noncommittally. His gaze never wavered from their path.

Truth be known, Cho was extremely worried about Harry. Ever since he had woken in the hospital wing the morning after he had been violated he had not spoken above a whisper. He was nervous around people, and had taken to eating his meals early in the morning and late in the evening to avoid most of the students. Cho once went looking for him at lunch and found him in the kitchens eating a corner.

This was the last Hogsmeade weekend before the Yule ball, and Harry still needed to get some new dress robes. Cho had come to terms with the fact that Harry was going with Ginny, knowing that he had no choice in the matter. Cho herself hadn't bothered asking anyone, telling anyone interested that she had study to do.

"Come on Harry," she said gently. "Let's go into town and get you some new robes."

Harry nodded reluctantly, and followed her lead towards the front gates of the castle. It was at this moment that Peeves made an appearance.

With an evil cackle, the poltergeist launched two water balloons at the pair. The shock of being hit by a water balloon took Cho's mind off Harry almost tearing her fingers off as he pulled his hand from hers.

The malicious grin on Peeves' face disappeared as a furious magical blast from Harry's wand struck him in the chest, hurling the poltergeist backwards into the stone wall. Peeves' control of his form was lost, and he seemed to lose focus, becoming more and more incorporeal.

Cho looked at Harry in shock. He was perfectly dry, having managed to dodge the incoming balloon with only a fraction of a second's warning. He stood there, quivering, his wand pointing directly at the almost dispersed poltergeist.

It was only Filch's arrival that caused them to move once again. His initial rage at Harry was soon overcome with glee as he noticed the bane of his life struggle to maintain form.

Dumbledore watched sadly as Harry and Cho silently left his office. Harry had not offered an explanation as to his actions, and Cho's description of events didn't give the teachers present any comfort.

The headmaster gave a deep sigh and turned to his deputy. "Recommendations?"

McGonagall frowned in thought. "The boy has been through too much in his life, Albus. But an uncontrolled burst of destructive magic at such a low threat as a water balloon is just not acceptable."

"I concur," said Professor Sprout. "But I don't believe anyone here thinks that his instinctive reactions are through his own fault. I cannot imagine the hardships Harry has been through in the last year and a half. We owe him so much, enough that he deserves another chance."

"And what if Mr. Potter's next uncontrolled outburst is directed at another student?" asked Snape. "As much as I am enjoying working with him, we do have a duty to the other students here."

"It is not as though this is unprecedented," added Professor Flitwick. "There have been cases of rape in this school's history before."

Dumbledore nodded. "It is not the first time that a victim has had the same training as Harry, either. In the hands of a disciplined wizard, Harry's skills would be a great asset to us. He learned these skills out of necessity, not out of any selfish desire. As such, he appears to be wired all wrong. The slightest provocation now sets off a violent reaction."

"What happened the previous time?" asked Professor Sprout.

Dumbledore sighed. "The victim had been trained by her dark wizard uncle. According to the records, she was given a potion by her attacker that

caused a similar effect to the body bind spell. Several male students raped her while she was fully aware of what was going on."

The head of Hufflepuff coloured with concealed rage. "That's horrendous." she sputtered.

Dumbledore nodded. "After the assault, whenever someone touched her unexpectedly she would blast them away with an uncontrolled magical blast. Several students were injured severely. She refused to talk about the assault on her person or get counseling. The headmaster of the time apprenticed her to a witch in the Orkneys."

Snape raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Surely you are not suggesting that we just send Mr. Potter away? I'm sure you would have no end of offers from prominent mages to take him on as an apprentice, but..."

Dumbledore raised his hand to interrupt. "I have no immediate intention of sending Harry away, Severus. But your previous point must be addressed. We have a duty of care to the students here, and Harry is currently not in control of his emotions."

Professor Sprout sighed deeply. "Has there been any progress in finding his attacker?"

Dumbledore sadly shook his head. "No. He refuses to discuss the night in question. Due to the powerful effects of the potion Harry and Severus brewed, we only have a few circumstantial facts. One, the person is probably a Gryffindor. Two, the person is probably female."

"I thought the person must have been female. Doesn't polyjuice potion limit the drinker to the same gender?" Professor Sprout asked Snape.

"Normally, but the version that was used that night does not. It is not without irony that the very potion Mr. Potter helped develop was used to assault him." the potion master replied.

"Three." Dumbledore continued. "Witnesses saw bloodstains on Harry's sheets before the elves washed them. The attacker was probably a virgin before the attack. That fact is probably the most disturbing."

"Why is that so disturbing?"

Dumbledore ran a hand over his tired eyes. "Because it muddies the motive. Rape is not a sexual act, but an act of proving power over someone. But the act of willingly giving up your virginity is one of trust."

McGonagall nodded. "So the attacker probably saw what they were doing as giving Mr. Potter something precious, and in all probability don't think they did anything wrong."

Dumbledore nodded. "Four, the theft of Harry's invisibility cloak."

Snape shook his head. "Remember the media coverage of his trial. A full list of the items he owns was published. The fact he had an invisibility cloak was used against him; the Ministry used it to accuse him of every unsolved crime in the wizarding world since he was five. Everyone knows that he owns one."

"True. Then there is the fact that Ms. Weasley was assaulted on the same night. In all probability by the same person. She also refuses to discuss the events that night."

Snape sneered at McGonagall. "You know, for all your innuendo and insults, it would seem that Gryffindor is the house to avoid."

"Enough!" said Dumbledore, heading off an argument before it began. "Minerva, no one is blaming you for the events that night. Severus, we are not here to make snide remarks. We need to come up with a reasonable solution to Harry's problem."

"Is it up to us to force a solution against his will?" asked Snape. "As much as I believe we need to help him, he needs to want to help himself first."

"Albus, you told me when Mr. Potter started back here that you were concerned for his sanity." said McGonagall. "

Dumbledore nodded. "The evening he secured the neutrality of the acromantulas in the Forbidden Forest he told me that he would continue to make jokes to protect his sanity. It would seem his rape has taken his ability to laugh."

"I'm not surprised. I would not wish rape on anyone." said Professor Sprout.

Dumbledore sighed. "If that is all that was keeping Harry sane, then perhaps we do need to insist that he accept some counseling."

Four nods followed this suggestion.

"Well?"

"Master, Potter didn't appear in Hogsmeade as expected."

Red eyes glittered mercilessly. "You dare return to report failure?"

"No Master! I spoke with Malfoy's son. Potter was prevented from going to Hogsmeade due to disciplinary action. Apparently he attacked the poltergeist."

The serpent-featured figure snarled at his servant. "Are you sure of your source?"

"Yes, Draco is desperate to serve you and attain his rightful inheritance."



Voldemort nodded. "Very well. Do not disappoint me again, Pritchard."

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Kiss and Tell

### Kiss and Tell

The diminutive figure of Professor Flitwick walked alongside the taller, but still petite figure of Cho Chang. The pair approached the main gates of Hogwarts in the twilight of early evening, the sun having set over an hour ago.

Cho carried several packages, some of the smaller ones tucked under her arms. Her tiny head of house had offered to carry some, but Cho had politely declined his offer. He had escorted her to Hogsmeade outside the regularly scheduled trips into the town specifically to get new robes for Harry, and the last thing Cho wanted was to be any more of a burden on the dear little man.

The pair made their way to the main entrance of Hogwarts, managing to avoid the worst of the snowdrifts that had built up on the grounds around Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. As they entered the castle, Cho turned to face her head of house.

"Thank you professor."

"For what, Cho?" he asked lightly.

Cho blushed slightly. "For taking me into Hogsmeade tonight. Harry really needs these robes if he is going to the ball tomorrow night."

The diminutive professor gave Cho a smile. "It is a pity you are not going with him, my dear. You make a wonderful couple."

Cho's blush deepened. "Thank you professor. I think so too." she said with a shy smile.

"Well, run along. I'm sure Mr. Potter will be delighted to see you. Especially if you are bearing gifts." Flitwick said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

Cho nodded gratefully, and made her way to Gryffindor Tower. She was panting slightly by the time she had climbed the stairs to the Fat Lady's portrait.

"Hello dear."

"Um, Hello. Can you let someone know I'm here?" Cho asked the portrait uncertainly.

"I'm afraid not, dear."

Cho frowned. "Oh. OK."

Cho turned to leave, thinking she would go down to the owlery and send Harry an owl when the portrait swung open. A pair of giggling third-year witches emerged, and looked at Cho.

Cho tried to stop the blush from forming, without much success. "Umm, would either of you mind telling Harry Potter that I'm here to see him?"

At the mention of Harry's name, the pair blanched, and looked at each other nervously.

*Nervous about talking to the 'famous' Harry Potter.* Cho thought wryly.

One of the girls nodded and disappeared back into the common room. Cho stood still, willing herself not to fidget or wriggle as she waited while a young Gryffindor witch stood there watching her intently.

"Are you Harry's girlfriend?" Cho was asked abruptly.

Taking a second to register the question, Cho nodded. The witch in front of her offered her hand.

"My name is Natalie. It is nice to meet you."

Cho put down half her packages and took the offered hand and smiled. "Thank you. I-, hey, didn't you play seeker for Gryffindor last year?"

Natalie blushed. "Yes. I wasn't very good."

Cho's smile widened. "You beat Malfoy though."

Natalie nodded and giggled behind her hand. "That was fun."

Cho laughed with her. "It is indeed. I always enjoy beating him. Are you still going to play?"

It was Natalie's turn to fidget. "Um, H-Harry insisted on me being included in the team, as reserve seeker. He has been making me come to the training sessions."

Cho raised her eyebrows in surprise. "That's good isn't it?"

Natalie shrugged. "He says I'm getting better, but he can always catch the snitch before me when we go head to head."

Cho smiled wryly and placed a hand on Natalie's shoulder. "Do you know the only person who has beaten Harry at Quidditch? Fairly?"

Natalie shook her head.

"No one."

"But, he has lost some games."

Cho nodded. "In a game against Hufflepuff, Cedric managed to catch the snitch before Harry. Harry always claimed that he was beaten fair and square. Cedric disagreed. He thought the game should have been replayed."

Natalie brightened, before nervously asking, "Wasn't Cedric your boyfriend?"

Cho sighed deeply and nodded. "Cedric and I were good friends, and at the time he was killed we were 'boyfriend and girlfriend'. But we were never in love. His death still hurt, as it would if any of your friends died. Harry was hurting too, but for a different reason. Together, we managed to help each other during that summer by writing to each other. We grew closer."

A smile graced Natalie's lips. "I guess seekers seem to go out with other seekers."

Cho gave a short laugh. "I guess so."

At that moment, the portrait opened and Harry appeared with Natalie's friend, a small smile appearing when he saw Cho.

"Hi Cho," he whispered. "and Natalie. Nat, don't be out too late tonight. We have training tomorrow morning."

Natalie looked at Cho and then back to Harry. With a big smile she said, "I'll be there."

Harry looked surprised at her enthusiasm, but smiled fondly. "Good. Off you go, just be sure to be back before curfew."

Cho leaned forward and gave Harry a quick kiss. "You seem to be in a good mood." she said, before picking up her packages.

Harry sighed, and nodded. "I've been thinking about what I did to Peeves. I don't want that to happen to anyone else, so I'm trying to come to terms with, with..."

Cho gently shushed him with a kiss. When she pulled back she said, "I know. I'm proud of you."

Harry smiled and automatically relieved Cho of her burdens. "Come in." he offered.

Cho smiled and followed him into the Gryffindor common room.

Harry and Ron made their way down the stairs to the Gryffindor common room. Ron's black and silver trimmed steel-grey dress robes matched his complexion well, while Cho's selected forest green robes again matched Harry's eyes.

The pair had resumed their friendship after an uneasy period of distance between them. Ron had finally tried to apologize to Harry for hitting him, but Harry would have none of it.

*"I attacked Hermione. Badly enough to put her in the hospital wing for a couple of days. I deserved what I got from you."*

*"But she told me not to get upset. I should have waited to find out what happened."*

*Harry snorted. "If you'd done that, I'd have been asking you what you'd done with my best friend."*

Once in the common room, Ron nervously started pacing around the floor. Harry sat down in one of the scarlet armchairs and silently watched his anxious friend.

More and more students made their way down into the common room, meeting their dates and leaving for the feast. Finally, Ron spoke.

"What the hell could they be doing?"

"Probably getting ready for the ball."

Ron gave him a disgusted expression. "I know that! I mean, why is it taking so long."

Harry smiled at his friend's obvious discomfort. "Hermione is obviously making sure that she looks as good as possible. Think of it as her gift to you."

Ron stopped pacing and blinked. A grin slowly spread across his face. "You're right. It is her gift to me." The red-dead paled spectacularly. "Oh, bugger. I don't have a gift for her!"

With that, Ron raced up the stairs to the sixth-year dorms. Harry shook his head. *I bet Ron will be apologizing to Neville tomorrow for destroying his flowers.*

Sure enough, Ron came downstairs carrying a single blue rose, one of Neville's creations.

Harry shook his head at his friends antics. Neville would not be too happy once he got back from the ball.

"Good evening, gentlemen." came a familiar feminine voice from the stair leading up to the girls dorms. Harry turned to see Hermione and Ginny walk slowly down the stairs looking radiant.

Ron was speechless. Hermione had put her hair up similar to how she wore it to the Yule Ball with Victor Krum, but with one important difference. A string of pearls had been braided into her hair, giving the young witch an air of dignity and grace that would not have looked out of place on a princess.

Ginny wore a stunningly simple gown of white that made her colouring look magnificent. With her hair flowing down over one shoulder, Ginny looked positively angelic. The cut of her dress robes exposed a good deal of what Harry would embarrassingly refer to as cleavage, and left her shoulders free. Harry was surprised at just how beautiful his classmate looked tonight.

Harry stood and smiled at his friends. Walking up to Ginny, he tucked a single white carnation behind her ear and bowed to her.

Arm in arm, the foursome made their way out of Gryffindor Tower, and down to the Great Hall.

The group's arrival at the hall did not go as smoothly as expected.

Harry tried moving into the Great Hall, but an invisible barrier impeded his progress. He looked at Ginny in confusion, relaxing when he saw she wasn't concerned.

"We need to perform a small ritual, Harry, before we can go inside."

"What do we need to do?"

Ginny simply smiled winsomely and looked up. Harry followed her gaze and saw a sprig of mistletoe hanging above the door.

"We need to kiss before the mistletoe will let us through." she answered.

Harry took a deep breath and nodded. He tried to give Ginny a quick peck on the lips, but the youngest Weasley had a different idea.

Ginny tugged on the front of his brand new dress robes to bring him closer before slipping her arms around Harry's neck. Ginny kissed him deeply, unknowing, uncaring what she was doing to The-Boy-Who-Lived.

The magic of the mistletoe forced the couple to remain kissing for five seconds. Many couples took longer than was strictly necessary to satisfy the charm. The instant Ginny's lips crushed Harry's he knew exactly who it was that had used the polyjuice potion.

To Harry, it was five seconds of pure torture.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Harry couldn't decide which hurt more. The fact that he had been raped, or the fact that it had been a friend.

As their lips parted Ginny's expression of hopeful confusion faded to one of fright and sorrow. Harry was staring at her in shock and disbelief. As Ginny tried to form the beginnings of an apology, an unfocused, wandless magical blast hurled her backwards across the hall.

For only the second time in her life, Ginny kissed the object of her adoration with wild abandon. It didn't matter who saw them now, they were under the charmed mistletoe. They had to kiss.

But Harry wasn't kissing her back, in fact he was trying to pull away.

Ginny was glad the charm on the mistletoe forced them to kiss for a specific time. Harry would have pulled away instantly otherwise.

It was with regret and not a little hurt when Harry managed to tear himself from her embrace. Ginny looked up into his eyes, hoping to see affection, but her heart skipped a beat when she recognised what she saw.

Betrayal. Harry's beautiful green eyes carried no hint of affection, instead they bored into Ginny's soul, accusing her of betrayal.

*He knows!* her mind screamed at her.

Ginny froze as her worst nightmare solidified in front of her. Harry's accusing gaze cut through all the self-denial and false justifications, and the full horrific impact of what she had done to him crashed down upon her.

Her elfin features betrayed her shame. But as she began to mouth an apology, Harry's rage burst forth. Ginny felt her ribs break before she blacked out as she was sent flying across the Hall by a furious, unfocused magical blast.

Harry raced through the halls of Hogwarts at such a speed he was bouncing off the walls when rounding the corners. His glasses slipped down his nose and nearly fell from his face, his new elegant dress robes slid from his shoulders and began restricting his arms. The tie holding his ponytail in place split as he violently shook his head in denial, and Harry's long, wavy hair flew everywhere.

Unthinking, Harry just ran. Ran away from the pain and the sick feeling in his stomach. Nothing mattered now, he knew who had violated him, and the pain of knowing a friend had done that to him was too much.

He pounded down the hard stone corridors, uncaring of the direction he was heading. For one of the few times in his life, tears ran from his eyes. Betrayal stung his heart, and Harry fell painfully to his knees to vomit once again.

Once he finished retching, he struggled out of the fine, velvet robes Cho had bought for him and tossed them aside without thought. Harry struggled to his feet, his legs trembling at having sprinted for several minutes.

Dressed only in a shirt and shorts, Harry stumbled along the corridor with one hand on the wall supporting him.

Cold wind washed over him as the corridor ended, and Harry stepped out of one of the castle doors. Hagrid's hut could be seen under the heavy drifts of snow that covered the grounds. The sudden sensation of cold combined with the negative emotions churning within him made him feel claustrophobic, trapped. It was almost as if he was back in Azkaban. Harry fell to his knees, clutching at his head.

Once again, the large black pit in his mind opened and invited him to fall. The seductive nothingness beckoned him with soothing entropy. Harry prepared to let himself fall into the painless hole when a voice captured his attention.

"*Stupefy.*"

Harry leapt to his right as the spell flew through the space he had just occupied. In one fluid motion, Harry rolled to his feet and had his wand pointing straight at his attacker.

Straight at Professor Snape.

*It is not without irony, thought Snape, that the very map that Potter created is instrumental in hunting him down.*

The headmaster had confided in the heads of houses that the tracking wards placed around Hogwarts had been improved with a map created by Harry and his friends. At any time, the professors could cast a spell, name a student, and be mentally informed to the student's whereabouts.

Snape exited Hogwarts and saw the boy, kneeling in the snow, holding his head as if in agony. Without hesitation, Snape raised his wand and quietly but prudently, erected a magical shield. As soon as it was raised, Snape sent a stunning spell straight at Harry.

Snape was not surprised to see Harry dodge the spell, but was surprised that the boy managed to draw his wand and assume a dueling stance in the blink of an eye. Harry willed a magical shield into existence, one of his own creations. It required no wand motion or incantation, and while it provided only minimal protection, it did take the sting out of most curses and hexes.

The pair stared each at each other, watching for the miniscule twitch that would signal an attack.

Harry watched Snape like a hawk, expecting another attack at any second. But seconds slowly slid by, and nothing of the sort was hurled his way by the potion master. Finally Harry spoke, his voice raw.

"Just leave me alone."

Snape raised one eyebrow. "And why would I leave you alone, when you have just assaulted another student?"

Harry's lip curled in anger. "You have no idea what you are talking about."

Snape's eyes flashed with anger of his own. "No? You were offered counseling and support, but no, you refused. You moped around acting like a martyr, wallowing in self-pity, ignoring the danger you posed to other students!"

"Shut up!" shouted Harry, his vision blurring. "You don't understand!"

Snape snarled. "I understand perfectly, Potter."

Simultaneously, teacher and student launched their attacks. Harry's disarming spell smashed into Snape's barrier, not even causing the professor to flinch, while Snape's stunner this time passed close enough to his student that Harry's tiny shield evaporated.

Harry gave a leonine growl, deep in his throat. He had no element of surprise, no defense, and was facing an experienced dueler. He had to end this now, before he lost all advantage. With a single wave of his wand, Harry cast a summoning spell, hoping it was something Snape would not expect.

Snape was ready for Harry's first attack, as the potion master expected it was the disarming spell. He allowed it to dissipate harmlessly on his shield. His own spell again just missed the boy as Harry dodged to his left, though a brief glow indicated that at least one of Harry's unseen defenses had been brought down.

The potion master was under no false impression of his skill against his opponent. Potter had less than a tenth of his experience in dueling, and was yet to complete his education. Snape was confident that he could easily defeat the boy, since he knew that Harry always needed to prepare for combat. The boy in front of him had only a wand, and none of the toys he used to defeat the Death Eaters.

Snape knew that his opponent was tricky, but he had no idea what hit him when half a ton of snow from the roof of Hogwarts crashed down on top of him.

Professor Moody raced along the corridors of Hogwarts as fast as his wooden leg would allow. He had followed Snape as the oily professor had quickly left the Great Hall, but his leg and age had slowed him.

With the aid of his eye, Moody had managed to track Snape through the corridors, and watched as the teacher and student met.

A deep, throaty chuckle escaped the grizzled auror as he watched Potter quickly overcome the Potion master by burying him in snow summoned from the roof of the castle. *That'll teach you to underestimate the boy* he thought to himself.

Moody watched as Harry desperately dug through the snow to get to Snape. The panic on the boy's face made Moody's heart skip a beat. *Merlin's beard! I hope he hasn't killed him!*

The Defense instructor reached the door just as Harry dragged the unconscious professor from the snow. Moody watched silently as Harry checked Snape's breathing. With a start, Harry's head snapped up and he stared in shock at the appearance of his Defense teacher. Harry turned and started scrabbling away through the snow, desperately trying to get away from the retired auror.

Moody cracked a smile at the effect his presence had on the boy. He raised a gnarled hand holding an equally gnarled wand to stun the boy.

He almost dropped the wand in shock as The-Boy-Who-Lived turned into a bird and flew away.

Dumbledore sat in the infirmary, a grave expression on his face. Both Miss Weasley and Professor Snape were tucked into the utilitarian beds in the hospital ward.

"Well, that tears it Albus. Attacking both a student and a professor is grounds for expulsion." Moody's blue eye swiveled to face the unconscious Snape. "Well, he was defending himself against Snape, but the attack on young Weasley..."

"Indeed, Alastor." Dumbledore replied. "I just wish I knew what set Mr. Potter off like that."

"I was watching them at the time. The only thing that happened before he lost his rocker was a kiss under the mistletoe."

A vague recollection tickled Dumbledore, who slowly frowned and faced his old friend. "He attacked her after a kiss?" he asked.

Moody nodded, and narrowed his eyes with suspicion. "That means something to you, doesn't it."

Dumbledore sighed. "I have a theory." He again looked at Ginny, still being fussed over by Madam Pomfrey. "If it turns out to be true, it is not one that will end happily, for anyone, I fear."

Moody looked from Ginny to the headmaster. "What is it?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "I would prefer to question Miss Weasley first, Alastor. If I am wrong, it would do her a disservice."

Moody nodded, and turned to look at Snape. With a low chuckle he continued. "You should have seen it, Albus. Snape standing there behind his shield, thinking he had made himself invulnerable to Potter's attacks. The boy then summons a massive chunk of snow from the roof and dumps it on him."

A faint smile touched the headmaster's lips. "Mr. Potter has become quite the adversary in recent times."

"He knows when to run too." cackled Moody. "And fly. I can't believe you didn't tell me he was an animagus."

Dumbledore shrugged. "He has permission from the Minister himself to delay registering until he has completed his schooling."

Moody's eyes narrowed. "That doesn't answer why you didn't tell me he was an animagus."

Dumbledore looked slightly abashed. "Not many people know. Not even Severus."

Moody's head tilted to one side. "That still doesn't answer why you didn't tell me."

Dumbledore sighed. "I didn't think you needed to know."

The retired auror nodded, understanding the concept of 'need to know'. "Fair enough. Not much I can do about it now anyway." Moody absently scratched the edge of the scar that marked all that remained of his nose. "Do you have any idea where he would have run too?"

Dumbledore pushed his half-moon glasses up onto his forehead and rubbed his tired eyes with his fingers. "I can think of only a few places Mr. Potter would run; if he wasn't thinking clearly."

Moody grunted at the caveat. "And if he was thinking clearly?"

"Then I'd imagine that those few places would be where we wouldn't find him."

Moody nodded, his face thoughtful. Suddenly a wide grin split the gnarled auror's face.

"What is it?" Dumbledore asked.

"You know, I always thought that teaching would be a nice, boring job, and that being an auror would be exciting. I've had more excitement in the last six months here at Hogwarts than in my last six years as an auror."

Madam Pomfrey gave the pair of chuckling old men a fiery glare before continuing to tend to Ginny.

In one of the most desolate, yet beautiful places on earth a lean figure sat on the pack snow, dressed only in a thin cotton shirt and shorts. How someone could survive wearing so little in an environment where a cup of boiling water thrown into the air landed as ice would have been a mystery to any watchers.

Harry sat, rocking gently back and forth, looking up at the shifting patterns of light. The brilliant curtains of blazing fire writhed in the sky, reflecting off the surrounding white landscape and the tears running down Harry's cheeks.

The warming charm was starting to wear off, but Harry was disinclined to renew it. How easy it would be to just relax, and let the cold take him.

Harry snorted at the image of an exploring scientist's reaction to finding the frozen body of a boy in the middle of the polar ice cap wearing nothing but shorts and a shirt.

Harry again looked up at the beautiful lights. Their calming, silent presence comforted him, allowing Harry to think about recent events more clearly.

Hogwarts was no longer a home. There was no way he could go back there now. Not after putting Snape in the hospital and attacking Ginny.

Ginny.

Harry closed his eyes and tried desperately to stop the tears from falling. Images of the youngest Weasley flooded through his mind. How she helped him become accepted by the other Gryffindor fifth-years. How the pair had done their homework together. How they had pushed their grades up to almost level with Hermione in most of their classes.

How she had betrayed him.

The sorry sight of Ginny with gashes all over her face and arms intruded on his thoughts. Understanding clicked, and Harry knew that Ginny had done the damage to herself. *Probably worried that the polyjuice potion wouldn't wear off.* the dispassionate part of his mind supplied.

The thought of being stuck in the form of someone you hated would be enough to drive many people insane. Ginny obviously was not well adjusted.

*Could something be affecting her? Perhaps she was under the influence of the Imperius curse. Or a potion.*

Harry shook his head ruefully. He was trying to justify Ginny's decision to rape him. He wanted to believe that Ginny didn't do it of her own free will. That she had been made to do it by someone else.

*Enough. This is not productive. I can't go back to Hogwarts, and I'm sure Dumbledore and the others will be looking for me at Privet Drive and Black's Pad. Probably even the Shrieking Shack.*

Suddenly, with a force that nearly took his breath away, the warming charm collapsed. Instantly, Harry nearly froze, his lungs screaming in agony at suddenly being forced to draw in air that was sixty degrees below freezing.

Harry quickly mumbled the warming charm again, and gasped as tears of relief mixed with the tears of hurt on his cheeks.

Draco fairly ran down the subterranean corridors, desperate to meet Mask. The events of the evening had been, interesting, to say the least.

Enough that Draco had allowed himself to be caught up in the events, spending too much time watching for more to happen. As such, he was running late for his 'appointment'. He had been warned never to be late.

Draco rounded a corner, the light from his wand tip bouncing around on the stone floor in front of him.

Mask suddenly stepped out of an alcove, startling the Slytherin. With a yelp, Draco tried skidding to a halt, only to fall on his backside as his feet slid out from under him.

"You make quite an entrance, Mr. Malfoy." said the man behind the mask, a slight trace of amusement in his voice. He stretched out and offered a hand.

Draco declined his assistance, and struggled to his feet by himself. "Sorry I'm late, but a lot has happened tonight."

Mask tilted his head to one side, obviously curious. "I was under the impression you were coming tonight to receive information from me, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco nodded. "Yes, but you probably need to know this."

"Go on."

Draco hesitated. "What will you give me for this information?" he said, testing the waters.

Mask was silent for a few moments, before speaking. Rather than anger, his voice betrayed his amusement. "A Slytherin to the bone. That I can understand."

Draco swallowed nervously. "Y-yes." he said, not sure he was being complimented.

"You know that I have been fair with your rewards for service so far, Mr. Malfoy. Tell me what you know, and I will decide what it is worth. Should you disagree, you are free to use the information you have to seek your fortune elsewhere. Secrets are valuable, after all."

Draco shuddered slightly. The jovial tone belied the silent threat beneath the words. *No one would trust me if what I was doing with Mask came to light.*

"Potter has put two people in the hospital wing tonight. He blasted his date, Ginny Weasley, across the hall after kissing her, and then put my head of house in there with her."

Draco was pleased with the reaction this got from his benefactor. Mask stiffened, and paused for a long moment, weighing up what he had been told.

"I find it hard to believe that Potter would have put Snape in the hospital wing."

*He called him 'Snape'.* Draco thought to himself. *Every other time he has mentioned my head of house he referred to him as 'Professor Snape'.* With an internal grin, Draco filed this piece of information away.

"So do many, but Potter was able to kill a lot of Death Eaters in one go." Draco offered.

Mask shook his head. "I didn't say that I didn't think Potter could have. I said I doubted he would have." he said absently.

Draco's heart raced. Even more information with which he could use to discern Mask's identity.

"Where is Potter now?" Mask asked the blond boy.

"No one knows. Rumours are flying, of course. But he would have to have left Hogwarts. Even as Dumbledore's pet, he will be expelled for attacking a student and a teacher."

Again, Mask was silent for a moment before he almost exploded. "Go, now! Back to your common room. We'll meet again."

Draco was stunned. "B-but what about what you were going to give me tonight?"

Mask spun and started stalking off. "If you are referring to what I was going to get you to do, it is redundant now."

"What about my money?" Draco called out as Mask moved further away.

"We will discuss it next time. You will not be disappointed."

Draco stood still as Mask moved out of the range of his lit wand. Draco smiled as he turned and slowly made his way back to the Slytherin dungeons. He had a lot to think about tonight.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Hide and Seek

### Hide and Seek

Pen scratched over foolscap paper and an assignment on economics took shape, though almost painfully slowly. A pool of light from a single desk light illuminated the workspace of a large young man.

Dudley Dursley lifted his head and stared into space, absently gnawing on the end of his pen. The effect was ruined by the fact that the pen had started leaking half an hour ago.

A slight fluttering attracted his attention, and Dudley fell off his chair with a girlish shriek of surprise at the appearance of a blood-red bird sitting on his windowsill. Dudley grabbed his chest with his right hand and tried to desperately get his breathing under control.

"Bloody hell. You little bastard. You scared the shit out of me." he said. Dudley struggled to his feet. "Go on, piss off." he said making shooing motions.

With a faint pop, the bird disappeared and the last person he ever thought to see sat on the window sill.

"Is that the best welcome you can give an old friend?" Harry asked sardonically.

Dudley sat back down on the floor in shock. After a few moments of trying to form a coherent sentence, Harry's cousin finally managed, "H-how?"

With a theatrical leap, Harry gracefully landed at Dudley's feet. "Magic." he said simply, offering a hand to his cousin.

Dudley blinked at the offered hand as if trying to work out what it was. Finally he recovered enough presence of mind to take it and climbed back to his feet.

"T-thanks." he said dully.

Harry gave him a smile. "My pleasure."

Dudley shook his head and stepped forward into the light of the desk lamp.

Harry's eyes widened as he took in his cousin's appearance, the first time the pair had met in over eighteen months. "My God, Dudley! Look at you!"

Dudley had the good grace to blush. "I've, er, been working out."

"I can tell. Jeez, you are huge. What happened to all the flab?"

"I always thought you swung that way."

Harry snorted. "You just can't help but try to put me down can you?"

Dudley righted his desk chair and sat down. With a shy smile he said, "I needed to get rid of it. There's this girl..."

Harry tilted his head to one side. "A girl? How long have you known her?"

"About 2 years. Yeah, about two years now. Xavier, one of my friends, his dad works for the government. He had a big dinner at his mansion at Christmas two years ago and invited a lot of important people in the government. Xavier invited me along. I met her there, her father works in one of the ministries. She didn't seem to like me, and told me that, well, that I was an absolute prick."

Harry blinked in shock. "Is that why you were nicer to me that summer? You wanted to impress her?"

Dudley shook his head. "Sort of. I realised how others saw me, and I didn't like it, so I decided to change. I asked her if I could write to her, but she wouldn't give me her address. I asked my friend's dad if he would mind forwarding on any mail to her via her father. He looked a little cautious, but said he would. We've been writing to each other for nearly two years now. I'm honest enough with myself to know that she probably started replying just to be polite, but now she has sent me letters out of the blue."

"Wow. I-" Harry was interrupted by a knocking at Dudley's door.

"Dursley? Are you alright?" came a gruff voice.

"Shit." Dudley said under his breath. He turned to the door and said aloud, "I'm fine, Master Jennings."

Without preamble, the school master named Jennings opened the door and entered. "I heard voices, Dursley. To whom were you speaking?"

Frowning, Dudley turned back to Harry, only to find a spectacular bird sitting on the window sill. Thinking quickly, he said, "I wasn't talking to anyone in particular, Master Jennings."

The stern-looking teacher frowned at Dudley and stalked around the small room, looking into the corners. After completely missing the phoenix's presense, the school master finally turned a faintly disappointed expression on Dudley.

"What are you doing, Dursley?"

"My economics assignment, sir."

"I see you are yet to be cured of your propensity to attempt to consume your writing utensils."

Dudley frowned and looked to his desk where his pen lay. A small ink stain was spreading from the teeth-marked end. His hand flew to his mouth and came away blue.

Jennings smirked at Dudley. "Clean yourself up, you stupid boy." The teacher turned and opened the door. "Watch yourself, Dursley." he said over his shoulder before closing the door.

Dudley counted to twenty under his breath before turning back to Harry, who was back in his human form. "I can't believe he didn't see you."

Harry shrugged. "I can't believe you could."

Dudley frowned. "What do you mean, you daft git? You're a bloody great big bird!"

The door suddenly burst open, and Jennings stood in the door frame, a wild grin on his face. It reminded Harry of Snape when he had discovered something he could blame on Harry.

"Aha! You have got someone in here! After curfew as well. Well Dursley, it's detention for you and... Who the devil are you?" Jennings demanded.

Harry smiled. "Harry Potter, Dudley's cousin."

"How did you get in here?"

Harry shrugged, enjoying this. "Through the window, of course."

Jennings snarled at him. "We are on the third floor. You would have had to have flown."

Harry turned to a suddenly coughing Dudley. "And you said he was slow."

Harry couldn't decide which was funnier, Dudley's expression of terror or Jennings' bulging eyes.

"Now look here!" the furious teacher yelled. "I will not allow-"

"*Obliviate!*"

Jennings' rage-induced colouring slowly faded as he stared blankly at Harry.

"Master Jennings, you thought you heard voices or something coming from this room, but you are obviously mistaken. There is no one here except Dudley Dursley, and he is busy doing his assignment. Doing it very well in fact. There is no need to stay, you really should go back down to the staff room."

Jennings nodded. "Yes, the staff room, yes." He turned to leave. "Keep up the good work Dursley." The teacher left and closed the door behind him.

Dudley's face swiveled between looking at Harry in shock, and staring at the door. Finally, a wide grin split his features, and he spun back to Harry.

"That was wicked!"

Harry smiled. "You see, magic does have its uses."

Dudley's smile vanished, but he took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

Harry walked over and sat on the bed. "That teacher give you much grief?"

Dudley nodded forlornly. "I just can't do anything right. No matter what I do, it isn't good enough. It's like, I don't know, like-" Dudley shifted uncomfortably and sat down on the chair. "Like my father was, you know, to you." he finally whispered.

Harry regarded his cousin thoughtfully. "You've really thought about this, haven't you?"

"What do you care?" Dudley demanded.

Harry shrugged theatrically. "Fine. I'll just go and look out the door and find the throngs of people desperate to listen to you bare your soul, shall I?"

Dudley sighed but nodded, not looking at Harry. "Lisa really opened my eyes, got me to see exactly how I was. I-I didn't like it much."

"And now?"

Dudley frowned and looked up at Harry. "Now what?"

"You said you didn't like how you were. Do you like how you are now?"

Dudley bit his lip, and shook his head. "I'm getting better, but people are still scared of me. I used to think that was cool, but Lisa told me that fear is a poor substitute for respect."

Harry grinned. "I'd like to meet this girl, she's having a good influence on you."

Dudley grinned back. "I'm seeing her after Christmas, that's why I'm staying at Smeltings this year. Xavier and I are going back to his dad's mansion for a couple of days, and Lisa is going to be there with her dad."

"So, what does she look like?"

Dudley's face betrayed his feelings. He was obviously besotted. "She is quite small, next to me she looks tiny, and she has long wavy black hair. She has pale blue eyes and wears glasses. Mr. Turpin calls her his Little Raven."

Harry's eyes widened. "Lisa T-Turpin?" he stammered. "Her name is Lisa Turpin?"

Dudley nodded confused at Harry's reaction.

Harry covered his face with his hands. "She has a mole on her left cheek doesn't she?" came Harry's muffled voice.

"How did you know that?"

"You won't believe me." Harry warned.

"Never mind that, tell me! How do you know?"

"Because Dud, she's a witch. I go to school with her."

"What? No way!"

Harry looked up at his cousin. "Yes way. Her dad is the head of the Department of Muggle Relations. It's his job to be the governmental link between the magic world and the muggle world."

Dudley frowned. "No, he said that he, um, helped different government departments... understand... each other."

Harry nodded. "She was sorted into Ravenclaw, that's where her father's nickname comes from."

"Ravenclaw?"

"A school house. There are four of them. Ravenclaw is where the bright, clever students are housed."

"What house are you in?"

"Gryffindor."

"What type of student goes in there? Short, ugly ones?" Dudley asked with a smirk.

Harry laughed out loud. "No, just the brave but foolish ones."

Dudley laughed along. "What are the other two?"

Harry looked surprised. "I didn't think that you would be interested."

Dudley looked uncomfortable. "Well, if Lisa and I get serious, it will be easier on her if I already know this."

"Even though you know she is a witch, you still want to know her better?"

Dudley nodded and gave Harry a smirk. "Not all freaks can be as bad as you."

Harry rolled his eyes, but Dudley continued.

"I don't know how well you know her, but she is really smart. I know I'm not, and she knows I'm not, but she still answers my letters anyway. I bet it is hard for your kind to tell us about magic, so if I already know, it will be better for both of us."

Harry smiled. "True. The other two houses are Hufflepuff and Slytherin. Hufflepuff get loyal, hard workers and Slytherin get ambitious, determined

people."

"Where did those stupid names come from?"

"The four wizards that founded the school gave their names to the houses."

"Their parents must have hated them. Heh, almost as much as my parents hate you. So, can Lisa turn into a bird too?"

Harry shook his head. "Animagi, that is wizards who can turn into animals, are rare. Only seven or eight people have registered with the ability in the last hundred years."

"How do you register?"

Harry smirked at him. "No idea."

Dudley's expression was a mixture of respect and a look of surprise. "You haven't, have you?"

Harry shook his head, the smirk still there. "Neither did my dad and godfather."

"Your dad could turn into a bird too?"

"Nope, a stag."

Dudley nodded absorbing this information before unexpectedly bursting into laughter.

"What?" asked Harry.

"Imagine the face of a hunter who just shot a stag, and finding that he just hurt and pissed off a wizard."

Harry chuckled along at that image. "Yeah, I bet a change of trousers would be in order."

After a while, the pair stopped laughing. Dudley rose from his chair and lay down on his bed with his hands behind his head. "What can you tell me about her? Do you know her well?"

Harry shook his head. "Before the start of this school year, I've probably only spoken to her a couple of times. But my girlfriend is in Ravenclaw too, so I've got to know the people in that house a little better. But Lisa is still shy around me, so I don't really know much about her."

Dudley frowned. "Why is she shy around you?"

Harry looked blankly at Dudley for a couple of seconds before letting out a short sharp laugh. "I forgot you don't know. I'm famous in the wizarding world, Dud. I suppose you'd call me a celebrity."

Dudley gave him a doubtful expression. "You? Famous? That's a laugh!"

Harry sighed and started explaining about Voldemort's attack on his parents. He finished explaining the aftermath of the third task when Dudley finally interrupted, a look of mixed pity and sympathy.

"Jeez, no wonder you were having nightmares that summer."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, they were pretty bad, but after a couple of weeks, I started writing to a girl called Cho. Cho was a good friend of Cedric's, I suppose you could call her his girlfriend. She and I managed to keep each other out of a depression, and we grew closer."

"So, this Cho girl, you've been going out with her since then?"

Dudley looked shocked at Harry's suddenly dark expression.

"No. She and I have only got back together recently."

"What happened?" Dudley asked.

Harry closed his eyes, clearly thinking deeply. "It's a pretty bad story. Are you sure you want to know?"

Dudley nodded, though looked apprehensive. "Yeah, well, if you want to tell me."

Harry took a deep breath. "Did you ever wonder why I wasn't at the train station last summer?"

"Yeah. Dad was pretty cranky that you weren't there, he called you all sorts of names for wasting his time."

Harry nodded. "I was in prison."

A long pause. "You're taking the piss."

Harry shook his head.

"Prison? Really? What for?"

Harry looked directly into Dudley's eyes. "Murder, Dud."

Dudley paled. "Y-you, you killed someone?"

Harry slowly shook his head. "I was framed, but they convicted me and sent me to Azkaban."

"Bloody hell. Did you find out who framed you?"

"Yep, it was a plan of Voldemort's. He thought that I'd either be insane or bitter enough to join him."

"Why would you be insane?"

Harry took a deep breath, and started to tell Dudley what a dementor was, and what effect they had on people. Harry's cousin looked faintly nauseous.

"You stayed there for almost a year?"

"Yes, and the only way I was able to escape was because..."

"Wait." Dudley interrupted. "You escaped?"

Harry nodded. "Yep. Only the second person to do so."

Dudley looked impressed. "Who was the first?"

"Do you remember the fellow called Sirius Black who was on the news a few years ago? Long dirty hair, the police said he had killed thirteen people."

Dudley slowly shook his head before his eyes widened. "Yes! Wasn't he your godfather?"

Harry nodded. "He was innocent too. That was what kept both of us sane, the knowledge we were innocent. It wasn't a good thought, so the dementors couldn't take it from us."

Dudley shook his head in amazement. "So, let me guess, you flew out of there?" After Harry nodded he continued. "Why did it take you a year?"

"Because I didn't know how to transform to start with. My Dad wrote me a letter on a piece of parchment when I was a baby that magically held instructions on how to become an animagus. Took me ten months of study to finally manage it."

Dudley chuckled. "You scared the shit out of me when I saw you in the window, you know."

Harry nodded, then frowned in thought. "Yeah, I'm surprised you could see me."

"What do you mean? You took up the whole damn window!"

Harry shook his head. "That idiot Jennings didn't see me, and I was in the room. My other form is a phoenix, Dud."

"A phoenix? Are they real?"

Harry nodded. "The headmaster of Hogwarts has a phoenix familiar called Fawkes. That bird is... a very good friend."

"Why couldn't Jennings see you?"

"Because he is a muggle."

"Muggle?"

Harry looked at his cousin, a small smile on his face. "Sorry, a non-magical person. I keep forgetting you don't know this stuff."

"But I can see you." Dudley frowned.

Harry looked at him intently. "Yes, you can. Now that I think about it, I'm willing to bet Aunt Petunia can too."

"But not Dad?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't think you are a muggle, Dud. I think you are a squib."

Dudley rolled his eyes. "You just made that word up. You don't have to make fun of me you know."

Harry laughed along with Dudley. "No, a squib is someone born to a magical family, but with no powers of their own."

"But Mum and Dad aren't magical."

"I know, but my mother was. Either Grandma or Granddad Evans were probably squibs too. Mum got some magical talent, but your mum didn't."

"So what does all that mean?"

Harry shrugged. "Probably nothing important, Dud. But if you are a squib, you can probably see all sorts of magical animals and objects too."

Dudley was silent for several minutes as he thought about what Harry had said. Finally he looked back up at his cousin.

"Harry, why are you here?"

Harry took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes with his free hand. "I've just run away from school, Dud. I needed to go somewhere where I would probably be welcomed, but nowhere they would think of finding me."

"Um, why? Why did you run away, I mean."

"Long story." Harry said shortly.

Dudley raised an eyebrow. "Longer than the one you already told me?"

Harry shook his head. "No, but it is still painful to talk about. I did come here to ask if I could stay here for a day or so. I won't take up much room, I'll just roost on the back of your chair."

Dudley burst into laughter, holding his stomach and rolling from side to side on the bed. Harry looked down at him, a wide smile forming on his own face.

After the blond boy managed to get his laughter under control, he said, "Sorry Harry. That was just the funniest thing I had ever heard. Of course you can stay here. But it is Christmas eve. Are you sure you don't want to be with your friends?"

Harry sighed. "I'm not sure my friends will want to be with me, Dud. Not after what I did."

Dudley frowned, but didn't push. "Well, OK. Do you need some clothes?"

Harry sighed and shook his head. "I can transfigure what I'm wearing tomorrow, and then buy some more the next day. I am going to set some wards up so we'll get warning if anyone else comes by."

Dudley nodded and watched in fascination as Harry turned into a magnificent phoenix. The red-feathered bird hopped up onto the window sill and looked out into the night. Suddenly, Harry was back, and he leapt away from the window with a startled curse.

"What? What's wrong?"

Harry looked fearfully at Dudley. "Dud, we have to go, now!"

"What is it?"

"Pritchard is out there! In the grounds!"

Dudley's eyes widened. "That teacher who helped frame you? The Death-whatsit?"

Harry nodded. "Eater. She was an auror, a magical policeman, for thirty years." He looked around the room. "Wait. Maybe it would be better if... yes..."

Dudley swallowed. "What?"

Harry turned to his cousin, and Dudley was shocked at the intense fire in Harry's emerald eyes. With a start, Dudley realised that Harry wasn't afraid, he was excited at the prospect of battle.

"How do you feel like being a hero, Dud?"

Dumbledore and Moody quietly left Madam Pomfrey to tend to her two new charges and quietly made their way back to Dumbledore's office. The only sound made was the distinctive clump of Moody's wooden leg on the stone floors.

More than a few students were in the halls, all trying to find out if anyone else knew what happened that evening. Moody shook his head.

"The only thing that moves faster than light is a rumour." he grumbled.

"Mmmmm," Dumbledore agreed. "Pity we can't combine it with useful information."

"Ha! Who is interested enough in the truth?"

"Indeed." Dumbledore gave a pair of excited witches gossip in hushed whispers a long emotionless stare. "Come, Alastor. There are some people we need to speak to."

The pair ascended the staircase to the headmaster's office. Moody sat on one of the many armchairs, while Dumbledore took a deep breath to steel himself. "Alastor, could I trouble you to organise the search for Harry? Put someone at Privet Drive, Black's Pad and The Burrow as well. Someone at the Leaky Cauldron too would be a good idea. Anywhere else you can think of?"

Moody scratched his cheek, deep in thought. "Maybe the person at Privet Drive could check Arabella's place too. Also, I'd get someone to check on Cedric Diggory's grave."

"You think Harry would go there?"

"It's possible. Talking to a dead comrade can help settle your emotions."

Dumbledore sighed. "It pains me to know that a student here thinks of another as a comrade in arms. I wish with all my being it was not necessary for any student here."

Moody nodded in understanding and stood to leave. "I'll go and organise this goose chase."

"You don't think Harry will be at any of those locations?"

Moody shook his head. "Nope. Not a chance. He'll be found by us when he wants to be found. Not before."

Dumbledore nodded. "I fear you are correct, Alastor. I just wish you weren't."

As he watched the ancient auror leave, Dumbledore shook his head. His unfortunate duty was now to call the Minister, and tell him that his daughter had been attacked and hospitalised.

Victoria Prichart was a bitter woman. A year and a half ago, when she started teaching at Hogwarts, her stern face still held much evidence of the incredible beauty she had in her youth. Even at fifty, she still had suitors, a fact which she took great pride in. Now, she looked haggard, her once firm, unblemished skin wrinkled, and hanging in folds around her neck.

In her mind, there was only one person to blame. Since Potter's escape from Azkaban, he had been a constant pain in her side.

After she and Malfoy had put him in Azkaban initially, Malfoy had claimed credit for himself, while she was stuck teaching at Hogwarts, unable to claim credit for her contribution with her master.

Then, before they were able to break into Azkaban to offer him a place at Voldemort's side, the little bastard escaped. Charged with tracking him down by both Voldemort and Dumbledore, she had miscalculated, and Harry had leapt off a cliff rather than be captured.

At the time she thought that he had committed suicide, and realised that both sides would be after her. Taking only an invisibility cloak, she had disappeared.

After Potter killed all of Voldemort's forces bar Wormtail and the Master himself, she had returned, betting that Voldemort's need for followers would outweigh his desire for revenge.

It had been a painful reunion, and one where she often doubted the decision to return. The thought of getting revenge on Potter was now all that drove her. She had been aware of his leaving Hogwarts the minute he left the protective wards. With Draco's gift, she was able to track Potter's location.

With a short wave to catch one of her subordinate's attention, Pritchart sent her towards one of the exits to the building. She would stop anyone from exiting through that door.

As the younger witch made her way to the doorway Pritchart turned to face the other two.

"You two, stay where you are, out of sight. Come out and attack after Potter makes an appearance. Understand?"

The pair nodded, but shifted nervously. Potter's reputation had spread throughout the wizarding world. Wizards from all over the world knew his name and recent accomplishments. Decimating seventy-two Death Eaters in one battle was a record no one was likely to break anytime soon.

Now, these two wizards were new recruits. Fully qualified wizards, given extra training by herself, they were petrified at the thought of taking on a student who had been held back a year and hadn't finished school.

"Cowards." she muttered under her breath.

Allison Sanderson wrapped her robes around her more closely in a vague attempt to stay warm in the cold December air. The uninspiring, square, red-brick building in front of her had only a few lit windows, indicating there were only a handful of alert people within.

She sighed quietly to herself. Being a double agent was an emotionally draining occupation. The threat of accidentally revealing your true loyalties while under the influence of curses such as the Cruciatus was very real. Voldemort was hurting, but he didn't want to give away anything to the new recruits.

The Death Eater in charge gave a small wave, attracting her attention. Allison nodded, and moved into her indicated position.

Allison swallowed nervously. She had not had a chance to inform her ministry contact about tonight's plans. Not that she had been aware of them beforehand. Pritchart had collected her and a pair of other recruits less than ten minutes before and immediately commanded them to follow to ambush someone.

She drew her wand and patiently waited for Pritchart's command to attack.

Dudley ran along the long dormitory corridor mentally noting which rooms held occupants. He looked down at his watch and noted he had less than ten seconds left.

Dudley reached the end of the corridor and turned, staring down the length of the ugly-carpeted hall. He drew in a deep breath, then let it out slowly.

Even though he knew it was coming, the explosion in the science lab on the ground floor still took him by surprise. The entire wing shook, and even through the small window at the end of the corridor he could make out the bright red-tinge light of the fireball.

Dudley shook his head in appreciation. Blowing up the building was a topic all the students at Smeltings talked about, but now Dudley was a part of it. With a grin, he realised he wouldn't be able to listen to the vapid claims of the other students without laughing.

He started walking back down the hall, bashing on the doors that still housed the few remaining students.

"Fire!" he yelled. "Get up! Move quickly to the south evacuation point but don't panic!"

A few shocked faces emerged. Dudley reached into one of the rooms and physically dragged a student out into the corridor.

"Move!" he roared into the older, but smaller student's face. "South evacuation point! Now!"

Slowly, but obviously more terrified of Dudley than the fire below, the Smeltings students made their way to the south fire exits. Dudley double checked that there were no stragglers before moving to the next floor below and repeating the procedure.

A secondary explosion rocked the building. Dudley smiled to himself. "Gas main." he mumbled under his breath. "Damn, Harry. You are having all the fun."

Allison had taken up her appointed guard position near one of the building's exits when a noise too loud for her to hear surrounded her. Blinded and deafened, she found herself flying backwards, only to land in an undignified heap several meters away.

Blackness started gathering at the edges of her vision, and it took all her determination to stay awake.

Stepping through the flames of the first explosion, Harry fought off the distraction of the tickling he felt with the flame freezing charm in force. Through one of the now shattered windows he could make out the crumpled heap of a Death Eater who had been stationed at the door before the explosion tore through the building.

Harry smiled to himself and allowed himself a small chuckle. Pritchart was slowly standing up after being knocked over by the blast. Not that that was surprising, since the explosion had shattered every window on the first floor of the building.

Since Harry was all but invisible against the bright red flames, he transformed and scanned the grounds outside the building with his enhanced avian eyes.

Besides Pritchart, there were three other Death Eaters. The one that had been thrown to the ground from near the exit, the other two were further away, and both shaking their heads in awe.

Harry flickered back to human form and waved his wand, causing several gas taps in the science lab to turn on, slowly filling the already burning room with methane. With one final satisfied smile, Harry again flickered into his phoenix form and sped through the window as a blur.

Pritchart shook her head in a vain attempt to clear it. The bright flash of the explosion had temporarily blinded her, and the ringing in her ears made it difficult to hear anything. Her own voice sounded hollow and distant to her as she cast a quick healing charm.

Snarling to herself the former auror ran towards the building. Potter had to be behind the explosion, it would cause the muggle emergency services to arrive soon. Too soon for her to capture the little brat, but perhaps not too soon for her to kill him.

A second explosion stopped her advance and hurled her backwards. Gasping, vainly trying to draw a breath into her abused lungs, Pritchart began to think that capturing Potter was no longer a priority.

Only his death would do.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Shades of Grey

### Shades of Grey

The second explosion shocked the two recent Death Eater recruits to their very core. They looked fearfully at each other and swallowed in tandem. The explosions from the base of the building in front of them had felled both Pritchard and Sanderson.

Pritchard was struggling to her feet, having been tossed back like a rag doll by the second explosion. Even to herself, her voice sounded raw and distant.

"That's it, Potter. You're dead."

Pritchard finally managed to stand on quivering legs, looking with dismay at the fire in the building.

"Hello, *Professor* ." came an unwelcome voice from behind.

From three hundred meters up, Harry tucked his wings and dove. At less than two meters above his intended target, Harry transformed. Suddenly increasing his mass over ten times slowed him down enough that he wasn't stunned as his knees connected with the Death Eater's shoulders. The air expelled from the crushed lungs tore through the dead man's voice box, causing an animalistic grunt.

Harry felt the sickening sensation of his victim's vertebrae fusing together under his assault. The corpse of the recent recruit collapsed bonelessly beneath Harry, cushioning his landing. As he rolled forward off his first kill, Harry deftly grabbed the dead wizard's wand in his left hand and gracefully rose to his feet just as the second Death Eater recruit spun to see what had caused his companion to grunt.

Harry stared straight into the other Death Eater's face, and gave the shocked man a big smile. Before the Death Eater could react, Harry drove his right knee hard into the wizard's groin. Adrenaline surged through Harry's lean body, and a feeling of intense excitement flooded him. Harry's emerald eyes widened, gleaming with inner fire, and his breathing quickened.

Harry spun his torso from the waist and drove his elbow into the man's throat with a satisfying crunch, knocking the Death Eater breathlessly to the ground. The wizard fumbled with his wand, aiming it straight at Harry's heart. Without the ability to pass air through his throat however, the young Death Eater couldn't cast a spell, and started panicking.

Harry snarled at him, stepped forward, drew back a leg and viscously kicked him in the temple.

Turning his back on the unconscious dying man without a second thought, Harry crept forward towards Pritchard. A fire burned in his mind, fueled by the deep anger he felt for the world.

The body of The-Boy-Who-Lived crept forward, but whatever was behind those green eyes, it wasn't Harry Potter.

Dudley quickly scanned the clipboard holding the names of the few students still staying at Smeltings over the holidays. He had evacuated each and every one of them in under three minutes. Now, twenty-odd shivering boys stood at the evacuation point on the opposite side of the school building from where the Death Eaters were.

A haggard looking Master Jennings ran across the grounds with a disheveled headmaster Hardcock. 'Greatbig', as he was known amongst the students, looked as though he had been rather rudely awakened. The pair of teachers descended on the boys.

Dudley stepped forward before either of them could speak. "Headmaster. I've evacuated the dormitory, and double-checked the roll with the students. We all got out without injury. I've called the fire department, and I was told they would be here in minutes."

Jennings looked at Dudley with a frown, but the headmaster took the clipboard and gave it a quick once over.

"Well done, my boy!" he said, visibly relaxing at seeing all his charges present and accounted for. "Dursley, isn't it?"

"Yes sir."

"Excellent work. Simply first class."

Jennings finally found his voice. "But Victor! He should have waited for the teacher in charge to oversee the evacuation!"

The Smeltings headmaster raised his bushy eyebrows and stared at his subordinate. "You only just arrived, Cyril. Dursley here has everyone out of the building and safe before you even made it here. I'd say he did a superb job."

"Thank you sir." said Dudley, a small smile the only indication of the wide grin that was threatening to break out over his face.

Faint sirens became audible, and all present turned to watch the arrival of the local fire brigade.

Dudley resumed his scan of the grounds. As the Hardcock and Jennings went to greet the firefighters, Dudley noticed two people in non-descript robes standing off to one side where no one had been seconds before. One thin, the other rather heavy-set.

"I'll be just a second." he told one of the students, and trotted off towards the pair.

Quickly, they put away their wands as Dudley approached. "Good evening." Harry's cousin said.

"We're busy. Go away." said the thin one.

Dudley shrugged. "I just thought you should know, the Death Eaters are on the other side of the burning building."

The pair stiffened. "What do you know about Death Eaters?" Thin growled.

Dudley smiled. "I'm a squib. My cousin goes to Hogwarts. He was with me in my room when he saw them approach. We started the fire so the emergency services would be called to cover the evacuation. Everyone is safe now."

The pair looked at each other. The large auror sighed and nodded, then faced Dudley.

"I'm Bellot, this is Atkins. Did you call in the Death Mark sighting?"

"Death Mark? Oh, you mean the floating green skull with the snake?"

"Yes. Where is it?"

"Sorry. There isn't one. My cousin told me to report that to the emergency services. He said it would mean that you guys would get here quicker."

The pair looked a bit disgruntled at that. "Where is your cousin now?" Atkins asked.

"Behind the building. He took on the Death Eaters to make sure the rest of us could get out."

"He took on-, Merlin's beard!" gasped Bellot, and the pair immediately sprinted around the burning building.

"Well," said Dudley to himself. "He is a Gryffindor."

Pritchard spun around and immediately noticed two things.

One, Potter had his wand trained on her and madness in his eyes.

Two, her reserve forces were gone.

Pritchard swallowed loudly.

Harry stared down his wand at the woman who caused him to be sent to Azkaban. In his anger, his mouth started forming the incantation for the killing curse.

"*Avada Ked-*" he started before the last remnants of Harry Potter finally managed to exert control of his body.

With a scream and a shudder, Harry collapsed, shaking his head. Through the throngs of pain, he forced the madness, the unthinking animal within aside.

"*Expelliarmus!*" shouted Pritchard. The wand in Harry's hand flew to her own.

Harry looked up, his eyes blazing with anger.

Now holding both wands, Pritchard noticeably relaxed. "Well, Potter. I had thought you'd put up more of a fight than this. My orders are to capture you, but if you resist, I can kill you. I think I'll kill you anyway."

Faster than Pritchard could see, Harry whipped his own wand and sent a quick hex at her. Pritchard ducked under the hastily fired spell and stood to respond. Her stunner landed in the dirt where Harry had been.

Both combatants conjured shields and began dueling in earnest.

Dudley was walking back to his classmates when another faint pop sounded behind him. He turned and saw a tall, thin man, with dark hair. The newcomer was staring intently at a small glass ball that had various coloured lights moving within.

"You're a little late aren't you?" he said.

With a jerk of his head, the dark-haired man fixed his grey-blue eyes on Dudley. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Swallowing at the man's overwhelming presence, Dudley replied, "Dudley Dursley, sir. I'm Harry Potter's cousin."

A slow, wide grin covered the man's face. "So, Dursley. You're the one that tormented my godson for all those years."

Dudley gasped. "You're Sirius Black!"

"In the flesh, and about to strip yours from your bones." Sirius snarled, drawing his wand.

"Wait!" hissed Dudley, hoping that none of his classmates were watching. "Harry is behind the building, taking on some Death Eaters. He got me to get everyone else out!"

Sirius' eyes bulged. He started to run round the building before realising Dudley was keeping pace with him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I have to tell you... there are aurors behind there... Harry said you escaped... don't get caught!" Dudley puffed.

Sirius' expression could only be described as confused. But he didn't slow as he tore round the building, leaving Dudley panting softly.

"Jeez, Harry. Is everyone in the wizarding world as insane as you?" he muttered to himself.

Dudley nearly jumped out of his skin when a voice from behind growled, "Yes."

Harry lashed out at the shield surrounding Pritchart. His magical assault caused a tear to appear, but it quickly healed itself. Shaking his head, Harry knew his was in trouble. The pair had dueled for what felt like several hours, but was probably only a minute or so. Both combatants were now panting, Pritchart quite heavily.

Pritchart was a wily one, he had to admit. Every hex, charm and curse he sent at her was neutralized quickly, while another was sent at him. *I suppose that spending over thirty years dueling with wizards who don't want to be arrested would sharpen your skills.* he thought.

Harry was sure that given enough time, he could wear down the former auror. Pritchart was in far worse physical shape than he was, and Harry was sure his magical reserves were greater.

But the other Death Eater was stirring. Time was an enemy now.

Pritchart sent a spell that surrounded Harry with a blanket of absolute darkness. From within the dark cloud, Harry grinned to himself. Darkness was no handicap.

He leapt to his left and crouched, casting a quick silencing charm on his feet while in midair. Pritchart's next spell went wide and high, while Harry's disarming spell struck her shield full on, and by the sound of it, knocked her backwards several feet.

*Silly to try and blind your opponent when you still let him know where you are by uttering an incantation*, Harry thought.

Harry shrugged, and cast, "*Serpensortia*."

In parseltongue, Harry directed the large snake to attack his opponent. A shrill scream told Harry that Pritchart was afraid of snakes.

With her concentration broken, the darkness was dispelled. Harry risked a quick glance at the other Death Eater and noticed that she was on her hands and knees. Realising he was out of time, a surge of adrenaline coursed through him. Time slowed, his senses were amplified.

Scanning the ground, Harry smiled at what he saw.

"*Accio!*" He shouted, holding his wand high and angled so it pointed slightly downward at Pritchart's head.

Standing still as he was, Pritchart's next spell brought down Harry's shield. Her triumphant expression remained on her face as the large chunk of fallen masonry Harry had summoned from the ground behind her slammed into the back of her head, crushing her skull.

Harry took a deep breath as he looked down at her corpse. "Well, that's two Death Eaters I've taken down with that same tactic tonight." Harry said to himself. "There must be a gap in their training somewhere."

Harry turned to look at the sole remaining Death Eater when a stunning spell fired from the other end of the building just missed him, passing so close to his arm that his fingers tingled. Harry spun and saw a pair of wizards coming from the side of the building.

Swearing to himself, Harry conjured another shield and sprinted back to the tree line.

Allison watched as Potter systematically defeated all of Pritchart's attacks. Allison was completely fine, able to leap to her feet and start attacking The-Boy-Who-Lived, but remained on her hands and knees. Harry defeated a wave of darkness by sending a snake to attack the Death Eater and looked in her direction. Allison slowly shook her head, feigning dizziness and shock. Harry went back to battling Pritchart, and in seconds had crushed the back of her skull.

Allison smiled to herself. "Well, that's one less Death Eater for the Dark Lord." she said to herself with satisfaction.

Suddenly, two wizards wearing auror robes rounded the corner of the burning building and immediately fired two stunners at Harry.

"Obviously green cadets." Allison muttered to herself as both stunners missed. Harry turned and bolted for the trees where the two other Death

Eaters Pritchard had commandeered lay in wait. *No, they must have been taken care of. They didn't attack when Pritchard was in trouble.* she thought.

Resolving to play dead for a while, Allison lay back down, facing the amusing scene in front of her.

Harry ran in a zigzag pattern for the safety of the trees. Three more stunners had missed him on his way there, but now he was in the relatively safety of the woodland marking the edge of Smeltings' land.

Harry hid behind the thick trunk of a massive tree, his mind racing.

*Who are these guys?* he thought to himself. *They're not Death Eaters, they aren't wearing masks.*

Panting softly to himself, Harry risked a glance around the tree he had hidden behind. The two wizards were approaching the woods cautiously. Harry transformed and launched himself into the air, debating the merits of fleeing, before gliding to a halt and landing on a high branch in a tree at the edge of the woods.

Popping back to his human form, Harry waited until the pair had passed beneath him before he fired two quick stunners down at them, quickly rendering them both unconscious.

Harry sighed and shook his head. Now the danger had passed, he could feel the thrill of battle flow out of him, leaving his muscles aching slightly. A massive grin spread across his face, and try as he might, nothing would shift it.

*Am I going crazy?* he pondered. *I just killed three people, and I'm smiling!*

*You're alive.* his mind supplied. *After everything you've been through, you're still alive.*

From her distance, Allison could only just make out the pair of aurors collapse. Blinking in surprise, she realised that Potter must have managed to take them down too. And quickly.

Allison took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Potter was certainly an enigma. She remembered his arrival at Hogwarts in her sixth year. Everyone was looking at this scrawny kid who had supposedly defeated Voldemort as a baby.

He was shorter than the rest of his year, except for one of the girls. He looked absolutely petrified when he had to try the sorting hat on.

*Come to think of it, the hat took a very long time to place him.* she thought.

It was hard to reconcile the two different mental images she had of Potter. One, the tiny, muggle raised boy who she first saw, and now, the still short but confident and powerful wizard who had taken down three Death Eaters and two aurors without too much effort.

Allison was a Slytherin through and through. She had willingly joined the Dark Lord when she had been approached simply because she thought that since the Ministry denied his return, he would use that fault to build an invincible army. She had decided as a child that she would always fight on the side that would win. Always.

Potter had changed that. He had joined the Dark Lord's ranks too. Got close, learned what he could. Then destroyed all the Dark Lord had built in a single day.

Not that Allison had been there. The night of the Ministry raid was supposed to be a triumph for her former master. Somehow the Ministry had a whiff of the plans and had captured dozens of Death Eaters that night.

That night. Allison shuddered despite herself. She remembered all too well what had happened before the raid.

It was true that she didn't have as much loyalty to the Dark Lord as others. She simply wanted to be on the winning side. Potter had also been there that night, and had witnessed her humiliation and degradation.

With a growl, Allison thrust such thoughts out of her mind. She was going to be on the side that won. Quite obviously, that was whatever side Potter was on.

A huge black dog rounded the corner of the burning building and sniffed the ground. She widened her eyes at the sight. *How the hell does he do that?*

Sirius had transformed as he ran around the burning building. With all the smoke in the air, sight would be almost useless.

He stuck his snout to the ground and sniffed. This low, the smoke didn't affect his tracking ability too much.

Harry had been here, just minutes before. *Not in pain. Exerted himself for a while. Pritchard! She is still here. Dead. Heh, that boy is getting good.* Sirius' canine thoughts were short and to the point. Another familiar scent mixed with four unknown ones. Sirius sniffed some more. *Sanderson! Where is she?*

"Over here!" came a call.

Sirius looked up and saw his spy stand unsteadily on her feet. With a faint pop, he returned to human form.

"Sanderson! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, sir. Just a little shaken. The building blew up just as we got here."

"We?"

"Pritchart and two others. I think they are dead. They were told to stay in the woods." Allison waved with one hand in the direction of the woods.

"What about the pair of aurors that were here?" he asked her.

She stared at him in shock.

"What about the pair of aurors that were here?" Sirius asked her.

Allison blinked in shock. *He knows how many people were here by scent, but how on earth did he know they were aurors?* "In the woods too. They tried to stun Potter, but he took them down too." she managed.

A huge feral grin spread over Sirius' features. With a short laugh that sounded more like a bark, he motioned her to follow and walked to Pritchart's corpse.

Allison followed him. Ever since she had met the man, she had been fascinated. Brilliant, erratic and driven, he was capable of making deductions from so little evidence that Allison had initially thought he could read minds.

Now, he grabbed Pritchart's hands as if expecting to find something. Yes, he just removed the ring she wore.

Allison frowned. *That ring had been given to her by one of her contacts. One that both Pritchart and the Dark Lord trusted. How the hell had Sirius known about it.*

"Um, Pritchart was given that. She said it would track Potter."

Sirius nodded. "Yes, it will." He put it on his own finger. The band expanded slightly to allow it to slip over Sirius' thicker finger. Closing his eyes in concentration, Sirius shook his head after a few seconds. "He's nowhere nearby." He removed the ring and slipped it in his pocket.

"Why don't you wear it all the time?"

Sirius smirked. "Because you age about ten times faster than usual while wearing it. It leeches your life to magnify your magical signature, making you easier to track."

Understanding dawned. "That's how you got here so quickly! You tracked her!"

Sirius nodded and walked towards the trees. Allison followed, still deep in thought.

"Mr. Black? How do you know what the ring does?"

"I followed it from when it was made, to Pritchart's contact, to when it was given to her."

Again, Allison shook her head. The depth of this man's knowledge of what the Dark Lord was up to was frightening.

The pair reached the edge of the woods, and Sirius looked down at the two aurors. He shook his head and chuckled. Allison too couldn't help but smile. She watched as Sirius gave them a cursory examination, making sure they were still alive before making his way further into the forest.

The second pair of bodies were obviously dead. One was hideously crushed as though from above, while the other's face was black from lack of oxygen. Blood trickled out of the second corpse's open mouth.

Allison swallowed. She had never liked gore. Potter was powerful indeed to have done this to them without being detected.

Sirius seemed almost delighted. He shook his head with a smile on his face. "Well done, Harry. But I think I need to teach you to recognise aurors on sight. They don't take it too kindly when someone stuns them." he said to no one in particular.

"Right!" he said, turning back to Allison. "Sanderson, when you decided to help us, your stated objective was the capture or neutralisation of Pritchart. Fairly obviously, that is now complete. You can leave Voldemort's Death Eaters and come and work for me formally, or you can continue to infiltrate his group, perhaps helping to bring him down. Your choice."

Allison blinked a couple of times, surprise at the offer clearly evident on her face. "Honestly, I hadn't thought too far ahead. Do you need me to keep infiltrating his Death Eaters?"

Sirius shook his head. "No. I have other agents working on that. Remember, you are not a fully-fledged Death Eater. Returning to Voldemort from a bungled mission is not the best way to ensure longevity. I can use your skills elsewhere."

Allison swallowed. "Y-you'd let me work for you formally? I'd really be a-"

Sirius put a finger to his lips and looked around nervously. After a few seconds, he relaxed. "Sorry, I thought I heard something. As for your question, yes, you will work for me, and report to me."

Allison smiled. "That sounds wonderful. I didn't enjoy being close to *him* ."

"That I can understand. Go home, clean up and meet me at my office tomorrow. Welcome to the Unspeakables."

Allison nodded and smiled. "Thank you, sir." With a pop, she apparated away.

"Thank you, sir." his new subordinate said, before apparating away.

With a smile, Sirius looked up. "Ok, you can come out now."

A soft flutter of wings, and a blood-red phoenix gently drifted down from the treetops. With a soft sound, Harry stood there, an expression of mild concern on his face.

"You are an Unspeakable?" he asked.

Sirius growled deep in his throat and grabbed his godson in a tight hug. "Damn you Harry, I was so worried. Why did you run away from school like that?" he demanded.

Harry stiffened in Sirius' arms, and replied, "Long story. Not one I need to recount right now."

Sirius took a deep breath and held Harry out at arms length. "Listen, you were in great danger Harry. I had expected you to remain at Hogwarts."

Harry frowned. "Why would it matter?"

Sirius sighed and reached into his pocket. "This ring can track your location once you are outside of Hogwarts' wards. Pritchard wore it."

Harry swallowed and nodded. "So that's how she found me so quickly."

Sirius nodded. "That's also why I was so worried when you left Hogwarts. I had to find her fast."

Harry nodded, a small smile on his face. The smile faded abruptly and a calculating expression covered his face. "How did Pritchard get the ring?"

Sirius looked troubled. "Ministry secret." he said.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "How do you know what the ring does?"

Sirius bit his lip. "Ministry secret." he repeated.

"How did you know how to find her?" Harry pressed.

Sirius remained silent.

Harry stared into Sirius' pale blue eyes for a long time, searching for something. "You made it." he declared. "She got it from you. That's how you found her so fast. It doesn't just track me, it allows you to track her."

"She didn't get it from me directly." Sirius mumbled.

Harry shook his head. "I wish you'd told me. I can't say I wouldn't have run from Hogwarts, but I wouldn't have come here."

"Why did you come here?" Sirius asked.

"Because he knew no one would think to look for him here." growled a familiar voice.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love What is Right?

### What is right?

Cho sat at the top of the Astronomy tower, her mind whirling.

Outwardly, she looked calm and collected, seemingly at peace with Harry going to the ball with Ginny. Truth be told, she had been fine with it. Not any more. More than one person had asked her if she was OK with it. Each time she dismissed the situation with a wave of her hand. Once everyone had left for the ball, she left the library and ran here to be alone.

Now, sitting alone with her thoughts, Cho was worried.

She just didn't know why.

Harry had repeatedly declared his love for her. He always lit up when he was around her, even those who didn't know him knew he loved her.

It was also well known that Ginny liked Harry. When Ginny came up to her that night in the library and said 'Bad luck' while she patted Cho's shoulder, Cho had felt physically ill. She knew then that Ginny would try something with Harry at the ball, and that Harry would finally convince her that he and Cho were not going to be split up.

But Cho's heart was racing, and a feeling of unease was slowly growing into downright worry.

No, it wasn't worry about Harry's devotion to her. Cho knew he loved her, knew it in her heart, her mind and her soul. It certainly wasn't Harry's fidelity she was worried about. Then what was it?

Cho sighed and closed her eyes, using a meditation technique her grandfather had taught her. Normally, she would reach a state of complete calm in seconds, but tonight that level of relaxation eluded her.

Cho opened her eyes and frowned. Her grandfather once told her that her grandmother had the Sight. In an attempt to honour her grandmother, Cho had taken Divination for three frustrating years at Hogwarts, giving up the subject after only receiving an acceptable for her OWL. The Divination professor had completely lost any respect Cho might have had, especially after Cho been rebuffed after asking her about doing some Chinese divination methods in class. Cho tried to put the rubbish Trelawney had taught her out of her mind.

No, something was wrong with Harry. He was in danger. Another teacher was with him.

Cho blinked at the unexpected thought. Why wouldn't another teacher be with Harry? He was at the ball, all the teachers were there. Why would he be in danger?

Cho rolled her eyes at the last thought. Like Harry needed a reason to be in danger.

Cho frowned and tried to relax again. She cleared her mind, closed her eyes and thought about Harry. An involuntary smile touched her lips. Cho thought about Harry's own lips, gently but firmly pressing against her own.

Smoke. She smelled smoke.

Cho's eyes flashed open, and she sniffed the air around her in a particularly unladylike fashion. Nothing.

Now Cho was starting to panic. The smoke had been so real. Harry was in danger. He wasn't at Hogwarts.

Cho swallowed nervously and concentrated. Concentrated on smoke and Harry and danger.

Cho leapt to her feet and bolted for the door, the sudden image of Harry dodging curses hurled at him by Pritchard in front of a burning building etched into her mind.

Ginny lay in a sterile hospital bed, gnawing on her thumbnail. Madam Pomfrey left her alone briefly; she had gone to fetch the Headmaster to tell him that she was awake.

She wished she wasn't.

Attaining consciousness was painful, thought not physically. The blessed unthinking darkness had parted, and now Ginny was wracked with guilt for her actions.

Her shoulders shuddered as she tried to contain the tears that demanded to be shed. The pain in her recently healed, but not fully mended ribs

simply added to the urgency, and Ginny began to weep softly.

In her mind's eye she saw Harry. Not a sweet, smiling Harry, but a Harry whose expression held shock, betrayal and anger. Since Harry's return to the wizarding world, he had looked at Ginny with affection, even sisterly love. At the time, it hadn't been enough. Now, Ginny would give all she had and would ever have just to see those feelings in his eyes once more. Now, she knew that those beautiful emerald orbs would never look at her with fondness again.

Ginny leaned back against the pile of pillows behind her, even though it caused pain to shoot through her chest.

Vaguely, she could hear her brother yelling outside the door to the infirmary. Hermione's voice joined his as the volatile pair had yet another argument. Instinctively, Ginny knew Ron was defending her, demanding that something be done to track down Harry.

Between sobs, Ginny admitted to herself that she was particularly unworthy of such brotherly love.

Suddenly, the voices outside the door stopped. With a faint creak, the door opened to reveal Dumbledore, her father, Madam Pomfrey, Ron and Hermione.

Ginny immediately looked down at her hands, too ashamed to meet the gazes of her family.

Mr. Weasley sprinted over to his daughter and with particularly un-Arthur-like emotion, wrapped one arm around Ginny's shoulders, and cradled her head with the other.

This made Ginny cry even harder. Even when showing his love for her, her dad still made sure she wasn't in pain. Her mother would have grabbed her in a bear hug without thought for her tender ribs.

"My poor little Pumpkin, I was so worried about you." whispered Arthur, using his nickname for his daughter while rocking gently forwards and backwards.

As upset as she was, Ginny didn't feel worthy of the pet name her father had bestowed upon her. Her sobs intensified until she was crying freely.

Ron placed a hand on her knee. "It's Ok, Gin. We'll find Harry, and make sure he gets-" Ron looked sourly at Hermione before continuing. "-make sure he apologises."

Ginny shook her head frantically, unable to speak through her tears. Predictably, Ron misunderstood.

"It's alright, Gin. We won't let him hurt you again."

Arthur Weasley turned his head and glared at his son. "Ron, take a deep breath and count to ten. While doing that, I'd like you to think of the events that occurred after the last time everyone believed Harry did something out of character." he said sternly.

Ron paled, his eyes widening in shock at his father's words. He then cupped his face with his hands. "Oh, man. Harry, I'm sorry." he mumbled to himself. Hermione walked over to his side and slipped an arm around his shoulders.

"Ron, I know your instinct to protect Ginny is strong, but for goodness sake, please think before you act. Harry had a black eye for three days the last time you didn't." she said to her boyfriend gently.

"What's this?" asked Arthur, his pale red eyebrows expressing his curiosity.

"Nothing important. Just a misunderstanding, Mr. Weasley." replied Hermione.

Arthur nodded and turned back to Ginny and kissed the top of her head. He gently placed his cheek where he just kissed her and closed his eyes, still slowly rocking his sobbing daughter.

Madam Pomfrey walked over to the other side of Ginny's bed and checked her pillows and sheets. Nodding to the headmaster, she turned and went to her office, closing the door with a faint click behind her.

Dumbledore summoned a chair and sat down next to the hospital bed. "Arthur, I believe we need to talk with Virginia, to let her tell us the events of this evening from her point of view."

Arthur nodded, but was silently surprised at the way Ginny tightened her grip on his robes at the announcement.

The ancient wizard turned to Ron and Hermione. "I believe Miss Weasley will require some support later this evening, but for now, I'd like to speak with her and her father alone."

Hermione nodded and clasped Ron's hand in her own. The pair reluctantly left the hospital ward.

Arthur slowly let go of his daughter's shoulders and sat down on a chair, but never let her hand go.

Dumbledore took a deep breath. "Miss Weasley, I know that you have just awoken and I know that you have just experienced an assault on your person by a friend, but I would ask you to tell us exactly what happened this evening."

Ginny bit her lip, and looked nervously from her father to Dumbledore. The headmaster's face grew stern. "If you do not wish to explain, I cannot force you to. However, as events stand, Harry will be expelled from Hogwarts when he returns."



"No!" Ginny exclaimed, starting her father. She turned to look at her father and grabbed his hand in both of hers. "Daddy! Don't let him! Please! He can't expel Harry! It wasn't his fault!" she babbled.

Arthur was somewhat taken aback by Ginny's unexpected outburst, and missed Dumbledore closing his eyes, a pained expression of the confirmation of his fears on his face. "Ginny! Shhh, you are safe here. No one is going to hurt you."

Ginny ignored him, still desperately shaking her head, hyperventilating and unable to speak in her panic.

"Breathe, Ginny, relax and breathe." her father whispered in her ear while gently squeezing her hands. As Ginny slowly calmed he smiled and cupped her cheek with his palm. "That's better. Just relax; you're safe here with me."

Ginny continued to shake her head. "But you can't expel Harry. Please professor!"

"Harry made an unprovoked attack on you with magic, Virginia. He injured you sufficiently that you required hospitalisation. He ran from the scene, neglecting to get you medical assistance. He assaulted and hospitalised a professor who sought to find and restrain him. There is no other outcome but expulsion." Dumbledore said softly.

Ginny started crying again, her tears running down her wet cheeks and silently dripped onto her robes. "No, please don't." she whispered, unable to draw enough air into her lungs to speak.

Arthur frowned and put his arm around Ginny's shoulders. "Pumpkin, why are you so adamant that Harry not be expelled? Do you still like him?"

Ginny nodded. "But that's not why he shouldn't be expelled." she sniffed.

"Then why, Virginia?" asked Dumbledore gently.

An expression of pure self-loathing crossed Ginny's beautiful face. "It wasn't his fault." she whispered softly.

Dumbledore gave Arthur a sympathetic look before turning back to Ginny. "Virginia. Is there something you'd like to tell us?"

Ginny swallowed, and nodded slightly. "It was me." she mouthed.

Arthur frowned. "What do you mean, Pumpkin?"

"It was me." she repeated, her whisper only just audible.

"What was you?" asked Ginny's father.

"I took the potion." whispered Ginny. "The potion that Harry made."

Dumbledore sighed. "Why, Virginia?" he asked gently.

Ginny screwed her eyes shut and shook her head. "I don't know! I'm so ashamed." she wailed.

Arthur's face betrayed his confusion. "What potion, Albus?"

Dumbledore took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You are aware that the Department of Mysteries now knows the recipe for a more potent version of polyjuice potion. My own Professor Snape has been credited with the discovery."

"Yes, I'm aware of that. If it wasn't for the secrecy involved, Severus would have received the Order of Merlin. Developing such a potion has given the Ministry a powerful weapon in the war."

Dumbledore nodded. "What was not disclosed to the Unspeakables was that Mr. Potter was the potion's co-creator."

Arthur's eyes widened. "Harry? From what Ron's told me over the years, Severus would prefer to take poison than work with him."

Dumbledore smiled faintly. "Yes, the pair have had their differences in the past. For the last couple of months though, the entire school thought Severus had given Harry detention three times a week. In fact, they were intently and secretly developing several new or improved potions. One of which is the new polyjuice potion."

Arthur nodded and turned back to Ginny. "What do you mean that you took it, Ginny?"

Dumbledore held up a hand. "Perhaps it would be easier on Virginia if I was to tell you what happened the night the potion was completed."

Ginny looked at the headmaster gratefully, and then bowed her head in shame.

Taking her silence as affirmation, he continued. "Severus told me that the evening the pair completed the potion, Harry siphoned off a single dose to test. Since it was less than an hour before the evening meal, he decided to wait until the next morning to test it.

"At the time, Harry was estranged from Miss Chang. The pair hadn't spoken to each other since the day Harry was attacked by that first golem we procured. Miss Granger decided to step in and encourage them to talk to each other. Miss Chang was collected from Ravenclaw Tower and escorted to the Gryffindor common room and was from there directed to Harry's dorm. There she heard what appeared to be Harry and another student being intimate."

Arthur shook his head. "I remember being involved in intimate relations during my stay here too, Albus. What does this have to do with Ginny?"

With a deep breath, Dumbledore continued. "Miss Chang was distraught and ran from the room. Miss Granger went up into Harry's room to confront him. She discovered there, in a very intimate embrace, both Harry and Miss Chang."

"But you said-" began Arthur before his mouth opened in shock. He slowly turned to face his daughter, who began sobbing again.

"Yes, Arthur. Someone had taken the dose of Polyjuice Harry prepared, assumed his girlfriend's form and raped him."

Ginny was still clutching her father's hand. "I'm so sorry, Daddy. I'm so very sorry." she whispered.

Arthur swallowed, and looked at his daughter sternly. He did not however, remove his hand from hers. "Ginny, I don't know what to say. I cannot believe you would do such a thing."

With a cry, Ginny tried to wrench her hand away, but Arthur refused to let go.

"Oh, no you don't, Pumpkin. I'm upset with you, but I still love you with all my heart. I won't let you go now, not when it is obvious you need me." he told her gently.

"How?" Ginny mouthed, her face splotchy and red with both tears and self-loathing. "How do you still love me?"

Gently, Arthur gathered his daughter in his arms. "Because, you are my daughter. Nothing you do will ever stop me loving you."

"I don't deserve it." she mumbled.

"Of course you do. You will now need to face the consequences of your actions, but I will still be with you, always."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Fortunately, Arthur, there will be no consequences, not publicly anyway."

"What? What are you talking about? Ginny violated Harry's trust, his friendship and his love. I'm surprised you aren't considering charging her formally."

Dumbledore closed his eyes as if defeated. "Arthur, the wizarding world needs you now. As Minister, you are the figurehead of the Light. Until Voldemort is finally defeated or brought to justice, you cannot have any stain on your character. Having your daughter charged with rape will undoubtedly lead to calls for your forced resignation."

Arthur stared at Dumbledore as if he had gone mad. "I can not believe you would say that, Albus. The one thing I have stood for in the Ministry is honesty." Arthur's voice rose in anger. "Now, you are suggesting that the only way for me to remain as Minister is to turn my back on the one thing I demand from everyone around me? How could you? How could you do this to Harry? If Ginny isn't charged, you will have to expel him! How much more will you demand from the boy? He has given us his life, his honour, his sanity and health, his everything to the wizarding world! We are safer now than anytime in the last four decades because of his sacrifices! Now, you want more? How could you? No! How **dare** you?" he raged.

Dumbledore looked Arthur in the eye. "It is precisely because you are honest that we need you to remain in power, Arthur. Please. It does no one good for you to throw your position away to save your honour."

"Does no one good?" demanded Arthur. "What about Harry? These circumstances would allow him to remain at Hogwarts and complete his education. I think it would do *him* good!"

Dumbledore's shoulders slumped, and he slowly removed his half-moon glasses. With his free hand he gently rubbed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "It is times like this that I feel my age, Arthur." he said softly. "No matter what I decide to do, people will suffer. The damage Fudge did to the Ministry's reputation will take years, even decades to repair."

"You are the only man who can do it, Arthur. You are famed for your lack of personal ambition. Your bravery, honesty and integrity are a shining light to the wizarding world. No one else with the necessary political skills comes close. Regardless of recent events, you are going to be needed over the next few years, and I am very much afraid that the pressures of the job will kill you."

"Virginia's actions will have far more consequences than she imagined. At present, her mind is occupied with the immediate - Harry, his welfare, and whether or not either of them will be expelled. But it is Harry's actions that will force those consequences to become public knowledge. Neither of them are blameless, and now ~~we~~ must deal with what comes."

"No. I refuse to be a party to this. I *will not* allow that boy to be used again. He deserves more than we can ever give."

"Then why are you determined to make his life a misery?" snarled a new voice.

Arthur frowned and looked over at a hospital gown-clad Professor Snape. His daughter shrank away from the Potion Master, as though afraid of him. "What are you talking about, Severus?" the Minister demanded.

Snape sneered at him. "Typical Gryffindor. So willing to sacrifice yourself for others, not knowing or caring what that will do to them."

"You think having Harry expelled would be better for him?" Arthur asked, incredulous.

Snape rolled his eyes. In a tone conveying that Arthur was an imbecile he said, "Yes, if the alternative is having the Ministry collapse from within due to internal bickering. He can be easily removed from Hogwarts and put into the care of any number of both willing and powerful wizards as an

apprentice. He would still finish his education, the ministry would still be strong under your leadership, and the Dark Lord would be unable to find a foothold in a corrupt government. But no, you will ignore all the consequences of your own actions, and resign immediately because your daughter is an idiot, condemning the wizarding world, *which includes Harry Potter*, to years of corruption and uncertainty. Bravo!"

Arthur opened his mouth to respond, but couldn't think of anything to say. As much as he hated it, Severus was right. The ministry was a house of chocolate frog cards, and a single sneeze could bring it crashing down.

Arthur turned back to look at Dumbledore and his daughter. With an expression that looked like he was swallowing something disgusting, he said, "I don't like this, Albus. Everything inside of me screams out against it. But I cannot deny your arguments."

Ginny looked at her father in horror. "No!" she screamed. "You can't! Daddy, please! Don't let them do this!"

Arthur closed his eyes, his daughter's words striking straight to his heart. "I'm sorry, baby. I don't think we have a choice. If you hadn't done this terrible thing, none of it would be necessary."

Ginny screwed up her eyes and burst into tears. Clenching her hands into fists, she started beating her legs and arms. With a cry of alarm, Arthur moved to restrain her. Dumbledore sighed and drew his wand, and cast a quick calming charm on Ginny.

Slowly, Ginny calmed and lay still, crying softly to herself.

Arthur looked up at Dumbledore before jumping in alarm when the door to the infirmary burst open.

"Where is he?" Cho demanded.

The headmaster did not appear surprised at her appearance. "We do not know, Miss Chang. We have several people looking for Mr. Potter right now."

Cho shook her head. "He is in danger. He and Pritchard are dueling."

Snape and Arthur looked skeptical, but Dumbledore looked intrigued. "Are you sure?"

Cho nodded. "I saw him. Fighting her, in front of a large burning building."

"You saw him?" Snape sneered.

Cho's dark eyes flashed dangerously. "A vision, Professor Snape." Cho turned back to Dumbledore. "But I didn't just *see* him, headmaster. I *heard* the curses Pritchard was throwing at Harry. I could *smell* the smoke from the fire. He is in danger right now!" she shouted.

"Miss Chang, please calm yourself." said Dumbledore, holding up one hand. "Remember, Harry is able to flee from almost any situation quickly and effectively. If he is engaged in a duel, it is because he believes he will emerge triumphant."

Snape looked at Dumbledore curiously. "You think he could escape Pritchard if she sprung an ambush on him?"

"Yes, easily." Dumbledore said absently.

Snape gave the headmaster a look of frustration and studied the suddenly blank faces of those present. "Why do I get the impression that everyone here knows something about Mr. Potter that I do not."

Ginny looked up, her eyes bloodshot and puffy. "Harry's 'n tr'ble?" she asked, her voice rough and slurred.

"Because he knew no one would think to look for him here." growled a familiar voice.

The hairs on the back of Harry's neck prickled, and he quickly spun round to the source of the voice, his wand out and ready before the newcomer had finished the sentence. He didn't lower it when he saw who it was.

"Mad Eye!" greeted Sirius. "What are you doing here? What is he doing here?" Sirius asked, indicating Dudley, standing nervously behind the one-eyed man.

"Following your godson. He has lead half the Order on a merry chase tonight." the grizzled retired auror replied happily, both eyes focused on Harry. "Potter's cousin is here at my invitation."

Harry swallowed, but kept his wand trained on his Defense professor. Sirius looked on in surprise, but didn't say anything. "How did you find me? No one knew I'd be here." Harry demanded.

Moody chuckled. "Don't worry, boy. You've covered your tracks well. I wasn't able to work out where you'd be. There are several people busy polishing their wands while staking out Privet Drive and Arabella's house, The Burrow, Diagon Alley, and a few other places."

"Then how?" demanded Harry, his eyes blazing.

"Jeez, Harry, chill out." said Dudley, a frown on his face.

Moody held up a hand to silence Harry's cousin. "Like I said, it wasn't because I knew you'd be here. I just went to the Ministry and waited for a report of a large magical disturbance somewhere in the country." A grin touched the scarred man's face. "Figured that the odds that you'd be

nearby were at least better than average."

A small smile slowly spread over Harry's face too and he slowly lowered his wand. "Luck. It was sheer dumb luck."

Moody nodded happily, while Dudley spoke up. "Why would Harry be near any magical disturbance?"

With an ugly, evil grin, Moody turned to face Dudley. "Well, Dursley, I'm not sure what you've been told about the wizarding world right now, but there is a war going on."

Dudley's eyes widened in shock. "A war? But surely we'd know about it, you wouldn't be able to keep it that quiet."

Moody shook his head. "Normally you would, but you'd know it as unexplained disappearances, a rise in family murder-suicides, that sort of thing. But just before this war got underway, the Dark wizards suffered a couple of minor setbacks."

"What setbacks?"

"The first came about when a spy within their ranks gave away their location. The ministry raided and captured and killed about a third of Voldemort's forces."

"And the other?"

Moody grinned and looked at Harry. "The spy later sprung a trap and killed seventy-two Death Eaters. All but two of Voldemort's entire available forces." he said happily.

Harry shook his head. Moody sounding happy was just too weird.

"Bugger me!" exclaimed Dudley. "How many Death Eaters have you killed, Mr. Moody?"

"I preferred to bring mine in alive, Dursley. Unlike your cousin here."

Dudley blinked. He turned to Harry. "Y-you've killed people?"

Harry nodded slowly, a somber expression on his face.

Dudley swallowed. "How many?" he asked.

Moody cackled. "Seventy-two, Dursley. Weren't you listening?"

Dudley's eyes widened at this, then bulged when Harry corrected his professor. "Seventy-five, professor."

Moody's eyebrows shot up in surprise, looking at the two corpses nearby. "Your work?"

Harry nodded.

Moody stomped over and examined the Death Eater Harry had crushed from above. Looking back at the student he spoke in a serious tone. "Tell me, Potter, how does killing make you feel?"

Harry stared at his Defense professor. "Afterwards... dirty. During battle... triumphant." he said honestly.

Moody looked relieved. "Good. I'd hate to think that the person with the most Death-Eater kills enjoyed it."

It was Harry's turn to look surprised. "I have the record?" Harry's face turned from surprised to disgusted. "You keep track of things like that?"

Moody nodded while Sirius put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Of course you do Harry." his godfather said, ignoring his second question. "How many dark wizards do you think there have been?"

"I can't believe it." Harry said. He looked to his cousin for support, but Dudley was holding his head in shock himself.

"A couple of *minor* setbacks he says. He's right, you're all insane." Dudley mumbled to himself.

"Believe it, Potter." said Moody, a wide grin on his face as he looked at Dudley. "Even old Mad Eye hasn't brought in as many of those scum that you've accounted for."

Harry smiled weakly. "How many?" he asked softly.

Moody grinned. "Like yourself, I don't put much stock in numbers and records. But on my retirement papers, it noted that I'd brought in fifty-seven dark wizards in my time, and I only had to kill six of them."

Harry nodded and stepped over to Dudley, who was swaying slightly. Harry's cousin started at his touch, but allowed himself to be steadied.

Dudley looked at him. "Harry, when Mr. Moody arrived, he said he was hunting you. And you had your wand on him when you first met, but now you are friends. Why was he looking for you?"

"He's one of my teachers, Dud. Like I told you, I left school tonight. I'm probably only avoiding my own expulsion anyway."

Moody nodded gravely. "In all probability, you will be expelled. You will get a chance to tell your side of the story though."

Sirius looked from Moody to Harry, confusion on his face. "You mean, you actually put Ginny in the hospital? And Snape too?" he demanded.

All three present looked at Sirius, Dudley in surprise, Harry and Moody with curiosity. "How did you know what I did tonight?" Harry asked. "I didn't tell you."

Sirius sighed softly. "Harry, you know where I work. I found out you'd left the school and I knew I needed to find you fast. So fast that I didn't bother finding out if the rumors were true."

"Freeze!" a slightly slurred voice sounded. All present turned to face the voice except Moody who merely growled, "Took your bloody time didn't you, Bellot?"

As Moody turned to face the disheveled auror, Bellot gasped in surprise. "Auror Moody, sir! I didn't see you."

Moody stomped up to him. "Perhaps you'd like to explain why when I arrived both you and Atkins were flat out on the ground unconscious?"

Bellot swallowed nervously. "Um, we chased a suspect into the woods here, but were struck from behind, sir."

Moody snarled at him. "If you were chasing a Death Eater, the pair of you would be being measured for wooden boxes right now!" Moody shook his head. "Doesn't anyone teach you the meaning of -"

"CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" shouted Harry, a grin on his face.

Moody ginned while Bellot jumped and looked at Harry before exclaiming, "It's you! You're the one we were chasing!"

Moody whacked him on the back of the head. "Aye! Can you not recognise him, ya daft bugger?"

Harry rolled his eyes, but moved his long, tangled hair away from his forehead.

"Bloody hell!" the auror exclaimed. "You're Harry Potter!"

Harry sighed, but smiled faintly at Dudley's snickers. "That's it Dud, laugh. Just wait until I tell Lisa about you being caught outdoors by aurors wearing only your underwear."

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# Midnight Duel, Midday Love

## Book of Revelation: Chapter 6

### Book of Revelation: Chapter 6

The tea had already been replaced three times by the house elves. Now, another elf appeared and quietly packed up the tea set, gently collecting the silverware so even the faintest clink didn't escape. A fresh pot of tea was then set out with new china cups. A faint pop, and the elf disappeared.

Sirius ignored him.

In his arms slept his godson. For the first time in a month, Harry slept soundly.

Sirius closed his eyes and rolled his neck, listening to the vertebrae creak. With a sigh, he looked down and gently brushed Harry's hair out of his eyes.

James' son looks so peaceful lying there, Sirius thought. Peace was not something that had been a major feature in Harry's life. Nor in Sirius' either for that matter, at least for the last sixteen years.

Sirius ground his teeth together in frustration. Harry should have been able to grow up with James and Lily. He should have been loved, respected and nurtured. He should have grown up playing pranks and having pranks played on him. He should have been taken out at six months of age against Lily's wishes and taken on his first broom flight.

He should have flirted with the local village girls in Godric's Hollow. He should have known the rules of Quidditch before he could walk. He should have had the chance to yell at his mother for her being too protective and overbearing; to argue with his father about what broom was better.

He should have been able to sneak out with his godfather and get pissed on his fifteenth birthday on butterbeer and firewhiskey. He should have had to listen to his godfather being scolded by his mother while he was retching his guts out into the upstairs toilet.

Damn it, Harry should have *lived* his life!

He should not have had to face the darkest wizard of recent times at the age of eleven. He should not have had to face down and kill one of the most terrifying and lethal monsters in the world before he was a teenager. He should not have had to watch as a school mate was murdered. He should not have had to witness the rebirth of a wizard of almost palpable evil. He should not have been put into a prison that was considered, with no false pretenses, to be hell on earth.

He should not have been raped by a friend. Especially not by a friend who is a member of a family who supposedly considers Harry one of their own.

He should not just be waiting to die.

Sirius sighed and slowly drew his wand from his robes. As gently as he could, he levitated his godson up and over to an antique couch that was covered with leather softer than a baby's skin. Quickly he covered Harry with a warmed blanket and quietly left the room.

The silencing charm on the room had kept the sounds of Black's Pad from interrupting Sirius and Harry, and now Sirius could hear the sounds of the house. With a wry grin, he could hear Dudley's shouts of surprise at something or other.

Sirius apparated to the main entertainment room, itself half the size of a muggle football field. Dudley was shouting and laughing at the far end over the residual effect of one of the twin's concoctions.

Sirius shook his head. From everything Harry had told him about his cousin, he had expected a younger version of Vernon. Not this strapping, playful, friendly fellow. Sirius wondered what it meant, that Harry ran to his cousin, rather than his godfather, when in need of a place to stay.

"Not what you expected, eh Black?"

Sirius looked over his shoulder and out of the corner of his eye at Moody. "Who are you talking about? Harry, or Dudley?"

"Take your pick." the ex-auror said, as he stepped forward, his wooden leg clumping on the polished wooden floor. The grizzled wizard slowly lowered himself into one of the comfortable chairs. "I've just been talking to Albus in the fire. I'm guessing from your expression that you've just been given the same information."

"The rape." Sirius said flatly.

"Aye." Moody nodded. "It complicates things."

With a snarl, Sirius picked up one of the antique vases and hurled it against the wall. "Complicates things, my arse. It makes things impossible."

Moody just stared at Sirius, his face carefully expressionless. "I'm not sure what Po-, Harry told you about who it was..."

"He told me."

"Then you know who her father is."

Sirius nodded. "I also know things Harry hasn't figured out for himself yet."

"Like?"

"Like that Albus will probably expel him, just to cover up what happened. That bitch will be made out to be the victim, and Harry will have to live with the stigma of being expelled from Hogwarts."

Moody nodded. "I'm impressed. I didn't think you'd be thinking so clearly."

Sirius rubbed the back of his wrist across his forehead. "Moody, I know what is going on more than you think."

"You're an Unspeakable."

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "Do you know, or did you guess?"

"Educated guess. I know enough of them to recognise the signs."

Sirius nodded, a wry grin on his face. "I suppose you would."

"So, you work for the man whose daughter raped your godson. I wouldn't begin to try to understand the stresses that will put on your work."

Sirius pursed his lips, looking at Moody thoughtfully. Coming to a decision, he said, "Moody, I was brought straight into the Department of Mysteries simply because Arthur wanted someone there who would report directly to him, but who also wouldn't have a history with the other Unspeakables. Did you know that two of the Death Eaters Harry killed that day were from the Department? Unspeakables, Moody! Who knows what they told Voldemort?"

"They weren't undercover?"

"Nope. Standard operating procedure states that they report to someone who is not in the field. No notes, files or evidence was found to suggest that they were infiltrating with an aim to bring him down."

Moody narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "You found something on the raid."

Sirius nodded slowly. "The items we recovered from the raid indicated that Voldemort was getting his hands on items that had been confiscated by the Unspeakables. Arthur has put me in charge of cleaning out the Department. I'm experiencing... resistance."

"I bet. Why are you telling me this?"

"Because of Harry. He said that he didn't tell me about what happened because he wanted to forget it. That he didn't come here because he didn't feel comfortable at Malfoy's old place. Now, he knows who I work for." Sirius growled in frustration. "Now he thinks that his problems are too petty to bother me with."

Moody looked surprised. "You want me to be his sounding board?"

Sirius nodded. "He trusts you. He told me what you said when Snape suggested he shouldn't be with you and the other teachers when testing the first golem. The fact that you trust him and you believe in him, has made him look up to you." Sirius sighed. "Albus has kept too many secrets from him for Harry to feel completely comfortable opening up to him. Not that I blame him."

"Don't blame who? Harry or Albus?"

Sirius snorted. "Both. Telling an eleven year old boy why the most powerful dark wizard in recent history wants to kill you would be difficult to justify. While having the entire world betray you would make it difficult to trust again. I think that Harry and Albus will eventually see eye to eye, but it will be a long time coming."

Moody appeared to consider this. "Maybe. The pair of them have more of a 'comrade in arms' relationship than a 'student and teacher'. But you're not telling me everything."

Sirius nodded. "I want to tell you, just to get your opinion on how to proceed. I'd need to put a memory charm on you afterwards though."

"That bad?"

Sirius looked over at Dudley, who was still rummaging around in the tester kit Sirius had bought from the Weasley twins. "Worse. Do you know about Harry's scar?"

Moody blinked and frowned at the unexpected question. "Only that he got it when his parents were murdered, and it was caused by the curse thrown his way."

With a deep sigh, Sirius extracted a hip flask and took a sip. He offered it silently to Moody, who declined with a shake of his head. Sirius continued, "Whenever Voldemort is nearby, or in a particularly bad mood, Harry's scar hurts. Burns even. He has visions, Moody. He can... 'see' what is happening around Voldemort."

Moody's eyes widened. "He would have been the perfect spy!"



Sirius shook his head. "Azkaban killed it for a while, but when he got back together with Cho, she woke up something inside of him. Something good and pure. His scar started hurting almost immediately." Sirius shook his head and took another sip. "The last time it hurt was directly after Harry destroyed his forces. He saw Wormtail and Pritchard in a hut, with what we thought at the time were the last of his Death Eaters."

Moody looked interested. "At the time?"

Sirius grimaced. "We used polyjuice to identify the corpses from Harry's ambush, at least, those that were unidentifiable by sight. We cross checked them on the list he gave us before the raid, and noticed that there was another name missing."

"Who?"

"Macnair."

Moody's scarred face took on an expression of disbelief. "Bollocks. I saw Macnair's body myself."

Sirius shook his head. "Not the Macnair who worked for the ministry. His nephew."

Moody cocked his head to the side. "I didn't know he had a nephew. Didn't know he had any siblings."

Sirius nodded. "His sister was sent to Durmstrang. Got pregnant and came back to England without finishing her schooling."

Moody shrugged. "So there is another Death Eater out there. One more for us to bring in."

With a sigh, Sirius said, "From here on, I'd need to obliviate you."

Moody crossed his arms and leant back in the chair. "This fellow scares you that much?"

Sirius shook his head. "It's what we've deduced from what Harry has told us."

"Bad?"

"Potentially."

"How bad, 'potentially'?"

Sirius rubbed his eyes. "Anything from 'Unload your long term stocks' to 'Check out those four dudes on horses'."

Moody closed his eyes. "That's what I like about you, Black. You can make a declaration of imminent Armageddon sound amusing."

"Believe me, it's not funny."

"I agree. Alright. Tell me. I agree to have a memory charm placed on me."

Sirius nodded, and put away his hip flask, then withdrew his wand. Pointing it at Dudley on the other side of the room and muttering a charm, Harry's cousin yawned and sat on a couch. Seconds later, he was fast asleep.

"Right. Have you ever heard of the potion called 'Serpent's Tears'?"

Moody shook his head slowly. "It sounds vaguely familiar, but I have no idea what it does."

"It causes the magic in a wizard to leech out through his skin and crystallise. The process is documented to be most painful, probably on par with the Cruciatus. It kills magical creatures, but if imbibed by a person with magical talent, it turns the wizard into a muggle."

Moody's lower lip pouted slightly as he thought. "No one at the ministry knows how to brew it, do they?" he guessed.

Sirius shook his head, a small smile on his face. "Did you guess that the same way I did?"

Moody shrugged. "If the ministry had the recipe, instead of putting criminals with life sentences into Azkaban, they'd could administer that potion, and turn the criminals loose in the muggle world. They'd never bother the wizarding world again."

Sirius nodded. "It was the same line of reasoning for me too. Personal experience, I guess."

Moody smiled. "You said the magic crystallises. Can that be used for something?"

Sirius nodded. "It depends if the victim is willing or unwilling."

"Which is worse?"

"Willing, definitely. If the imbiber is unwilling, or willing but under duress, you can only create a potion from the crystals by dissolving them in an elixir of Serpent's Blood that will allow the drinker to absorb the victim's power, but that gain is only temporary. Your own power recovers from use, like a slowly filling well. Any power gained from taking the potion is gone once used, like a glass of water. It is only really good for a quick boost of power before a planned major expenditure."

"Only?"

Sirius shrugged. "The potion is complicated, and difficult to make. *If* the recipe was published, I'd guess that fewer than a dozen people in the world could create it, even with practice. The effort is generally not worth the return."

"And if the victim is willing?"

Sirius closed his eyes. "If the drinker willingly takes the potion, through honour, duty, loyalty or whatever, the crystals can be used in a ritual to open a rift to another plane of existence."

"Plane of existence?"

Sirius nodded. "This sort of thing isn't taught at school, or even at auror college. Only a few of the more learned sorcerers on the planet understand the concepts involved, but in mageling's terms, the different planes of existence are places where the 'universal numbers' are different."

Moody snorted with amusement. "That's in mageling terms?"

"Sorry, I just don't know how to explain it better to someone who doesn't have an understanding of the different universal numbers. Let's see. You know that the ratio between the diameter of a circle and its circumference is known as pi. Three point one four blah blah blah. Infinite precision."

"Yeah. I learned this at muggle primary school."

"Right. Now, imagine if pi was a different number."

Moody frowned. "How? It can't be different."

Sirius nodded. "Difficult to imagine, isn't it. Pi is a universal number. If it was different, the entire universe would be different. Anything from a pink sky to gravity being reversed. Whatever. Now, Harry told us that Macnair's nephew didn't exhibit magic at all. We found the recipe for Serpent's Tears in a potion lab during the raid on Buckingham Palace. Written on a sandstone slab in hieroglyphs. We know Narcissa Malfoy has the ability and talent to brew it. If Voldemort has convinced the younger Macnair to willingly take Serpent's tears, then he could have the ability to open a rift.

Moody looked shaken. "What is in these other planes of existence?"

Sirius sighed. "The only one documented, and by documentation I mean the same twelve and a half thousand year old stone tablet written in hieroglyphs, is a rift to a planar level where the beings there live on life energy."

"Live on life energy?" Moody repeated.

"Yes. They eat things that are alive."

"And that differs from us how?"

"They don't live on food. It is theorised by the Department eggheads that the dementors originally come from that plane. The first documentation of the existence of dementors is about as old as that stone record. They live on life energy. Souls."

Moody looked shaken. "If Voldemort opened a rift to a place with unlimited dementors..."

"Or worse." Sirius added.

"...then, bloody hell, the whole world would be destroyed."

Sirius nodded. "Yep." he said softly.

Ginny was spared a painful collapse on the floor by her father's timely catch.

"L't m' go." she mumbled. "G'tta h'lp Harry."

Arthur gently pushed Ginny into bed. "Not now, Sweetheart. There is nothing you can do for him."

Cho frowned, having noticed Ginny. "Why are you here, Ginny?"

Cho immediately noticed the temperature of the room drop. Not one of the three adults in the room met her gaze.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Miss Weasley was the victim of an unfocused magical blast. She is simply here for observation."

Cho's eyes widened. With quick strides, she moved to Ginny's side and picked up Ginny's hand. "Are you OK, Gin?"

Ginny nodded slightly, not looking up at Cho. She pulled her hand from Cho's comforting grasp.

"What's the matter?" Cho asked, confused.

Dumbledore stood, his knees creaking audibly. "You have a right to know the events of this evening, Miss Chang, but not just now. I would be very appreciative if you would locate Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley- Ronald, that is." corrected Dumbledore, giving Arthur an apologetic look. "I believe they will be happy to spend some time comforting Miss Weasley here. Once you have found and directed them to the hospital ward, I would like you to come and see me in my office."

Gin?"

Ginny slowly opened her eyes a little. She could make out two silhouettes in the faint light of the room. "R'n?" she mumbled.

Ginny felt each of her hands taken. "I'm here, Gin. So is 'Mione. Cho got us to come and visit you."

"Th't's n'ce" Ginny replied.

Hermione spoke up. "I know it seems like it isn't really the time but, Merry Christmas, Ginny."

"Yeah." said Ron. "I know it isn't really morning yet, since the sun hasn't risen, but we brought you your presents from the common room."

"That's right." said Hermione. "It looks as though your mum has sent you another jumper."

Ginny frowned. "Where is mum?" she asked, her voice getting stronger.

Ron swallowed nervously. "Dad told us not to tell her you were hurt. Said that you needed to be given space. I reckon she'll go mental when she finds out dad knew you were hurt but didn't tell her."

"Come on, Ginny. Open your presents." urged Hermione. She leaned over and turned on the bedside lamp.

Ginny looked at the small pile of presents in front of her. Given how guilty she felt, she couldn't bring herself to open even one.

"Come on Gin. Here, open mum's. We all know what that will be."

Ginny slowly tore the wrapping off her annual Weasley knitted sweater. Slowly, she ran her fingers over the soft wool, feeling the texture. It reminded her of home, her mother's love, family, peace. Everything Harry didn't have, and would never have.

Ron watched as tears formed in Ginny's eyes as she looked at the navy blue sweater. He bit his lip, nervous and not a little scared at how his little sister was behaving. He looked to Hermione for answers.

Unusually, it appeared she didn't have any.

"Here, Gin. Open this one." he said, pushing a small square present into her hands.

With quivering hands, Ginny slowly tore the carefully prepared paper. She withdrew a simple wooden box, polished to a deep shine. Ginny lifted the fitted lid to find a beautiful coil of polished unicorn ivory.

As the light fell on the beautiful gift, the two girls gasped with delight. Ginny gently lifted the bracelet out of its container and slipped it onto her left wrist. Looking in the bottom of the box, Ginny withdrew a small Christmas card.

Reverently, Ginny opened the card and read the contents.

*Dear Ginny,*

*Thank you for everything you have done for me. This year has been so much easier with your help, friendship and love.*

*This bracelet is charmed to prevent anything from attacking your mind. Even the Imperius curse cannot overcome its magic, as long as you believe in yourself.*

*While you wear it, you will never have another nightmare about the Chamber of Secrets. You will finally be free of Riddle's grasp forever.*

*Affectionately yours,*

*Harry*

Ginny's face screwed up yet again, and she howled in shame and guilt. Her two companions stared at her reaction in shock.

Ginny tore off the bracelet and put it back in its beautiful box. "I can't... I just can't" she whispered.

"Gin, why did Harry attack you like that?" Hermione asked her.

"Didn't you hear my dad, 'Mione?" Ron pointed out. "He said that it wasn't Harry."

Hermione gave Ron a look of frustration. "No, he said to think about what happened last time Harry did something out of character. When was that?"

Ron frowned. "When he was supposed to have killed Crabbe."

Hermione shook her head. "No, Ron. It was when he joined Voldemort. He did it for different reasons than everyone thought at the time. While we all condemned him, he was trying to save us. Your dad was trying to get you to see that he may have had a good reason to do what he did."

Ron opened and closed his mouth a few times before Ginny surprised them by whispering, "He did."

"He did what?" asked Hermione, confused.

"Have a good reason." finished Ginny.

Ron's eyes betrayed their confusion before becoming hard, and they bored into his younger sister's own. "What reason?" he asked in a flat, unfriendly tone.

Ginny looked uncertainly at her brother. "You know, don't you?"

"I think I do. I wish I didn't." he snarled.

"Ron! How dare you talk to Ginny like that?" said a shocked Hermione.

Ron's face coloured, and his breathing became heavy. "Well?" he demanded, staring straight at Ginny.

Ginny swallowed. "It was me. I took the potion."

Hermione blinked. "The potion?" she said disbelievingly as Ron stood up abruptly.

"I was thinking of ways to hurt him, Ginny. I was coming up with all sorts of things to do to him for hurting you. I wanted to hurt my best friend because of what he did to you. Now, it turns out that I was thinking about doing those things to the wrong person!"

Ginny shrank back, away from her brother's temper. Hermione stood and placed her hands on Ron's broad chest.

"Ron! Don't-" she started before he roughly slapped her hands away. Turning on his heel, Ron stormed out of the ward, slamming the door behind him.

Ginny started crying again. Through tear-filled eyes she looked up at Hermione.

Hermione looked blankly from the door to Ginny and back again, holding the wrist that Ron has struck to her chest. Finally her eyes settled on Ginny's.

"Why?" Hermione asked, her expression one of intense horror.

"Because I needed him to love me, just once. Only once."

Hermione sat back down. "Only once? What would you have done if you finished and had another chance to do it again? Would you have taken it?"

Ginny slowly wiped the tears from her cheeks, deep in thought for a long time. "I don't know." she finally admitted.

Hermione dropped her gaze to her own hands. "Gin, you've done something really bad. You don't need me to tell you that. But what are you going to do to fix things?"

"I don't know. Dumbledore wants to expel him."

"What?" screeched Hermione.

Ginny jumped in alarm, but nodded. "He said that Harry needs to be expelled, to cover for me. So Dad doesn't have to resign."

Hermione's hand flew to her mouth. "My God!" she said. "You can't be serious!"

Ginny nodded mournfully. "Without my father in charge of the ministry, it could collapse from within. Dumbledore thinks that only Dad can hold things together, but he can't if it comes out that... that..."

"That his daughter raped The-Boy-Who-Lived." finished Hermione. This set off a new wave of tears from Ginny.

Hermione was silent and let Ginny cry for a long time. After almost half an hour, Hermione finally broke the silence.

"Gin, this is serious. If Harry is expelled, it will remain with him for his entire life. We need to come up with a way, something, that will allow both Harry and you to remain in school."

Ginny nodded earnestly. "I'd do anything to help. Anything!"

Hermione shook her head. "Normally I wouldn't be a party to this. I think the most terrible thing that any politician can do is use someone else for their own advantage. Helping cover up something like this is just wrong." She looked up at the sterile, white ceiling. "But we need to help Harry now."

"What do we do?"

Hermione pursed her lips together tightly. "You need to stay out of sight, and out of the way. I'm going to try and recruit help."

"Why do I need to stay out of the way? I want to help!"

Hermione looked at her sternly. "I'm going to summon the Marauders, and they need to be thinking clearly. I don't think Sirius would think clearly if he

sees you nearby."

Ginny's breath caught in her throat as she remembered Cho's story of what happened when Sirius kidnapped her from the hospital ward. Having someone so powerful and so devoted to Harry know what happened simply instilled fear.

Ginny was finally beginning to realise the full meaning of the phrase 'face the consequences.'

Hermione took out the charm bracelet Harry had made for Ginny. "Put this on, Gin. If Harry loves you enough to make it for you, he may love you enough to forgive you."

Ron sat on his bed looking between Harry's empty bed and the Christmas gift Harry had made for him. A single small piece of polished amber was set into a platinum band. Inside the amber, frozen in time, was a tiny spider.

According to Harry's note, the ring would detect if any spiders or spider-kin were nearby, and drive them away with a high-pitched noise too high for humans, or even dogs and cats to hear. In essence, anyone wearing this ring would never be approached by a spider again.

Ron felt supremely unworthy of such a gift.

Watching his sister hurled backwards by Harry's magic had frightened Ron. Not because for the first time he had witnessed the reserves of power Harry had at his command, but because he thought that Ginny might not survive. Once he was informed that Ginny would quickly make a full recovery, he had instantly switched into vengeance mode.

For a few hours, Ron had entertained fantasies of hurting his best friend. Over and over he had imagined his fist landing on Harry's face, turning it into pulp.

Now he felt dirty.

Ginny had been the one who raped Harry. Ginny, who supposedly loved him. Ron closed his eyes.

Harry had once told Ron the reason he felt that he had cheated on Cho was because the person who raped him kissed differently from Cho. The mistletoe over the door to the Great Hall forced any couple who walked beneath it to kiss to enter.

How ironic, that a tradition with such a benign purpose would be the catalyst for such horrible events.

Now Ron wondered what would happen. Would Harry be expelled? Would Ginny? Will Harry still be Ron's friend, or would looking at Ron remind Harry too much of Ginny?

Ron ground his teeth together. Before that terrible night, he had not thought it was possible for a female to rape a man. Some of Ron's own favourite fantasies involved Hermione tying him up and having her way with him. But seeing the change that came over Harry after that night opened Ron's eyes.

Harry had become a virtual recluse. He wouldn't eat at normal times to avoid crowds, he hadn't spoken much above a whisper. Occasionally, Ron had got frustrated and almost told him to snap out of it, but Ginny had been there the whole time.

Ron cradled his head. Ginny. She had been so conscientious of Harry's wellbeing that not even Cho had been upset with the amount of attention he received. Now, knowing the single fact that it had been Ginny that had caused Harry to become so reclusive, the reason she spent time with him became a little sinister.

Ron groaned and fell back on his bed. He had initially thought that the war would split his family, Percy had left after all. But thanks to Harry, the Ministry firmly had the upper hand in the fight against Voldemort. Now, it would appear that his family would be torn apart by the selfish actions of his own little sister.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Family Ties

### Family Ties

Cho stopped in front of the large statue guarding the office of the headmaster. Frowning deep in thought, she wondered what password Dumbledore would be using now. She and Harry had enjoyed a few laughs over the headmaster's choices in the past, but now, even knowing the password was probably a sweet, Cho had no idea.

"Um, headmaster? Help?" she said hopefully.

Cho jumped and managed to bite back a yelp of alarm at the sudden sound of stone grating on stone. Slowly, the head of the statue turned to face her, its eyes moving independently to finally focus on her. She swallowed nervously.

The statue seemed to find what it was looking for, because it moved aside and revealed the moving staircase.

At the top of the stairs, Cho gently knocked on the door, which swung open at her touch. Dumbledore was looking at Professor Moody's head in the flames in his fireplace.

"Thank you Alastor. I shall see you in the morning."

The Defense professor nodded and disappeared. Even to the headmaster, he only spoke when it was necessary, Cho thought.

Dumbledore turned to face his new guest. "Welcome, Miss Chang. Please, take a seat. Would you like a sherbet lemon?"

Cho shook her head. "I need to find Harry."

Dumbledore chuckled. "It would appear that Mr. Potter's traits are rubbing off on you. Without further ado, I will inform you that Harry has been found. He is currently safe at Black's Pad, under the watchful eye of both his godfather and Defense professor. I have already dispatched another level of protection for him too."

Cho visibly sagged as relief flooded through her. "Can I go and see him?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Harry has had a very busy evening, Miss Chang. According to Sirius, he is out like a light. Given the emotional turmoil he has suffered this evening, I have no doubt he will remain asleep for some hours yet."

"Still, I'd like to be there for him when he wakes up, sir."

Dumbledore nodded. "I understand your desire, but I'm afraid that will not be possible." he held up a hand to stop Cho's protest before it began. "Please, sit. There are a great many things to discuss, and unfortunately, Harry may not be returning to Hogwarts."

Cho's mouth dropped open at that announcement. Without conscious thought, she found herself sitting in one of Dumbledore's comfortable armchairs.

"Now, first of all, your vision was surprisingly accurate, Miss Chang. Harry did indeed duel with Victoria Pritchard this evening. In front of a burning building, just as you predicted."

Cho nodded, not doubting it for an instant. "And he isn't hurt?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Not in the slightest, at least physically."

Cho frowned. "He has been hurt mentally?"

Dumbledore shook his head slightly, then stopped, thinking deeply. "I had meant emotionally, Miss Chang. However, he may well have been mentally harmed by tonight's events."

"What happened?" Cho asked, exasperated.

Dumbledore looked down at his clasped hands, then stood up and turned to look out the window into the inky dark sky. "I must ask something of you first, Miss Chang. Something that you will probably agree to willingly now, but feel a great temptation to actually do once you hear of tonight's events."

Cho tilted her head to one side. "What?"

Dumbledore turned his head towards her, but didn't completely face her. "I must ask that you do not go and visit Miss Weasley again. Not tonight, nor when she has recovered."

Cho sat back, blinking in surprise. "Can I ask why?"

"The answer will undoubtedly send you to her immediately. I need your assurance you will not go to her." Dumbledore turned completely about to face her.

Cho shook her head. "Can I go and see her one last time? She has been so supportive of Harry over the last few weeks that I'd just feel bad if I couldn't thank her."

Dumbledore paused, and then shook his head. "I don't believe Miss Weasley would react to your presence the way you believe she would. Please. Promise me you will not seek her out."

Cho frowned, but nodded. "Very well. I promise."

Dumbledore nodded, looking relieved. "It was Harry who attacked Miss Weasley tonight. He lashed out at her with an unfocused, wandless, magical blast."

"Why?" Cho whispered, shocked.

Dumbledore sighed, obviously frustrated. "There was the usual sprig of mistletoe hanging inside the door to the Great Hall. When Harry and Miss Weasley kissed, he recognised her kiss, and knew he had kissed her before."

The colour drained from Cho's face as she realised what the headmaster was saying. "No!"

Dumbledore nodded, suddenly looking older than Cho had ever seen him. "On recognising his rapist, Harry's instincts took over, his unconscious magical assault putting Miss Weasley in the hospital."

Cho put her face in her hands. When she looked back up, her expression was one of stone. "Why? Why did she do it?"

"Miss Weasley chose not to confide her motive to me. I suspect it has something to do with her crush on Harry growing into an obsession."

Cho abruptly stood, and began pacing. Finally, she rounded on the headmaster.

"Just what are you going to do about it?" she demanded, ignoring her inner voice that told her she was letting her anger out on someone who didn't deserve it.

Dumbledore took off his half-moon glasses and carefully laid them down on his massive desk. He gently massaged his temples with his fingertips before answering. "Nothing."

Cho stopped pacing, sure she had just heard wrong. "Pardon?"

"Nothing, Miss Chang. At least, nothing publicly."

Her inner voice silenced its objections. "Would you care to explain why?" she said carefully.

Dumbledore nodded. "So far, there have been three unpublicised attempts to remove Arthur Weasley from office. Two of those attempts were shown to have been financed by people with sympathies to the Dark Lord. The other was a more direct method. Fortunately for us, Arthur Weasley is a very misunderstood, and underestimated man. He managed to fight off the assassination attempt."

Cho swallowed and sat back down.

Dumbledore continued. "If any of the attempts had been successful, the current government model of the wizarding world would have collapsed. Anarchy would have reigned. Imagine the sort of problems the wizarding world would have to overcome without the services of the aurors or the magical reversal unit. Our presence would have undoubtedly come to the notice of the muggle world.

"From that standpoint alone, Arthur must remain in power. There is no one else with the required political skills that has both the reputation for honesty and lack of personal ambition that allows members of the public to trust him. At this time, after being lied to for so long by Fudge's administration, there is an amazing lack of trust among the wizarding public for the Ministry.

With a snarl, Cho growled, "What has this got to do with Harry?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Should it become public that the daughter of the Minister raped The-Boy-Who-Lived, Arthur will be forced to resign his position. Nothing could be worse, Miss Chang."

Cho's anger built up higher. "So you are going to just let her get away with it?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, once Miss Weasley has physically recovered, I shall be informing her mother of her actions. Though she will not be publicly punished, many people in the wizarding world will see my actions as violations of the Geneva convention on deploying cruel and unusual weapons." he said with a small smile, hoping to lighten the mood.

It didn't work. "Not funny," snapped Cho.

Dumbledore sobered. "I know, my small attempt at humour was quite ill-timed. But the fact remains that because of Arthur's precarious position, no action can be taken against his daughter."

Cho shook her head. "I can't believe this. Ginny is a **rapist**; Harry was her victim. For punishment, you are going to tell her mother, and from what you said before, expel Harry?"

Dumbledore nodded, a pained expression on his face. "Harry's actions forced this, Miss Chang. He-"

"Don't you **dare** try and blame this on Harry! Just don't you dare!" Cho screamed.

Silence filled the room for long moments after Cho's outburst.

"I'm sorry." Cho finally said, uncomfortable at how she had just spoken to the headmaster.

"Quite understandable, Miss Chang. Though I must say it is difficult to believe that it is the same student in front of me. The last time you were in my office alone, I could barely detect a spark of any emotion."

Cho blushed. "Are you really going to expel Harry?"

"I can't think of any other outcome, Miss Chang. Harry has the ability to live on his income from his assets and investments quite handsomely. In fact, I don't believe he could spend his yearly income if he tried. He will not want for anything."

"Except an education, companionship and his reputation." Cho said. "It sounds remarkably like you are trying hard to justify your decision."

Dumbledore sighed and picked up his glasses. "It pains me to have to do this, but the belief that Harry would agree with me does ease my conscious somewhat."

"You think he will agree with you?"

"I believe so, Miss Chang."

Cho shook her head. "He may have, before the entire world betrayed him. He may have, before he was raped by a friend. I wouldn't be at all surprised if he doesn't agree."

Dumbledore closed his eyes in resignation. What happened next left Cho feeling petrified, alone, and vulnerable.

A tear slid down Dumbledore's cheek.

Hermione knocked on the large oak door of her head of house's rooms. A crisp, angry voice responded with "Enter!"

Hermione swallowed nervously. She had never heard McGonagall speak like that before.

Turning the ornate door handle, Hermione cautiously entered McGonagall's study. The sight of McGonagall's study in disarray left her speechless.

On a normal day, McGonagall's desk would have been pristine; each stack of paper organised into perfectly squared piles.

Tonight, the Transfiguration teacher appeared to have swept the contents of her desk off onto the floor in a fit of anger.

"What is it, Miss Granger?" snapped McGonagall at the open-mouthed prefect.

"Um, I, er..."

"Out with it, girl!"

"I'd like to use your fire." blurted Hermione.

McGonagall frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

"I'd like to use your fire, please."

"What's wrong with the fire in the Gryffindor common room?"

Hermione bit her lip. "I assume you know why Harry attacked Ginny tonight?"

McGonagall growled in frustration. "Of course I know. It's why I'm not with Miss Weasley right now. I don't think I could keep my temper if I saw the girl."

"Well, you know that Professor Dumbledore will probably need to expel Harry. I was hoping I could contact Professor Lupin and Sirius Black. Between them, they may be able to come up with a way for Harry to stay."

"As much as I admire your motivation, why do you need to use my fire?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "Because I'd prefer to not have people come across us discussing ways to get Harry to stay."



McGonagall was silent for a moment before nodding curtly. "Brown velvet bag on the mantle. Help yourself." she said abruptly.

Hermione nodded and almost ran to the fire. Grabbing a pinch of powder from the indicated bag, she tossed it in the fire and called out, "Sirius Black!"

Parvati and Lavender giggled to themselves as they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower. The ball had been most interesting to the pair, giving them lots of juicy gossip to spread around.

The pair stopped abruptly on hearing the voice of Arthur Weasley in an empty classroom, talking to Dumbledore. The two Gryffindor witches looked at each other and crept forward quietly.

"I cannot believe the gall of that boy." said the Minister.

"I agree Arthur. However, no matter how poorly thought out his plan was, you cannot deny it was effective." Dumbledore replied.

A new voice spoke up. "I can't believe you were thinking of expelling him, Albus."

"At the time, I didn't think I had a choice, Sirius. I know as Harry's godfather you have a duty to protect him, but he and Miss Weasley managed to pull off an incredible deception this evening."

"Ginny was in on this too?" the Minister asked incredulously.

"Indeed, Arthur. Your daughter and Harry hatched a plan to capture Victoria Pritchard. Though their former teacher sprung their trap far earlier than expected, Harry was able to overcome and defeat her."

Sirius snorted. "Defeat her, he says. Albus, Harry killed her, two other Death Eaters and managed to capture a forth tonight. If he were an auror he would have been promoted at least to lieutenant by now. Probably Captain."

Parvati and Lavender exchanged glances, their eyes wide with shock. They huddled closer as Sirius continued.

"Unfortunately, by not being able to finish their plan, it now appears that Harry did in fact assault Ginny."

"What was the rest of their plan?" asked Arthur.

Dumbledore sighed. "Young Virginia was going to pretend to be completely mindless, in an effort to have Poppy send her to St. Mungos for evaluation. Harry was going to meet her there, where they would let their presence be known, inviting attack by Voldemort. Pritchard located Harry and attacked before Virginia could be moved."

Arthur growled. "I cannot believe Harry would put my little Virginia in so much danger."

"Don't be so hard on Harry, Arthur. It was Virginia's idea in the first place." replied Dumbledore.

"Come, gentlemen. Let us go to my office, and raise a toast to Harry and his success tonight. Then, we will try and come up with a reason he should not be expelled."

Parvati and Lavender gasped softly, turned and ran before they were spotted. Less than two minutes later, they were entering Gryffindor Tower, bursting with the most juicy news just waiting to be spread.

"Come, gentlemen. Let us go to my office, and raise a toast to Harry and his success tonight. Then, we will try and come up with a reason he should not be expelled." Dumbledore said, looking questioningly at Remus.

Remus held a hand up as he looked intently at the Improved Marauder's Map. The tiny dots indicating Parvati and Lavender moved away quickly, and out of earshot quickly. He smiled and looked up. "Perfect. Once again, simply perfect."

Hermione clapped her hands, stood up from her seat next to Remus and grinned. "Well done, gentlemen. You sounded absolutely genuine."

Dumbledore, and Sirius looked satisfied with themselves. "Are you sure this will work?" Arthur asked nervously.

Sirius and Remus nodded. "Oh yes." the werewolf said. "Those two are the biggest gossips in Gryffindor. We already performed this little show for the popular gossips in the other houses. By morning everyone in the school is going to think that Harry and Ginny planned the fireworks tonight, and that their plan didn't finish so now it looks like he will be expelled. It won't matter what reason you give for not expelling him, no one will be expecting you to anyway."

Dumbledore nodded, the most relieved look on his face. "Perhaps we should retire to my office. That toast is probably in order."

Sirius smiled but shook his head. He opened his pocket watch. "Actually, I have a favour to ask of all of you. I know it is early Christmas morning, but I was hoping you could do something for me. Well, for Harry actually."

Slowly, Harry emerged from his deep slumber feeling more peaceful than he had in months. Without opening his eyes, he luxuriated in the complete comfort he found himself in.

Whatever he was lying on was perfect, soft enough that he sank into it, but firm enough that he was supported. The cold air he was breathing in told him the room wasn't heated, but the blanket covering him was generating enough heat that Harry felt cocooned in its pleasant warmth.

With a deep sigh, Harry tried moving, but found his legs under a heavy weight.

Opening his eyes, he brushed away the sleep there with one hand, and groped for his glasses with the other. Once on his nose, Harry looked down at his blanket-covered body.

Snuffles the grim was lying on his legs, his huge bushy tail wrapped around his head. Harry grinned at how safe he felt near his godfather.

A musical trill sent shivers of delight down Harry's spine, awakening him fully. With a smile he arched his head and saw Fawkes sitting on the headboard of his bed.

"Good morning, Fawkes." he said, his voice a little gravelly from so much use last night.

Last night. Memories of opening up to Sirius came flooding back.

Harry had told Sirius everything. From the verbal abuse at the hands of the Dursleys, to the events when he faced down Quirrel, the basilisk, the tournament, and Azkaban.

The night Ginny raped him. That was the hardest.

Harry had talked for hours. Though for his entire life he had been reluctant to open up like that, it had felt curiously satisfying.

Harry thought about that that sensation. Growing up in a house where questions were greeted with verbal abuse and insults had conditioned Harry to keep everything inside. But last night, everything had flooded forth.

Harry grimaced. He had told Sirius things he thought he had forgotten. Events of his childhood that had been buried had come to the surface and divulged. With a wry snort, Harry realised he had absolutely no secrets.

And he felt great.

Harry clasped his hands behind his head and lay back down, staring up at Dumbledore's familiar. Was this what it was like to confide in your parents? To share your fears, your pain?

A day ago, Harry would have thought such inner peace didn't exist. The sensation of waking up next to a loved one was curious. Harry had heard that young children sometimes slept with their parents when feeling scared or helpless. Now, he understood why.

With a cough, snort and a small sneeze, the large black canine on his bed awoke. The pale blue eyes caught sight of Harry wide-awake. Snuffles jumped off the bed and with a faint pop, Sirius appeared.

"Merry Christmas, Harry." his godfather said with a wicked grin.

Harry smiled back. "Merry Christmas, Sirius. What time is it?"

Sirius glanced at a clock behind Harry's head. "Almost eleven."

Harry sat up with a chuckle. "I don't think anyone in the world sleeps so late on Christmas day."

Though Harry didn't notice, Sirius' heart leapt with joy at his godson's banter.

"Go and have a shower and get dressed." Sirius said. "Then come downstairs to the main living room. I have a surprise for you."

Harry stood as Sirius apparated away. He turned and stroked Fawkes' scarlet and gold plumage. "Merry Christmas, Fawkes. I'm sorry I didn't get you a gift. Is there anything you would like?"

Fawkes blinked. *Seeing you enjoying life is gift enough for me, young phoenix-wizard.* the familiar trilled. *My lord-master will be pleased as well.*

Harry blinked in surprise. "Can you talk to Dumbledore like this too, or just to me because my other form is a phoenix?"

*I talk to my lord-master all the time. Whether he understands me as you do, you should ask him.*

Harry grinned. "Thank you, Fawkes. I will. I assume he sent you to look over me. Are you returning to him soon?"

*I shall return when my mission is complete, phoenix-wizard. Your dog-father and your blue-eye-teacher are protecting you here.*

Harry continued to smile. The thought of having a father, even though it was not James Potter, warmed him. "Thank you Fawkes. It is always good to see you." He stroked the beautiful plumage once more before entering the room's ensuite to shower.

Harry made his way down to the main living room in the mansion. Though Harry had initially expected that being in the house would cause memories of his time spent at Malfoy Manor to resurface with a vengeance, Sirius had made enough changes that the place now only superficially resembled its original state.

The heavy drapes that gave the place a claustrophobic feel had been removed, and now unfettered sunlight streamed in through the large windows. Harry looked out one of the enormous arched windows and saw a pristine white landscape, the normally weak December sun shining brightly in the cloudless sky.

As Harry's vision swept over the snow-covered landscape, he noticed something with a start he never expected.

There was a Quidditch pitch set up in one of the fields.

The six goal rings stood proudly, three at each end of the full sized pitch. The major difference was the size of the stands. Well the stand.

A single box that probably only held a score of seats stood on a half dozen wooden pillars. Obviously, this was a coaching box, the pitch designed for practice.

Harry smiled. He couldn't imagine that the Malfoy's would have installed such facilities. Trust Sirius to add something to the Manor that would make Harry happy.

Harry finally entered the main living area, having walked for a good five minutes from his room. When he entered, he stopped still in surprise.

"Merry Christmas!" shouted the crowd there.

Harry smiled as he looked around the room. Cho was the first to break ranks, and simply flew into his arms. The pair held each other tightly, smiles mixing with tears of relief and happiness.

Remus Lupin came forward to give them both a hug and place a silly paper hat on his head. Fred and George were next, they grabbed him by the arms and led him to a large armchair in the middle of the room.

Everyone was talking at once. Harry simply held onto his girlfriend's hand and looked from face to face.

Dudley was there his arm around a smiling Lisa Turpin. Sirius was putting another hat on a vaguely familiar young witch, while Mrs. Weasley bustled forward and gave Harry one of her trademark bone-crunching hugs.

Mr. Weasley shook his hand, as did several other people from the ministry. Ludo Bagman kept trying to wheel Harry away for a private chat, but was unsuccessful.

Ron and Hermione both hugged him, thanking him for their gifts, though berating him for the gift he had given the other.

"He'll never get over his phobia now!" said Hermione.

"She'll never get over her obsession now!" complained Ron.

Cho laughed, and put her mouth next to Harry's ear as if to kiss him. "What did you make her?" she whispered.

Harry smiled. "I made her a book bag that could hold about a thousand books, but didn't weigh any more than a normal backpack."

Cho nodded in understanding, then pouted. "Where's my present?" she asked coyly.

Harry laughed. "I'll give it to you once we are alone." Cho gave him a look, obviously joking about his presumption.

A group of Asian witches and wizards descended on the couple. Cho jumped up and hugged the lead figure.

"You made it!" she said. Turning to Harry, she continued, "Harry, you remember my family?"

Harry nodded. "I certainly do. I learned more about the properties of various potion ingredients in four days than I did in four years of Potions classes."

Cho's family lit up at Harry's praise, but his heart skipped a beat when a smooth voice from behind him said, "Really? How very interesting."

Forcing himself to wear a smile, Harry turned. "Professor! I'm glad you are alright."

The Potion master still had bandages around his head, and walked with the aid of a cane. "Yes. I'm sure you are."

"I'm sorry for last night."

Snape waved away the apology. "Had I not underestimated you, I would not have been hurt. It appears that due to our history, and my prejudices, I still don't give you your due respect."

Harry swallowed. "I bet that hurt to say."

Snape snarled, but Harry could tell his heart wasn't in it. "Go and enjoy yourself, Potter. Should you return, I have several projects to work on, and your assistance would be most welcome."

In his relief at the lack of ill will from Snape, Harry didn't ask about why he would not be returning.

Bill Weasley put his arm around him, steering him away from the Potion master. "Ah, Harry. We need to have a little chat."

"About?"

"Those traps you laid for You-Know-Who. Dad got me out of bed early to clean up after you. I figure you owe me at least four hours of sleep."

Harry grinned. "What will you take in trade?"

"Something my father promised, but was unable to deliver."

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise. "What couldn't your father give you?"

"He promised to make Mum stop going on about my hair. Now, since you have a ponytail yourself, could you talk with her, tell her to stop bugging me? We'll call it quits."

Harry smiled. "I'll do my best."

Bill snorted. "That's what Dad said. It wasn't enough."

Harry smiled and braced himself as Parvati and Padma descended on him. The pair threw their arms around him, earning themselves a sour look from Cho.

"Oh, Harry! You were so brave. I can't believe you managed to beat Pritchart!" Padma said.

Harry allowed himself to be kissed by the pair before gently disentangling himself.

Over the next few hours, Harry met friends of his parents and grandparents. He met his father's retired teammates from his Quidditch days, playing Chaser for England, a fact that stunned Harry. What had surprised everyone else was the fact that Harry hadn't known.

His mother's friends from Hogwarts included a rather tipsy Professor Sinistra, who confided in Harry that she had a crush on Sirius at the time his parents got together.

In a revelation that surprised both Harry and Neville, his formidable grandmother had actually dated Harry's grandfather at Hogwarts.

A massive, loud party flowed around Harry. People were constantly coming and going, taking an hour or two out of spending time with their families to visit Harry.

When Oliver Wood made an appearance, several young witches in the room started screaming lustfully at the charismatic Quidditch player, much to Harry's amusement.

Charlie Weasley's appearance had a similar effect, causing nearly everyone to scream, by his landing on the front lawn while riding a dragon.

Even Dobby made an appearance, giving Harry another gift of mis-matched socks. His high-pitched, enthusiastic voice adding to the mirth in the room.

Harry finally got to meet Hermione's parents, both of whom were awestruck by the magical house and its contents.

Harry looked at Cho, and the smile that had been present on his face for hours widened further. Since his first Christmas at Hogwarts, the day had been one of joy for Harry. This Christmas however, left Harry's heart singing.

One person most certainly wasn't enjoying Christmas.

Draco sat at the single table in the Great Hall for his Christmas lunch, looking around at the empty seats. The lone boy sat in the empty hall, his untouched meal sitting in front of him, slowly cooling.

Since publically revealed that he had abetted Harry's framing for murder, Draco had become an outcast, from his own house, to his extended family and friends.

A large black raven flew through the window and dropped a thick bundle of parchment in front of the blond Slytherin.

Draco frowned in confusion, picked up the bundle and broke the seal. His already light complexion paled further as he read.

Harry sat, his head bowed. Perspiration trickled down his face, dripped from his hair. Once more he tested his bonds, again noting that struggling was futile. Not for the first time, he pondered the course of events that led to his incarceration.

The large, oak chair was padded for comfort, but Harry had spent the most uncomfortable hour of his life tied here, his wrists and ankles fastened securely to the chair frame.

Yes, according to the clock on the wall, he had only been here an hour. It was still Christmas day. It felt like he had been here a century. He had been put through torture like nothing he had ever experienced. He swallowed painfully, trying to lubricate his dry throat.

Once again, the door to the next room opened, and his tormentor walked in. No, strutted in, knowing he was totally helpless. He let out a groan, muffled by the gag in his mouth.

He gasped in shock as the front of his robes were torn open, and long fingernails lightly scatched down his toned chest, before reaching his underwear.

With a quick tear, Harry was left completely exposed to view, his heart hammering painfully in his chest.



## Midnight Duel, Midday Love The Morning after the Night Before

### The Morning After the Night Before

Cho strutted into the room, looking at her boyfriend tied to the chair. With a wicked grin, she walked over and took hold of the front of his robes and tore them to the waist. She ran her fingernails down his chest, making him quiver with anticipation.

Finally, Cho tore off his underwear, releasing Harry's erection from its confines.

Through his gag, Harry groaned mixed with both frustration and relief from the discomfort of exceedingly tight underwear. When Cho removed her robes to model the latest in a string of brief lingerie, Harry's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

Once more, Cho stood in front of her captive audience, slowly dancing to the soft music that filled the room. She threw her head back and opened her mouth to let out a low moan, and ran her hands down her body. Slowly, her hands cupped her small breasts, now daintily covered in dark grey, semi transparent silk.

Her hands continued their slow journey down her taut stomach, over her hips and around her thighs. With a coy smile, Cho turned and gently caressed her buttocks, then wiggled her bum less than a foot from Harry's face. The tight silk panties felt good against her skin.

She stepped forward to put more distance between them, then bent at the waist, her legs locked straight. At full stretch, she grabbed her ankles and looked between her legs at Harry, now almost crazy with desire.

Cho could smell the sweet, dewy scent of her own arousal, and the knowledge that Harry could as well made her even more aroused.

Cho stood up straight and slowly lowered herself onto Harry's knee, taking care not to touch his erection.

Smiling, she ran a finger down one of his damp cheeks, then leaned in and placed a delicate kiss on the end of his nose.

"You know," she whispered huskily. "You really shouldn't have bought me all these wonderful things if you didn't want me to model them for you." she told the struggling young man.

With that she slipped off his knee and knelt in front of him. With a wicked grin, she leant in and lightly nipped at his right nipple. Harry almost shot off the chair at her touch. With the most self-satisfied smile, Cho finally bobbed her head and ran the tip of her tongue from the base to the tip of Harry's erection. His muffled groan told her just how successful she was at teasing her boyfriend.

Suddenly standing up off Harry's knee, she walked around behind the chair and lightly brushed the backs of her fingers down each side of his neck. Harry's entire body shivered at her faint touch. Cho reached around and gently took the gag from Harry's mouth.

"Untie me, please!" he pleaded, his voice rough from lack of water. "I have to hold you."

Cho shook her head and picked up a glass of water from the nearby table and placed it to Harry's lips, slowly tilting it as he drank.

"Sorry." she said when he had finished. "I'm having far too much fun."

Harry growled. "You have been torturing me like this for the last hour. If you keep this up, I'm going to explode, then I'll be of no use to anyone." he complained.

"That sounds like a challenge." Cho giggled. "Besides, I've still got over half of your gifts left to model for you. It would be rude of me to stop now."

"No it wouldn't! No it wouldn't!" Harry blurted. "You could save some for next time!"

"Hush now, my love. Just sit back and relax." Cho whispered in his ear before kissing and gently sucking on his earlobe. She smiled and once more went next door to change into yet another sexy outfit.

It was an hour and a half later that Cho finally tried on the last outfit Harry had bought her. Both were more than ready for the frantic coupling that then occurred, though Cho didn't release Harry from his bonds. And then again after she did.

Harry slowly woke, his left arm numb to the fingers. With his right, he fumbled for his glasses.

Frowning slightly, he turned to find Cho's beautiful features in perfect repose, her head lying on his left shoulder with a small soft cushion under her neck. Cho's warm breath gently caressed the side of his own neck. Harry looked down the bed over her bare back, down to her partially covered buttocks, and smiled.

Waking up with a loved one was even better than falling asleep with them, he thought.

Luxuriating in the warmth the pair shared, Harry looked out of the bedroom window, the overcast sky preventing the sun from casting any shadows on the world. Yesterday had been one of the most enjoyable days of Harry's life. The sheer number of people he had links to was staggering.

With what felt like a permanent smile, Harry gently tucked a stray lock of dark, silky hair behind his girlfriend's ear. Cho stirred at his touch, a soft moan escaping her lips. Harry just looked at her, marveling at her beauty, as she calmed and again resumed her steady breathing.

For almost half an hour, Harry simply watched and waited for Cho to wake. As her eyelids flickered, Harry whispered, "Good morning, my love."

Cho's glorious eyes opened, tiny grains of sleep still in the corners of them. She smiled back at him. "Good morning yourself, handsome."

Harry leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. "I thought you were going to kill me with frustration last night."

Cho giggled lightly. "It certainly didn't kill you. You were very attentive after that."

Harry put his right arm around her and drew her closer, smelling the faint scent of her hair. "Do you feel like a shower?"

Cho reached up with her left hand and cupped his cheek. "Only if you join me."

An hour later, washed and dressed, the pair made their way to the kitchen hand in hand. Sirius was already up, dressed in a thick robe, sipping coffee and reading the paper. He turned to face the new arrivals.

With a pained expression he said, "Couldn't you two keep the noise down last night? You kept Moony and I up for hours."

Harry and Cho glanced at each other, both blushing furiously. "Sorry, we-"

Sirius snorted, unable to suppress his grin.

Harry rolled his eyes. "You bastard."

Sirius chuckled. "Come on, breakfast is served. Help yourself."

The pair sat and began to eat. House elves popped in and out to keep the platters full and the coffee hot.

Sirius looked up from his paper. "Oh, by the way, Cho. Your parents have given you permission to stay with me for the rest of the break, if you wish."

Cho lit up, delighted. "Thank you. I had enough trouble convincing them to let me stay just last night."

Sirius nodded. "I think they were worried that Harry would steal you away from them."

Harry looked up, wanting to say something in his defense, but was obstructed by the mouthful of sausage he had just eaten.

"Don't speak with your mouthful, Harry." Cho gently chided.

Harry chewed and swallowed. "I'm not stealing you!"

Cho smiled at him warmly. "You are, but not in the way my parent's think."

Sirius nodded. "Moony was pleased to see you again, Harry. He was sorry he hasn't been able to make time to visit."

"What has he been up to?"

Sirius growled deep in his throat. "He has had to travel abroad to get a job. Even then, it doesn't pay much. I offered to let him live here with me, but the stubborn bugger will have none of it."

Harry tilted his head to one side. "Why not offer him a job?"

Sirius frowned. "What do you mean?"

Harry sighed. "He's proud, Sirius. He needs to prove to himself and everyone else that he doesn't need charity to survive in the world. Being a werewolf is difficult enough, but the stigma attached makes it even more difficult to actually live."

"Yes, I know. He jumped at the chance to teach at Hogwarts in your third year not because it was a source of regular income, but because he had the opportunity to hold down a full time job."

Harry nodded. "So offer him a job. He's a smart fellow, he could do almost anything."

"Like what? He'd spot any attempt at charity immediately."

Harry frowned, then lit up. "I assume you've invested the money awarded to me?"

Sirius winced. "Not yet. It is sitting in several hundred Gringotts vaults."

"So ask him to help me. Since he's responsible for you, he should be responsible for me too. Give him a percentage of the profits. That way, the harder he works, the better off he is. We both get something out of it, and he gets to stay nearby."

Sirius grinned. "You sure are a Potter. Best of all, he is helping himself by doing something he loves doing, helping others."

Harry blushed. "Besides, I'll probably need him here, to finish my schooling."

Sirius barked a laugh, ignoring Cho's fierce gaze at his outburst. "What makes you think you are not going back to Hogwarts?"

Harry frowned. "The fact that I attacked another student with magic."

"That's right." Cho added. "Dumbledore told me that he had no choice." She turned to Harry. "He even started crying. I couldn't believe it."

"He what?" asked Sirius, disbelievingly.

*Slowly, the tear disappeared into Dumbledore's silvery beard. The ancient wizard stood once more and again looked out of his window.*

*"I just can't do this, Miss Chang," he said with a shuddering sigh. "For a long time now, I have felt the weight of the world on my shoulders. I have always thought myself up to the challenge, but not now. No matter what decision I make, I know it will be wrong."*

*Dumbledore turned back to face the silent witch.*

*"I just don't have the strength to do this. For too many years I've been serving the wizarding world to the best of my ability. But it would appear that my best is no longer good enough."*

*Cho swallowed nervously.*

*"Please, return to your house common room. I shall organise for you to visit Harry tomorrow."*

*Cho slowly stood and walked to the door. She turned to find Dumbledore slumped in his chair.*

*"Good night, Professor," she whispered.*

Sirius nodded soberly. "That must have been when I called him." Harry's godfather sat deep in thought for a few moments before looking up at the pair and shook his head.

"Dumbledore will probably want to explain everything to you, but you are not going to be expelled. Let's just say that the Marauders struck again."

Both Cho and Harry lit up at the news. "What did you do?" Cho asked.

"Hermione called me in a panic after finding out that you were going to be expelled. I contacted Moony and got him to apparate here straight away. Moony and I looked at the problem and noticed that it was one of perception. You attacked Ginny and put her in the hospital. So we changed people's perceptions. Several of the gossips of the school 'accidentally' overheard Albus, Arthur and I talking about you. About the way you and Ginny hatched a plan to capture Pritchard, but it didn't quite work because she sprung the trap too early."

Harry frowned, confused. "That sounds a bit far fetched."

Sirius shrugged. "According to Albus, the school was alive with speculation. Not a single person seemed to think that you should be expelled. In fact, several parents owed him to say that if he did expel you, they would pull their own children out of Hogwarts in protest."

"Why didn't he come and visit yesterday?" Harry asked.

Sirius shrugged. "From what Cho said, it's possible he feels too embarrassed to visit. He was planning on expelling you to cover for Ginny."

Harry tilted his head to one side. "Cover for Ginny? Why?" he asked levelly.

Cho put her hand on top of Harry's own. "Because Mr. Weasley would have had to resign if it came out that his daughter was a rapist."

Harry swallowed and looked down at his plate, thinking deeply. Sirius and Cho just watched, waiting for him.

"What was Mr. Weasley's reaction?" he finally asked.

Sirius shrugged. "I wasn't there, but Snape told me that he wasn't going to have anything to do with it, and that he was insisting that Ginny be charged. Snape said that it was only when he pointed out that Arthur's resignation would harm you just as much by bringing the Ministry to its knees that he agreed."

Harry sat in silence for a few more moments. "Do the other Weasley's know?" he asked softly.

Sirius shook his head. "As far as I'm aware, only Arthur knows. Although Ron and Hermione both sat with Ginny for a while after she was put in hospital, I suppose it is possible that they know as well. Other than that, both Dumbledore and Arthur are insisting that it be kept from the others for now."



Harry nodded. All three at the table jumped at the unexpected sound of a Wheeze going off.

Dudley appeared in the doorway, his face blackened with soot, but with a huge smile on his face. "Harry! These things are great! Oh, and why didn't tell me you invited Lisa yesterday?"

Harry gave his cousin a wry smile. "I didn't Dud. I think you can blame Sirius here. And wipe your face."

Dudley sat down with a satisfied sigh, wiped his face with a napkin and started helping himself to breakfast. "I tell you what, her eyes nearly popped out of her head when she saw me there. It was the first time I'd ever seen Miss "In Control" Lisa Turpin completely speechless. You were right, she had no idea that I was related to the famous Harry Potter."

Cho looked surprised. "Lisa Turpin? From Ravenclaw?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "Didn't you see her here yesterday?"

Cho blushed and shook her head. "I was too busy focusing on you."

Harry just looked at her, his green eyes conveying just how much he loved her.

Dudley made retching noises at the pair, but his smile defused any tempers. Sirius grinned at him.

"So, Dudley, I heard that Hagrid gave you a pigs tail the first time you met."

Dudley stiffened, but nodded. "Yeah, it cost Dad a small fortune to have it removed. He took me to a private clinic in London."

Harry smiled. "What about the ton-tongue toffee you ate?"

Dudley chuckled a bit at that memory. "I found the same thing in their starter pack that Mr. Black had. It wore off quicker this time though."

Cho poked Harry in the ribs, making him jump. "Sounds like you tormented him as much as he tormented you."

Harry was about to respond, but Dudley beat him to it. "Don't you believe that. I was awful to him for years, at least up until the summer after his forth year at Hogwarts. I deserved everything I got and more."

Cho looked at Dudley in surprise, but said nothing. Harry nodded at his cousin thankfully. "Are you going home at all this Christmas holidays, Dud?"

Dudley shook his head. "I was going to spend the time at Smeltings, and visit Xavier's place for a few days, hopefully to meet with Lisa. Mum and Dad aren't expecting me home. If I can, I'd like to stay here until school goes back."

Sirius looked at Dudley in surprise, but nodded his approval.

The four at the table consumed the breakfast laid out for them in silence for several minutes. A rhythmic thunk of wood on wood signaled the arrival of Professor Moody, his artificial leg leaving tiny marks on the polished wooden floor.

"Mad Eye!" Sirius greeted him. "Breakfast?"

Moody nodded and moved to one of the dozens of empty seats that surrounded the mahogany table. "Just checked the wards around the Manor. I don't think I've ever seen a better set up for defense."

Sirius grinned. "I know. Sometime in the Malfoy line there was an impressive attempt to make the place impregnable. Took me a long time to break the blood magic on the Manor too, but I think I got everything."

Dudley looked nervous at that, his knife and fork shaking in his fingers. "B-blood magic?"

"It's OK, Dud." Harry reassured his cousin. "It just means that only people from a certain family could do certain things. This house used to belong to a family called Malfoy. Only those of Malfoy blood would have been able to access certain parts of the house, or possibly order the defenses to work."

Dudley frowned. "Malfoy, Malfoy, do you have someone in your year called Malfoy?"

Harry nodded surprised. "I used to. How did you know?"

"From your nightmares. You would shout in your sleep sometimes. I think I remember you shouting the name Malfoy sometimes."

Harry nodded, impressed. "Yep, Draco Malfoy was in my year, but I'm in the year below now. His father Lucius was the one who framed me. At the hearing that cleared me, they gave Sirius and I half each of the impounded assets of the Malfoy family and Voldemort's money."

Dudley looked around the massive house. "You own half of this?"

Sirius shook his head. "I got the house, and a fair bit of gold besides. Harry got nearly all the gold and other properties."

Harry frowned, looking at Sirius. "Just how much did we actually get? What properties do I own?"

Sirius stood and walked over to a wall. With a wave of his wand, the wall shimmered and disappeared startling all at the table, even Moody.

"Grindelwald's grave! I didn't see that!" the ex-auror shouted.

Sirius nodded. "I'm not surprised. I found this place by accident." He stepped into the revealed room, and sat at a large desk. "The wall is real, this room is not. This is where Malfoy kept all the records of his dealings with Voldemort. It was an absolute treasure trove of information." Sirius said absently as he rummaged through one of the desk drawers. With a small cry of victory, Sirius withdrew a sheaf of parchments.

"Here we are." he said, standing and returning to the breakfast table. The wall shimmered and became solid once more.

Moody was impressed. "So that room isn't behind the wall, it's elsewhere?"

Sirius nodded. "If you know how and where, you can get into it from four places from within the Manor, one for each of the sides of the room." he said as he leaved through the papers. "I've only managed to find three so far." Finding the ones he wanted, Sirius passed them over to Harry.

Both Harry's and Cho's eyes widened as they looked over the documents for several moments. With a gasp, Cho covered her mouth. "Harry! You own my parent's apothecary!"

Harry blinked. "I do?"

Cho nodded and put one of the papers on top of the pile. "Look, here. The row of shops in Diagon Alley that includes my family's was originally bought by a syndicate. It would appear that you are the sole investor left alive in that group."

"Left alive?" asked Harry.

"Well, from the names, you left them all at that ambush site." Cho replied with a vaguely worried expression. It faded quickly when Harry nodded and scowled at Sirius' snort of amusement.

Dudley grinned at Harry. "Let me get this straight. You own the shop that your girlfriend's parents run? Wicked! Tell them you'll raise the rent if they don't let you go out with her."

Harry rolled his eyes, ignoring Cho's semi-serious spluttering. "Dud, her parents are letting me go out with her. She spent the night here."

Dudley's grin didn't waver, but he appeared to give that some thought. "Well, I don't suppose you own Lisa's parent's home too?"

"Fraid not, Dud." Harry said with a smirk.

Dudley shrugged. "Ah well, you can't win 'em all." he said, helping himself to more sausages.

The five sat and ate in silence for a while, Harry and Cho leafing through the documents Sirius produced. Moody suddenly stiffened, then relaxed. "Company." he said shortly.

Sirius grinned and looked up as Allison Sanderson entered the room. The former Death Eater looked a little confused, but on seeing Harry's godfather, she visibly relaxed.

"Sanderson! Welcome. Come and join us for breakfast."

Allison gave a shy smile, and moved to sit next to Sirius. "Good morning." she said to the others. A chorus of "Good mornings" greeted her.

With a wry smile on her pretty face, Allison said to Sirius, "You know, it took me half an hour to find my way down here from the apparition room. This place is huge."

Sirius nodded. "I know. Allison, this is Cho Chang, Dudley Dursley, Harry Potter and Alastor Moody. Guys, this is Allison Sanderson, one of my minions." he said with a maniacal grin.

Harry looked at the new arrival with a faint frown throughout the introduction as the others laughed, his head tilted to one side. Realisation dawned, and Harry gasped softly and covered his mouth.

Allison swallowed and nodded. "Yes, Mr. Potter. That was I."

"I'm sorry." Harry said simply.

Allison waved his comment away. "I made some silly decisions, and I've been given a second chance."

Moody, Cho and Dudley looked at Harry questioningly. He simply raised his eyebrows while facing Allison, who sighed and nodded her accent.

Harry took a deep breath. "The night Voldemort attacked the ministry, he and his Death Eaters tortured one of the recruits in a ritual, for not having enough loyalty. I just recognised her."

Cho looked horrified. "What did they do to you?" she asked.

Harry put his hand on Cho's own. "More than what happened to you that night." he said simply.

Allison looked up at Cho. "Something happened to you?"

Cho nodded. "Harry captured me that night, brought me back to V-Voldemort's lair. He spent four hours branding patterns into my skin with a curse while Voldemort watched before my portkey brought me back."

Allison looked sick, while Dudley looked at Harry in horror. "You did what?" he demanded, half standing.

Cho reached out and grasped Dudley's hand. "It's OK, Dudley. Harry used a curse that would brand the victim, but not cause pain. As a matter of fact, he cast a binding spell on me first so I didn't give away the fact that I was not hurting."

Harry's cousin still looked furious. "He still captured you." he spat.

Cho shook her head. "Sorry, I was unclear. Harry was there when I was captured. It was Wormtail who actually insisted that I be taken back with them."

Dudley closed his eyes and took a deep breath before sitting back down. "Sorry Harry. I really shouldn't automatically think the worst of you."

Harry waved the apology away. His response was interrupted by a burst of green light in the fireplace. Professor Snape's hawk-like features appeared in the flames.

"Black! I need you. Malfoy has disappeared."

Draco swore to himself as he tripped for the third time, barking his shins on the rocks littered on the uneven ground. Even with a lit wand, it was tough and slow going, making his way down the dark, filthy passageway. As much as he was used to the claustrophobic dungeon corridors around the Slytherin common room, this dank damp tunnel was filling him with nervousness.

The blonde boy shook his head. It wasn't the passageway that was making him nervous, it was what awaited him at the end.

Draco stood and bent over to rub his shin in an effort to stop the stinging pain. Not for the first time, he cursed Mask for not giving him the ability to contact him. Mask had always maintained control of their meeting times and place.

He hoped Mask would find the scribbled note left at their regular meeting place soon. Given what he knew of the man, he would be sure to stake out the meeting place before they met. Draco just hoped he would do so long before their next scheduled meeting, in three days time.

Several minutes later, Draco stumbled out of the end of the tunnel into a basement. Without looking around to get his bearings, he activated the portkey he found wrapped in the bundle of parchment he received on Christmas Day.

The tug behind his navel was more painful and violent than any other portkey he had ever used.

It was almost an hour later that Draco returned to the same place from which he left. His platinum blonde hair plastered to his head with perspiration, the only surviving Malfoy fell to his knees, then onto his side. A muffled thump echoed in the small basement as his head landed on the hard floor.

Finally surrendering to the overwhelming desire to cry out, Draco moaned in agony. He clutched at the inside of his left forearm, sucking in a lungful of air through clenched teeth. Glad he was alone, Draco whimpered to himself desperately hoping that the pain would soon subside.

It didn't. The burning in his arm grew. Draco bit his lip in an attempt to distract his mind from the pain. Spots appeared in front of his eyes. He finally remembered to breathe, and drew in a ragged breath of life-giving air. Darkness gathered at the edges of Draco's vision, and the Slytherin started panicking.

That was how a frantic Dumbledore and Snape found him less than half an hour later, lying unconscious on his side, gripping his arm.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Check

### Check

Sirius looked down at the whimpering boy lying in the sanitary hospital wing. Draco had not regained consciousness since he had been found by Dumbledore and Snape. Even so, the newly added Dark Mark still caused him pain. Sirius' sharp ears could make out a faint hiss and sizzle emanating from the small tattoo, testament to the fact that Voldemort was still punishing the last Malfoy.

The door behind him opened, and Sirius heard a faint swish of robes. "No change, Snape." he said absently.

The oily Potion Master drew up a chair and sat down silently on the other side of the bed. "I hadn't expected there to be any." said Snape, equally absently.

Sirius frowned and looked up at his boyhood rival. "Huh?"

Snape gave him a sneer, but his heart just wasn't in it. "Eloquent as ever, Black. Why do you think that Dumbledore and those fools at the Ministry were never able to get a spy into the Dark Lord's inner circle? Why Dumbledore finally approached me and convinced me to spy for him?"

Sirius crossed his arms and sat back, thinking hard. He looked down at Draco and back to Snape. A slow smile crept over his features. "Because the act of getting the Mark exposes your thoughts to Voldemort." he guessed.

Snape raised a single eyebrow. "Close. Your motivation. Mine was for forbidden knowledge. Malfoy senior's was for power. Pettigrew's was, well, probably because he wanted to be on the same side as the biggest bully in the playground. Draco here obviously is not accepting the Mark willingly, so it is punishing him. If his motivation was to help spy on the Dark Lord, then just like all the others who tried, he will die of pain and suffering soon."

Sirius sighed. With one hand, he reached into his robes and extracted a single scrap of parchment. Passing it over to Snape he said, "Draco left that for me to find."

Snape frowned with curiosity, and looked down at the sheet.

*Mask,*

*I've been summoned by V. He gave me a portkey to use on Boxing Day.*

*He wants to give me the mark.*

*You owe me. Get me out of this.*

The note was unsigned.

Snape crushed the scrap in his hand. His face flushed red with anger. "You endangered one of my students?" he hissed.

Sirius nodded slowly. "He agreed. At least, he agreed to my suggestion of passing information to Voldemort. I never meant for him to actually meet the bastard." He looked up at Snape, noting in passing that Snape's flared nostrils were white at the edges.

Snape stood and stalked around the bed, grabbing hold of the front of Sirius' robes he hauled Harry's godfather to his feet. "Who the hell do you think you are?" Snape spat into Sirius' face. "You come in here and risk student's lives for your own purposes?"

Sirius stared expressionlessly into Snape's dark eyes. "No. I don't. Listen Severus, Draco is of age. He is able to legally make his own decisions. All I was using him for was as a contact for Pritchard. He is just as responsible for her downfall as Harry. It would not have happened but for his assistance."

"And now because of you, he is lying there, dying!"

Sirius slowly grabbed hold of Snape's fists, and gently but firmly pushed them down and away, breaking Snape's hold of his robes. "Yes. Because of me he is lying there. Because of me he is dying. It isn't because of Voldemort at all." Sirius said softly, his words sarcastic, though not his tone.

The pair stared straight into each other's eyes. The dark pair glittered dangerously with rage, the pale blue pair betrayed inhuman determination. For long moments, the two men stood as still as if they had been carved from marble.

Finally, taking a deep breath, Snape blinked and stepped back. "Damn it, why?"

Sirius sighed. "I found him stripping his home of too much to carry. He was panicking, thinking that he had to sell everything before anyone found out." Sirius shook his head. "He would have been charged with theft had he managed to get the stuff out without my permission. I told him to take whatever sentimental items he wished, and gave him a reasonable timetable in which to do it."

Snape snarled, looking almost canine in appearance. "I already know this."

Sirius nodded. "After he finished, I disguised myself and met with him. Masked and robed. I suggested that he could reacquire his wealth, but he would have to assist in the downfall of Voldemort."

Snape's lips curled into a predatory smile. "I'll bet my entire library that Albus knows nothing about that offer." he said.

Sirius shook his head. "You'd probably lose. Though I never told him, I doubt he knows nothing about it."

"So what happened?"

"Draco took a few weeks to think about it. In the meantime, he turned seventeen. When I next met with him, he agreed to my proposal."

"Your proposal?"

Sirius rubbed his forehead, gathering his thoughts. "Pritchard was the one we wanted neutralised. Voldemort will eventually show himself, he wants power too much to stay in the shadows, but Pritchard is patient. She had auror training, plus decades of experience. I commissioned a ring that allowed the wearer to locate Harry, at the cost of aging the wearer tenfold. It also magnifies the wearer's magical signature, allowing anyone to track the wearer."

Snape's smile grew wider. "I imagine Potter will be more than a little annoyed that you created a ring that allows the wearer to find him."

Sirius winced. "He was."

Snape looked surprised. "He knows?"

Sirius nodded ruefully. "Draco gave the ring to Pritchard, who happily accepted it. The night Harry put you and Ginny in hospital, Pritchard followed him to his cousin's school. Pritchard brought along three others to attack him. Harry killed Pritchard and two of the others."

Snape closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Given the casual nature of Sirius' last comment; it seemed that Potter was becoming accustomed to killing. Not a good thing.

The fact that the boy had easily overcome him in less than a minute was not a reassuring one.

Sirius continued. "Harry also stunned two aurors who were sent to the site. Apparently when they arrived they decided to stun everyone and ask questions later."

"Sorry, did you just say that Potter took out two aurors?"

Sirius nodded, his entire posture exuding pride in his godson. "Yep. They still have no idea how he did it, it was too quick for them." he said with a smile.

Snape smirked. "Then I imagine that Potter will not be extended an invitation to join their ranks any time soon."

Sirius looked up. "You'd want him as an assistant?"

Snape's smile vanished. "If that is what he wants, he could potentially be one of the most skilled master potion brewers in history."

Sirius nodded. "If I wanted to bait you, I'd point out his marks for the first four years in potions here." he said with a faint smile.

Snape snorted. "I have been spending a great deal of my time over the last six months re-evaluating Mr. Potter." he said. *And my prejudices*, his mind supplied.

"Anyway, I think Harry has a different destiny than being an auror. Or a master brewer." said Sirius.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Then for once we totally agree."

"At any rate, Harry is currently staying at Black's Pad, under the watchful eye of Alastor and Dumbledore's familiar." said Sirius. "I imagine they are flying around the Quidditch pitch I commissioned. Anyway, after finding Draco's scent trail for you, I went down to our meeting place to see if he left anything for me. I found that note."

"So what do you propose to do to save his life?" snapped Snape.

"Kill Voldemort."

Snape blinked. "I see. Do you have a plan?"

Sirius nodded. "One that neither you nor Albus will be happy with."

Snape frowned. "Exactly why does your plan require both Albus' and my approval?"

Sirius sighed. "Because it involves a number of students."

Snape just stared. "Oh, this I've got to hear." he said.

The next day, in the sterile, white surrounds of the hospital wing, the whimpering of an unconscious student stopped as if someone had thrown a switch. Draco's eyes snapped open, the amount of light in the room causing both pupils to quickly contract in the middle of his light grey irises.

Slowly, the emotionless pair of eyes drifted around the room, taking in Draco's surroundings, ensuring no one else was nearby. His parched lips opened, and a soft dry gasp emerged from the Slytherin's abused throat. Draco woodenly reached inside his mouth, under his tongue. Questing fingers found a single strand of thin human hair, tied securely to one of his lower molars. Draco wrapped the end around one finger, pulled the hair from around the tooth and slowly drew it from his mouth.

From in his stomach he drew out a tiny wrapped package tied to the other end of the hair, choking slightly as it passed the back of his throat, stimulating his gag reflex. Once the putrid package was clear of his mouth, Draco vomited onto the crisp, white sheets.

Spitting to clear his mouth, the blond Slytherin turned slowly and looked around. He reached out and grabbed the glass of water on his bedside, rinsing his mouth and again spitting the fouled water onto his sheets. Without wrinkling his nose at the stench, Draco pushed the covers off absently and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Pausing slightly, Draco showed his first sign of emotion, poured himself another glass of water and gulped it down hurriedly.

His immediate thirst quenched, the expressionless face returned. Like an automaton, Draco picked up the partly digested package and opened it, dropping the fouled wrapping parchment on the floor unheeded.

Draco took the three tiny objects from the package and placed them in his pocket. Emotionlessly, he turned and silently left his room. Once in the hospital wing proper, the Slytherin's attention was captured by a soft voice, whimpering quietly.

The long, fiery curls that framed the patient's features immediately confirmed the person's identity.

Ginny Weasley lay on her side, sniffing quietly. The white sheets of the hospital bed were tucked up tightly under her chin. Even though the thick blankets, it was obvious that her ribs were still bandaged. Draco could make out the puffy red skin around her tightly closed eyes. A tiny stain on the pillow under her eyes could just be made out at the edge of her profile.

Draco woodenly moved to the side of the bed, extracting two of the three objects he pulled from his stomach, a small metal sphere and a tightly folded piece of parchment. He placed the sphere and the note on the bedside table. The slight clink of metal on polished wood startled Ginny.

Her eyes flew open in alarm, and she looked over her shoulder straight at Draco. With a yelp, she sat up and scrabbled away from the blond Slytherin.

"What is going on here?" demanded Madam Pomfrey, drawn by Ginny's outburst. "Mr. Malfoy?" she gasped on seeing Ginny's visitor.

Draco lashed out quickly, painfully grabbing hold of a fistful of bright red hair. Ginny's face screwed up in pain. She shifted her posture, ready to physically lash out at Draco, but he put his hand in his pocket and grasped the third tiny object taken from the hidden package. He muttered something under his breath and instantly the pair disappeared.

Madam Pomfrey's scream echoed throughout the school.

Harry flexed his painfully frozen fingers, trying to get some feeling back. The muscles in his arms and legs ached tremendously. He arched his back, feeling the vertebrae creak back into alignment, then ran a rough tongue over his dry and cracked lips.

Throughout it all, the massive smile on his face had no intention of being removed.

He shifted his weight both backward and left, pulling his new broom up and over in a combined barrel roll and three-quarter loop, diving straight down at the snow-covered ground over three hundred meters below.

Letting loose with a loud whoop of pure joy, he pulled out of his power dive so late that the perfectly aligned twigs at the rear of his broom traced their image in the pure white snow.

Flying faster than the previously tested top speed of the broom, Harry flew from one end of Black's Pad's Quidditch pitch in less than three seconds. Leaning into a high-speed turn, he reached out with his foot, touching the top of the snow.

A beautiful arc of snow sprayed up from Harry's passing. He pulled up on the polished handle, and the broom groaned and the sudden change in direction. Harry felt his body pressed against the broom briefly at over 6Gs. Once more, he climbed hundreds of meters into the air.

*The views from up here are truly spectacular,* he thought.

The sudden change in air pressure caused Harry's ears to press out painfully. He yawned widely, grunting in relief as he felt dual pops.

Harry leveled out the broom and gently circled the pitch below. He turned and looked up, down and around.

The object of his search also screamed in joy as she buzzed past him at over two hundred kilometers an hour. Harry looked at his rapidly retreating girlfriend, marveling at the skill she exhibited on the latest powerful racing broom.

Cho's straight, silky hair streamed out behind her like a dark comet tail. His smile grew wider and less than a second later Harry was a blur, speeding after the beautiful Ravenclaw.

The pair had been playing an impromptu game of high-speed tag for hours, their shared joy of flight pushing the already powerful brooms beyond the limits the designers created.

Like a pair of diving birds of prey, the two lovers pushed themselves and their brooms into what felt like a new plane of existence. The sheer freedom of the mock dogfight set twin hearts racing, endorphins flowing and adrenal glands working overtime.

Finally, the two pulled their brooms up and leveled out, flying at what felt like a more sedate pace, but would still be considered break-neck speed by most others.

"Do you remember the last time we flew against each other?" Cho asked, raising her voice slightly to be heard over the rushing wind.

Harry frowned momentarily, then smiled and nodded. "My third year. I kept swerving to avoid you, and Wood yelled at me for being a gentleman."

Cho giggled. "That's it. I thought I had you beaten; me on my comet, you on your bloody firebolt. Then a pair of great big dementors appeared and I just about fell from my broom."

Harry nodded, still smiling. He looked straight at Cho, marveling at the way her cheeks were flushed red with cold and excitement. "I remember. I threw a Patronus down at them, and Malfoy and his cronies fell out of the robes in a rather undignified heap."

Cho laughed at the memory. "I remember wondering during the week before why you were doing so much training. Then you appeared prepared even for a dementor attack. Did you realise that the entire Ravenclaw team were telling each other horror stories about what sort of training sessions Oliver must have been putting you through to get you that prepared?"

Harry laughed out loud. "Oliver was fanatical about Quidditch, but I don't ever recall him discussing what to do during a dementor attack, besides telling me to hang on tighter."

Cho's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry Harry. I forgot that you fell that year because of them."

Harry waved the apology away. "Right now, I think I could produce the world's biggest Patronus." he said, and leaned in for a kiss.

Sirius stepped through the fire, and out into the main reception hall at Black's Pad. The sight that greeted him was, unique.

Harry was sitting on one of the large couches wrapped in a massive blanket, steam coming out of his ears. In his hands, just poking through the folds of the blanket, was a cup of hot chocolate, obviously laced with Pepper-up potion.

Cho sat on the opposite couch, similarly wrapped, though her cup was sitting on the table next to her couch. In her hands was a sheet of parchment and a quill, on which she was making notes and sketches.

The object of her attention, and what made the scene unique, was Fawkes. The fire-bird stood tall, his powerful wings flared wide. Fawkes slowly turned from side to side, looking for all the world like a witch trying on a new set of dress robes.

Sirius had never considered phoenixes vain, but it was obvious Fawkes was proud to be one.

The fireplace flared again, and a tall, beautiful blond witch stepped out. Harry stood in greeting.

Sirius waved him back into his seat. Turning to his beautiful companion, he said, "Thanks again, Tonks. But we may need to change again; some of the papers are suggesting that wedding bells are in the air for me."

The pretty blond nodded, giving Harry and Cho a speculative look before continuing. "Redhead or brunette?"

"We'll go with red, but you should be a little shorter next time."

"Will do, boss. Are you not keeping this from him?" she asked gesturing towards Harry.

Sirius shook his head. "Nope, Harry needs to know everything. Last time I kept something from him, he nearly paid the price."

Tonks nodded. "See you tomorrow then." She turned and stepped into the fire.

Sirius grinned at the twin expressions of curiosity from the pair in front of him. "A colleague." he said simply. "You both know what I do, and who I work for. Tonks helps out sometimes, going with me for regular nights out on the town."

"What about the other girls you have gone out with?" asked Harry.

Sirius smiled. "All of them were Tonks. She can change her appearance easily, so Sirius Black gets a reputation as a ladies man."

"Ensuring no one guesses you work as an Unspeakable." said Cho, nodding in appreciation at the idea.

"Exactly." Sirius sat down on a free chair. "Oh, by the way Harry, I've organised with Dumbledore for you to go to Hogwarts to load up your belt."

Harry nodded, but Cho looked at him curiously. "Belt?"

Harry grinned. "My Christmas present from Sirius."

A long pause. "And?" Cho asked, exasperated after it became apparent that no further information was forthcoming.

Harry opened his mouth to answer, when the fire flared yet again. Out of the green flames stepped Molly Weasley. Wildly, the Weasley matriarch looked around the room, her gaze fixing directly on Harry.

With a cry she pounced, and gave him a rib-creaking hug. "Oh Harry! Please help me! Ginny needs you!"

It was a somber group gathered in the headmaster's office. Arthur Weasley was hugging his wife, who was sobbing quietly into his shoulder. She had not said anything since arriving at Hogwarts except to repeatedly whisper, "No, not my little Ginny." into her husband's robes.

Sirius and Snape stood shoulder to shoulder, leaning against one wall, quietly talking to each other. From what Harry could tell, Snape was trying to convince Sirius of something, but was having a great deal of trouble. It was only the tense feeling in the room that was preventing the quiet conversation from erupting into a full-blown argument.

Dumbledore sat behind his massive desk, staring glumly at the note and portkey Draco left beside Ginny's hospital bed. Both McGonagall and Moody sat in the comfortable armchairs arranged around the headmaster's office, lost in thought.

Several high ranking aurors were also present, having received the news that the Minister's daughter had been kidnapped. Tiberius Wodenbane, the auror chief was pacing, his impressive handlebar moustache quivering in rage.

A worried face appeared in Dumbledore's fire. "Minister Weasley, we've tracked the portkey signature that took your daughter. It took her to an area just outside the wards set up over the castle and Forbidden Forest. There were traces there of another portkey being used. Without the wards in that area though, we cannot locate the destination of the second portkey. I'm sorry."

Arthur Weasley raised his tear-stained face. "Thank you for trying." he said simply.

The chief auror finally stopped pacing, turning to face the minister, his large stomach aiding in presenting the man as an imposing figure. "Arthur, let me send a hit squad. They can all be touching when the portkey activates. They'll take out You-Know-Who quicker than he can expect!"

Both Sirius and Snape stopped their quiet bickering and stared unbelievably at him. "You can't be serious!" Snape spat.

"I believe I'm in charge of the investigation, Snape. You are here at the request of the headmaster, nothing more."

Sirius shook his head. "Look, Woodenbrain-" he started.

"Wodenbane, Mr. Black."

"I know what I called you. You cannot just send in a group of hit wizards in our only attempt to save the minister's daughter. You'd get both her and your squad killed."

"So you just suggest we comply with the demand? That we send The-Boy-Who-Lived to an unknown destination, with nothing to guarantee that either Potter or Miss Weasley will be released?"

Sirius pushed off the wall and stood up straight. "It is a trap that an entire group of hit wizards will be unable to escape from. Voldemort will be expecting that. He will have a plan in place. You know this, you just cannot stand to sit down and do nothing."

Wodenbane's eyes bulged. "You want me to do nothing?" he demanded.

Sirius nodded. "Yes. Sometimes, doing nothing is harder than other choices."

"You have information we lack, what are our options, Sirius" asked Dumbledore gravely.

Sirius opened his mouth to speak, stopping suddenly as Harry hissed in pain and grabbed his scar.

"*Crucio!*"

Ginny's scream rent the air. Voldemort held her under the curse longer than her breath lasted, leaving the young witch shaking in silent agony, her lungs completely depleted of air.

Finally Voldemort released her, then whirled to face his other prisoner.

"Well, my little Dragon, you managed to fight my Imperius enough to get me a worthless captive. I am impressed."

Draco knelt before his 'Master', his ankles and wrists shackled to the floor. Fighting the pain of his scar, the youngest Malfoy defiantly stared up at the Dark Lord.

Voldemort grinned evilly. He raised a thin arm and beckoned to Wormtail. Pettigrew nervously crossed to stand next to his Master. Voldemort grabbed the short man's arm, and touched the tattoo on the inside of his forearm.

Draco and Pettigrew let out twin howls of agony.

Voldemort closed his eyes and listened to the frenzied screams with what appeared to be bliss.



Removing his hand from Wormtail's tattoo, he grabbed a handful of the front of Pettigrew's robes. "Potter will not be joining us, thanks to this traitor's decision. I imagine that a large group of ministry fools will use the portkey. Expand the edges of the containment charm."

Wormtail whimpered and nodded. Quickly, he scurried over to the middle of the chamber.

Voldemort watched as he went, once more running his eyes over the trapped room. The underground chamber was lit by hundreds of burning torches set into rusty iron brackets riveted to the stone walls, all sustained magically. Sixteen huge pillars supported the ceiling, eight forming an octagon in the centre of the room, and framing each of the four entrances to the room. The entrances each sat between two cardinal points.

Ginny lay gasping for air, tied to the onyx altar in the north corner of the room. From the north-east entrance, hurried footsteps could be heard. A tall, lean man appeared, dressed in loose fitting, non-restrictive clothing. "You summoned us, my Lord?"

"No, Macnair. I was simply punishing my little dragon here." Voldemort replied. "It would appear that he does not have the same level of loyalty to me that you have shown."

Voldemort's weapons master sneered at the humbled boy. "Your father was loyal, and reaped the rewards of service."

Draco coughed, his lips sparsely covered with pinkish blood. "I'm alive, and not a squib either." he snarled.

Macnair sneered back. "For now. I would give anything I could to my master. I gave my magic, I would give my life. I live in luxury, with my every want fulfilled." he said. "You could have had everything too. But you threw it all away."

"Enough." said Voldemort, his tone commanding. "Return to your duties Macnair, it would appear that Potter is unlikely to join us now, but I would like you to be ready should he appear."

Macnair bowed. "Your will, my Lord." he said. The ex-wizard turned and exited the chamber.

Voldemort turned back to Draco. "Pritchard was quite pleased with how you were turning out, little dragon. How disappointed I was to hear that she had an ambush sprung on her, one that you assisted."

Draco stared into the blazing red eyes of his captor. The pride he had was all that was keeping him from collapsing to the floor, begging for release.

Harry's eyes flicked open. The room focused quickly, and he could make out the concerned faces of everyone in the room.

"What did you see, Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry shook his head. "No time, I have things to get and not much time. Just one question."

Dumbledore blinked, but nodded.

"What happens if you are moving when you activate a portkey?"

--

## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Mate

### Mate

Draco Malfoy clenched his eyes closed and waited while the pain in his chest faded from unbearable to merely excruciating. He knew he was going to die soon. Very soon.

The blood coming up into his mouth was a pinkish colour, almost like foam. He knew that this meant that the sharp pain when he breathed was from a rib sticking into his lung.

Voldemort knew this too. He had cast a few minor healing charms on Draco, not quite healing either the lung or rib, before torturing him again.

"Don't worry, my little dragon, the portkey will activate soon, bringing your rescuers here. Once they arrive they will be contained quickly and dealt with."

Draco gave the serpent-featured man a look of loathing. "You claim to be the greatest wizard of all time, yet a boy who hasn't finished school killed nearly all your minions and sent you running like a coward. You are nothing." he wheezed. Draco steeled himself for the response.

Surprisingly, Voldemort just laughed. "Ah, my little dragon. You'll soon see just how wrong you are. I am on the verge of attaining more power than even your father dreamed of."

At Draco's doubting look, Voldemort continued. "You sit there, a frown on your face. You will learn what it means to betray me."

Voldemort straightened and gestured towards the circle of diagrams etched into the floor in front of the altar Ginny was tied to. Draco felt truly ill looking at the patterns. As artwork, they were awful, unappealing to the viewer. Voldemort crouched and lovingly traced one long finger around the edges of a particularly gruesome pattern that vaguely reminded Draco of the nightmares he used to have.

"Today I shall summon a creature of pure shadow, one that makes the dementors look like butterflies. One that will obey my every command and feed on my enemies."

Voldemort stood and faced Draco. "To do so requires the most valuable gift a wizard can give."

Draco frowned. "His life?"

Voldemort snorted. "His magic."

Draco's eyes widened. "Macnair!"

Voldemort looked pleased. "Yes, my little dragon. Macnair. His Uncle was a disappointment in many ways, but this one wishes nothing more than to see me succeed." Voldemort's expression softened as he examined his memory. "When I presented my discovery of the recipe for the Serpent's Tears potion to my loyal followers, only one saw the potential of a willing imbiber. Every single one of the others simply coveted the power they could gain from ingesting another's power."

"You see, little one, if someone willingly drinks Serpent's Tears, their magic crystallises into this." Voldemort drew a fist-sized glass container from his robes, the tiny crystals within glimmering gently. "The very essence of magic. With it, I can span the universes themselves. Imagine having the power, the raw ability to tear a hole in the fabric of the world, reach into the lowest depths of hell, and bring back a raging demon."

Draco's already white face paled further.

"You shall be its first meal, my little dragon. I look forward to watching your expression as your body and soul are devoured before your eyes."

A whimpering caught Voldemort's attention. "Don't you worry either, Weasley." he said, turning to face the helpless girl. "You will be next. I intend to capture your final moments, to send your father a picture of his only daughter being devoured by a nightmare."

Wormtail appeared and bowed. "Master, the portkey will activate in moments."

Voldemort nodded. "Excellent. Well, Weasley, we shall see exactly who your father decided on sending to save you. I hope you will be able to assist in identifying the bodies." he said with a sneer.

The room fell silent, Voldemort waiting in anticipation, Draco and Ginny with dread. After a minute of tension, a flash and pop indicated the arrival of someone using a portkey.

A minute fraction of a second later, another, larger flash blinded those present. A glowing bubble now encircled the center of the room, enclosing

the entire area around the arrival point in a prison of pure force.

Voldemort's expression of triumph faded as he saw exactly what he had caught.

"What do you mean, he's not expecting you? The ransom note specifically states that you are to go alone!" Sirius blurted.

Harry shook his head, still rummaging through his trunk at the foot of his bed in the sixth-year dorm. "Voldy was torturing her, she must have told him that she raped me. He is not expecting me now, he expected Draco to capture one of my friends. He thinks he only has the Minister's daughter. Now, he's preparing for a big bunch of aurors to appear." he replied.

Sirius closed his eyes tightly and grabbed both sides of his head in an effort to gather his thoughts. "You are not going!" he said for the tenth time.

"Try and stop me." said Harry.

Sirius looked furious. "I can, you know!"

"Not without condemning Mr. Weasley's daughter." Harry retorted, unwilling to let Ginny's name cause him distracting emotional turmoil.

"She raped you!" spat Sirius. "You don't need to risk your life for her."

"I'm not." said Harry. He finally added his daikatana to his belt, the long-bladed sword disappearing into a tiny, 2-inch long scabbard. "Look, you said that Dumbledore didn't want to punish her since that would cause Mr. Weasley to have to resign. If he loses his daughter, he won't be able to function properly. The ministry could collapse anyway."

Sirius growled deep in his throat. "Please Harry, don't go!"

Harry gave an exasperated sigh and looked directly into Sirius' eyes. "I'm sorry, Sirius. I have to."

"It's a trap!"

"I know." replied Harry calmly. "I saw it. I also know how to beat it." He shrugged his backpack over one shoulder. "I'm the only one who can."

"Harry, please-"

"No!" shouted Harry, his eyes blazing. "I've made up my mind. I also have a plan."

"What plan?"

Harry just looked at him. "Once I disappear, put on that ring that tracks my location. You should be able to find me then. I'll try to stay alive until you and the rest of the world get there."

Sirius had tears in his eyes. "I don't want to lose you again, Harry. It nearly killed me last time."

Harry grabbed Sirius in a tight hug. "I'll come back. You know it."

"If you don't, I'll haunt you in your next life."

Harry chuckled, and his laughter seemed to break the mood.

The pair made their way down to the Gryffindor common room, where both Dumbledore and McGonagall were waiting for them.

Dumbledore gravely handed Harry a sheet of parchment. "Here are the calculations you need, Harry. Is there anything I can say to dissuade you from your planned course of action?"

"No, you know that." he said, scanning the page.

Dumbledore nodded. "Then Madam Hooch is waiting for you at the main entrance. She has your broom. Good luck."

Harry nodded to him. Professor McGonagall's chin was trembling slightly, but her stern expression was stuck firmly in place. "I cannot condone this action." she announced, her voice uncharacteristically thick. "It is foolhardy, ill-thought out, and has an overwhelming probability of failure." She closed her eyes and swallowed.

"I therefore cannot think of anyone who would be more likely to succeed. Please be safe, Harry. And bring Ginny and Draco back home with you." she whispered.

Harry nodded. "I have the means to bring them back, professor." he said, showing her two small glass globes. "Professor Dumbledore gave me these. They are charmed specifically to Draco and, to, those two." he finished.

With a final nod, he turned and exited the tower, Sirius walking behind him.

The small gathering at the castle gates stood around nervously, waiting for the time the portkey would activate to approach. Harry passed his broom and backpack to Sirius. From inside his robes he passed his godfather a firework of Fred and George's design.

"Remember, light that with the command word on the side. Drop it in the backpack, then drop it a few seconds before the portkey on the straps

activates." he said.

Molly Weasley looked up, still sniffing. "Aren't you going to fly your broom quickly to avoid the trap Harry?" she asked worriedly.

Harry shook his head. "The containment charm will activate almost instantly after the portkey activates. I need to be traveling faster than the top speed of my broom."

Several people in the group frowned. Snape, Molly, Madam Hooch and Moody all showed their confusion. "Then how?" the potion master asked. "How do you intend to escape the trap?"

Harry took a deep breath, and glanced one last time at the parchment Dumbledore had given him. "I need to be travelling around twice the speed of sound to ensure I escape the trap." he said.

Moody grunted. "That's impossible, Laddie."

Harry looked at him. "How many impossible things have I done?" he asked pointedly.

Moody's sour expression softened and he started chuckling. "All right then. Show us how."

Harry dropped the tip of his right wing, coming around in a wide half-circle. With his incredible avian eyes, he could make out Hogwarts easily, even though it was several kilometers away.

The comparatively tiny figure of Sirius on Harry's firebolt hovered in the air, a hundred meters up. At the sight of a red flare, Harry accelerated quickly but steadily towards the castle and his godfather.

As Harry broke the sound barrier, silence surrounded him. In his panoramic vision, he could see birds, insects and even squirrels thrown around in his wake as he tore over the Forbidden Forest.

Sirius dropped his backpack. Harry mentally calculated the angle he needed to be on to intercept it quickly, and minutely adjusted his course.

It took just three seconds for Harry to cover the required ground. The knuckles on his clenched talons touched the portkey attached to the falling bag at just the right moment.

Dumbledore let loose with a massive red flare. A second later the wake of Harry's passage could be easily made out, even though he was still too distant to see. Trees twisted and bent, birds were thrown about in a V-shape pattern.

"Here he comes now." supplied Dumbledore unnecessarily, as the red blur approached at an unbelievable speed. The blur reached the bag just as a flash of light from the portkey indicated activation, and both bag and bird disappeared.

Sirius quickly landed. He pulled out a ring and put in on his finger. Dumbledore immediately felt Sirius' aura brighten.

"Where is he, Sirius?" asked Dumbledore, pulling out a map.

Voldemort stared at the backpack that landed in the middle of the entrapped area. The backpack looked vaguely familiar.

The timer on a WWW perfect start firework buried in a large package of other explosives quietly counted down twenty seconds from its activation.

Cho stared out her bedroom window, looking over Diagon Alley. Sirius had sent her home immediately after Mrs. Weasley's arrival and now her curiosity was making her crazy.

"Why would she need Harry?" Cho pondered aloud.

"What was that, Cho?"

Cho turned to see her father in the doorway. "Nothing really, I was just wondering why Mrs. Weasley would come to ask for Harry's help."

Her father nodded, and came over and sat next to her on her bed. "I'd guess because he had something or could do something she needed desperately."

Cho smiled fondly at her father. "As usual, you answered the question both perfectly and completely uselessly."

Mr. Chang shrugged and nodded. "It's a gift."

Cho snorted. "Mum thinks it's a curse."

"Your mother was silly enough to marry me, why on earth would you trust her judgment?"

Cho giggled briefly, and hugged her father fondly, but quickly returned to her brooding.

Cho's father sat silently for several moments, studying his only daughter intensely. "What's wrong? Is everything alright between you and Harry?"

Cho nodded. "Yes, at least I think so. I know Grandmother isn't keen on me having a serious boyfriend and I'm sure you get more of her disapproval than I, but I am truly glad that you are letting me follow my heart."

Mr. Chang sighed. "It is more painful than you know. I swore when you were born that I would raise you in a manner suited to the country you were raised in, but it is difficult to watch you grow up so fast."

Cho smiled. "And I can't thank you enough. I must have been terrible to live with after Harry was put in prison. I'm sorry for that."

Her father sighed and smiled. "Cho, when your friend Cedric was killed, you were devastated. Harry filled the void in your heart and more. Then came that terrible time. I admit that I was terrified at the change that occurred in you after Harry was found guilty. I hated him then, probably even more than you did. He had done something that had taken away my daughter, and left only a shell."

Cho smiled and rested her head on her father's shoulder. "It was too painful for me to feel."

"I understand. But his return into your life brought you back to me, brought you back to us. Now, you are even more alive, more... more... you than I remember. For that, I will always be grateful to him."

"Thank you, Daddy." Cho whispered.

"I did want to ask you something difficult though."

"What was that?"

Mr. Chang sighed. "When you were born, some wizards and their families from China visited. My parents pressured me to promise your hand to one of the sons of their region's sorcerers."

Cho's head sprang up from his shoulder. "What?" she demanded.

"I refused straight out to promise you, but to save face, and I admit, to shut my mother up, I did promise something that I am not proud of."

"Go on." Cho said evenly, her eyes narrowing.

"I told them that I would always allow my only daughter to follow her heart. To save face, I promised that you would meet this boy before you were married so he could court you himself."

Cho blinked in surprise. "Why did you never tell me?"

"Because I wanted you to grow up without the expectation that you would have a husband selected for you."

"Why tell me now?"

"Because things between you and Harry have progressed beyond a... certain boundary."

Cho blushed. "Is it that obvious?"

Her father sighed softly. "No, but your Grandmother grabbed your bags when you arrived home and went to clean your clothes. Imagine her surprise when she found a large number of silky items she had no idea existed."

Cho's blush intensified. "Oh, no!"

"Harry must have bought them for you. Even though I have very limited experience with feminine undergarments, I do have an eye for quality. With the sheer number of them, it must have cost him a fortune."

Cho covered her face with her hands. "Can we talk about something else before I die of shame?"

"That's just it. I would like you to meet this young man, to get to know him. Once you finished school, of course. Harry will still be in school, so the two of you wouldn't be seeing a great deal of each other during that time in any event."

Cho raised her face from her hands, looking as though anger was not far off. "Do you want me to *meet* with him, or do you want me to *marry* him?" she asked dangerously.

Her father shook his head. "Just get to know him. That is all I promised. If you truly love Harry, and he you, then the only result of this will be that in six months you will personally know someone who lives in China."

Cho calmed, her brilliant mind turning the scenario over. "You could have given in, couldn't you. Back then, I mean."

Mr. Chang nodded. "It would have made my life easier. But not yours, I expect."

Cho leaned over and hugged him. "Thank you for not promising me, Dad. I will meet this man."

"Thank you, Cho. To tell you the truth, I expect that he will be just a little intimidated by the fact that the most famous wizard in the entire world is romantically involved with you."

Cho smiled and opened her mouth to respond, but suddenly gasped and wrapped her arms around her chest tightly. She fell to the ground, whimpering.

Her father's smile faded. "What is it?" he asked, concern evident in his eyes. Cho looked up as saw he was on the edge of panic.

"Harry!" she wheezed. "He's hurt!"

Harry transformed quickly and collapsed to the floor, his arms crossed against his chest, his mouth open in a silent scream of agony. The sudden appearance of a wall in front of him caused him to instinctively try to stop his supersonic flight and the effort of reversing his momentum all but tore his chest muscles from his bones.

In any event, he had hit the wall hard, his light avian body absorbing the impact enough that no bones were broken, but when Harry transformed back, he felt as though his organs had been removed and put back in the wrong order.

Now, he sat with his back against a stone pillar, willing the pain to subside. Gently, with trembling fingers, he extracted a thin metallic container from his belt and raised it to his lips. Between silent gasps, he swallowed the contents of the flask.

A dispassionate voice in the back of his mind finished counting. ...*eight...nine...t-*

The sound of the magically enlarged backpack full of powerful fireworks exploding at once distracted him from the pain in his pectorals and organs. With his back against the thick stone pillar, Harry didn't feel the shock wave as his ripped through the room, tearing through the containment charm like a soap bubble. He did feel his ear drums nearly burst from the noise. Harry clutched the sides of his head in agony.

Cho clutched the sides of her head and screamed. Her father, panicking, scooped her up and cradled her to his chest.

"H-H-Harry!" Cho gasped, pushing her father's arms away. "He's in trouble. I need to help him."

Cho's father held on tighter. "What's going on?" he demanded.

"It's Harry," said Cho. She concentrated on her love for him. "He's in a big room. Leaning against a stone wall. No, pillar." She took a few deep calming breaths.

"How? How do you know?"

Cho looked up into her father's eyes. "I don't know." She grabbed a handful of her father's clothes. "Grandfather once told me that Grandmother had the sight."

Mr. Chang swallowed loudly. "No Cho. Her sister did."

Cho blinked. "Are you sure?" she asked after a pause.

Mr. Chang nodded. "You have never shown any talent for divination, remember your grades?"

"Then what is happening to me?"

Voldemort slowly got to his feet after being thrown backward by the explosion, his face clearly showing his rage. "How dare they?" he screamed. "How dare they?"

Draco rolled over and got to his knees. "What's the matter? Not getting the attention you want?" he spat, spraying blood from his sneering mouth.

Voldemort whirled on him. "*Crucio!*"

Draco screamed, the awful noise fading to a horrible bloody gurgle.

His sudden disappearance left the Dark Lord standing shocked.

Harry glanced around the pillar to see Voldemort stand. The evil wizard rose in front of an altar and was obviously in a rage, Harry's scar throbbed and burned. Harry's ringing ears couldn't make out what he was saying, but it was quite clear when he put the Cruciatus on a bound wizard.

A bound wizard with blond hair.

"Draco!" Harry hissed. He fumbled for Draco's portkey on his belt and slowly stood. Stepping around the pillar, Harry tossed the globe in the air and with a wave of his wand, banished it.

The globe hit Draco square on the shoulder, causing the Slytherin to disappear in mid-howl.

The look on Voldemort's face was almost comical. As Voldemort lowered his wand, Harry could make out a tangle of copper curls on the altar.

Another wave of pain from his abused body staggered him, and Harry knew that in his current condition he had no hope of facing the Dark Lord. Not even to delay or distract him enough to save Mr. Weasley's daughter.

Pushing off against the pillar, Harry exited the large chamber down the nearest passageway, slowly staggering down the dimly lit corridor.

Harry slowly walked around another corner, opening onto a moderately large, open chamber. Weapons lined the walls, Japanese tatami mats lined a large square area in the center of the floor.

Harry knew exactly who this room belonged to.

And because of that knowledge, he dived forward and rolled into the center of the room, avoiding the swipe that would have taken his head off.

"Well, I hadn't expected to meet you again."

Harry rolled gracefully to his feet facing the room entrance. "Macnair." he said shortly.

"Ah, so you do know my name." said Harry's old instructor. The athletic man jumped down from his perch, just above the entrance to the room. "I'm glad. I hate killing people I haven't been introduced to."

Harry quietly drew his sword from his belt. Macnair's eyes widened. "You stole that from me!" he spat.

Harry nodded. "I like this sword."

Macnair growled, deep in his throat. "You should. There is no finer blade outside of Japan."

"I'm not surprised." Harry replied dryly.

Macnair gave Harry a sneer. "I told you before that using a blade like that will likely kill you. I'll find it amusing watching you lop your own head off."

"We'll see." Harry replied, slowly moving backwards onto the tatami.

In seconds, the pair faced each other across the reed mats. Macnair drew his own katana and assumed his stance, one Harry found very familiar.

Harry took the initiative, knowing that as much as he had improved, he was still very much outclassed. He threw himself at his opponent, launching a unskilled flurry of blows at Macnair's head. With practiced ease, Voldemort's weapons master picked off each one with an almost bored expression. "You have not improved, boy."

Harry didn't respond, but with an upward swing he pushed Macnair's sword above his head, then lashed out with his foot, connecting with Macnair's knee.

The surprised weapon master was able to turn his knee enough that Harry's kick struck side on, rather than front on. He did not however, manage to keep balance enough to strike at Harry.

Harry held his daikatana's blade against his opponent's own, giving him the opportunity to drive an elbow into Macnair's right eye.

With a grunt, Macnair let go of his blade with one hand, and swung his fist in a wide arc, connecting with Harry's already abused ribs. With a gasp, Harry leapt back, putting room between them again.

"Impressive. You drew me in, played on my underestimation of your skills." Macnair said, getting to his feet and testing his knee. "You should have pressed your advantage."

"If I'd stayed that close to you, my sword would have been almost useless and that knife strapped to your arm would have been lethal."

Macnair's smile faded. "You have improved. Good. It is much more satisfying hunting lions instead of rabbits."

Harry brought his sword across his body and back again to deflect two quick jabs. He leapt to his right, twisting his body and sweeping up Macnair's blade over his head. Harry ducked and twisted, swinging his leg out in a wide arc at ankle height.

Macnair easily jumped over Harry's kick, and brought his blade down on the Gryffindor's next attack, a horizontal swipe at Macnair's stomach.

"Predictable, Potter. Too predictable."

Harry leapt away, avoiding Macnair's next attack, which had come halfway through his last comment.

"I can see why my master's former followers underestimated you. You have an un-intimidating air about you."

Harry swallowed, trying to concentrate.

"Yet you learned your lessons well." Macnair thrust at Harry's face, then swept the blade round at his thigh. Harry recognised the feint and parried the true attack. With a flick of his wrist, Harry ran the edge of his sword down Macnair's blade towards the hilt, and only Macnair's own quick twist and flick saved him from losing some fingers.

"So well, you can improvise and adapt what you have learned quickly and effectively." Macnair continued, nodding thoughtfully. "You would have made a valued addition to my master's forces."

Harry shook his head. "Voldy never wanted me, he would have used me against the ministry and then abandoned me." Harry said, bringing his blade up horizontally, catching Macnair's descending blade cleanly. He allowed the blow to lower him to one knee then swung his blade out wide and across and knee height.

Macnair decided to jump rather than block, but Harry didn't complete the sweep. Instead, he halted his stroke halfway through, and raised the blade.

Macnair's eyes widened as he realised that Harry had tricked him. Desperately, he brought his katana down on Harry's own, succeeding enough so as that as he landed he didn't impale himself.

Harry rose from his knee like the leviathan, thrusting his shoulder into Macnair's chin. His head snapped back, teeth painfully crashing together. Blood and spit mingling in his mouth, Macnair stepped backwards, trying to center himself. Harry followed through this time with a stroke at Macnair's groin, swinging his blade up and through in, as his muggle primary school cricket coach would say, a classic straight drive.

Macnair, acting on instinct, got his own katana in a defensive position, but Harry's swing caught his blade on the incorrect edge, and Macnair found his arm twisted the wrong way.

But Macnair wasn't a master for nothing. He sacrificed his katana, letting it fly overhead and behind him. He collapsed backward, but lashed out with his legs, his right foot hooking behind Harry's left knee, and his left foot in front of Harry's left ankle.

Harry felt the tug behind his knee, pulling him forward. Fighting his instinct, Harry let himself fall straight down to his knees instead of face down on top of Macnair.

Macnair's knife flashed through the air where Harry's stomach would have been. With a swipe of his sword, Harry struck the knife in his opponent's hand, slicing the blade off the hilt. As the knife's blade clattered against the wall, Macnair rolled backward quickly, giving both swordsmen the chance to get to their feet.

"Not bad, not bad at all." said Macnair, a trickle of blood coming from one side of his mouth. He spun and raced across the room to his blade, adrenaline masking the pain in his knee.

Harry set his daikatana in his left hand, and drew his wand.

*"Accio Macnair!"*

Macnair was just centimetres from his sword when the magic caught him. With a yell of denial, Voldemort's weapon master flew through the air towards Harry. And, more importantly, the point of Harry's katana.

Even his desperate mid-air twisting couldn't save him, and Macnair's body slid onto the razor-sharp blade with a sibilant hiss.

The pair stared into each other's eyes, Harry with determination, Macnair in confusion.

"But, that's not fair." he whispered.

Harry snorted, staring at his dying instructor with blazing eyes. "Where the hell did you get the impression that I'd fight fair?"

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love A Darkness Rising

### A Darkness Rising

Dumbledore laid the map flat on thin air, the parchment enchanted to mimic a solid table underneath. The faint wind around the castle ruffled the edges of the map, causing the headmaster to frown slightly and hold down the offending corner. "Sirius, Hogwarts is here." he said, pointing to the school's location with his spare hand. "In what direction is Harry now?"

Sirius closed his eyes in concentration. "That way." he said with conviction, his arm pointing in a vaguely south direction. "A long way off, over a hundred leagues."

Dumbledore nodded and drew a line with his wand in the direction indicated by Harry's godfather. "Right then, Sirius, Alastor, Severus, you will come with me. Arthur, please gather Wodenbane and his aurors at their headquarters. We will triangulate Harry's position and collect you there before we apparate to Harry." Dumbledore turned to his deputy, her stern features twisted into a mask of denial.

"You cannot expect me to remain behind when two of my students are in danger!" she said, her impressive voice rising in anger. Behind her, Molly Weasley also took a deep breath.

Dumbledore held up a hand, hoping against all available evidence that he could placate both his deputy and Ginny's mother. "I need both of you to remain here for a reason." he stated, then waited for them both to calm.

"Molly, as much as your temper-enhanced prowess would be welcome on this foray, remember, for now we are only gathering intelligence as to Voldemort's location. We will not be launching any assault until he has been found. I suspect Harry will be able to return Virginia before we get there, and the portkey I gave him is keyed to the infirmary. Please, would you go and inform Poppy that she will hopefully be receiving some students soon."

The Weasley matriarch let out her breath explosively, then nodded once and once only, her temper only just defused. Accepting one last hug from her husband, she wordlessly set off back into Hogwarts to the infirmary, to wait.

Dumbledore faced his deputy, swallowing at the fierce determination in her stance. "Minerva, I can only request you stay behind on a hunch. I have a suspicion that you will be needed here."

McGonagall frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Something tells me that you will be needed here."

"Are you sure?" she demanded.

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, but if I am correct, your presence here could stop another student from doing something rash."

Dumbledore turned to Madam Hooch. "Xiamara, please remain here too, and I ask that you tell no one of Mr. Potter's animagi status."

The eagle-eyed flight instructor nodded, still in a state of bewilderment herself.

"My thanks to you all. Come then, gentlemen." Dumbledore said. "Somewhere in Wales will be a good place from where a good direction to Harry. Somewhere we all have been before."

"Godric's Hollow?" suggested Sirius.

The four nodded, and made their way outside the wards to apparate away.

Harry looked down at the body of his former instructor, feeling oddly empty. With a shuddering breath, the Gryffindor collapsed to his knees, and started trembling. Tears formed in his eyes and fell quickly.

"W-w-what's g-going on?" he asked the empty room. "W-what's h-h-happening t-to me?"

The fit intensified, and Harry dropped his sword, unable to control it enough to avoid doing himself an injury.

A powerful cramp shot through his lower abdomen, and an urgent need gripped him. Harry managed to drag himself to the corner of the room and open his robes before he violently voided his bowels. For long moments, Harry clutched his stomach, experiencing the worst runs of his life.

It took Harry several minutes to bring his body under control, yet he still felt ill. He summoned a towel and began cleaning himself up. He transfigured

Macnair's severed knife blade into a metal bowl. Aiming his wand at the bowl, Harry cast *aqueous* . Quickly, the bowl was filled with clean water. After washing himself, he felt a little bit better.

Harry swallowed, noting that his stomach still sent occasional flashes of pain through him. The healing potion he drank just after his arrival had not healed all his internal injuries. Steeling himself, Harry extracted his second, and the last of his healing potions, cursing at the fact that he was still sore. "Must have really hurt myself hitting the wall." he muttered under his breath.

Once again, he felt the warmth spread throughout his body as the powerful draft did its miraculous work. Even the red mark on his ribs where Macnair had struck him faded. Harry sighed in relief, but looked at the empty potion flask in concern.

A second later, he rolled his eyes at his own idiocy, set the flask upon the ground, transformed, and began to fill it with his own highly potent healing fluid.

Cho gasped in relief as the pain in her stomach faded to a warm glow. She took a couple of slow deep breaths, relieved to feel nothing wrong.

"What happened, Cho?" asked her worried mother from the doorway.

Cho stood and left the bathroom. Taking a deep breath, she looked up at her family. It was odd that they were all here; normally at least one of them would be minding the shop. "Harry was in trouble. I have to go to him." she said simply.

The six adults in the room shared glances. Finally her father leaned over and gripped her shoulder. "Cho, are you sure? It wasn't a dream?"

Cho shook her head. "I was awake, remember. This has happened once before, and Harry was in danger then."

Her parent's exchanged glances. "I'm not sure..." began her father.

Cho sighed, knowing her father would not let her anywhere near danger, and frowned in thought. "I need to at least warn the headmaster."

Her father nodded his permission, and Cho stood and walked over to the fireplace. She pulled down a green velvet bag and tossed a pinch of the powder into the fire. "Albus Dumbledore!" she said.

Nothing happened.

Cho frowned briefly, then tossed another pinch. "Albus Dumbledore's office!"

After a few seconds, the stern features of the deputy headmistress appeared in the flames. "Miss Chang? Is there something I can do for you?"

Cho bit her lip. "Has something happened to Harry?"

McGonagall caught her breath. "What do you know?"

"I saw him in a room, a big stone-walled room. He was in pain. There was an explosion. He was in lots of pain." she quickly related.

"When was this?" McGonagall asked intently.

"Maybe five minutes ago. That vision faded, then another one came a few moments ago. He was fighting someone with a sword. He won, but was in more pain when he finished."

McGonagall leaned forward, staring straight into Cho's eyes. Harry's girlfriend had never in her life seen the Transfiguration Professor so intense. "Can you see him now?" McGonagall demanded.

Cho frowned. "Do you know what has happened to him?" she retorted, more harshly than she meant.

McGonagall's expression hardened. "Miss Chang! This is important! Can you see him now?"

Cho swallowed and closed her eyes. For ten seconds she sat there focusing on Harry. She felt nothing.

"No, I see nothing, professor." she said, and opened her eyes. Cho let out a small gasp of fright. Even with her eyes open, she could see nothing. "I'm blind!"

Cho heard her parents start panicking, but McGonagall's tone calmed her. "Don't panic, girl. Focus! Can you see nothing, or can you only see a dark space?"

Cho took a few breaths. "I see nothing. Blackness. No! I see a glimmer, a light ahead. I'm in a corridor, walking towards a lit room!" she blurted happily.

McGonagall sighed. "I never thought I'd say this, but I wish Sybil was here." she muttered. "Miss Chang, can you let go of the vision?"

Cho blinked and shook her head to clear it. Her parent's sitting room swam into focus. "Apparently." she said.

McGonagall nodded. "Good. I think it would be best if you came straight here. I'll have someone meet you at the Three Broomsticks in five minutes."

Cho blinked. She had expected to have to demand permission to go to Hogwarts. "I'll be there."

"Excellent." came the clipped response. McGonagall's face disappeared.

Cho turned to her now extremely anxious family. "Um, I need to go." she said.

Mad-Eye and Dumbledore exchanged glances, and gave each other a shrug and a sigh. The pair waited for a break in the wonderfully entertaining argument currently running between Sirius and Snape.

"You expect me to believe Potter became an animagus without your help?" demanded Snape.

"I don't care what you believe." Sirius snarled back, not in the mood to verbally spar with anyone.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. The pair ignored him.

"Albus removed all the texts from the library that reference how to become an animagus!" growled Snape. "That was just after Potter's third year. There is no way he could have become one without your help."

"You mean in my copious amounts of spare time when not on the run from both the magical and muggle law, I stopped by and gave him several months of tuition without anyone noticing?" Sirius retorted, sarcasm dripping from his words.

Dumbledore cleared his throat again, louder this time.

Moody didn't bother. He just drew his wand and cast a silencing charm over the bickering pair. "Right kids, if I have to tell you to be quiet one more time, I'm going to send you to your rooms."

Both men looked a bit sheepish at the grizzled auror's reprimand. With a wave of his twisted wand, Moody removed the silencing charm.

"Sorry." said Sirius. He closed his eyes and concentrated. "That way." He said, pointing vaguely to the east. "Not too far."

Again, Dumbledore drew out his map and lay it on thin air. His wand traced out another line on the map. The two lines crossed north-west of London.

Moody grunted. "If we go to Auror HQ, we will be able to get a third fix on his location, and organise the raid."

His three companions nodded, and four pops indicated their apparation from Harry's first home.

Cho stepped through the fire into the Three Broomsticks. Coughing softly, she brushed the soot from her clothes.

The bartender nodded to her, gesturing to one of the many empty tables. Cho smiled and shook her head, heading straight for the door.

The cold, late December Scottish wind swept into the warm, cozy interior of the pub as Cho opened the door. Shivering slightly, Cho stepped out into the main street of Hogsmeade and clutched her cloak more tightly around her shoulders.

A figure flying on a broomstick appeared at the end of the street, swooping with such control and ease that Cho thought it may have been Harry, except that this person was flying far too safely. With an efficient technique, the witch landed in front of Cho. The eagle-like eyes of the new arrival easily allowed deduction of their identity.

"Hello, Madam Hooch. Were you here to meet me?"

Madam Hooch quickly removed her scarf from her face and neck and nodded curtly. "I was. Minerva sent me. Apparently you have some information about young Mr. Potter."

Cho nodded. "But I think I'd better give it to the headmaster directly."

Madam Hooch withdrew her wand and a tiny stick from her robes and cast an enlarging charm. Instantly, another broomstick appeared. "That may be difficult, but I'm to get you to Hogwarts as quickly as possible."

Cho nodded and grabbed the offered broom. "Hey, this is my Comet!" she exclaimed, missing the comment on how giving information to the headmaster may be difficult.

The Hogwarts Flying Instructor nodded, a smile on her face. "It has been a while since you flew it."

Cho nodded happily and launched herself into the air.

Draco's sudden appearance had surprised Madam Pomfrey, but she quickly had the badly injured boy into a crisp white bed.

"I hope you don't plan on kidnapping another one of my patients today, Mr. Malfoy." the nurse said as she catalogued his injuries.

Draco weakly shook his head. "I was under the imperius last time." He coughed, spraying some pink blood. "Am I going to die?" he asked pointedly.

"Not unless you don't shut up and let me do my work." she snapped back at him.

Draco smiled in spite of the pain in his chest and lay back.

With practiced ease, the nurse raised her wand and summoned several items from her stores. Working quickly, she deftly apparated most of the blood from Draco's damaged lung and started healing the torn organ.

A few minutes later, Molly Weasley ran in through the door to the infirmary. She took one look at Draco and spun around almost in a complete circle. "My Ginny! Is my little Ginny here?" she asked.

Madam Pomfrey sighed and shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Mr. Malfoy here just appeared out of thin air. Miss Weasley was not with him."

"Where is she?" Mrs. Weasley demanded of the injured boy.

"Molly!" snapped Madam Pomfrey. "He needs peace and quiet in order to recover. He is in no condition to answer your questions."

Draco shook his head, with no blood in his lungs he felt much better. "We were captured by You-Know-Who. I don't even know how I got back here. One moment he had me under the Crutiatius, the next I'm kneeling on the floor in here."

Mrs. Weasley took a deep breath and tried to calm down. "Albus sent me, Poppy. He said to tell you to expect some students. Harry was given a pair of portkeys to bring Ginny and Draco back here."

Madam Pomfrey started in shock, sending a tray of medical implements crashing to the floor. "What?" she demanded.

Mrs. Weasley swallowed. "From what Albus told me, Draco left a portkey for Harry to take, and a note saying that my little Ginny would be returned if he went."

"And Albus sent him?" shrieked the nurse.

"No, he volunteered."

Behind the nurse, Draco snorted to himself. Madam Pomfrey didn't notice. "Albus let him go?"

Mrs. Weasley frowned in thought. Running the recent events through her mind calmly, she noted that the headmaster hadn't suggested that Harry go. He had been agreeing with Sirius that no one should go. Then Harry received a vision, and afterwards literally ignored everyone else while issuing orders.

She gave a weak smile at the memory. Harry had dismissed Albus with a wave and a minor task, something about calculations of speed. The Auror Chief had also been dismissed, instructed to gather his forces until called for.

Wodenbane was almost apoplectic with rage at being ordered around by a teenager, but his arguments and claims of jurisdiction had been casually dismissed with a wave of Harry's hand.

Molly Weasley may not have been brilliant, but she had raised six devious children (and Percy). The short time frame demanded in the ransom note has caused everyone to be indecisive. After Harry's vision, having someone calmly take charge like that was almost comforting.

The teachers had tried to talk Harry out of his plan of action, even though they had no contingency plan in place. Harry had ignored them all, even Albus hadn't been able to convince the young man otherwise. Only Sirius seemed to get any respect from him, any respect at all.

"I don't think Albus had a choice." she said, still frowning. "He tried to object, but Harry just held up his hand and said, 'Don't'." Mrs. Weasley took a breath, working the scene over in her mind. "I don't think Harry respects his judgment any more."

Draco interrupted the pair. "Are you saying that Potter saved me?" he said, his aristocratic features screwed up into an almost comical expression of denial and disgust.

Mrs. Weasley nodded. "He was given a portkey for you, and one for my daughter."

Draco slumped back. "He did it. Somehow, he did it. That little bastard outsmarted him again. Oh, I almost wish I was back there." he said to himself.

"What do you mean?" asked the nurse, curious at his mumbled statements.

Draco smiled. "You-Know-Who set a trap for the person who used the portkey. A containment charm was sprung as the portkey activated. He was expecting lots of aurors, but only a backpack arrived. The thing exploded, destroying the containment spell and knocking him to the ground. It almost ruptured my eardrums too, let me tell you."

Madam Pomfrey frowned. "But if the containment charm activated when the portkey did too, how did Harry survive the explosion? Or how did he get around it to use your portkey?"

Draco shrugged, then winced. "No idea. That was what I was saying. Potter managed to outsmart the bloody Dark Lord again. He'll be seriously pissed off."

"Where is my daughter?" Mrs. Weasley demanded.

Draco gave her a smirk. "With You-Know-Who, of course."

Molly Weasley was not a naturally violent person, usually preferring to use her incredible vocal range to punish people. Madam Pomfrey had to put a

warning hand on Molly's chest to stop the woman from attacking the Slytherin.

Draco continued, satisfied at the reaction he received. "She was tied to an altar the last time I saw her." he said, grinning at the expression of horror dawning on Mrs. Weasley's face. "I was near her when Potter got the portkey to me, I'll bet he was under his invisibility cloak." Draco's eyes lit up with another realisation. "If I'm here, and your daughter isn't, I'd say Potter decided not to rescue her."

"Don't be ridiculous. Why wouldn't Harry rescue Ginny?" demanded Mrs. Weasley.

Madam Pomfrey interrupted. "That's enough." she said, hoping to keep the pair apart. "I need to tend to Mr. Malfoy here, *in private* ." she emphasised.

Neither of the pair paid her any attention. "You don't know, do you?" said Draco, his voice filled with self-satisfaction.

"Know what?" demanded Mrs. Weasley.

"Enough!" shouted the nurse. "You, out." she demanded, facing Mrs. Weasley. "You, *stupefy* !" she cast at Draco.

If the nurse thought that having the antagonist unconscious would make things quieter, she was soon disabused of that idea. "What was he talking about?" demanded Mrs. Weasley, her incredible voice rising effortlessly.

Madam Pomfrey sighed and looked over at Draco, noting that he was stable enough for now. "If you can keep quiet, Molly, I'll tell you." she said softly.

Voldemort lowered his wand, and the high pitched screams faded into sobs. Ginny lay gasping for breath on the stone altar, weakly straining against her bonds. Perspiration made her hair stick close to her scalp, turning the vibrant red curls into a dark rusty colour.

"Your kidnapper has left you in my power; your father has ignored your peril. Even your hero *Potter* didn't try and rescue you, not that I blame him, after what you did to him." taunted the Dark Lord. "The entire world has abandoned you. No one loves you, no one cares."

Ginny clenched her eyes closed in an effort to stop the tears from falling. So this was how Harry felt, she thought morbidly. Having everyone turn their backs and just leave you, leave you alone in the hands of your worst nightmare.

Voldemort's thin hand grasped the youngest Weasley by the throat. "I sense myself in you. Lucius told me of his little sleight of hand, putting my diary into your school things. How long have you fought me, how long have you denied me?"

Ginny couldn't control her voice enough to make a voluntary sound, let alone speech. As the hand at her throat tightened her eyes flew open. On looking deep into the blazing red eyes of her captor, Ginny lost what little control she had, and started shivering in fear.

"Master!" called Wormtail, appearing in Ginny's peripheral vision, looking as though he had just sprinted a fair distance. "Macnair!" he gasped.

"What is it?" spat Voldemort, glaring at the short wizard with contempt.

"Macnair!" he gasped again. "Dead!"

As Voldemort spun and grabbed a handful of Pettigrew's robes, Ginny felt his sharp fingernails scratch her white neck.

"How!" demanded the Dark Lord, shaking his servant violently.

"S-s-swor-r-r-rd, M-m-mas-s-ster-r." stammered Pettigrew, the rough shaking breaking up his speech.

Voldemort dropped him, and stalked back to the center of the room. "How? The outer wards have not been breached. Malfoy's son didn't bring back anyone else." Voldemort spun round and faced the petrified pair. "How? Who?" he spluttered.

Wormtail got unsteadily to his feet. "Master, we are vulnerable." he said, flinching at the expected outburst. "If there is a gap somewhere in the wards, then there could be many aurors coming through the labyrinth."

Instead, Voldemort looked thoughtful. "Perhaps you are right, for once. Move, Worm. I will begin the summoning."

Instantly, Wormtail jumped from the etched circle in the stone floor. Ginny, grateful that the torture had ceased for now, turned her head to see what new horror Voldemort was about to commit.

Slowly, carefully, Voldemort poured the tiny, sand-grain-sized crystals from the glass container. As the faintly glowing particles landed into the etchings, their glow steadily intensified. Skillfully, the Dark Lord filled the engravings in the stone with Macnair's very essence.

"I had hoped for a larger audience for this, but you will have to do, disgrace that you are." Voldemort said, positioning himself at the opposite side of the circle to Ginny. "Wormtail, prepare yourself, remain vigilant."

Accepting his servant's hurried nod as acceptance of his orders, the tall, serpent-faced man took a deep breath and assumed a wide stance. With graceful movements that bespoke long years of practice, he started chanting while drawing figures in the air with his yew wand.

As the unfamiliar figures of fire were drawn, they floated down to the floor, writhing, twisting, dancing. As they landed, the fiery lines linked the horrible etchings with each other, forming an evil, fire-edged jigsaw puzzle.

Voldemort changed the tone of his chants, from a droning, soft voice to a powerful, confident summoning tone. The fire edges of the figures brightened, burning through the hard stone floor beneath them. First one, then another, then more individual pieces fell through into what looked like an intensely hot ravine.

With a rush, the rest of the floor to the edges of the circle collapsed. Only the glowing essence of Macnair's magical sacrifice held the fabric of the world together at Voldemort casually tore a gaping hole to another plane of existence.

Voldemort's casting took on an insistent tone, commanding through the arcane words that he must be obeyed. For long minutes, the Dark Lord mentally searched what truly looked like hell for the object of his summons.

A gigantic, clawed and scaled hand broached the hole, grasping the edge hard enough that the stone beneath the ebony talons cracked and splintered. Thick tendons rippled down the back of the hand, easily two feet across.

The second hand appeared, grasping the opposite edge of the portal with similar results. Long cracks appeared in the floor, streaking out away from the demonic creature.

Demonic indeed, as what could only be the head rose from the depths. Dark twin pools of pure blackness dominated the hideous, bestial face. An enormous cranial ridge swept from either side of those awful eyes up and over the cranium, before splitting at the peak. The two bony protrusions twisted into horns sprouting out and up from the sides of the head.

The nightmare's canine-like maw was filled with glistening shadows where the teeth should have been. Somehow, the fact that it didn't have solid teeth did not make Ginny feel any better at all.

As awful and terrifying as the face was, the rest of the creature was truly gut-wrenching. Thickly muscled arms were attached to a bent and twisted torso. Dozens of faces of damned souls could be seen pressing against the inside of the creature's chest, each one screwed up in expressions of agony, horror and despair. As one face slid under the beast's leathery hide, it opened its pitiful mouth in a silent scream, begging for release. It disappeared, pulled back into the creature's belly, but was not gone for a second before another took its place.

Wormtail fell to his knees, retching violently.

Once the monster's torso was clear of the portal it spread its wings. Obsidian coloured feathers covered the enormous wingspan, easily six meters tip to tip. The feathers showed their razor edge, leaving great gouges in the stone walls.

Still higher the beast rose from the portal, its backwards hips clearing the portal's edge to reveal equally powerful legs, though the knees were reversed. Triple-clawed feet finally completed the release of this monster, the talons crushing the stone beneath their grip.

The Shadow Demon towered just over three meters tall, the twisted horns scraping on the domed ceiling. It spread its wings, curled its hands into fists, took a deep breath and *Screeched!*

The earth itself responded to the otherworldly presence, twisting and jumbling. Cracks appeared in the granite ceiling and up the thick pillars. Wormtail clutched the sides of his head, Ginny screamed in pain, while Voldemort stood stock still, his arms still raised, reveling in the sound of pure power.

None of them heard the gasp of surprise coming from one of the entrances to the room.

"Oh, *fuck!*"

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Midnight Duel

### Midnight Duel

"Oh, *fuck!*"

Harry's uncontrolled vernacular outburst echoed in both the chamber and his mind.

Harry was too shocked at the sight of Voldemort's horrific otherworldly summoning that he let slip the first words that came to his mind. Fortunately, no one overheard. Unfortunately, this was due entirely to the fact that everyone's attention was focused on the presence of a living nightmare. A Shadow Demon.

Not that Harry recognised what the creature was.

He had spent the past several minutes searching for an exit, traveling back and forth through the dark corridors, noting with not a little dismay after the forth turn that he was in a labyrinth. The spell to make his wand point north wasn't functioning correctly; casting it just caused the holly wand spin in a slow circle. Harry had come to the conclusion that there were wards around the maze preventing directional magic from being cast. He made a mental note that he needed to add a muggle compass to his belt.

The dark, twisting corridors had turned him around on himself, and now Harry stared with a horrified expression into the same room in which he had arrived. The fact that he was looking into the cavern from a different entrance was not comforting.

In front of him, Voldemort stood straight, his arms held up and out, his legs spread in a wide stance. The Dark Lord's head was thrown back, an expression of ecstasy on his serpentine features. Even from this distance, Harry could sense the sheer volume of magical power thrumming through the Dark Lord's thin frame. If someone cast a spell to show magic as light, Voldemort would be incandescent.

Wormtail was slowly trying to stand on wobbly legs, Ginny was writhing desperately on the stone altar while tugging at her chains, her cries echoing unheeded in the vast cavern. But Harry didn't even register the pair's presence at first.

Standing on heavily muscled legs stood a true nightmare. The Shadow Demon's initial scream had made the earth heave and twist in agony, its presence an abomination to this plane of existence. Muggle scientists would be scratching their heads over the unexplained earthquake for years to come.

If the world survived that is.

Voldemort smiled and pointed to the creature, then to the altar, obviously giving it an order.

Harry swallowed nervously, praying that Sirius and the others would arrive soon.

He had no problem admitting that he was well out of his depth.

Voldemort stared into the infinite black eyes of his new minion. Upon its arrival, the Demon had immediately tried to exert its dominance, sending a backlash of darkness towards the Dark Lord. Left unfettered, not even a fully immortal Voldemort could have withstood such a crushing attack; but with the circle of power still humming with Macnair's willingly given magical force, the Dark Lord easily overcame the challenge. A malevolent smile crossed the serpent-like features.

"You are mine." he said simply. "You shall bring me the power I deserve, the power that has been denied me. As a token of my faith however, I have a gift for you!" commanded Voldemort. "Consume the daughter of my enemy."

With a roar of delight that again shook the foundations of the cavern and caused dust to fall from the ceiling, the Shadow Demon turned to face the terrified young witch. An horrific smile crossed the demon's canine features, the slaving upper lips curling to reveal the visible, but insubstantial teeth in its maw. With a low growl of anticipation, it slowly reached forth a taloned hand.

From one of the cavern's entrances, an unwelcome voice cast, "*Alohomora!*"

Ginny's desperate thrashings caused the now open shackles to fly from her wrists and ankles, sparks flying where one bounced off the Shadow Demon's seemingly rock-hard hide.

She maintained enough presence of mind to roll off the altar just before the demon's grasping right hand snatched at the space she had just occupied. Talons that ended in a point a micron wide gouged deeply into the stone, causing a spider web of cracks to rip through the altar.

Ginny looked up from the floor on her hands and knees, not sure why the manacles had released her. The demon roared its disapproval, one foot

stepping up onto the abused altar, gripping the stone so hard that it cracked even further and then crumbled. Ginny's eyes widened in horror as she realised the true scale of this monster. Its foot was almost as large as she was. Pure black eyes stared down at the flame-haired witch, promising a painful death and an eternally agonizing afterlife.

"Miss Chang, you are not being at all helpful!" snapped the Divination professor. "Now please follow my instructions, I am the expert here."

Cho took a deep breath and prepared to let the small medium know exactly what she thought of her level of expertise. It was only McGonagall's stern, yet uncertain expression that kept her anger in check. The deputy headmistress had summoned Trelawney from her tower after speaking through the fire with Cho, but was now silently debating the wisdom of that action.

"Sybil, Miss Chang has shown that she has her own method of controlling her visions. Perhaps we should..."

"Minerva, please. You have repeatedly stated that you have no respect for the discipline I practice. If you wouldn't mind, please be quiet and let me do my job." Trelawney turned back to Cho. "Now, I want you to clear your mind, let the universal energies surround you, let them infuse you."

Cho almost growled with frustration, but did as she was bid. Clearing her mind was difficult, more difficult than she expected, but using a Chinese meditation method allowed her to eventually reach a state of calm. Try as she might though, she could feel no 'energies' surround her, or attempt to infuse her.

Cho let her breath out in a rush and opened her eyes. "Nothing. Just like the last three times you had me do this pointless exercise."

Trelawney drew herself to her full, yet still unimpressive, height. "Miss Chang. If you refuse to allow yourself to accept inspiration from..."

"Shut up." Cho snapped, her dark eyes flashing with inner fire. "Harry is in danger, and you sit here asking me to breathe in disgusting incense and focus on cosmic energies? *This* is how I get my visions!" Cho clenched her eyes shut, shunting away the flash of shame she felt from speaking to a teacher in such a manner. *Harry*. she thought. *Focus on Harry*.

Cho thought of what Harry looked like, his lean, toned physique. His long, dark, silky hair. Hair that was so very unmanageable. Those beautiful and expressive eyes. Deep pools of emerald green. Mentally, Cho remembered the tactile sensation of slowly tracing her fingertips down his muscled back.

Cho opened her eyes to a nightmare. She screamed.

The older witches jumped in fright. Both clutched at their hearts with such symmetry that one could be forgiven for thinking them sisters.

"Run, Ginny!" Cho screamed. "Run you stupid bitch!"

Cho alone heard the curious mix of her own voice and Harry's, as they both shouted the same words at the same time.

"Miss Chang! What is happening?" demanded McGonagall, concern, fear and mounting panic blending in her voice.

"Ginny!" Cho exclaimed. "She's about to be eaten! Creature! Horrible! Nightmare!" Cho spouted, too frightened to be able to form a coherent sentence. "*Wings! Awful! Expecto Patronum!*"

"Run, Ginny!" Harry shouted, frustration clearly evident in his voice. "Run you stupid bitch!"

Hoping that Ginny heard and acted on his shouted instruction, and praying that this would work, Harry minutely adjusted his aim, and then brought to mind the memory of kissing Cho after playing broomstick tag for a few hours.

The hours old memory easily brought an out of place smile to his face. "*Expecto Patronum!*" he shouted, an unexpected shiver of remembered delight running down his spine.

The silver stag that burst from his wand was half again as large as the one that held off the hoard of dementors that had tried to kiss his godfather that fateful night at the end of Harry's third year. Leaving a trail of glimmering motes of floating silver dust, the shining image of James Potter's animagus form silently charged down the Shadow Demon.

Both Voldemort and Wormtail stood openmouthed at the sight as the stag crossed the gap, lowering its head before reaching the demon at the same time Voldemort's summoning managed to sink its claws into Ginny's leg.

Ginny's scream of agony was tinged with anger, while the Shadow Demon's shriek of rage hinted at the pain of being struck, but not pierced by eighteen glowing points. With one foot on the altar higher than the other, the enormous demon stumbled, losing its balance, falling to one knee.

Prongs raised his head, his antlers tearing at the Shadow Demon's hide, though still unable to penetrate the rock-hard skin. With a silent bellow, the silver stag rose on its hind legs and lashed out with its front hooves.

Where iron manacles had just bounced off the demon's hide, Prongs' kick connected solidly, forcing the demon to land awkwardly, the sound of its landing echoed throughout the cavern mixing horribly with the screams of hatred and pain.

Prongs was unable to avoid the counter-attack however, and was struck by a razor-sharp feathered wing. The mighty stag fell to the ground under the assault, silver blood streaming from a three foot long gash in his flank, but continued to lash out at the demon's legs with his own hind hooves.

As his patronus kicked the demon's feet from under itself, Harry drew out Ginny's portkey and banished it towards the girl.



Time appeared to slow down for Harry as he watched the portkey's flight, from the corner of his eyes, Harry saw Voldemort mouth a spell. The thirteen-inch yew wand spat blue flame, surrounding Ginny's escape route with a flickering cage of blue fire. With a sharp retort, the portkey disintegrated, sending tiny shards of glass in all directions.

"Not this time, Potter. You've taken one of my play things today, but not this one." Voldemort snarled.

Suddenly, Harry clutched his chest, feeling as though fire was consuming his heart. He staggered back, and collapsed, landing hard on his backside. Looking up, he saw the injured Shadow Demon pierce Prongs' chest with claws sharp enough to rip through stone. The silver stag faded away.

Ginny gasped at Harry's fall, finally noting his arrival, and started desperately crawling towards him, leaving a trail of red blood behind her severely injured leg.

The three wizards and one witch in the room gasped in unison, each of them feeling the sudden sensation of a severe drop in magical energy. Harry likened it to the magical equivalent of flying too high on his broom, and having his ears pop.

Wormtail turned to his master. "The wards!"

Voldemort looked up at the stone ceiling, then over at Harry. With a feral grin, he pointed directly upwards, and turned to his summoned minion. "Destroy those who now attack me!" he demanded. "Feast on their souls!"

The demon stared at his master, then looked up at the stone ceiling. With a powerful leap of his legs, the Shadow Demon launched itself at the roof.

Dumbledore scratched absently at his bearded chin, examining the subtle but powerful wards that extended over an area of several hundred acres. "I wish Fillius were here." he muttered. "He'd probably know of a way to negate them quickly."

"Are they that strong?" asked Snape, who was nervously watching the large group of aurors debate amongst themselves the merits of just blasting their way in.

"No, I'm sure between just the four of us we could bring them down; I'm just not sure we'd be of much use afterwards."

"What do you mean?"

Dumbledore sighed. "One of the wards is designed to release a spell when broken. It may just be a magical warning signal, like a muggle alarm, but given the nature of the wizard who set them, I'd guess the release would be violent."

"What would Fillius be able to do that you could not?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Perhaps he could use the way they are overlapped to exploit a weakness, or perhaps he knows of a dispelling charm that the wards think came from within them. At least he would know, I'm making an educated guess."

Moody grunted softly, indicating he wanted to speak. "You sure this is the place?"

"We triangulated Harry's location here." replied Sirius, who slipped the ring on for a second. "Yes, Harry is nearby, less than a hundred yards away." he confirmed before removing it again. "Behind the wards too."

"I see nothing hidden, that's all." said the retired auror. Even when things are hidden with an aversion charm, I can see them. Invisibility is easy to see through. Wizard repellant doesn't work on my eye, and I can even see muggle false doors. All I see out there is grass!"

Sirius swallowed nervously at this announcement and looked out over the large, empty plain, the short grass gently waving in the wind. He raised his arm and pointed. "What about-" was all he got out.

Each and every witch and wizard, auror and teacher alike, were thrown to the ground by the violently churning earth. What had once been solid ground now acted like liquid.

It was over in seconds, but it took over half a minute before the group above gathered their wits.

"What, by Grindelwald's grave, did you do, Black?" snarled Snape.

"I didn't do anything." Sirius snapped back. "I just pointed out over th..."

Once more, though far less violently, the ground shook and trembled. All the aurors were staring at Sirius, who was looking at the tip of his own finger with a very comical expression of disbelief.

"Are you going to deny that was you too?" Snape asked sweetly, slowly rising to his feet.

While Dumbledore moved between the pair to prevent an argument, Moody looked over visibly changed landscape. Several tears had appeared in the grassy plain, some reaching ten feet deep or more. His magical eye rotating wildly, the grizzled professor gingerly lowered himself into the closest rift.

"I have no idea why my finger caused the earthquake, I swear!" shouted Sirius, looking around at the skeptical faces on the assembled aurors.

Snape, who actually believed him, couldn't help but take the opportunity to ruffle his feathers. "I suppose it is the same way you have no idea how

Potter managed his little 'feat' or transfiguration earlier?"

Dumbledore placed a hand on each man's shoulder, realising that Sirius was close to breaking point. "Gentlemen, please. We do not have time for this. We need to come up with a way of bringing down those wards quickly."

Moody's faint voice caught their attention. "Right, now that I'm behind the bloody things, how do I bring them down?"

"Alastor?" blurted Dumbledore. "How on earth did you manage that?"

Moody shrugged. "While you were watching the kids arguing, I noticed that one of the rifts in the ground opens a gap under the wards. Now, how do I bring them down."

As Dumbledore and some of the aurors started offering advice, Snape and Sirius stepped away to the side.

"Sorry, I can't believe they didn't tell you." said Harry's godfather.

"What?" asked Snape, surprise clearly showing on his face.

"How Harry became an animagus."

Snape shook his head. "I'd have settled on just knowing that he was and animagus."

Sirius nodded, a smile playing on his lips. "You know the letter they let him take to Azkaban?"

Snape nodded. "The one from his father."

"That's the one. James wanted to make sure he got it at a particular age. When you activate the parchment it was written on properly, it becomes a guide, a textbook if you will, detailing the steps on how you can become an animagus. We created it to help Peter become one, since he was having a lot of trouble."

Snape blinked. "That doesn't explain how he managed to become a bloody phoenix! Even I know that you can't become a magical creature."

Sirius shrugged. "Probably ignorance paving the way. He didn't know that he couldn't, so he did it." Harry's godfather made a face. "We didn't bother putting many of the safety issues in the guide."

Snape rubbed his face with his hands, processing this new information. "Is there anything that boy can't do?" he asked plaintively.

Sirius shrugged, a smile full of pride on his face. "Not if he puts his mind to it."

A detonation that was felt rather than heard, and the pair turned to watch the wards evaporate harmlessly. Both Dumbledore and Moody looked pleased with themselves. Wodenbane stepped up, and started issuing orders to his troops.

Fifty yards away, the recently abused ground erupted, something bursting forth in a shower of turf, sod and stone. The thing spread its wings and hovered in mid air, magic obviously aiding its flight.

Few of the aurors were able to keep their wits about them, which is why only a half dozen spells struck the creature's hide as it dived at the tight auror formation.

Harry covered his head as dust, gravel and pebbles landed on and around him. The Shadow Demon had leapt *through* the ceiling, leaving a gaping hole through which grass, dirt and sunlight streamed through.

"No!" Harry screamed, instinctively realising that Sirius was out there. "Call it back!"

Voldemort sneered at Harry, though the effect was ruined by how dirty and dusty the Dark Lord's robes were. "Why would I do that, Potter?" he asked sardonically.

Harry's mind whirled, suggesting and discarding reasons. "If you let it go too far, it might break free of your control."

Voldemort laughed. With one arm, he gestured towards the portal to hell. "While Macnair's crystals remain in place, I maintain control of the Shadow Demon."

As quick as he could, Harry tightened his grip on his wand and pointed it at Voldemort. The Dark Lord's movements seemed languid and smooth, but were just as quick.

"So, Potter. Do we join our wands again? Imagine my surprise to find that our wands were brothers. That fact alone is why you were able to avoid your fate on the night of my rebirth. Well? Shall we?"

Harry swallowed, and slowly shook his head. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ginny stop her frantic crawl towards him, and slowly crawl back. Back towards the portal Voldemort had opened. *She knows something!* he thought to himself. "I only beat you because you had just regained your body."

Voldemort nodded, a smirk on his face. He raised his eyes, looking up at the ceiling, beyond which screams and cries of pain filtered down through the gaping exit hole the Shadow Demon made. "It would seem my new pet is enjoying himself." The red eyes returned to focus on Harry. "One thing

puzzles me. I would like to know how you escaped the trap I set for your arrival."

Harry snarled back. "You'll have to get used to disappointment."

With a nonchalant shrug, Voldemort simply said, "OK." and shot a quick hex at Harry.

Harry easily evaded the spell, but didn't retaliate. Ginny was almost at the portal.

But Wormtail was more observant. Pointing with his silver hand, he blurted, "Master!"

Voldemort snapped his head around and focused on the young witch. A low growl escaped him, and the thirteen inch yew wand arced around to point at Ginny.

Harry shouted, "No!" and quickly cast the disarming spell he learned from Snape in his second year. "*Expelliarmus!*"

The spell sparked off Voldemort's shield, while the Dark Lord entombed Ginny's legs and torso in a glowing enchantment, freezing her in place.

"Well, it would appear that you have feelings for your rapist after all." said Voldemort, an evil grin on his face. With his free hand, he removed a small wooden rack holding some stoppered vials from his dark robes.

"These contain last potion your instructor ever made, Potter." he said, holding up the small rack. "You will drink one of them, or your friend will... erupt." he finished with a leer.

Suddenly, Ginny gasped in pain, her face quickly turning red, slowly darkening to purple as more and more blood was pushed away from her body by the crushing enchantment. Her breath hissed from her mouth, leaving her gaping like a freshly landed fish.

"Drink it, Potter." demanded Voldemort, extracting one vial and tossing it to Harry. "Or she will be crushed alive. She may die quickly, a vein bursting in her head, or she may die slowly, as her heart pumps lifeless blood."

Harry caught the vial one handed. Looking from Ginny to Voldemort, he swallowed nervously.

Harry gave the vial a surreptitious tap of his wand and a quick mumbled charm. Voldemort did not seem impressed.

"You think you can charm it? You don't even know what it is. Drink it!" the Dark Lord ordered.

Harry tossed the contents down his throat in one swallow. Instantly, the pain from his stomach left him gasping. He dropped the empty vial and grabbed his abdomen.

Voldemort grinned at Harry's obvious distress. "You just imbibed Serpent's tears, Potter. Your magic is now slowly congealing within your veins. Soon, it will weep through your skin, turning into crystals." The Dark Lord turned to Ginny, and removed the immobilizing spell.

The flame-haired witch collapsed to her knees, sucking in a lungful of air. She tried desperately not to lose consciousness as a wave of dizziness overtook her.

Harry too was on his knees. He leant forward and vomited the contents of his stomach onto the stone floor.

Voldemort shook his head. "Too late Potter, much too late. The potion is already working. Macnair vomited almost immediately, yet he was still turned into a muggle." He turned his vivid red eyes onto Ginny. "As for you. *Imperio!* Jump into the portal! Let your soul be torn apart for eternity!"

Harry let loose an unforgivable curse the instant Ginny started running towards the portal. "*Crucio!*"

The shocked expression on the Dark Lord's face faded quickly as the most painful spell ever devised tore through both his shield, and then him. For the first time since attaining the self appointed title of 'Dark Lord', Tom Riddle suffered under the pain and indignity of the Cruciatus curse.

Wormtail stood still, shocked at what had occurred. He looked aghast from Harry to Voldemort and back again.

Ginny dived for the portal, but with a wide swing of her arm, swept away half the glimmering crystals forming the magical collar Voldemort had on the Shadow Demon.

Once more the ground heaved as a scream of hatred and release echoed into the cavern from outside. All four occupants were thrown onto the floor, breaking the curse Harry had on the Dark Lord.

"It's not yours anymore, Tom!" shouted Ginny as she raised herself onto one elbow, her voice hoarse from the punishment she had suffered under earlier. "And neither am I!"

Voldemort's eyes widened as he stood, confusion and fear mixing in his expression. He turned to Harry. "How in Merlin's name did you...?"

Harry knelt and picked up an object in the middle of the pile of vomit, holding it up for Voldemort to see. "I put a freezing charm on your potion." he said simply, turning the frozen Serpents Tears.

Still stunned, Voldemort turned to Ginny. "How did you...?"

Ginny raised her left arm, showing the beautiful coil of unicorn ivory. "Charm bracelet."

Voldemort turned his head to look at the portal, and noticed the broken circle. The sight sparked him into motion. "You stupid bitch! You just released it on the world with no restraints!" He whipped his wand around to aim straight at Harry.

Time seemed to stop as a silver hand tentatively reached out and closed around the yew wand, and then broke it in half.

Wormtail looked straight at Harry, shrugged and said, "I'm so sorry."

With a titanic crash, the Shadow Demon slammed into the earth in the midst of the auror formation. The claws on its feet gripped and crushed several robed wizards into the soil. Howling with unholy joy, the demon swept its arm around in a wide arc, knocking over the closest aurors with its arm, dismembering the aurors further out with its claws.

Sirius paled so much that his skin was white. Recognising that Voldemort must have opened a portal to another plane of existence, he drew his wand and started casting offensive spells.

Taking their cue, the rest of the Hogwarts' staff joined in the magical battle.

With a quick snatch, the demon grabbed two aurors and leapt into the air, its massive wings gaining it altitude quickly. Once it was out of spell range, the wizards stopped their attack, only to find that the demon had no intention of letting them recover.

The corpse of one of the two captured aurors crashed down to earth, disrupting Wodenbane's effort to form the remaining aurors into ranks. What happened to the other was frightening in its bloodlessness.

The Shadow Demon brought its remaining thrashing captive to his maw, slowly opening its hideous mouth. Insubstantial teeth bit down on the auror, moving through the poor man's body without resistance. With a jerk, the demon pulled the auror's body away from its mouth.

To the surprise of those present, the now lifeless body came away whole, and was then dropped. What caused the shivers of horror in those present was the auror's now semi-visible soul, caught in the demon's teeth.

With a silent shriek of denial, the demon swallowed the soul of the doomed man's soul. Several aurors fell to the ground retching when they saw their colleague's face appear briefly under the demon's skin, beginning an eternity of screaming for help.

A groan spread through those on the ground, as the Shadow Demon grew several inches larger after consuming such a magically powerful meal.

Someone at the ministry was awake though, as several small detonations announced the arrival of more ministry personnel. Including several from the department of mysteries.

"Decoys!" shouted Sirius, as the Shadow Demon started to dive. He quickly transformed several blades of grass into dummies wearing auror robes. Dumbledore and Moody nodded their understanding, quickly mimicking Sirius' plan.

Fortunately for those present, it worked. The demon adjusted its course to land upon the recently arrived group of wizards, only to land on and crush the collected dummies.

Ducking and weaving amongst the flying pieces of transfigured decoy, the assembled troops finally managed some semblance of discipline, and the attack was taken up to the demon.

Several aurors disappeared then returned a few seconds later, holding brooms. In moments, an aerial contingent started containment measures, desperately trying to keep the demon on the ground.

With a quick leap, the demon moved to his left, causing the broomstick formation to adjust course. Fatally, that is, as the demon jumped back to his right, directly into the path of the aerial formation. It spread its wings and slashed the flying group of wizards and witches with its razor sharp feathers.

It dropped onto all fours and charged the main group of resistance, surrounding the professors from Hogwarts. Several massive boa constrictors summoned by Snape coiled themselves around the thing's legs, causing it to stumble into a thick stone wall, transfigured courtesy of Sirius. When the dust cleared, the Shadow Demon nearly opened its maw and screamed its defiance before attacking again.

With a charge that flattened a group of Unspeakables, the demon stood and leapt into the air. It turned to face those who it had been sent to kill, an expression of total satisfaction on its face.

Suddenly, it focused not on the assembled wizards, but on the gaping hole it made when it erupted from the earth. With a shriek of unfettered joy it dove at the hole with a single-minded purpose.

Which gave Sirius and Moody the opportunity to transfigure more walls for it to run into.

"Something's changed!" Harry's godfather shouted. "Keep it here if you can!"

Tactics changed accordingly, the demon now struggled to get past walls and break free of conjured bonds. But no matter what the wizards did, the invulnerable three meter monstrosity inched closer and closer to the gaping hole, leading down to Harry.

At the betrayal of his last remaining Death Eater, Voldemort spat out two unfamiliar words. Wormtail dropped to his knees and clutched at his left arm, squealing loudly. Less than a second later, smoke started rising from the tattoo on the silver handed wizard's forearm. Then, starting from the mark on his arm, Peter Pettigrew slowly burst into flames.

Harry wasted no time, transforming himself and flew directly at Voldemort, covering the distance in a single heartbeat. He quickly turned back and body checked the Dark Lord at speed, feeling a rush of satisfaction as Voldemort's breath exploded from his lungs.

But touching Voldemort caused his scar to burst forth with agony, and Harry growled loudly as he tried to fight off the pain in his head. Voldemort grabbed Harry's right wrist with both hands, trying to wrest away Harry's wand.

Harry quickly drove his knee into his opponent's stomach, causing the evil wizard to gasp in pain. He quickly brought up his left hand, still holding the frozen potion. With the speed of a striking snake, Harry thrust the ice cube into the Dark Lord's open mouth. Before Voldemort could spit it out, Harry clamped his free hand over the evil wizard's mouth.

The Dark Lord let go of Harry's right wrist, and tried to pull his left hand away. With a triumphant grin, Harry cast *Finite Incantatem* directly at Voldemort's face.

Red eyes widened in panic as the powerful potion melted instantly. It took all of Harry's strength and will power to keep his left hand in place as Voldemort struggled to tear his hand away.

Harry cast one last spell just as his hand was finally pulled away, a simple medical charm designed to trigger or test a reflex in a patient.

Voldemort swallowed.

The young wizard was tossed off the suddenly violently quaking body, as massive tremors wracked Voldemort's frame. The Dark Lord rolled onto all fours and retched in a useless attempt to get the very potion he commissioned out of his system.

Harry stood and stepped back, only to be grabbed from behind by Ginny.

Too exhausted to fight, he let her drag him away from the doomed Tom Riddle.

The pair watched in awe as Voldemort struggled in agony. He tore his robes from his body and rolled around howling.

The pair both noticed it at the same time. The tiny, glowing crystals that started forming on the snake-like skin. He was sweating magic, Voldemort's very essence oozed from his skin, before crystallizing and falling away.

It was over in less than a minute. The pitiful wretch of a man lay on a pile of brightly glowing crystals. Crystals that were glowing far brighter than Macnair's own. The painfully thin, quivering man rolled onto his side, gulping in lungfuls of air. Harry gently removed Ginny's hands, and looked down on what was left of the most powerful dark wizard in recent history.

"It's over." he whispered.

"Yes." whispered Ginny, tears streaming from her eyes. She looked at the thin layer of crystals strewn about. "Will we be able to fix the portal with those?" she asked.

Harry shook his head sadly. "The potion needs to be willingly taken to do that. I forced it down his throat."

Ginny swallowed loudly, realising what her impulsive action had done. "I hope they find some way to kill it." she said, her voice low and rough with shame.

A howl brought them out of their revreie. The demon fell through the hole to the outside world, twisting almost gracefully to land on his taloned feet less than two meters away.

Without a chance to say a word, Harry and Ginny were struck away to the side of the room by a flailing limb. The red-haired witch shouted her defiance, but was silenced as she hit the wall hard.

Harry landed awkwardly, and felt his ankle twist sharply. With a yelp of surprise, he rolled over onto his back, and scrambled away from the demon. The Shadow Demon laughed at his antics, standing still long enough for the surviving aurors and professors to apparate down to the chamber from the top of the crater.

A veritable rainbow of curses struck the demon from behind, lighting up the chamber like a muggle disco. The demon didn't even acknowledge the spells. Harry could see Dumbledore frown in frustration, and send the unforgivable killing curse at the demon.

The powerful green spell struck directly between the Shadow Demon's wings.

The demon didn't notice.

Harry swore under his breath, and snatched his vial of phoenix tears from his belt as the demon leapt towards him. The ground trembled and shook as it landed in front of Harry, causing the young wizard to fall onto his back and fumble the vial into the air.

The thin glass shattered on Harry's forehead as he tried to both sit up and catch the falling vial, his seeker skills deserting him at that instant.

A sharp tingling in his scar indicated that the healing fluid was trying to heal the most potent curse scar in history. But not even the tears of the phoenix could manage that.

The demon lashed out, and grabbed Harry in one taloned hand. In an instant, the young wizard was unable to move any part of his body. Harry felt like he was held in a vice, on which at the flick of a switch, could crush the life from him with no effort what so ever. Harry's glasses fell from his face

as he was drawn up to eye height.

To Harry, the universe suddenly went quiet. He could hear the roar of blood in his ears as it was pushed around his body, his heart beating one hundred and fifty times a minute. With a growing leaden sensation in his stomach, he found himself staring into twin pools of perfect blackness. Despair washed over him, fear infused him. The canine features of the massive face in front of him contorted themselves into some semblance of a smile, further draining Harry of the will to fight.

Not even Azkaban sapped the life out of him so quickly. All of Harry's defenses crumbled, one after the other. His stoicism, his will, even his determination wilted and vanished. Who was he to fight this thing? How could one person be expected to do so much, when others didn't do a thing?

The relief at seeing Voldemort permanently powerless vanished as if it never existed. Every insult from Malfoy, every putdown from the Dursleys, everything bad memory from his entire life flooded through him in an instant.

The Shadow Demon's gaze ripped through Harry's soul, tearing at it. Tears ran from Harry's exposed eyes, as humiliation and grief struggled for dominance. He was nothing, he would die a nobody. In a handful of seconds, the Shadow Demon had stripped away Harry's humanity. It tore away his life, finally exposing the core of just who Harry was.

With a low growl, Harry slammed his forehead directly between the Shadow Demon's eyes.

Sirius was the first to apparate into the chamber from above, and felt his heart skip a beat as he watched the Shadow Demon sweep Harry and Ginny away from the portal with one swing of its powerful arm. Ginny hit one wall hard and lay still. Harry landed awkwardly, but apparently still able to fight. Sirius launched the most powerful stunning spell he ever cast at the back of the demon.

A red streak struck the demon in the rump, sparks cascading from the point of contact.

The demon didn't even notice.

Dumbledore's deep and powerful casting voice intoned the forbidden phrase, "*Avada Kedavra!*" sending an iridescent green curse towards the demon.

The demon didn't even notice.

It leapt in the air and landed in front of Sirius' godson. The sudden churning of the earth that accompanied the demon's landing caused Harry to fumble something, which flew from his grasp and shattered on his head. Sirius gave a strangled shout as The-Boy-Who-Lived was snatched up in the demon's giant fist.

Dumbledore and Moody appeared on his left side, Snape appeared on his right. Together with the aurors who survived the demon's assault they launched every offensive spell in their arsenal.

Red spells blended with blues and yellows, pinks and browns. Spells that should cause the victim to collapse in pain mixed with hexes designed to turn gravity upside down. Gouts of fire combined with hailstones the size of Hagrid's fists to burn and freeze the demon's flesh.

Nothing had any effect.

Sirius groaned as his godson was lifted up to the demon's face. For a long moment did the Shadow Demon stare down Harry Potter, and it was easy to see even from this distance the effect that unholy gaze was having. The green-eyed boy wilted quickly, and appeared defeated.

Until suddenly Harry drew his head back, and slammed it between those twin pools of darkness.

The demon's head rocked back, and an awful sizzling sound was drowned out as a powerful squeal of pure agony filled the room.

Harry fell from the Shadow Demon's grasp as the otherworldly creature grasped its head and writhed around, seemingly in immense pain.

Harry cried out as he landed, his already injured ankle shattering on impact.

Sirius didn't even wait. "*Accio Harry!*" he shouted.

With a yell, Harry flew across the room, to be caught in the strong arms of his godfather.

"Harry!" Sirius yelled at him while hugging him tightly. "You do not **NUT** a demon!"

"Blame Remus." Harry slurred and wheezed, his eyes unfocused.

Both Sirius and Snape stared at him before simultaneously demanding, "Why?"

"He never taught me that."

"Enough, gentlemen." said Dumbledore, after performing a similar summoning on Ginny, who blinked her eyes open on being caught by the headmaster. "We need to leave quickly."

"No!" shouted both Ginny and Harry.

Ginny pointed to the portal. "It is open, I broke it open. Any demon can get through. I'm sorry."

Harry shook his head. "You chased that thing down here." he said, looking accusingly at the headmaster.

Dumbledore looked abashed. "Yes, but how did you manage to make it flee in the first place?"

Harry blinked. "Patronus charm."

Snape looked over at the demon, now stumbling from side to side, still clutching its face. The scene would almost be comical if it wasn't for the fact that the demon was hitting the walls hard enough to produce cracks from floor to ceiling. "You came up with a happy memory with that thing looking at you?"

Harry struggled out of Sirius' arms and stood up, his entire weight on his good leg. "See him over there?" he asked, pointing at the stick thin figure, trembling against one wall. "That's Voldy."

"Voldemort?" Wodenbane demanded, having joined the group.

Harry nodded, and looked at Sirius. "I forced a dose of Serpent's tears down his throat. He's a squib now."

"A squib?" gasped Wodenbane. "The Dark Lord... is a squib?"

Harry nodded, a smile on his face. "Will that do for a happy thought? Are you ready for a patronus charge?"

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Midday Love

### Midday Love

The four professors, six aurors and one student stood arrayed under the massive opening to the world above with their wands drawn. Flooding through them was the thought that never again would the world suffer under the threat of Voldemort. Even facing a demon from another plane of existence, many of those present couldn't keep a smile from their face. As one they shouted in unison, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

For the second time that day, Prongs rode again. At his side ran a massive, fearsome looking badger, courtesy of Harry's godfather.

Harry first thought that Dumbledore's patronus was a just large cloud of silver mist, but it twisted and turned on itself enough that Harry recognised it for what it was. A massive swarm of bumblebees.

A large, lumbering bear ran on all fours towards the demon, as imposing as its summoner.

The potion master of Hogwarts added a glimmering ten foot adder to the charge, sliding with silent yet deadly grace towards its target.

Only four of the six present aurors managed to produce a corporeal patronus; the five magnificent creatures summoned by those from Hogwarts were joined by a bat, an owl, a huge lizard and, curiously, a platypus.

Where spells and weapons proved ineffectual, the charge of the silver brigade proved slightly more effective. Silent as they were, the Shadow Demon was caught completely off guard. Prongs again all but opened eighteen wounds on the demon's flank, the glowing points of his antlers pressing uncomfortably into the impenetrable flesh.

Sirius' badger sank its teeth into the base of the demon's left wing, clinging on with the stubbornness of its summoner. Mad-eye's lumbering bear body checked the much larger demon, but was able to tackle it to the ground.

All nine patroni attacked the howling demon with animalistic ferocity. The unnatural darkness and shadows that surrounded the Shadow Demon started slowly dissipating, and everyone present felt their hearts lift.

Until a second unearthly roar shook the cavern. The bestial features of a second Shadow Demon appeared through the portal. The head was almost as large as the portal itself, and twice the size of the free demon currently in the cavern.

Dumbledore adjusted his aim, and cast a second patronus charm at the new arrival. A second, smaller swarm of glowing silver bees sped towards the new threat, causing it to slowly retreat to the safety of its own plane of existence with a hiss of anger and disappointment.

"We need to close that portal!" shouted Wodenbane.

Sirius shook his head. "The circle of crystals has been broken." he said, pointing to the portal, where only a little over half the circle of glimmering crystals still held their shape. "That circle needs to be complete before the spell to close the portal is read."

Suddenly two aurors screamed in unison, clutching at their chests. With one swipe of the Shadow Demon's razor sharp wing it had sliced through the silver owl and bat. The pair of wizards fainted.

The demon shook one arm free of the long lizard's grip, and reached over its shoulder to grab Sirius' badger. Sirius hissed as the impossibly sharp claws dug into the silver badger before it was pulled away from the demon's shoulder and thrown across the room. The massive creature struck a pillar and collapsed at the base, slowly fading away.

Moody's bear was next. With a deep grunt of effort, the demon swung its arm and swatted the bear's silver head from its body with one massive blow. Hogwarts' current Defense professor fell to his knees, gasping in pain.

Dumbledore turned to Harry. "Harry! Do you have Virginia's portkey?"

With a shake of his head, Harry replied, "No, Voldy blew it up when I tried to banish it to her."

Wodenbane yelled in denial, struggling unsuccessfully to remain upright as the demon smashed its taloned foot down upon the center of the giant silver lizard's back. One more patronus faded away.

"Look at its head!" shouted Harry, pointing to where he had head butted the demonic creature.

Dark, viscous blood all but gushed from the wound. About the size of Harry's forehead, there was a hole in the Shadow Demon's skin and bone. Even from this distance, the bubbling and sizzling could be seen; the phoenix tears eating their way through the demon's hide and skull. The blood



that fell from the wound hissed and spat where it landed on the ground.

Harry touched his scar, still slightly tingling. He was sure he had cracked his skull on the demon's rock hard head, but the tears he spilt on himself had quite obviously healed him quickly.

*The tears!*

"Phoenix tears!" shouted Harry. "Headmaster! Call for Fawkes!"

Dumbledore shook his head, flicking the perspiration running down his face from his nose. His normally benign features were now contorted into an expression of extreme concentration; maintaining both patroni a large drain on his mental resources. "Fawkes had a burning day yesterday," he said. "He won't be able to fly for almost a week."

The shadows in the chamber lengthened and deepened as the Shadow Demon casually impaled the platypus patronus. Prongs charged at the demon's flank, once more striking it with his massive antlers. Again, the demon was knocked to the ground. This time, one of its wings sliced Snape's adder in half.

Both Snape and an auror with purple hair fainted as their patroni were forcefully dispelled. Sirius noticed the auror fall. "Tonks! No!" he shouted, his voice weak.

With an explosive breath, Dumbledore allowed one swarm of his summoned bees to disappear. With a sigh and a look of apology, he shrugged. "Maintaining two patroni is difficult," he said to Harry.

Harry nodded. "Just keep any more demons from coming through the portal," he said. "I'm going to rain tears on that thing" he added, before collapsing as Prongs was dispelled a second time by the demon's claws.

Dumbledore cursed softly, panic rising, as he saw his only source of phoenix tears fall down in front of him. The ancient wizard looked around and took a deep breath and prepared himself to cast another patronus charm.

Of those capable of summoning a patronus, only Sirius and himself still stood. The two aurors who couldn't make a corporeal patronus were working to move the fallen to the rear of the cavern. Looking up at the massive nightmare come to life, Dumbledore wasn't sure that the thought that Voldemort was gone was happy enough to summon another swarm of bees.

He completely missed Ginny Weasley.

Ginny slowly crawled away from the main group as they cast the patronus charm in unison. The nine silver forms lit up the room with their luminosity, temporarily lightening her mood. Without a wand, she was useless in this fight, but the young Weasley knew there was something she could do to help. Something that would serve as penance for her crimes.

The red haired witch moved slowly towards the naked, shivering form of Tom Marvolo Riddle. She reached his scattered crystals and torn robes. Ginny stopped momentarily, and scooped up a handful of the glowing crystals.

Slowly, she let them trickle through her fingers.

Uncertainty was replaced with determination, and Ginny quickly searched through the remains of Voldemort's robes.

A few seconds later, she found what she was looking for. Ginny quickly ran behind another pillar, out of sight of both Tom Riddle and the demon. She started removing her robes.

Once she was clad only in her underwear, Ginny spread her robes out on the ground as wide as they would go. She sat in the middle cross legged, and took a few breaths working herself up to what she was about to do. She looked around the pillar to lay eyes on the boy she loved one last time, only to see him fall.

Harry hit the ground hard, his heart seemingly on fire. Having one patronus forcefully dismissed was painful enough, but two in less than ten minutes was too much.

Though dazed, he could still feel the mood of the room. The darkness that spread from the Shadow Demon permeated him, and he felt despair once more.

The demon had torn everything away from him, but his godfather had saved him. Harry almost smiled at the memory of Sirius' first words to him after casting the summoning charm that pulled Harry from harm.

But now, he was going to die. The world would die. There was no way to close the portal to hell. There was a demon free, and though it was injured, only Dumbledore and Sirius were still standing and able to do something.

Since nine witches and wizards acting in unison had been unable to do more than delay the thing, Harry had no hope that the pair could do more than slow the thing down briefly.

Darkness again washed over him. He would never see Cho again.

Cho.

Cho.

As he thought the name of his love, Harry could almost swear that he heard her, responding in song.

Dumbledore shouted, "*Expecto Patronum!*" as the growling Shadow Demon moved closer. A silver mist jetted from the point of his wand, testimony to the fact that the old wizard couldn't form a very happy thought. With a snarl and a single beat of its wings, the demon blew Dumbledore's attempt away.

Looking up into the eyes of this demonic creature, Dumbledore felt his will drain away. Knowing Harry had managed to fight back after several seconds under that draining gaze was the only thing that kept him upright.

The demon shifted its gaze to Harry, still lying prone and moaning softly. Sirius jumped in front of his godson in one of the most courageous stunts Dumbledore had ever seen.

A faint musical noise sounded from far away. The beautiful noise grew louder by the second, and caused the demon to grunt in surprise and step back, looking around for the source.

With an explosion of joyful sound, an electric blue and silver phoenix flew through the hole in the ceiling, singing at the top of its voice. Despair was washed away from their souls, the shadows faded, while the demon grabbed the sides of its head and moaned in pain.

Harry gasped and arched his back, looking like he had just taken his first breath. The song of the phoenix touched all present, and like a sunrise, every witch and wizard slowly rose to their feet.

Wodenbane had a look of awe on his features, Dumbledore one of joy. Harry looked around at the others.

Mad-Eye Moody had a most unexpected look; a genuine smile. On the face of the old auror, it made him look three decades younger and far less intimidating than normal. Harry was shocked to see a tear run down Snape's cheek.

Without thought, Harry held out his arm. With a trill of joy, the phoenix landed on his wrist, flapping her wings a couple of times to get balanced.

Harry stared into the dark brown eyes of the blue phoenix. "Cho?" he asked in wonder.

Cho bobbed her avian head, and let out another trill of joy. The sound sent shivers of pure delight down Harry's spine.

A roar from the Shadow Demon shook the cavern again. Cho turned her determined gaze onto it, fluffed her feathers and let out her musical voice.

The aurors exploded into action as the Shadow Demon fell back, again covering its ears. This time, instead of attacking the demon, the Ministry personnel cast their restraining spells. Ropes wrapped around the demon's legs, felling the creature.

Dumbledore began chanting a long string of unintelligible syllables, the tip of his wand spitting a long stream of small darts of light. The darts assembled themselves into an iridescent cage around the fallen demon.

With a nod and a grin, Wodenbane raised his wand and joined in, the same repeating stream of almost-words causing more darts of light to join Dumbledore's in forming a tight cage. The Shadow Demon lashed out at the bars, causing them to splinter and break, but no sooner had the tight-knit bars been shattered than more conjured darts of light reformed the destroyed portions.

Harry turned to his girlfriend, her magnificent avian form still trilling proudly. "Tears, Cho! We need to rain tears on it!"

Ginny looked around her pillar, noting that both a blue and red phoenix were now flying around the caged monster. The pair were dive-bombing it, swooping low then soaring off again. Each time one of them swooped, a drop of liquid fell from them. If the liquid fell on the creature it screamed in agony, clutching at the sizzling wound. The tears didn't appear to lose potency after time however, and now dozens of burning holes appeared in the demon's hide.

Ginny sat back behind the pillar, breathing almost in relief. The demon she had unwittingly released onto the world looked like it was pretty much caged, and now they had a tactic that was effective.

That only left sealing the portal left. For that, they would need new crystals. Crystals that could only be taken from someone who willingly drank the potion Voldemort gave Harry.

With trembling fingers, Ginny withdrew one of the last two vials from the rack she took from Voldemort's robes.

"I'm so sorry, Harry. I'm sorry Daddy. I'm sorry Mum. But I need to do this to set things right." she whispered.

Ginny tossed back the potion in one swallow.

Snape stood at the back of the crowd, not feeling the need to get too close to the Shadow Demon now things seemed to be at hand. That idiot Black obviously still couldn't subdue his moronic Gryffindor impulses, and now stood less than two meters from the caged demon, yelling encouragement and advice to the pair of animagi.

Given it took almost a full minute for each bird to shed a single tear, having two phoenix animagi drop those tears on the caged beast hardly seemed the quickest way to take care of the beast, but it probably was the safest way.

Snape shook his head, recalling how Harry had greeted the new arrival. Obviously, the 'special project' Minerva had been working on with a student had proven effective. Another mystery solved.

the screams of the Shadow Demon as it was eaten alive filled the cavern, another reason Snape deemed it prudent to stand well back.

Thus, he was the only one to hear another muffled scream during a short lull in the demon's cries.

Snape frowned and looked around. From his vantage point he could see most of the cavern, and none of the human occupants looked to be in any pain. Quickly and methodically, he started searching behind each pillar, finally coming across Ginny.

The witch was curled into a ball, clad only in her underwear and lying on her robes, shaking as her small frame was wracked with pain. All across her skin, tiny secretions solidified and fell away, leaving tiny glowing crystals on her spread out robes.

"What the... No!" he shouted, instantly dropping to his knees. With ungentle hands he grabbed Ginny's head and turned it to face him. He pushed his fingers between her lips and forced the girl's mouth open. On her screaming breath he could smell the telltale scent of a magical potion.

"Oh you stupid... you took Serpent's Tears, didn't you!" he shouted in her face.

Ginny nodded, her spasms slowly becoming less frequent. "For... the... portal." she gasped.

Snape growled in frustration, his teeth grinding together. Muttering something about the world needing less idiotic Gryffindors, the potion master set about gathering the precious crystals Ginny shed, ensuring that none were wasted and lost.

Dumbledore stopped chanting, feeling more fatigued now than he could ever remember. The auror chief nodded, but kept chanting, keeping the cage of light slowly healing itself. Though now, the Shadow Demon was almost subdued.

The attacks on the bars on the cage were half hearted at best, though Sirius had to duck at one point as one wing got free and tried to decapitate him. Cho had managed to fix that permanently, one of her tears landing directly at the base of the wing. That single tear had promptly eaten through the wing joint, and now the black razor-feathered wing lay limp and unusable.

Dumbledore sat down hard on the rough stone floor, unable to summon the energy or focus to transfigure a chair for himself. The portal Voldemort opened to another plane of existence drew his attention. His patronus still guarded the opening, though it was fading. Dumbledore shook his head. Even after all they had done this day, stopped Voldemort, saved Ginny and Draco, even defeated an incredibly powerful demon, they still had to find a way to close that portal. Dumbledore looked up at the caged demon. Well, they still hadn't defeated it yet, though through Harry and Cho's efforts it seemed only a matter of time.

Moody stomped over and sat next to his old friend with a grunt and sigh of exhaustion. "So, do you think we can safely leave the world in the hands of the next generation?" he said into Dumbledore's ear, the roars and whimpers of the demon having all but rendered everyone deaf. The grizzled ex-auror's steel-grey hair was plastered down on his scalp, drenched in perspiration.

Dumbledore smiled, looking up at the pair of beautiful phoenixes as they continued their aerial assaults on the Shadow Demon. "I believe so, Alastor. A few years ago I might have disagreed, but young Harry has surpassed all expectations."

Moody snorted. "Yeah. He's killed every Death Eater south of the North Pole, saved every hostage taken in the last six months, and just delivered the bloody Dark Lord up for justice, incidentally stripping him of his powers. The bloody world never needs to worry about him again." The old auror sighed. "If only he'd been in Slytherin."

Dumbledore chuckled. "He once told me that the Sorting Hat wanted to place him in Slytherin."

"Yeah, he told me that too. I wonder how my old friend Snape would have handled that?"

The pair looked around for Hogwarts' resident ex-Death Eater. Moody spotted him first, standing over Ginny behind one of the pillars. "Over there." he told Dumbledore, pointing at Ginny's hiding place.

Dumbledore looked over to where his old friend was pointing only to see his Potion Master escort a pale and shivering Virginia Weasley around the pillar. In his hand, was a small glass beaker of glowing crystals.

Harry swooped away, another tear striking the caged demon. The horrible creature looked even more dreadful now, several dozen open, smoking, oozing wounds visible on its hide. The bright cage of light surrounding it was holding it in one place, enough that the demon couldn't gather enough strength to break free.

One gaping wound in the Shadow Demon's chest tore wider as it thrashed about, exposing the beast's internal organs. Harry's vision blurred as another tear formed, but this time, he had a specific target.

The blood-red phoenix dived and shook his head with a practiced flick, sending the pearly tear down into the wound on the demon's chest.

Directly onto the black, beating heart.

With a roar that temporarily deafened everyone in the room, the mortally wounded demon lashed out, shattering one side of the cage. Wodenbane was struggling desperately to maintain. Back and forth the Shadow Demon heaved, smashing against the sides of the prison of light. With a sudden pain-fueled jerk, the demon stood upright, breaking free through the roof of the conjured prison.

After an instant of panic in the assembled wizards and witches, the Shadow Demon started to visibly *deflate*. Streams of semi-visible souls flew from the creature's wounded chest, speeding around in all directions before fading themselves.

Like slowly releasing the air from a balloon, the demon shriveled up. Though it maintained its height, it hissed and dried, the powerful muscles and organs turning to dust under the ever tightening hide.

Finally, the remains of the demon fell back, and the previously rock hard skin turned to dust, leaving nothing by a hideous skeleton behind.

With a final trill that sent a pulse of victory down everyone's spine, Harry and Cho landed and transformed back. Amid applause from the assembled aurors, the pair shared a hug.

Wodenbane was shaking his head in disbelief. "Two unregistered animagi, both phoenixes, and both students." He looked around the assembly. "Dumbledore!" he shouted.

"Over here, Tiberius." said Dumbledore wearily. The ancient wizard put his arm around Ginny's shivering shoulders. "You wish to talk to me?"

"Oh, yes! Something about unregistered... ah- Miss Weasley. I shall organise a team to escort you back to your father."

"Not now, Tiberius. I believe Miss Weasley has something for us."

With a faintly shaking arm, Ginny took the precious beaker from Snape and passed it to Dumbledore. "You can use this to seal the portal."

The ancient wizard gave a sigh, and wiped his still damp forehead. "I'm afraid I do not know the diagrams Tom used to make the portal. Only Harry and yourself saw it in its complete state."

Harry raised his hand. "Um, Professor? A phoenix can see what an object looked like at a certain time in the past. It can 'focus' on a time as well as a place."

Dumbledore blinked, a rare look of complete surprise on his face.

Though a similar look of surprise flashed over Snape's face, he quickly schooled his features into an expression of defeat. "You'd need to be able to pour the crystals accurately, Potter. I doubt you'd have much luck with your talons."

Cho cleared her throat. "Um, Professors? I can see whatever Harry can see."

Dumbledore gritted his teeth, drawing on the last of his impressively large reserves of magical power, then scraping the bottom of the well for more. His third patronus swarm silently buzzed around Cho and Harry's animagus form as they slowly and carefully recreated the circle of power.

Harry, as a phoenix, focused his gaze on the circle of glowing crystals *and* a few hours ago. Dumbledore shook his head slightly (moving it too quickly hurt). Yet another unusual skill the boy had.

Cho gently placed a tiny pinch of Ginny's crystals onto the edge of one of the existing diagrams. Where the crystals touched each other, they stuck, allowing Cho to build the diagrams out from the existing patterns.

With Harry's vision showing her what the etchings were like, the pair were painfully slowly rebuilding the gate that could then be closed on the alternate world.

The silver swarm of bees had buzzed down and driven off several dozen smaller demons and hundreds of tiny imps, keeping them from distracting the pair of students as they completed the most important piece of teamwork the magical world had ever seen.

For hours the pair worked in complete silence, Cho checking and double checking the positioning of every single pinch of Ginny's magical essence. Apart from the aurors stationed at the newly created perimeter wards, everyone present quietly watched in awe as the pair of phoenix animagi worked together.

Later, Harry and Cho sat together on the hard stone floor, ignoring their discomfort from sitting on such an uncomfortable surface. To the relief of all present, the circle of power had been completed, with only a few tiny grains of Ginny's sacrifice remaining.

Wodenbane had been examining Voldemort's notes, and incanted the almost offensively short ritual to close the portal.

Like the opening in reverse, blocks of stone rose up from the portal, slotting together like a fire-edged jigsaw puzzle. Once all were in place, the fiery outlines themselves leapt into the air, dancing wildly, leaving unmarked and complete stone slabs behind.

As the wicked fire sprites danced and faded into thin air, only the circle of glowing crystals remained behind on the floor, the only evidence of the recent tear in the fabric of the world. Even as the group of professors, students, aurors and Unspeakables breathed a collective sigh of relief, the crystals faded to nothing, their power spent.

Even through the jubilation, the aurors kept working. Site de-contamination, it was referred to.

Tonks had transfigured a twig into a sledgehammer, and was happily turning the deep etchings in the stone floor that outlined the patterns of the circle of power into rubble. She shot a wink at Harry while doing so, who blushed slightly. He was interrupted by a discovery by his godfather.

"Um, Harry?" said Sirius, his voice shaking. "Is that what I think it is?"

Harry looked to where his godfather was pointing. "Yes. That's what's left of Wormtail."

With a whoop of joy, Sirius did a mad dance around the charred remains of the despised Marauder. He stopped when he noticed Harry not joining

in. "What's the matter? The man who betrayed your parents is dead. The man who raised Voldemort is gone. What's wrong?"

Harry sighed and shook his head, his breath hissing from between clenched teeth. "He helped me. At the end, he actually helped me." Harry looked up into Sirius' eyes. "Voldy was going to kill me, but Wormtail reached out and snapped his master's wand. He even apologised to me."

Sirius looked down at Wormtail's remains. He knelt and picked up the unmarked silver hand, shaking it slightly to remove the ash. "This man framed me, Harry. He put me in Azkaban for twelve years."

"I know!" Harry hissed, clenching his eyes and fists shut. "But he saved me, at the end."

Sirius nodded, and moved over to his godson and placed his arm around Harry's shoulders. "You think he may have redeemed himself? That he may not have been worthy of your hate?"

Harry shrugged. "Perhaps not all of it."

Sirius softly cupped Harry's cheeks, and gently turned his godson's head so the pair were eye-to-eye.

"This man murdered Cedric, Harry. He didn't need to do that. He had a debt to you, and in your mind he may have discharged that debt, but do not doubt that he was evil."

Harry froze for a second, then took a deep breath and nodded. "You're right. Thank you."

Sirius smiled and grabbed the young wizard in a tight hug. "Right. Now, don't you dare do anything like that again! Have you got any idea how scared I was?" he shouted.

Harry closed his eyes and grinned, luxuriating in the sensation of being loved by a parent figure. Loved enough that he was being yelled at for putting himself in danger.

A few hours later, Harry led Cho, Sirius and a pair of his Unspeakables back into the main cavern. Floating behind them on enchanted sleds were the contents of the other rooms in the labyrinth, including Macnair's corpse and collection of exotic weapons.

Already packed into tamper-proof containers were Voldemort's robes, magic (in the form of crystals) and wand fragments, the Shadow Demon's skeleton and Wormtail's silver hand. The parchment containing Voldemort's notes on the summoning were also sealed in a tightly enchanted container. Voldemort himself had been escorted away, presumably taken to the Ministry for questioning.

Ginny lay sleeping on a hastily transfigured bed in one corner, exhausted in several ways. Her father sat vigil over her, holding her hand and gently running the fingers on his free hand through her hair. The Minister had arrived just minutes into Harry and Cho's effort to rebuild the circle of power, and had spent his time comforting his only daughter. He looked up and saw Harry's arrival back in the chamber. Letting go of Ginny's hair, he beckoned Harry over.

Harry swallowed nervously, and looked questioningly at Sirius. The head of the Unspeakables simply raised an eyebrow, then nodded slightly. Harry turned to face Cho, who also nodded.

Harry walked across the room to Ginny's bed, where Mr. Weasley had already transfigured an extra chair for him.

"Please, Harry, sit." he said, gesturing towards the new chair. "There are some things we need to discuss."

"Do you wish to discuss them here, Minister?" Harry asked, looking around at the aurors working around them.

The Minister nodded, but waved away the honorific. "Please, call me Arthur. If you can't handle that, Mr. Weasley will do. After all, that is what you used to call me." he said with a grin. Before Harry could respond he continued, "We will not be leaving until we have been given the all clear. After I arrived, I gave the order that no one else be allowed in or out, to be sure we don't have some sort of illness or disease stemming from exposure to the other plane of existence."

Harry nodded. "That is something the muggle authorities do with animals when they go between countries."

Arthur Weasley nodded, a small smile on his face. "I know, that is where I got the idea. Tiberius isn't happy, but he sees the necessity for such an action."

Harry nodded again, and looked down at Ginny. "Is she asleep, or unconscious?" he asked.

"Asleep, though that was potion induced. However, it is on Virginia's behalf that I would like to thank you."

Harry suddenly looked uncomfortable. "I don't deserve any thanks. I wasn't able to save her before Voldemort tortured her, or stop her from sacrificing her magic."

Arthur shook his head. "Harry, Virginia did something terrible to you. Even under normal circumstances charging off alone to save a friend is heroic, doing it when you certainly had no reason to call either person in trouble a friend truly speaks volumes about your character."

Harry swallowed to remove the stubborn lump in his throat. "Thank you. What will happen to Ginny now? Will she be coming back to Hogwarts?"

Arthur sighed and looked at the ceiling. "I doubt it. There are still four months until your OWLs, so while she may still be able to take the written portion, she will not be able to take the practicals. Even then, without passing a practical OWL, she will not be able to go back to Hogwarts in

September. I'm afraid that Ginny will probably never return after today."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, my boy. If Ginny has to live as a muggle, then she will have to live as a muggle. It can't be too hard or the muggles themselves would not be able to do it." he said with a smile.

"Plus you will get to play with all her gadgets when you visit." guessed Harry.

"Yes, silver lining and all that." replied Arthur with a chuckle. Arthur soon lost his smile however, and again looked at Harry in seriousness. "We were finally able to send Molly a message a few minutes ago saying that you, Ginny and myself were alright. Her response came so quickly I believe she is waiting rather impatiently just outside the boundary Wodenbane has erected. Apparently, in the last few hours, Draco has been telling horror stories to his visitors. I imagine that there will be dozens of wild speculations running rife at Hogwarts, given the few students who are actually there. There may well be maybe thousands of conflicting stories of what happened here once the parents hear of it."

"Yes, I know." said Harry bitterly. "I know how things like this get around. However, I think the truth will be worse than the majority of those stories."

Arthur gave him a look of sympathy. "Yes, you would, wouldn't you, and you may be right. Now, at present, there are only five people inside the boundary not under my direct authority. Albus, Severus, Alastor, Cho and yourself."

Harry nodded, indicating that he should continue.

"Albus recognises the necessity for secrecy in this, and can order both Severus and Alastor to remain tight lipped about the events of today. But you Harry, and Cho are under no such obligation."

Harry looked around at the people milling around. "You want Cho and I to keep what happened her a secret." he surmised.

"Yes, exactly. While I am breaking one of my own cardinal rules here, I do believe that if the knowledge that an almost unstoppable beast was summoned and released became available, then panic would ensue. We have collected all known records of the summoning ritual and even the recipe for Serpent's Tears."

"Will that knowledge be destroyed?"

Arthur sighed. "I don't know. The thing is, the knowledge can be used both to summon such a creature and also to bind and dispel it. If we destroy the records and another cache of knowledge is found by the wrong people, then future generations may not have the capability to defend against it. On the other hand, if someone like Lucius Malfoy gets a similar amount of influence over the Ministry, then if we keep the knowledge it may be used." Arthur gently tugged at his thinning hair. "It is decisions like this that make this job so difficult, Harry." he confided.

Harry tilted his head to one side. "Are you sworn to defend current witches and wizards or future ones?"

Arthur blinked. "Well, current people."

"Then order the knowledge destroyed. The ministry is too corrupt at the moment to police itself."

Arthur looked at Harry with a bemused expression. "Then how would I know that the material had truly been destroyed, and not just hidden by my corrupt ministry?"

Harry shrugged. "Then give it to Dumbledore. Tell him to put a charm on it, making it only available to the true headmaster of Hogwarts and only if required."

Arthur stared at Harry for a long time before laughing out loud. "If you didn't have two years left at school, I'd hire you in an instant to be my advisor."

Harry blushed. "Thank you."

Cho, Sirius and Dumbledore quietly joined them. "Sorry to interrupt Arthur, but the medi-wizards have completed their preparations. They are ready to start examining us. I suggest you and Virginia go first. If you make Molly wait any longer, you will be able to hear her from in here."

Arthur nodded. "Thank you Albus." he said before turning to Harry. "I hope you don't get tired of people thanking you, because I know Molly will want to break your ribs with a hug." the Minister said with a small smile before gently picking his daughter up and cradling her to his chest. "You will keep what happened here today a secret, won't you?"

Harry nodded. "I will, and I will do my best to convince Cho."

"Excellent. Well gentlemen, I'm off to see my wife. I'll see you soon." said Arthur, before bending over and gently picking Ginny up. He made his way over to the opening in the roof, and apparated up to the lip of the crater.

Dumbledore turned to Harry. "Arthur was not the only person who received some communication. Minerva was kind enough to send me a message detailing what has happened at Hogwarts in my, excuse me, in our absence." The headmaster gave Cho a sly look.

Cho blushed a fierce red.

With a twinkle in his eye, the exhausted headmaster continued. "Apparently, Miss Chang all but physically tossed Sybil from my office before demanding that Minerva help her perfect the final change in her animagus transformation." With an smile at Cho, Dumbledore said, "Once Miss

Chang had left my office on her incredibly fast wings, Minerva heard the Sorting Hat mention that it may have been mistaken to have put her in Ravenclaw."

"What?" shouted Cho, earning her an amused look from those within earshot.

Dumbledore waved away her concern. "I wouldn't worry too much, Miss Chang. You will remain in Ravenclaw for the rest of your time at Hogwarts. There has never been a student resorted in the history of the school. Minerva was just as surprised, but it would appear that young Harry's traits are rubbing off on those he spends time with."

Cho's blush intensified. "I'm sorry for what I said to professor Trelawney, but I needed to get to Harry quickly, and that meant getting professor McGonagall to help me with the final stage of the animagus transformation."

Harry smiled brightly, looking at his girlfriend with pride. "What did you say to her?" he asked, as excited as a puppy.

Cho looked at Dumbledore apprehensively, but whispered extensively in Harry's ear. His expression ranged from shocked to highly amused. Finally, he cupped Cho's cheeks and kissed her deeply for several seconds. After Harry pulled away, he looked deep into her eyes and said, "Ah, my Cho! I am so in love with you!"

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Aftermath

### Aftermath

The excitement that followed Voldemort's attack on Harry's family over fifteen years ago again swept through the wizarding world. Muggles were again confounded by literally thousands of sightings of owls all over the country. Magical fireworks (many courtesy of WWW, whose profits over the next few weeks spiked dramatically) were set off everywhere two or more wizards met, causing the Ministry many headaches as they tried desperately to keep up with the demands for memory modifications on muggles.

Arthur Weasley was being hailed as a hero. In the months since he had taken control of the Ministry, he had proven that the magical government could take effective action when necessary. In less than half a year, Arthur had overseen a government which had broken Voldemort's ring of Death Eaters, enforced his own requirements of honesty and integrity at all levels in the Ministry, and finally captured and rendered Lord Voldemort himself helpless.

The trial of Tom Marvolo Riddle would be a very long one. Arthur resisted demands that the ex-Dark Lord be immediately given the Dementor's Kiss, saying that everyone who had lost someone to the dark forces had the right to confront their tormentor.

As such, each of Voldemort's crimes were being tried one at a time. Families who lost loved ones could appear in court to see justice handed down before the next case and next family were admitted.

Over the next few months, it was often joked that Riddle would die of old age before he was punished. At the end of the Hogwarts school year, the man who's name used to be feared had racked up seventy-eight kisses, not to mention almost a millennium of prison time.

Sirius was incredibly busy in the months following Voldemort's downfall. With Riddle being questioned daily under Veritaserum, many senior Ministry personnel found themselves implicated by the very man they had supported. Various dark schemes and plots designed to increase Voldemort's support were uncovered, quite a few wizards and witches were charged with accepting bribes and/or support from his Death Eaters. The new core of Unspeakables tore through the Ministry ranks, finding evidence against many high ranking wizards and witches.

With genuine pleasure, Arthur promoted young, enthusiastic, and (due to his amazing success) loyal workers to positions of authority. In many cases, given the Ministry's past culture of rewarding longevity rather than merit, departments started functioning more efficiently and effectively just weeks after the sweeping changes.

Percy Weasley proved that he was a Gryffindor at heart, meeting with his father and admitting that he had been duped, that his blind loyalty had been used against him by those he considered his mentors. Though the other Weasley siblings remained cool to him, Percy returned to the Burrow and had been assigned to work as a liaison between the Ministry and the courts. Percy's fussiness and minute attention to detail made him perfect for the role.

The changes were a little less pronounced at Hogwarts. Ginny Weasley's crime against Harry had briefly become a gossip topic, Draco doing everything in his power to spread around what he had heard her confess under torture.

Harry and his friends did what they could to ignore it and kept repeating the Ministry-sanctioned story, that Ginny willingly sacrificed her magic to help bring Voldemort down. When given the option of slandering someone not present to defend themselves and who the world at large considered a hero or disbelieving a disgruntled and bitter student, most chose to ignore the claims of the orphaned Slytherin.

After term resumed in the New Year, Dumbledore spent several days under the care of Madam Pomfrey for a severe case of magical exhaustion. On his release, the aged headmaster was seen walking with the assistance of an ivory cane, albeit one that literally thrummed with magical energy. With the threat from Voldemort gone forever, Dumbledore could often be heard in the staff rooms, discussing his retirement with his deputy.

Harry and Cho didn't get to spend much time together in the months leading up to their exams. Even with their talents and hastily acquired skills, the pair still found themselves exhausted with their study routine at the end of most days. Their hard work paid off though, both getting the highest number of OWLs and NEWTs of their year level. Harry managed to equal Hermione's eighteen OWLs, much to Hermione's discomfort. Harry's excellent results sent the girl into studying overdrive, determined not to be outdone on her NEWTs. Ron had to put his foot down and insist that her book list of required reading over the summer break be limited to one book a day. Even so, Harry was sure his Christmas present to Hermione would be used to its maximum capacity.

The farewell feast that year was an exuberant one to say the least. Gryffindor again took the Quidditch cup, but Ravenclaw won the House cup, just nudging out Slytherin by a meagre four points. Tiny professor Flitwick was so delighted that he stood and danced on his chair for most of the feast.

Dumbledore sat in his high-backed, padded chair, his benevolent gaze tracing over the entire student body. The ancient headmaster looked even older than usual, though his smile and eyes were still the same.



Even Snape looked to be enjoying the evening somewhat, though Harry suspected he was more to do with the fact that he now had a two month window of opportunity to perform some experiments he had been dying to do ever since he got his long-fingered hands on the potion texts Harry took from Voldemort.

Once all the students had filled themselves up to the brim, Dumbledore slowly stood. "I have a couple of announcements to make before you all head off to bed. Firstly, I would like to congratulate Ravenclaw house on winning their first House Cup in thirteen years."

Dumbledore paused and smiled as a roar of applause erupted from the Ravenclaw table. Once it died down, he continued. "And secondly, not to mention finally, I wish to inform you all that as of tomorrow, I will no longer be the headmaster of Hogwarts."

A groan of dismay from the majority of the students followed this announcement. Dumbledore held up one hand and continued. "I have spent many, many years leading this school. I have had a hand in moulding many of the people in power today. But all things must come to an end, and my tenure here has most definitely reached its end."

Harry sighed to himself, but knew in his heart that it wasn't unexpected. He squeezed Hermione's hand in comfort, since the young witch looked about to burst into tears.

"Several years ago, I promised one of my staff members my own position upon my retirement. However, Professor Snape has decided to decline my offer, citing his work and research as being too important to the Ministry at present to take over all the responsibilities of running the school."

Though not a word was uttered, a visible and palpable shudder of relief swept through the Great Hall. Snape watched the reaction with a self-satisfied smirk not even Malfoy could produce.

"I therefore announce that my successor will be Professor McGonagall." The stern Transfiguration professor stood and accepted the polite but enthusiastic applause at her appointment.

"Professor Flitwick has accepted the responsibility of deputy headmaster." Dumbledore continued, smiling at the shouts and applause from the assembled Ravenclaws. "I have no doubt that between them they will continue to run and improve the school for many years to come."

Dumbledore sat down to applause from the staff table. The roar from the students was almost deafening. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Cho stood, followed by many of their year mates. One by one, two by two, then dozen by dozen, students rose all around the hall. Finally, all but a handful of students stood to attention, applauding the man who had led the school through the most difficult of recent times.

Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Cho sat in the headmaster's office early the following morning as four house elves gently packed away his enormous collection of magical objects and artefacts. Dumbledore watched as the shelves were slowly emptied in silence. With a sigh, the ancient wizard looked up on the stone wall where a place had been made for his soon-to-be-commissioned portrait.

"I suppose that a piece of me will always remain here." he said to himself, though loud enough to be overheard by his visitors. Many of the portraits added their own agreement to his statement.

"Are you sure you've made the right decision, Professor?" asked Hermione.

Dumbledore nodded. "Miss Granger, I have no doubt that I could have led the school for a few more years at least. But after Tom's capture, I was left magically drained. Harry and Cho were exhausted too, but being as young as they are, they were back, as good as if not better than new in less than a week."

Harry and Cho swapped gazes. After the massive magical and mental energy expenditure, they had indeed recovered quickly. But like working your body to exhaustion improves your stamina, both of them had noticed a significant increase in their reserves of power. Spells that left them weary before, now didn't require anywhere near as much effort to cast.

Dumbledore gently lowered his body into his comfortable armchair, giving a slight grunt of effort. "Tiberius is only just getting over the effort himself. Sirius took almost a month to get back to his best. It will take many more months, perhaps even years, for me to rebuild my reserves. If, indeed, I ever do." He wiggled his body slightly, settling into the deep chair. "Hogwarts needs someone at the peak of their form to run, especially if they have to put up with you lot." he finished with a cheeky grin.

"Do you have any plans yet, sir?" asked Ron.

With a small chuckle, Dumbledore shook his head. "Though I have given this decision a lot of thought, I have not spared any time to think of the consequences. No, Mr. Weasley, I have no immediate plans but to enjoy my time."

Dumbledore shuffled through some paperwork on his desk, before holding up a sheet of parchment. "Right, down to business. The reason I asked you all to join me. Ah, here we go. Miss Chang, I believe this is for you." he said, handing it to her.

Cho's expression registered her surprise. "This is an acceptance letter from the auror academy!" she blurted. "But I haven't even sent my application in yet!"

Dumbledore smiled. "Tiberius was most insistent on getting a copy of your results immediately. I believe he feels that he needs to keep an eye on a student who can become a magical creature at will. Don't be surprised if your parents are already aware of this. He is most interested in getting you signed up, Miss Chang."

Cho smiled brightly and looked over at her boyfriend. Harry's grin rivalled her own.

"Next, Miss Granger." continued Dumbledore, handing her an envelope. "You have most definitely proved that this is yours beyond doubt."

Hermione's frown disappeared at the sight of the Head Girl pin that fell from the envelope into her hand. With a shriek that Molly Weasley would have been proud of, she grabbed Ron in a massive bear hug.

Dumbledore theatrically wiggled his little finger in his ear. He took the chance during Hermione's jubilation to extract another sheet of parchment. Once things had calmed, he handed it to Ron.

"Mr. Weasley, since the Tri-Wizard Tournament was rather a disaster, the Heads of major schools in Europe have decided to come up with an alternative. Next year, the inter-school Quidditch competition will begin. I'd like you to form and captain the team."

Ron sat stunned at Dumbledore's announcement. He woodenly lowered his gaze to the parchment, looking over the agreement of the various school and ministries. He didn't hear Harry and Cho congratulating him warmly.

"And finally, Harry." said Dumbledore. "I'm afraid that beyond the Special Award for Services to the School you received after returning from Tom's capture is all I have for you. Except this, a choice. You may inform Minerva of which year level you wish to enter next year."

"Seventh!" blurted Harry quickly. "I want to be with my friends."

Dumbledore nodded. "I understand and I thought as much. Though I suggest you ask your old Defense instructor to make sure you are up to speed in all your subjects. I have no doubt that you will do just as well in your NEWTs as you did in your OWLs."

With another grunt of effort, Dumbledore stood, still leaning heavily on his cane. He moved over to the window and looked out over the grounds. "I could not be more proud of the four of you. Hogwarts owes much to you all."

For a long moment, Dumbledore stood silently, staring out the window.

Harry cleared his throat. "What are you looking at, sir?"

Fawkes trilled from his perch, attracting the attention of the four students. My Lord-Master is looking over the lake, to where the trees meet the shore. Sang the phoenix. He finds that part of the lake very beautiful.

Cho and Harry looked Dumbledore's familiar in surprise. "How do you know that, Fawkes?" asked Harry.

Fawkes tilted his head, as if weighing up his answer. All familiars can see what their master sees, phoenix-wizard. He trilled.

Dumbledore turned from looking out the window, his eyebrows raised in a silent question. Hermione and Ron both looked at Harry and Cho curiously. Harry and Cho just stared at each other, shock evident on their faces. This was one secret they were going to keep from everyone.

The ride home on the Hogwarts Express was enjoyable, but subdued. Many of Cho's friends stopped by in the quartet's compartment to say goodbye and to swap plans for the future. Several of Cho's friends looked envious of her having received her acceptance already.

Surprisingly, Malfoy didn't make an appearance. Harry and Ron reminisced at the events last time they were on the Express together when Malfoy interrupted them.

"I thought Neville was going to have a heart attack." said Ron.

"What did Angelina end up making him do for his detention?" asked Harry.

Ron smirked. "She made him strip all the school brooms in the Quidditch shed and recharm them. It took him three nights to get it right."

Hermione laughed. "That's right, he kept complaining about having to work with shoddy equipment."

"Well, without his Daddy to buy him the best, he'll have to learn how to budget now." said Cho. "Sirius has all his family assets now." She frowned slightly. "I wonder if anyone is meeting him at the station today."

"You know, I don't have anyone picking me up from King's Cross." Harry said to Cho with a theatrical pout.

Cho bit her lip. "Do you want to come home with me? I'm not sure my parents would approve."

"Oh?" Harry said, clearly surprised. "They let you stay at Black's Pad between Christmas and New Year."

Cho sighed. "I know. But I have to do something for my father. And you being there would probably ruin things."

Harry gave Cho a reassuring kiss on the cheek. "You know I'd never do anything to ruin things for you or your family." he said, a little hurt.

Cho smiled and cupped his cheek. "I know that, silly. It would be your presence that would make things awkward."

"What do you mean?"

Cho sighed. "My father sent me word that an old Chinese family has arrived in London to stay. I had expected them to arrive after you'd gone back to school, Harry. But they arrived early after hearing that I had helped capture Voldemort."

"They want to meet a famous witch?" Harry guessed.

Sort of." replied Cho with a sad smile.

"Oh no!" said Hermione, her hand over her mouth in shock.

"What?" asked Harry and Ron together.

"The family includes a twenty-two year old wizard. He has come over to court me." Cho whispered.

"What?" roared Ron.

Harry just smirked and let out a small chuckle. "Does he know he has competition?" he asked, his emerald eyes alive with mirth.

Cho looked surprised at Harry's reaction. "No. Not yet at least. If he reads English, then it will only be a matter of time until her reads about me in the paper as your girlfriend."

Hermione still looked outraged. "Did your parents promise that you would marry him?" she demanded.

Cho quickly shook her head. "No, My father only promised that I would meet him, so he would have to court me himself."

Harry laughed out loud, earning him curious looks from the other three. "Does he think you have been raised in a traditional manner?" he asked Cho.

Cho frowned for an instant before realising what he meant. A grin forced its way onto her features. "I guess so."

"Then he will be in shock when he finds how you talk to him." chuckled Harry.

The other three took up the laugh, and eventually all four were clutching their sides, joined together in friendship and joy.

Harry and his friends stayed on the platform for a long while, shaking hands with friends and meeting their families. Harry was quite sure he had shaken hands with half the wizarding population.

Finally, they managed to leave, the massive Weasley family almost forming a guard of honour to escort Harry and his friends out of the station.

Molly Weasley again gave Harry one of her trademark hugs, squeezing his breath from his lungs. "I cannot thank you enough for bringing my Ginny back." she whispered in his ear. "I'm so sorry for what she did."

Harry smiled sadly. "Ginny made a mistake, one she is very sorry for." he whispered back. "She did something very brave that allowed us to save everyone. I won't ever be able to forget what happened, but I do forgive her."

"Oh, Harry!" Mrs. Weasley cried, briefly hugging him tighter before releasing him. "Where are you going now? You're Aunt and Uncle are not here are they?"

"No, though I seriously doubt that I will ever be welcome at Privet Drive ever again. At least until Dudley inherits the house."

"My goodness. Do you need to come and stay with us?"

Harry smiled at the motherly woman who never truly believed he was a murderer. "No thank you, Mrs. Weasley. Sirius is expecting me."

Mrs. Weasley looked around the dwindling crowd. "Is he coming to meet you? How will you get home?"

Harry's face split into a wide grin. "Unless you apparate home, I'll probably be at Black's Pad before you get out of the station, let alone back to the Burrow."

The brief look of confusion on the Weasley matriarch's face before realisation sunk in was priceless.

The next day, Harry had completely emptied his trunk and belt, all the items either put away in the wardrobes in his new bedroom or were decorating the shelves and walls. He stood in the middle of his room and turned in a full circle.

The textbooks from his time at Hogwarts lined one shelf. Several crossed blades of various swords decorated one wall. His comfortable bed was already made up by the house elves in scarlet and gold blankets, even though Harry had only been up and about for half an hour.

The thing that brought the biggest smile to Harry's face was his desk. No longer did he have to do his summer homework at night and in secret; he had all his essay topics, texts, and resources out and in plain view.

As Harry simply stood still and smiled at the sense of belonging, Remus appeared in the open doorway.

"Harry, are you ready?"

Harry nodded, a smile on his face. "Yes Remus. I think I'd better start on the Defense essay first. That is your specialty isn't it?"

Remus rubbed his hands together in excitement. "Not really. But it doesn't really matter. Albus sent me the seventh year curriculum for your subjects. We'll make sure you're up to speed on them all by your birthday."

Harry laughed at the werewolf's exuberance. The pair sat down and began to work.

Dudley Dursley thrust his shovel blade-first into the hard, dry earth and wiped his forearm across his forehead, noting with bemusement the amount of perspiration now clinging to the hairs on his arm.

The large blond boy took a deep breath before tugging on the shovel and lifting up another spadeful of earth. With a small grunt of effort, he slung the load onto the growing heap of clay and soil behind him.

Since Harry had disappeared from his parent's lives, they had hired several people to do all the work they used to have him do. Harry was never mentioned, except when Dudley's father was bemoaning how much it cost to actually have people do what Harry had done for free. Dudley had mentally stepped back and looked at just who his parents were.

He didn't like what he saw very much. With a deep sigh of regret, Dudley now wondered why he had ever looked up to them.

Over his mother's objection, he had signed on with a local tradesman who did landscaping work in gardens to do summer work. For the last month, Dudley had been working hard shovelling earth from one place to another, then back again.

Much to his surprise, he found he enjoyed the work. While he was quite used to having money handed to him by his father, the feeling of working for it was much more satisfying to Dudley's developing morals.

An avian screech above him caused the large boy to jump slightly. Dudley craned his neck and put his open hand against his forehead, shading his eyes from the hot sun. He quickly spotted the source of the noise.

Almost without thought he held out his left arm. A brilliant white owl swooped down quickly, flared its wings at the last instant and gracefully landed on Dudley's outstretched wrist.

"Well, this is different." he mumbled. Gingerly, he reached out with his free hand to the familiar owl's legs, where a rolled piece of parchment was tied. Obliging, the owl stood on one leg and held out the other, allowing Dudley to perform the unfamiliar act of removing mail from a bird's leg more easily.

Fumbling slightly, Dudley managed to unroll the parchment with one hand. A tiny ball of silver fell from the letter to the ground. Ignoring it for now, Dudley read the letter.

*Dear Dudley Dursley.*

*I hope Hedwig didn't startle you too much. I asked her to find you outside of your parent's home, knowing their normal reaction to such things.*

*Allowme to introduce myself. My name is Hermione Granger. I am one of Harry's best friends; you and I met briefly at the Christmas party held in Harry's honour.*

*I am writing to invite you to Harry's seventeenth birthday party. A wizard's seventeenth birthday is very similar to an eighteenth birthday in the non-magical world, the point at which one is considered an adult. As such, a large party is definitely called for. We are organising a surprise birthday party for Harry.*

*The party will go for three days, starting on the 30th of July. It will be held at Black's Pad, where you stayed briefly at the end of last year.*

*If you do not wish to, or cannot come, simply tie this message and the silver ball back onto Hedwig (my owl now, she used to be Harry's) and ask her to return. If you do wish to come, simply hold the silver ball in your hand at 9am on the 30th. It will transport you to Black's Pad at that time.*

*Regards,*

*Hermione Granger.*

*P.S. Sirius said to say that Lisa Turpin will be there.*

With a grin, Dudley turned to Harry's old pet and said, "Thanks, you can go back now."

With a hoot of agreement, Hedwig took off with a few powerful beats of her wings. Dudley watched the snowy owl fly off before turning around and marching over to his employer. He needed to ask for a few days off.

Harry slammed shut the thick textbook he had taken from his godfather's library with a sigh of accomplishment and content. His History of Magic essay was finally complete.

In less than four weeks, Harry had managed to complete all the homework essays his teachers had assigned. It had helped that he had borrowed Hermione's notes from the past year, looking through them had allowed him to pick out the relevant information from more detailed texts.

Having Remus around for the past month had been invaluable. With the exception of three days over the full moon, the werewolf had tutored Harry with patience and devotion, as delighted as Harry was as the young wizard quickly mastered the many spells he missed from the sixth year curriculum.

It was during the pair's thrice-weekly star-gazing and astronomy lessons that Harry felt an idea burst into his mind. One he would need to keep from Remus to start with and discuss with Sirius first.

But now it was the day before his birthday and Harry had managed to not only finish his homework, but had (in Remus' estimation) caught up with

his peers in all areas.

All before his birthday.

Harry stood and stretched, swinging his arms around. He looked over at his collection of weapons on the opposite wall. "Hm, perhaps some practice..." he said to himself.

With that decision made, Harry began a much longer and detailed stretching routine. He was halfway through when there was a knock at his door.

"Come in!"

The door opened a couple of feet and Sirius stuck his head in. "How's your homework going?"

Harry gave his godfather a grin. "All done."

Sirius didn't look surprised. "Good. Time for some fun." With that, he withdrew his head and left Harry alone.

Harry gave a curious laugh, wondering what Sirius had in mind. He walked over to the door and checked that there wasn't any 'prank' attached to the door or the hall outside. Sirius' distant voice called out, "Come on, Harry!"

With a shrug, Harry started jogging after his godfather.

As he entered the main reception room, Harry was greeted with a massive explosion of light and noise as over seven hundred people let off some of Fred and George's inventory and yelled, "Harry Birthday!"

A smile of genuine pleasure flooded onto Harry's face. With a wop of joy, he ran forward and started hugging his friends and 'family'.

Sirius had outdone himself. The old Malfoy manor was now the temporary home to a rather large collection of magical amusement rides. Somehow, Harry's godfather had managed to cloak their arrival and construction in an invisibility ward, keeping Harry in the dark while he studied not half a kilometer away.

What looked like the entire contingent of house elves from Hogwarts had set up a massive two hundred yard long buffet table for the guests; the little mites running back and forth along the length of the structure, continually loading more food onto the already groaning table.

At least half of the current Gryffindors were there, as well as a fair smattering of those who had left in the last few years. Not only that, but the majority of sixth and seventh year students from every house were there too.

Remus was continually accosted by his ex-students, each and every one of them glad to see him. Dumbledore was there too, dressed in muggle clothes to the astonishment of nearly everyone. As Harry looked around, he saw all his teachers throughout the crowd, no doubt enjoying the fact that they were not responsible for the children for once.

Even Snape was there, and was in deep conversation with Allison Sanderson, one of his old students.

Harry wandered around the grounds, trying most rides. His main contingent of Cho, Ron, Hermione, Dudley and Lisa Turpin joining and leaving other groups to try different things.

The circle of friends had their arms around each other, so when Hermione tripped, they all tumbled down in a cacophony of shouts, mock groans and laughs. With no discussion, the group just lay there on the warm, dry grass laughing and chatting, looking for patterns in the clouds.

Harry turned his head to look at his girlfriend. "So, tell me. How did your meeting go? I'm dying to know."

Cho closed her eyes and giggled.

*Cho and her father arrived back in Diagon Alley less than an hour after leaving King's Cross Station. She wistfully looked over the row of buildings that her parent's apothecary was part of, smiling at the thought that her father was paying rent to her boyfriend.*

*It was quickly obvious after passing through the retail section at the front of the building that her parents had visitors. The surrus of low, but well spoken Chinese voices gently permeated the home.*

*Cho raised an eyebrow at her father, who simply gave her a small smile and a shrug of his shoulders. "Go and make yourself presentable, and come and meet our guests."*

*Cho sighed, but quickly ascended the stairs, her floating trunk obediently following along behind her.*

*It was quite obvious that her mother had made some decisions for her. Laid out on her bed was a beautiful, traditional silk dress, a pair of jade and emerald earrings and some make up. A pair of brand new matching shoes sat side by side on the floor at the foot of Cho's bed.*

*With a rather unladylike snort, Cho set about making herself 'presentable'. Distaining the make up, she simply slithered into the tight dress and put the matching shoes on. For a second, she tossed the beautiful earrings from one hand to another, debating silently with herself.*

*"It's not like I'm trying to prove anything." she said to herself, before putting them on.*

*Cho sat in front of her full length mirror, brushing her long, silky hair. Feeling a pang of loneliness, she closed her eyes and thought about*

Harry.

*When she opened her eyes, the ground was speeding beneath her. The scenery changed as phoenix Harry swooped and headed in a different direction, obviously enjoying himself immensely.*

*Cho blinked, and her image appeared in the mirror again. She smiled to herself, knowing that Harry was safe and happy.*

*Deftly, she tied her hair into a long ponytail, and then twirled it up into an elegant spiral. A quick fixing charm held it in place. Satisfied with what she saw, Cho took a few deep breaths to calm herself, before making her way downstairs.*

*Her entrance into the family's reception room caused instant silence. Apart from her grandparents and parents, there were seven other people in the room. One ancient wizard, to whom Dumbledore would probably appear to be a young upstart, sat in her father's armchair, his calm gaze fixing onto Cho. Without thinking, Cho smoothed down her dress with an almost genetic need to show this man respect.*

*A group of four unfamiliar adults took up the rest of the seats. Three wizards and a witch of varying ages sat stiff-backed and proper. A young girl, probably not even old enough for Hogwarts, sat on the unfamiliar witch's lap.*

*But the object of Cho's search stood behind the venerable wizard, one hand resting lightly on the old man's shoulder. The young wizard, probably in his early twenties, stared back at Cho with a look of adoration.*

*Without a word, he stepped forward to stand in front of Cho.*

"Kai took one look at me and proposed." said Cho.

Among the snorts of amusement from the assembled friends, Harry, with a gleam of mischief in his eyes, asked, "What did you say to that?"

"I told him I wouldn't marry someone I didn't know, so he decided to give me a rather lengthy verbal autobiography."

Among the snorts of amusement from the listeners, Lisa Turpin spoke up. "What were the highlights?"

*Blinking in surprise at her sudden refusal, Kai couldn't control the dark expression that flickered briefly across his face. The witch holding the young girl didn't bother controlling her disapproval, shooting a glare at Cho's mother.*

*The young wizard turned to Cho's father and started to relate the many achievements of his life to date. Trying to stifle a grin, Mr. Chang coughed and whispered "Cho is the one you should be telling."*

*The young suitor gave the other unfamiliar wizards in the room a questioning look before turning back to Cho and restarting his autobiography.*

*After several minutes, Cho sighed slightly, realising that by the time they reached adulthood, her feet would be covered in blisters from the new shoes.*

"He was very proud of the fact that he had been studying to become an animagus." Cho said, trying with all her might to maintain a straight face.

"I see." said Harry, whose discipline was slipping. Unable to hold back, he started laughing. "What did you say to that?"

Cho covered her mouth and snorted in an unladylike manner.

*Cho interrupted the wizard's self grandization as he mentioned something that interested her. "You are studying to become an animagus?"*

*Again, the brief dark flash crossed Kai's face. "Yes, my instructor believes I will be ready for the final transformation in two months."*

*Cho blinked in surprise herself. "Two months?"*

"Yes. Why?"

*Cho frowned. "But it only took me just over three months to become an animagus from scratch. Mind you, I did have the help of the premiere Transfiguration expert in the UK. How long have you been studying?"*

*At this question, disbelieving murmuring filled the room. Only the ancient wizard remained quiet, giving Cho a piercing look. A faint smile appeared on his lips, along with a tiny approving nod, unnoticed by all but Cho.*

*"Really?" asked Kai, his tone blatantly telling the world he did not believe her.*

*Cho shrugged, and changed form.*

"I told him I was an animagus. Just straight out told him."

After a couple of seconds of silence, Dudley said, "Well? What happened?"

Cho pouted a little. "He didn't believe me."

"Did you show him?" asked Harry.

Cho nodded. "He blustered about for a bit, before saying he was friends with the son of the regional governor."

Ron gave a barking laugh. "And you told him you were friends with the Minister of Magic?" he guessed.

"Yep!" Cho said lightly, and laughed at the memory.

"Did he believe you this time?" asked Harry.

Cho shook her head.

*"The Minister?" Kai chuckled.*

*Cho nodded, her face flushed at his constant doubting. "His youngest son at Hogwarts is a friend of mine. His son's best friend is very famous too, and is a very close friend of mine."*

*"I suppose you mean Ha Li Bo Te?" Kai asked with a sneer.*

*"Yes." Cho said simply.*

*For an instant, Cho looked around at the sea of disbelieving faces. With a sigh, she drew her wand and cast a couple of summoning charms. A rolled piece of parchment and a photo of Harry and herself flew down the stairs into her waiting hands.*

"I had to show him the letter Mr. Weasley wrote to me after we got Moldywarts."

"The one that said that he was forever in your debt?" said Harry, a smirk on his face.

"That's the one. He opened and closed his mouth like a fish for a while, and finally came out with his big guns."

"What were they?" asked Hermione.

"That his final marks were good enough that he could apply for a position with the Magical Defense Corps."

Lisa propped herself up on one elbow. "What did you say to that?"

Cho blushed slightly. "That my marks were good enough that the auror chief headhunted me before my application was submitted."

Dudley and Lisa both looked awed. "Really?" Lisa squeaked.

Cho nodded. "I showed him the letter Chief Wodenbane gave to Professor Dumbledore to give to me."

"How did he take it?"

"Not well." Cho snarled slightly.

*"No wife of mine will work as an auror." Kai sneered, his polite facade fading away.*

Harry squeezed her hand. "And you said?"

Cho coughed. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" the others chorused.

Cho looked a bit apprehensive, but leaned over and whispered something in Harry's ear.

*Cho glared at the self-righteous git standing before her. Laughing at her. Flat out implying that she would be repressed all her life should she marry him.*

*Cho's tightly clenched fist connected sharply with Kai's chin.*

"You hit him?" Harry blurted. Cho scowled at him and slapped his shoulder.

The other four burst into laughter, Lisa and Hermione both giving Cho their congratulations.

The group laughed and laughed. Laughed at the relief of Voldemort being gone. Laughed at the blow Cho had literally struck for Chinese witches everywhere. Laughed with the joy of simply being with friends.

Cho tightened her grip on Harry's hand. Harry just looked at her, marveling at how much she had changed, how much he loved her. His familiar.

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## Midnight Duel, Midday Love Epilogue

### Epilogue

Nymphodora Tonks held up her hand and gave a quick signal in the pre-dawn silence. The four figures behind her halted their forward movement and quickly spread out within the grove of trees into a precise formation without making a sound.

As leader of the auror team, Tonks scanned the area in front of them around their target, an lonely old ivy-covered mansion in the Scottish highlands. The moon had been full the night before, so there was plenty of light. She turned to her second in command.

"What do you see?" she mouthed.

Cho nodded, closed her eyes for a second before slowly opening them. Only the most observant viewer would notice that they were slightly unfocused.

Cho stayed stock still for all of six seconds before blinking and turning her attention back to Tonks. "Two on patrol. Under invisibility cloaks. Over there." she whispered quietly, pointing off to the group's right.

On Tonks' left, Miles Stirling, a recent academy graduate, frowned in confusion at Cho's whisper. The more experienced auror had not even been looking in the direction she was indicating.

Tonks nodded, giving Cho an odd look. With a series of efficient gestures, she sent a pair from her team to intercept and neutralise the threat, with instructions not to use magic. Stirling shifted his weight, and slowly moved closer to the Asian witch who, despite being the second least experienced auror in the group, had quickly built such a reputation in the auror ranks that she had risen to second in command of an auror squad.

"Chang? How do you know there are two people out there?" he whispered.

"Saw them." she replied, not turning to face him.

Stirling frowned. "Under invisibility cloaks?"

She absently shook her head. "The foot falls they made on the grass."

Stirling blinked at her answer, but noticed that Tonks gave her second in command a nod and look of realisation. Before he could ask another question, two quick buzzes could be heard from the trio's right, followed by the sound of two bodies hitting the ground.

The two aurors Tonks ordered away slid the muggle stun guns back into their belts, and dragged the pair of now unconscious wizards over to the rest of the group. Tonks confiscated the invisibility cloaks and turned the captives over.

Tonks and one of the aurors she sent to incapacitate the wizards hissed. Cho and Stirling both sent her questioning glances. "Old friends?" whispered Cho.

One of the aurors nodded. "Weasley kicked them out of the Ministry five years ago, during the Trial."

Tonks nodded in agreement. "At Sirius' request. They were Unspeakables."

Stirling coughed softly. "Well, we should get going then." With that, he quickly cast a powerful binding charm on the captives.

Harry soared half a kilometer above the action with in a wide circle, his powerful avian eyes easily spotting the foot steps the men under the invisibility cloaks made as they patrolled the grounds around the manor house. He gave a quick trill of humour as two of Tonks' aurors crept around behind them, stunning them without a spell.

The wards around the house were intact.

With the immediate danger to the auror team neutralised, Harry swooped down to the large manor. It was easy enough to locate the open window all wizard homes maintained. Owls needed to get in after all.

The blood-red phoenix sped towards the open window, before flaring his wings and alighting on the sill with the silence of a ghost. Seven wizards and one witch were in deep discussion around a large cedar table, the aromatic wood filling Harry's sensitive nostrils.

Before Harry heard enough of their conversation to determine the topic, a subtle change in the air told him a ward had been tripped. Even as he mentally cursed, the eight jumped to their feet, each drawing their wand quickly.



The witch, obviously the leader, quickly started ordering the men to various tasks, ranging from destroying documents to ambush positions to give the others enough time to escape. From the wizards' lack of questions and abundance of quick, efficient action, Harry decided that this group had effective disaster plans in place.

A quiet pop, and Harry was sitting on the sill, for the moment unnoticed. With a feral smile the young man dropped down to the floor in a crouch and drew his wand, his emerald eyes alight at the prospect of battle.

Stirling raced across the field to the manor house, right on the heels of his colleagues. He would never for the rest of his life forget the incredulous look Tonks gave him as his binding spell set off one of the wards.

Mentally he kicked himself again, starting what would probably become a lifetime long habit. In his attempt to try to show that he could think for himself, he proved the exact opposite.

Tonks sprinted in front of the group, Chang right beside her. It took the group less than thirty seconds to cover the ground between the trees and the house, though to Stirling it seemed like half an hour.

He watched as Chang drew her wand and sent a *Reducto* curse at the door from ten metres away without breaking stride. From that distance, Stirling would have expected the door to easily shrug off the assault, but the spell hit and shattered the wooden door, allowing the group to enter the house at speed.

Over his panting, Stirling could hear shouts and screams from the level above, interspaced with explosions and flashes of coloured light.

Leaping over the remains of the door, Miles sped past Tonks and Chang, and ran up the stairs leading to the next floor. Tonks cursed under her breath and indicated with the efficient hand gestures that Chang would come with her while the other two secured the lower floor.

With the two witches on his heels, Stirling crashed through a pair of double doors to reveal the scene of a large magical battle.

One that was still raging.

Cursing in Chinese under her breath, Cho followed Stirling up the stairs. The boy was now so desperate to prove himself after his blunder that he was a danger to himself and the rest of the group.

True to form, without hesitation he crashed into and through a set of closed double doors at the top of the stairs, opening onto a magical duel.

Cho couldn't help but smile at the sight of her husband. Standing tall but anything but still, Harry Potter easily sent hex after curse after charm at his opponents, all the while moving around quickly enough that each spell sent back at him hit nothing but empty air. At first glance it appeared that he was having an extraordinary amount of luck, but it was soon apparent that Harry was simply an extraordinary duelist.

He would combine both a summoning and a banishing spell on a vase, sending it from one side of the room to the other, a seemingly useless move. But the flying vase intercepted a curse from one of his opponents in mid-air, shattering under the assault and protecting him from the spell. The flying fragments struck a second opponent, causing that wizard to scream in pain and duck for cover as dozens of tiny ceramic shards cut his hands and face.

The next second, Harry shrunk the four legs of the large table, causing the heavy tabletop to land hard on the witch who was hiding under it. By casting *finite incantetum* at only two of the legs on one side, the table sprang up and flipped, landing on two of the other wizards, and becoming a makeshift barrier that protected Harry from two curses.

Between all his unorthodox tactics, Harry was sending a volley of hexes and charms at his opponents, keeping them off balance and confused. Already he had disabled six of his opponents, and he was yet to be too troubled in this battle.

The arrival of the aurors caused a surge of victory to course through him, until he saw one of them raise his wand and point it at him.

Cho groaned aloud as Stirling raised his wand and cast a stunning spell at Harry. Before the spell hit, he had moved his aim to one of the others, ready to stun the next one too.

Obviously of the 'stun everyone and ask questions later' mindset.

Too bad for him then that he tried to stun someone who could read your movements well enough to know what you were going to do before you did.

Stirling had no idea what hit him when stunning spells from Harry, Cho and Tonks all hit him simultaneously.

Harry ducked a killing curse and summoned one of the large bookshelves lining the wall, causing it to crash heavily on his attacker. Flicking his gaze over the room, he noted that only the witch was left conscious, though she was groaning.

With a bony hand, the witch grasped at a pendant around her neck and muttered some soft words Harry didn't catch. A chill wind swept through the room.

Harry's foot connected sharply behind her ear, and the old witch slumped, out like a light. The chill in the air stayed. Harry turned to Tonks and Cho.

"Check the rest of the house, I think she summoned reinf-" he started, before another door to the room swung open, revealing a frighteningly familiar tall, thin being wearing a dark cloak.

The dementor glided forward, allowing its presence to dissolve will and moral. Tonks felt her mouth go dry as the unfettered dementor gracefully

moved towards Harry.

Cho raised her wand and shouted "*Expacto Patronum!*", but with thoughts of losing Harry flooding her mind, only a thin wisp of silver vapour curled from the tip of her wand.

Mentally she screamed at Harry to move, to flee, to cast his own magnificent patronus, anything. But Harry just stood there stock still, seemingly just waiting for the dementor to approach and steal his soul.

Harry felt a curious detachment as the dementor drifted towards him. Absently he noted that after having stared a Shadow Demon straight in the eyes for almost a full minute, the sensation of a dementor's chill just didn't affect him as usual anymore.

Not that the dementor noticed. It eagerly moved closer to Harry, slowly raising its hands and pushing back its hood, exposing the sightless face and toothless maw. Almost lovingly, it reached out to grasp the sides of Harry's head, leaning forward to administer the Kiss to an unresisting soul.

Harry curled a fist and punched it in the mouth.

Hard.

With a curious squawk of total surprise, the dementor's head rocked back from Harry's strike. It fell backwards onto its backside in a rather undignified way, then completed the fall, landing on its back.

Both Tonks and Cho gasped with relief as the dementor's field of cold was dispelled in an instant. They both ran over to Harry, who was standing over the unconscious form of one of the most feared creatures in the world.

"Well, that was interesting." he said to no one in particular. Slowly, Harry drew his katana, and with a quick, practiced move, decapitated the dementor.

"I'm sorry, Love. He's new."

Harry shook his head, and let out a long breath, releasing his tension and frustration. He looked up at the sunrise, letting the burst of light from the horizon calm him.

The clean up was progressing nicely in the manor below, with several dozen ministry personnel combing the house. Harry and Cho sat quietly on the tiled roof, just listening to the bustle below.

A broad grin split Harry's face, reminding Cho of her husband's mischievous side. "Perhaps we could..."

"No." said Cho adamantly.

"You didn't even listen to what I was going to say!" Harry protested.

"When you get that look on your face, only Sirius would be pleased." she chided, fighting to prevent her own grin from appearing.

Harry sighed theatrically, and put his arm around his wife's shoulders. The pair sat in silence for several minutes just watching the sunrise.

"Cho? Harry?" enquired a familiar voice.

The Potters turned to see Tonks hovering on a broom behind them. "Mind if I join you?"

Harry gestured to the space beside him. "Be our guest."

Tonks landed gently and sat down. "Thanks. You know, being a squad leader is more trouble than it's worth." she grumbled.

"Stirling? Or the dementor?" Harry asked, already suspecting the answer.

"Yes." Tonks replied, ambiguously. "Firstly, Stirling trips the wards, then he breaks formation to get to the fight first, then the first thing he does is try and stun an ally. Not only that, he then committed the cardinal sin of dueling, moving to the next opponent when you haven't incapacitated the first." The now magenta haired witch shook her head. "I'm not sure he's cut out to be an auror."

Harry chuckled. "What are you mad at him for? Attacking an ally, or losing a duel to one? I'm guessing he'll be just as critical of his own performance when you explain it to him."

Tonks nodded morosely. "I think I'm looking forward to his appraisal less than he is." She looked up at the pair after a silent moment. "And secondly," she continued. "An unregistered dementor. The ministry thought they recorded them all, and now we find evidence that there are others out there, supporting dark wizards!" Tonks gave a quick growl of frustration.

"Ah well." she said after taking a deep breath. "The raid turned out a success, regardless. Thanks for scouting for us."

Harry waved away the comment. "Sirius didn't have me doing anything else. Molly thinks I'm training with the team and is looking after Cedric and James. It was either be an ace in your sleeve or sit at home doing nothing."

Tonks smiled. "Thanks anyway. The rest of the team are very curious as to how Cho could see two guys under invisibility cloaks from fifty yards away. Are you ever going to let it become public knowledge that you are a phoenix animagi?"

Harry shook his head. "Sirius thinks that having only a handful of people know will mean that when I help out in auror raids, I'll continue to be useful."

Tonks nodded. "Well, you've pulled my arse out of the fire more times than I'm prepared to count over the last few years. You'd best be off soon though, if you want to keep your part in this operation a secret. We've got enough evidence of sedition to put them all ten of the buggers we caught away for a long while, but since this is a secure site and you officially are not here..."

"I get it." Harry said with a smile. He stood and stretched before grabbing Cho in a tight embrace. "See you at home, Beautiful." he said to Cho, and gave her a deep kiss. "Have you set up wards to track apparition?"

Cho nodded. "I did that right away."

Harry smiled at her and blew her a kiss. "Good girl!" he said with a grin, before transforming into a phoenix and swooping away.

Molly Weasley sang softly to herself as she cooked breakfast. With expertise that spoke of countless hours of practice, she quickly assembled a massive platter of pancakes. She placed a heating charm on the enormous ceramic platter to keep them warm, and placed it on the kitchen table, ready for the small army of occupants the Burrow housed that night.

True to form, Percy was the first down. Dressed, showered and ready for the day, the fussy young man quickly ate his breakfast, kissed his mother and flooded to work. The dust had almost settled when two tousle-haired toddlers made their way into the kitchen, both rubbing sleep from their eyes.

"Good morning James, Cedric. Ready for breakfast?" she asked them.

With enthusiastic nods, the pair moved to the table. Cedric clambered over to and into his chair, while James held out his arms, waiting for Molly to lift the younger brother into his highchair.

"My, that looks delicious."

Molly and the two boys turned to see Harry, a grin on his face.

"Daddy!" the two boys yelled, before running over to him. Molly Weasley simply smiled at the sight.

With a whop of joy, Harry picked both his sons up, one in each arm. "Were you boys good for Grandma?" he asked.

Both nodded quickly, too quickly. Harry raised an eyebrow and looked over at the woman he considered his second mother. "Really?" he asked her.

Molly slowly walked over to Harry and kissed him on the cheek. "They were absolute angels, once they went to sleep." she said, giving them a warm smile.

Harry tried to look stern, but anyone could see he was trying hard to contain his amusement. "What did you boys do?"

"Jamesy gave Uncle Fred purple hair." said Cedric.

"Did not!" blurted his brother.

Cedric looked at James in surprise. "Did to!"

James shook his head with indignation. "Blue!" he countered.

Harry laughed out loud. "Ah, but Uncle Fred already has red hair, James. What colour do you get when you mix blue and red?"

James frowned in thought, trying to remember the colour chart his father had pinned to his bedroom wall at home. "Purple?" he offered.

"Exactly!" said Harry, hugging his younger son as a reward. "Now, something smells good. How about we eat those pancakes for breakfast?"

Both boys shouted their enthusiasm, Cedric tottering over to his chair while Harry inserted James into his highchair.

Once they were all seated, Harry filled their plates and they began to eat.

"How was practice, Harry?" asked Molly, taking a sip of tea.

"Fine. I tried to get away early, but with a match coming up in a fortnight..." Harry shrugged, "What can I say."

"Do you want me to keep looking after these two for you?" she asked.

Harry shook his head, a smile on his face. "Cho should be off duty soon, and I'm looking forward to a couple of days without training. We'll probably take these two young monsters and head off to the zoo or something."

"Zoo!" shouted James excitedly, banging his plastic fork's handle on the table. "Want the zoo!" Cedric nodded his agreement.

Harry smiled at his sons. "Just promise me that you'll not convince the snakes to dance for you this time."

Both James and Cedric frowned at this completely unfair restriction.

Harry turned back to Molly. "Thank you again for taking care of them."

"Oh pish posh, Harry. It was my pleasure. It is always nice to have some little ones around again."

Molly regarded the young man before her, weighing up what she was about to say. "Harry, Ginny was asking after you the other day."

Harry nodded calmly. "How is she?"

"She just finished university. She got a job with my cousin's accounting firm."

"I thought Arthur wanted her to get a job in the Muggle Relations department."

Molly sighed sadly. "He did, but she wouldn't hear of it. She hardly ever comes home any more. I think she has emotionally severed her ties with the magical world."

Harry leaned over and took one of Molly's hands. "Is she happy?"

Molly took a deep breath. "I think so, but it is hard to tell sometimes."

Harry squeezed Molly's hand gently. "Ginny is stubborn, but she knows her limits. If she needs you, she'd tell you."

Harry noticed that Cedric had finished his pancakes. "Do you want some more?" he asked his son.

At Cedric's enthusiastic nodding, Harry again placed a couple of pancakes on Cedric's plate.

Harry eyed the stack of uneaten pancakes, and the only place at the table with used plates. "Did only Percy stay last night?"

"No, Bill and Fleur are staying in Ron's old room, with their little Chantelle. They arrived late last night, so are probably going to sleep in this morning. Arthur is upstairs of course, still sleeping since he also got in late, and Hermione is staying here with young Albus while Ron is away on tour. We were up until early morning reminiscing. You know, it would be so much more convenient if you and Ron were on the same team."

Harry grinned. "Probably, but then we would see more of each other than our spouses. Hermione and Cho would feel jealous."

"I know Ron has tried to get you transferred to the Cannons, but Sirius won't let you go. What if you were to try and get him transferred to the Marauders?"

Harry gave a low chuckle. "Ron's dream has always been to play for the Cannons. If I was to get him transferred, I'd have an ex-best friend."

"Harry?" came a most familiar voice from the stairs. "Is that you?"

Harry turned to face the newcomer. "Good morning, Hermione. Sleep well?"

On bare feet, a slightly rumpled Hermione rushed over to her best friend and gave him a big hug. "I'm glad you're OK."

Harry coughed. "Why wouldn't I be OK?"

Hermione stiffened briefly. "Oh, no reason." she said lamely.

If Molly noticed the byplay between the two, she didn't react to it. Soon the rest of the family came down and helped themselves to breakfast. Once Harry and his sons were finished, Harry gave a quick kiss on the cheek to Hermione, Fleur and Molly and said his goodbyes. He gathered up Cedric and James, summoned their belongings, and floored home.

"Glad to see you finally decided to report." grumbled Sirius as Harry stepped out of the fire.

"Granddad!" shouted the boys, pulling away from Harry to grab and squeeze one of Sirius' legs each.

"Hey! No fair!" complained Sirius. The older wizard gently collapsed backwards, allowing the pair to clamber on top of him and loudly proclaim 'victory'. Or 'vicky' from James.

With a laugh, Harry grabbed Cedric and lifted him off Sirius' stomach. Sirius sat up and picked up James. "What should we do with these two Marauderlings?" he asked his godson.

Harry pretended to think deeply. "How about we have Dobby give them a bath?"

The despairing look on Cedric's face was priceless.

Harry and Sirius sat down at the older man's desk in the hidden room after sending Dobby away with the boys for a bath. Harry rubbed the back of his neck and poured a glass of pumpkin juice.

"Hermione nearly blew it this morning." he remarked, as Sirius gathered his notes. "Came down and hugged me as if I'd been in life-threatening danger the night before, rather than just a quidditch practice."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "That girl." he said, shaking his head. "She's a think-tank to herself, and she may have come up with half the gadgets in the Unspeakable's field kit, but she can't keep her emotions in check to save her life." he sighed. "I'll have a chat with her when she comes into work."

"And Molly remarked *again* how much more convenient it would be if Ron and I were on the same team."

Sirius grunted. "I know. Ron apparently convinced the Cannon's manager to put forward another bid for you. I'm getting sick and tired of turning down offers for your services."

Harry smirked. "So is this a good time to ask for a pay rise?"

Sirius didn't look at him, but growled, "Don't let it go to your head."

"Do you want me to start throwing matches then?" Harry asked, his smirk still in place.

Sirius snapped his head up and looked at Harry as if he was insane. "Don't be ridiculous. Owning a successful Quidditch team that just happens to be made up of undercover Unspeakables is the most valuable tool I have. Have you any idea how many invitations I get to social events I get?"

"Half as many as I do?"

Sirius coughed. "Um, yeah, probably. My point is, having agents and the opportunity to move regularly in the social circle where the money resides is the best way to track dark behaviour, since it needs money to thrive."

Harry looked around. "Yeah, like you have such a piddling amount of that in the first place."

With a quick chuckle, Sirius finally got his notes in order. "So, what happened?"

Remus jerked awake as the massive aeroplane touched down at Heathrow. After five years of monthly flying, he could sleep from take off to landing if he wished.

Not that he wished to often. On his monthly flights, Remus always took at least a dozen books with him for some 'light reading'.

Remus stood and stretched, groaning a little as he felt his joints pop and muscles protest slightly. Releasing an "Ahhhhh!" of satisfaction, he started to gather his belongings.

Once all his reading material and toiletries were packed into his suitcase, he turned his bed into an armchair and sat back down to wait for the plane to taxi to its gate. He looked around the interior of what had been his home for the last three days.

Over a hundred people were in the process of repeating Remus' actions, packing their 'away' bags in readiness to leave the aircraft. Though this class of plane usually seated almost five hundred passengers, it had been converted at Harry and Sirius' request to carry just a quarter of that.

After all, there were only one hundred and twenty werewolves in the United Kingdom.

Remus smiled at his first reaction to Harry's plan. Packing every werewolf in the country into one place and sending them round the world three times in three days sounded crazy, but it turned out to be incredibly effective.

Since a werewolf only transformed at night over the three days of the full moon, Harry theorised that sending them around the world, 'chasing the day' as he called it, would keep them from transforming. One side benefit was the fact that there had not been a new case of lycanthropy in the British Isles in five years. If all the other magical governments adopted the scheme, they would completely eradicate the curse worldwide within a couple of generations.

The theory had been proven correct quite simply, and now every werewolf in the UK made a monthly three day trip that kept them on the day lit side of the world at all times. The logistics involved were more difficult to overcome. At least, they would have been, had Harry not started throwing around money like water.

Under the guise of a muggle 'long term scientific study on the effects of regular long distance air travel on travelers', he had bought and paid for a plane to be converted to house all the werewolves in the UK in comfort. Every month he then paid for the plane to fly round the world, staying in sunlight at all times.

The fuel costs alone were astronomical, the landing fees at the various airports exorbitant, but Harry paid them every month without blinking.

Not that Remus was worried about Harry's finances. According to his calculations, Harry only spent just over two thirds his monthly investment income on sending Remus and his fellow lycanthropes on their four-weekly trips. When Remus had initially balked at the cost, Harry simply snorted and asked what else he was going to do with the money, other than watch it pile up uselessly.

Another passenger came up to Remus and asked him to thank Harry. Remus nodded again, just as he always did. He had already thanked Harry on behalf of each of the passengers at least five times each.

The plane reached its destination, and the werewolves began to disembark. The private lounge set up for them was staffed by wizards from the Ministry, checking their documentation and designed to keep track of all the 'dangerous' lycanthropes. Once their identity was established, they would be issued a portkey to take them home.

Remus took a quick break in the bathroom to refresh himself before passing through the Ministry control. He gathered his documents together, looking not for the first time with bemusement at the photo on his papers.

It had been taken five years ago, at the start of Harry's 'experiment'. The old man in the photo had plenty of grey shooting through his hair, testimony to the stressful transformation he had been forced to endure every four weeks for thirty years.

Now, Remus looked up into the mirror, marveling at the difference. His natural hair colour had returned, and the grey had disappeared. Most of the wrinkles around his eyes were completely gone. Even when severely travel weary, Remus estimated that he actually looked his chronological age, rather than his father's. The result of not subjecting his body to the monthly ravages of his forced transformation was plain to see.

"I'll have to get a new photo, they'll stop believing it's me soon." he chuckled to himself.

Remus' portkey transported him straight to Black's Pad, where it seemed an argument was taking place. Quickly, he ran into the main reception hall and opened the wall to reveal the secret room, to see Sirius stalking around waving his arms around, while Harry sat on one of the plush chairs grinning at his godfather.

Harry looked up with no surprise to see the new comer. "Ah, here is the man at fault in person." he said with a smirk.

Remus blinked, wondering what he had done. Sirius spun around and saw his friend.

"Moony! Do you know what your protÃ©gÃ© did?"

Trying to keep a smile from forming, Remus replied, "No, but I'm quite sure you are about to enlighten me."

"He punched out a dementor!"

Remus blinked and turned to Harry. "And that is my fault how?"

Harry replied before Sirius could say anything. "Because you taught me in my third year, and you never told me not to punch a dementor. Just like you didn't teach me not to head butt a demon."

Remus frowned, his expression darkening. "You are never going to let that go, are you? For the last time, 'not nutting a demon' has never been in the Hogwarts' Defense syllabus." He took one look at Harry's expression, then shrugged and grinned. "Well done?" he ventured, wondering what Sirius' reaction would be.

"Well done?" Sirius blurted. "Is that all you have to say for yourself?"

A smile started playing around the edges of Remus' mouth. "Very well done?" he offered.

Harry stood, since it looked remarkably like Sirius was about to have a blood vessel burst in his forehead. "Sirius, don't worry. I didn't cast a patronus at it because it wasn't affecting me. I was curious as to why."

Sirius spun round. "Do you stand still and watch a dragon fly towards you teeth bared if you've cast a flame freezing charm? Dementors have other weapons than their presence too, you know."

Harry nodded. "I know. All too well."

Sirius blanched and quickly bit his lip. "Sorry Harry. It's just, well, damn it, I honestly thought that all the dementors were accounted for."

Harry nodded, motioning to a set of files on one wall. "In all probability, only a handful at most could be unregistered. We just need to go back over the records, perhaps dive into some pensieves. I'm sure we can track down the time and place where this one slipped through the net." Harry took a sip of his tea. "If we find a hole in our security procedures, it may well help us identify where and when we missed it. It could also point to how many are at large."

Sirius nodded. "Alright." He took a deep breath and sighed, which quickly turned into a chuckle. "I bet the dementor was surprised. When you socked it one, I mean."

Harry laughed out loud. "It was. It made a kind of mousey squeak and fell over. I'll put it in my pensieve if you want to see it."

Remus nodded enthusiastically. "I'd like that."

Sirius blinked at his friend. "Moony! You're back!"

Remus rolled his eyes. "Padfoot, you have the worst observational skills in existence. Why Arthur hired you is beyond me."

"Mr. Padfoot demands an apology from Mr. Moony, stating for the record that he was under duress at the time Mr. Moony first made his presence known."

"Mr. Moony rejects Mr. Padfoot's demand for an apology, since Mr. Padfoot has proven time and again that Mr. Padfoot is unable to notice things that happen two inches in front of his nose."

Harry sat back down and smiled behind his tea cup as the pair started their bantering again.

"Dudley? Are you there?"

Dudley Dursley jumped slightly at the sight of his cousin's head in the fire in his living room. Clutching at his rapidly beating heart, he turned to face Harry. "Jeez, Potter. Do you have to freak me out every time you call?"

Harry's face twisted into a smirk. "Well, now you mention it..."

Dudley rolled his eyes and got himself under control. "So, what is so important that you need to kill me for?"

"You'd think that after five years of exposure to us freaks that you'd have become used to our methods of communication by now."

Dudley slowly shook his head. "I'll admit that there are everyday benefits to being in the magical world, but if I have to show one more of my father-in-law's underlings how much more efficient a bloody ball point pen is compared to a quill, I think I'll stuff the quill where the sun don't shine."

Harry laughed along with his cousin. "I was wondering if you and the family would like to come and visit the zoo with us today. It's been a few months since we all got together."

A smile played around the large man's lips. "Do you promise not to set a snake onto me this time?"

Harry laughed. "I promise, though I can't make any such claims on behalf of Cedric and James."

Dudley waved the comment away. "They love their Uncle Dudley. They'd never do anything to hurt me."

"I suppose so," Harry said doubtfully, "though that might be because you are their only source of muggle sweets."

"Exactly." Dudley agreed with a nod. "Tell you what, I'll have a chat with Lisa, and if she and the kids are up for it, we'll portkey to Black's Pad in an hour."

Harry nodded. "I look forward to it. See you soon."

Albus Weasley studiously sat next to his mother, a massive tome open on his lap. With a grunt of effort, the tiny boy managed to bring the book up so he could copy his mother. He loved the way her face grew intense when she started reading a book. Looking over at his mother, he tried to copy her expression, and stared deeply at the open pages in front of him.

"Good book?"

Albus looked up at his Uncle Bill, easily identifiable by his long hair and earring. Ron's son gave Bill an enthusiastic nod.

"I see. It would probably be better if..." Uncle Bill said, gently lifting the book, turning it the right way round and putting it back on Albus' lap. "It makes more sense this way." he finished with a smile.

Albus nodded happily and resumed his 'mummy-reading-face'.

A flash of fire and a subtle clearing throat got the little boy's attention. Albus turned to the fireplace to see his Uncle Harry's face.

"Hello, Albus. Is Mummy there?" Harry whispered, looking over Albus' shoulder at Bill, who was looking on, rather amused.

Albus nodded. "She's reading." he whispered back, not sure why they were speaking softly, but going along with it anyway.

"Reading, eh? Tell me, does she look like this?" Harry asked, putting on a very good impression of Hermione's 'reading-face'. Albus nodded happily. Bill snorted with repressed laughter.

A wicked smirk appeared on Harry's face. "Do you want to go to the zoo, Albus?"

The little Weasley's eyes lit up, and he nodded fervently.

"Good. Go and tell your mother you are going to the zoo. That you are going to see lions and tigers and jellyfish."

"OK." Albus turned and potted over to his mother, still wholly engrossed in her book. "Mummy? I'm going to the zoo. I'm going to see lions and tigers and jellyfish." he dutifully said.

"That's nice, dear." Hermione said absently.

Bill walked over to the fireplace. "That's cruel, Harry." he whispered, not at all disappointed.

Harry just grinned back. "That will teach her to ignore her son. Do you want us to take Chantelle too? Dudley, Lisa, Cho and I are going." he whispered back.

Bill shook his head. "No thanks Harry. Fleur has already taken her out to the beauty parlor. I just want to take a photo of Hermione's reaction when she realises Albus is gone."

Albus slowly walked over. "Mummy said OK."

Harry smiled at the little boy. "Right, Uncle Bill is going to give you some powder. Throw it into the fire and say, 'Black's Pad', then step into the fire. Got that?"

Albus nodded. "Mummy always lets me say the floo name!" he said proudly.

Harry nodded. "Good! You are very responsible. Later, Bill." Harry finished, before his head disappeared.

Bill smiled down at Albus' expectant face. The little tyke already had his hand out, waiting for the floo powder. Bill put a pinch in his hand and stood back.

"Black's Pad!" said Albus as clearly as he could, tossing the powder into the fire. He stepped into the flames.

Four adults and five children slowly wandered around the zoo. Lisa Dursley rolled her eyes as her husband gave a shout and pointed towards an enclosure containing unicorns. "Honestly, it is like having three children sometimes." she complained to Cho.

Cho smiled despite herself, daintily licking her never-melt ice-cream. She watched as Dudley scooped both his daughters up and held them over the rails. One of the unicorns uncertainly made its way over to the group, allowing the two little girls to gently pat its silky hide.

"I remember Hagrid showing us those." said Harry. "He was grumbling last time I saw him, saying that he was going to have to introduce them earlier in the kid's education, to ensure more of them could... take part."

Albus looked up at his Uncle. "What do you mean, Uncle Harry? Will I get to take part?"

Lisa swatted at Harry's arm. "Shut up, you. That's just gossip." Harry gasped theatrically and grabbed at his arm.

Cho laughed at Harry's attempt to feign injury. She knelt down so she was at eye level with Cedric. "Behold the hero of the world, boys." she said to her children. "See how brave he is?"

James and Cedric giggled at their father's expression.

**"Harry James Potter!"**

Harry smiled at the expected voice. He turned to see his best friend's wife storming towards him, her hair waving around like medusa's in her rage.

"Hello Hermione. How are you?" he asked politely.

Hermione looked about to explode with wrath when she saw her son. Instantly, her expression changed and she swooped down on him. "Oh Albus!" she said, grabbing her son in a tight hug.

Harry turned to his wife. "I wish I had a tape recorder. I'd have loved to send Dumbledore a copy of Hermione saying that."

"You... you... you..." Hermione said, one arm around her son, shaking a finger of the other at Harry.

"What?" asked Harry, affecting an air of innocence.

"I nearly died when I found out Albus wasn't at home!"

Lisa and Cho looked at Harry with astonished expressions. Harry turned to face Hermione's son, who was looking at his mother in confusion. "Albus? I thought I asked you to tell your mother you were going to the zoo with me."

"I did!" said Albus, on the verge of tears. "I told you Mummy!"

"Hermione?" Harry gasped. "You mean to say you don't listen to your own son?"

Hermione opened and shut her mouth, before leveling a basilisk-like glare at him. "Now listen here, Potter!"

Harry turned to face Albus, who was looking at his mother in confusion. "It's OK Albus, I'll always listen to you. And if your Mummy doesn't calm down soon, I'll teach you how to prank her all the time. I know all her weaknesses."

"Oooo, I'll get you for that, Harry." Hermione promised.

Harry smirked at her, ruffling Albus' hair. "You're saying that to a person who owns a third of the most successful chain of joke shops in the UK. Someone who has unlimited access to inventory and new, untested inventions of two of the most devious minds in the world."

"Yeah, Mummy!" added Albus, his tiny fists on his hips. "And he has me too."

"That's right!" Harry said, scooping Albus out of Hermione's arms. "He's my godson."

Hermione looked from her son to her best friend and back again. With a sigh, she said, "I give up. I can't compete against both of you."

"You see, Albus? Your mother *is* the cleverest witch in the world."

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Our characters.

Harry is publicly living the life of an idle rich celebrity seeker. He married Cho after he finished his NEWTs, and they have two sons, Cedric, 3 and James, 2. Secretly, Harry is an Unspeakable, in counter intelligence. He often shadows his wife when she is on a dangerous mission. Though still actively sought by the media for interviews and by companies for endorsements, Harry is very private. He allows all manner and number of absurd rumours to circulate, even starting a few himself. In the past, when a newspaper announces that he is an Unspeakable, the public shrug it off as another piece of rubbish.



Cho is publicly an auror, and has developed a reputation for both being cool under fire and for observing the most incredible detail in any situation. In her years in the field, she is yet to fail her objectives.

Sirius is still the head of the Unspeakables. He used his own funds to set up and manage a professional Quidditch team, dubbed The Marauders. Harry is his primary seeker, while each and every one of the other players is an Unspeakable, who only played as amateurs. As such, the team is moderately successful, Harry assisting them to victory more often than not. Sirius uses the intelligence he gets from his players to get an understanding of what the rich and powerful in the magical community are doing.

Remus happily took on managing both Sirius' and Harry's fortunes. He occasionally helps Minerva out at Hogwarts as a substitute professor in nearly any subject when needed. With his monthly round the world trips, he hasn't had to withstand his lycanthropic transformation in five years. He has finally managed to attain that which has been denied him all his life, acceptance within the magical community.

Hermione married Ron after she fell pregnant accidentally, and gave birth to a son, Albus, 3. Ron is a professional Quidditch player, the Keeper for his favourite team, the Chudley Cannons. Hermione is publicly known as an Unspeakable, working for Sirius in development, coming up with new and innovative ways to combine muggle and magical technology to assist the Department of Mysteries.

Dudley married Lisa two years after she finished her NEWTs. They both work for her father in the Department of Muggle Relations; Dudley teaching advanced muggle studies classes, while Lisa teaches corresponding magical theory classes to muggle politicians. They have twin daughters, Chloe and Crystal, 2.

Arthur Weasley reached the end of his time as Minister and, despite an outpouring of public support, retired. Arthur now heads the Order of the Phoenix, working with Sirius to stabilise the wizarding world. He left the Ministry in far better shape than when he was elected Minister, and for the last few months his successor has built on the foundation that was Arthur's legacy to the public.

Fred and George are still unmarried which drives their mother nuts. The WWW chain of stores is taking off overseas, leaving them little time for romantic socialising. When they do visit their family, they are generally loaded with new gag gifts and prank presents, which in turn has meant that when the twins arrive at someones door for a visit, they are welcomed in a very defensive manner.

Ginny is now an accountant. (A/N Many believe this is the ultimate punishment...) She sees her family less and less often, and is now totally immersed in the muggle world.

Draco purchased the Hand of Glory from Borgan and Burkes, and became a thief after his trust funds failed to provide him with the income he needed to live as he desired. He was finally captured after three years and is currently serving time in Azkaban. The Malfoy name has become synonymous with deceit and sedition.

Tom Riddle was finally sentenced, in what was later known as simply 'The Trial', to three hundred and twenty-seven Kisses, and to just over four thousand years in Azkaban. He was the last person ever to be administered the Kiss before Arthur Weasley entered into the wizarding world's constitution that it forever be banned as a punishment.

Albus Dumbledore is a frequent visitor in Harry's life, though is spending his retirement traveling all over the world, meeting new people, sharing spells and amassing a truly startling collection of socks.

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