

Master Potter Not again!

You know, I'm getting really damned tired of having to regain consciousness. Over the years I've lost count of the number of times I've had to struggle to attain some semblance of lucidity in an unexpected location. Of course, it's not the actual waking up itself that bugs me; it's the fact that I'd been knocked out in the first place that really pisses me off.

Due to the repeated times I've had to experience it, I have unconsciously developed a basic grading system, where I take clues from my immediate environment to decide whether or not it was a good thing or not to wake up. Unfortunately for me, at least this time, there were no crisp white sheets smelling faintly of disinfectant, indicating that I'd been moved into Madam Pomfrey's realm. There was no tantalising scent of frying bacon or bubbling stew to hint that I was anywhere near Dobby's cooking. So, no high points this time. Hell, there wasn't even the eye-watering orange that I'd come to associate with Ron's old bedroom at the Burrow. Nope, there was absolutely nothing comforting about where I'd found myself this time.

I was lying on my stomach, with my left cheek pressed tightly against the ground. The cold, gritty and uncomfortable ground. With a low grunt of effort, I lifted my head, ran my hand up the side of my body, and wiped off whatever crap had stuck.

Moist, grey sand rubbed off my cheek, falling to the floor. Yep, this had to be one of the worst ways to regain consciousness.

I rolled over, ignoring my grumbling muscles and painful side, and sat up. In the dim light, I could only make out a few details, but it appeared I was in a squarish stone alcove, about three metres wide and four deep. Rough-hewn stone walls surrounded me on three sides, with an equally unrefined stone ceiling above my head. An empty wooden pail sat in one corner. The sandy floor I now sat upon was awful - coarse, gritty, damp and cold. I felt dirty just sitting on it.

I slowly stood and stretched, noting that the ceiling was so low I could place my palms on the rough rock without standing on my toes. My stiff muscles protested briefly, before deciding that actually having some sort of mobility was far better than the enforced state of non-mobility they had recently been subjected to. The little alcove was probably only the size of a small prison cell.

A corridor ran left to right at the open side of the alcove, as though the room I was in had been cut into the corridor wall. Where (I assume) the wall had been, there was now just a simple white line on the ground, as though a reminder to where the original corridor wall had ended. Oddly, it was the only part of the floor of both the corridor and my alcove that had been swept clear of sand. The line had been etched onto the stone floor. I looked closer at it. It seemed rather familiar. I just couldn't place where I'd seen such a thing before.

I patted myself down, noting wryly that I had been relieved of my stolen wand and all my other items, including my backpack and the expended portkey the embassy official had given to me to return to England. My captors obviously didn't want me to use magic. Shortsighted buggers, aren't they?

Or were they? Usually, after an enforced period of rest, I woke up nearly fizzing with energy. It was most noticeable during Zab's brutal regimen during my apprenticeship, where he magically exhausted me every day for nearly two years. Then, I'd wake up almost bouncing, only to have to undergo the most magically exhausting experiments, sending me right back to my bed. Today, I felt lethargic and listless, as though I'd been hurling magic around for a full day or so already.

I shook my head to clear it and scanned my memory. The portkey from the Embassy in Berlin had activated as expected, but instead of being greeted by a Ministry official looking for a photo op, I'd appeared in a small room and hit with several spells before I could even catch my balance. The conniving smile of the Embassy official swam into my thoughts, and in hindsight, it looked damned self-satisfied. No wonder he was so desperate to get me home through non-official channels. Bastard.

I took the two steps necessary to stand near the line and glanced up and down the corridor. To my left, it took a sharp turn to the right after only about ten metres. To my right, it continued on for as far as I could see, which, considering the low light, wasn't too far.

"What in blazes is going on?" I muttered to myself. Not even the most incompetent wizards would go out of their way to kidnap me and then put me in an open room. Either they have another way of preventing me from leaving, or I was supposed to attempt escape, and maybe get caught doing something illegal in the act. Either way, staying here was probably a bad move. I stepped over the line and into the corridor.

Or at least, I tried to.

With the painful sensation reminiscent of being hit in the stomach with a bludger, I was hurled backwards, connecting painfully with the rough, rocky wall. My vision swam with the impact, and it took a fair presence of mind not to lose consciousness. I'd had enough of being helpless for the moment.

A thrice-damned age line. Just. Fucking. Wonderful.

I slowly rose to my knees, shaking uncontrollably and wondering just how old I would have to be to cross the thing. Knowing my luck, I'd probably

have to be around a hundred or so. Swearing softly, I reached around and clutched the back of my head, discovering two things.

One, the skin on the back of my head had been split open with the impact with the wall, and I was bleeding from the cut.

Two, a great big patch of hair from the back of my head was missing.

Further tentative exploration with my fingers revealed that nearly half my scalp was bald, or close to it.

I started swearing ever more loudly.

"Language, Potter," an amused voice chided me. I knew that voice.

Sure enough, the unimposing, portly man strode down the corridor, with two others behind him. "Cornelius Fudge. It's so nice to see you again," I said sarcastically. "Any chance you'd like to come over here so I could tear your head off? I'd put it back in that fucking ugly bowler hat you always wore, but you seem to have developed a rudimentary fashion sense in the past two years."

He smirked at me at first, before developing a scowl half way through my spiel. "Now, now, Potter, there's no need for threats or insults. In any event, I'm quite comfortable out here, thank you."

I took a deep breath to quell my anger. All three wore the same dark grey robes, though Fudge's had silver trim, indicating some sort of rank. Both of his toadies had their wands out and ready, but not pointed at me.

"So what poor, misguided soul had the ill-fortune to end up with you as an employee?" I snarled. "Have you managed to send them into bankruptcy with your usual level of incompetence yet?"

Fudge instantly lost his faked joviality. "It's because of you that I'm stuck here, Potter," he spat, sending spittle flying as he all but shouted my name. "Therefore, you're going to help me out."

I snorted with laughter. "You think?" I asked while my mind worked through that little piece of information. I'd embarrassed the Ministry enough that they'd taken a vote of no confidence in him, but I had no idea what happened to the moronic Gestapo-wannabe after that. Whatever his job now, it had to be the Magical world's social equivalent of garbage collector.

He grinned evilly at me. "Oh yes. Your childish fit of pique at the Vatican stirred up a lot of interest in you." He laughed out loud. "Again."

I stood on wobbly legs, refusing to kneel in front of him. "Was there anything of interest to someone who possesses a modicum of intelligence? Or just you?"

His eyes flashed with anger. "Do you have any idea where you are, Potter?"

Another clue. From his tone, this had to be somewhere bad. A prickling feeling of dread crept over my now-exposed scalp. "I'm in Hell," I replied simply. "That is, until you bugger off and leave me alone. As soon as you're out of sight I'll be as close to heaven as to make no bloody difference."

That didn't go well. With a quick nod to his underlings, a pair of hexes flew towards me. I managed to dodge one, but the other hit my shoulder, sending a crackling wave of electricity up and down my arm. I fell to the floor and hissed in pain, but didn't cry out.

Internally, I was screaming out curses. Zab had taught me that hex. It caused little to no permanent damage and didn't take a great deal of power to use, though it did require a certain level of discipline and skill to cast. It was taught almost exclusively to a specific subset of Ministry employees. I knew exactly where I was now.

"Don't annoy me, Potter. I have the ability to make your life bearable if you cooperate, or the opposite if you don't."

With a twitching arm, I rose again to my feet. "You think?" I asked dangerously. I glanced at his hands. There, on his left index finger, was a jade ring. Unwelcome conformation of my deduction.

He stepped back, behind his lackeys. "Go ahead and try it, Potter. I know all about your ability to cast a wandless banishing charm. I'm rather interested to see what the wards here do to you."

I paused for a second or two. My Gryffindor instincts wanted to push the trio so hard that they would end up as greasy smears on wall opposite. But my Slytherin side pointed out that Fudge had no reason to bluff here, not when he had me trapped. There was also the fact that my lethargy was directly due to the wards here. I'd be better off discovering the results of experimenting with magic in my own time, without an audience.

After a few moments of silence, Fudge said mockingly, "Oh, poor little Potter, afraid to use his magic."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, poor little Fudge, afraid to use his brain," I replied in the same tone.

That earned me another couple of jolts.

Fudge waited patiently for me to stop jerking. "Well, as nice as it is to catch up with an old friend, we really need to get down to business. A few more of those and you won't be able to tell me what I need. Not for a while, at least."

I gingerly rolled over onto my stomach, and pushed myself up onto my hands and knees. "And just what would the warden of Azkaban need from me?" I snarled, with an odd sort of echo to my voice. My larynx wasn't functioning properly after the repeated zaps.

That made him blink. “How did you know, Potter?”

I swallowed and coughed, trying to get my voice back properly. I could tell him that I knew that that hex is used to control prisoners, and is only really taught to prison guards. Or because the bloody Abrogo wards around Azkaban are powered by draining the power of anyone under them who don't have a piece of jade against their skin. Or because he was here after being voted out of office after I exposed his idiocy to the world, and that being the warden of Azkaban was the most unwanted job in the Ministry. But pointing any of those out would give away the fact that I could actually use my brain. It was not a good idea to let your captors think that you were smarter than them.

“Dumbledore told me,” I mumbled.

Fudge actually rubbed his chin in thought. “Odd. I wouldn't have thought he would have told you that.”

I glared at the man, deciding that ascribing his own traits onto others would make him less likely to prove my lie. “He told me thinking that I'd enjoy knowing that you were forced into doing something this bad. He was right.”

Fudge glared at me, but stopped thinking. I slowly gathered my power. If the wards were going to sap my strength, I had to conserve it for when I needed it most. “Just what do you want, Fudge?”

“The Horcrux,” he said simply.

My breath caught in my throat. “What?”

“Don't play dumb with me, Potter. I know about your little trip to find You-Know-Who's last soul jar.”

I raised my gaze to look directly at him. I knew some magic that didn't take much power to use. “What do you want it for?” I asked carefully, as soon as he'd met my eyes.

I wasn't expecting him to answer. Or at least, I wasn't expecting him to answer honestly. With the eye contact I had with him, I was rather hoping he'd bring those memories to mind, where I'd get the answers myself.

Sure enough, the little bastard didn't even have a rudimentary knowledge of Occlumency, let alone any skill in the discipline. No wonder Lucius could manipulate him at will. I ignored Fudge's spoken answer and gently rifled through his forethoughts.

Well, I wouldn't have believed it, but the Ministry is even more idiotic than I gave them credit for. Ex-Ministers (or at least, ex-Ministers not convicted of a crime while in office) were apparently permitted to peruse sensitive Wizengamot documents even after their term had expired. Ostensibly, it was so they could take precautions to ensure their own safety. It was assumed that a Minister would have cultivated a certain number of enemies during his term in office; or at least, it was assumed he would have if he were doing his job right.

Despite his being voted out of office a full three years before his term was up, Fudge was never brought up on charges. If I had to guess, it would probably have been because too many of the Wizengamot members who had danced to his tune would have had to answer some decidedly uncomfortable questions.

So, thanks to this supremely imbecilic situation, Fudge knew everything Dumbledore had decided to reveal to the Wizengamot. Thankfully, given it was Dumbledore doing the revealing, I suspected it wasn't much. But the real problem was what Fudge had managed to infer for himself. It was spookily accurate.

Voldemort's Horcrux existed, I had it, and it was his ticket back into power.

The one bright spot in this whole mess was that he still wasn't sure what he was going to do with it. He had some vague plan to use it to 'buy' his way back into influence either by visibly being the person who finally destroyed the last vestige of Voldemort, or to blackmail whatever remained of Riddle to help. Well, I'll have to give Fudge credit here; not too much, but a little bit. He has a firm goal in life, and is absolutely unencumbered by anything even remotely resembling a scruple.

“Potter!” Fudge snapped.

I blinked, leaving his mind. “Sorry, what? You were boring me so much I phased out there for a moment.”

He took a deep breath and let it out through his nose while clamping his lips together tightly. “Tell me where the Horcrux is, and I'll let you go.”

I paused, making some deductions of my own. There was no way he would let me loose after kidnapping me in the first place. I discarded that offer out of hand. It was odd that he hadn't just petrified me and force-fed me Veritaserum, which in and of itself told me something. Either he couldn't requisition it from the Ministry without a few flags being raised, or he didn't think it would work. He had mentioned my 'fit of pique' at the Vatican, which was probably a reference to my first visit. Perhaps he heard that I resisted their Veritaserum, and decided it wasn't worth trying it on me.

“Tell me who you have impersonating me with polyjuice, and I'll tell you everything I know about its location,” I replied, being both specific and honest.

That raised an eyebrow. “How did you know?” he asked, clearly baffled.

I snarled at him and pointed to my exposed scalp. “I prefer to frequent barbers who aren't as incompetent as you.”

He swallowed, and nodded thoughtfully. “Well done, I wouldn't have guessed you could have figured it out. At any rate, a kissed criminal is currently in the spell damage ward at St. Mungos. It doesn't matter who it is. Now, where is the Horcrux?”

I started chuckling. “Right. Sorry, can’t help you.”

He clenched his teeth so hard, his jaw whitened. “You promised to tell me where it is,” he said through his clenched teeth.

My chuckle grew into a laugh. “No, I promised that I’d tell you everything I know about its location. I really can’t help you. I don’t know where it is.”

“I think you’re lying, Potter,” he growled threateningly.

I didn’t stop laughing. “No, you hope I’m lying. But I do really mean it when I say I don’t know where it is.”

Fudge actually looked thoughtful. “No, I really don’t believe you. There is no way you’d let someone else have control of the Horcrux.”

I shook my head. “Unless...?” I prompted him, to get him well and truly onto the wrong track.

Incomprehension flooded his face. He obviously wasn’t used to doing his own thinking. He’s very much like the rest of the wizarding world, in that respect. “Unless what?”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on Fudge, keep up. You ascribe a value to it, what makes you think that I didn’t?” I asked dismissively. “Perhaps I’ve already sold it.” Classic misdirection. Start the story with enough truth to get their attention, then gently guide their attention away along a different path and let them come to the wrong conclusion themselves. Then deny it strenuously. With any luck, he’ll come up with a ludicrously complex conspiracy theory, and I won’t have to force myself to laugh when denying it, which should just make him believe it all the more.

Fudge drew himself up to his full, still unimpressive height, and said with a smirk, “No, I don’t think so. There would have been too many buyers for you to just hand it over to the first offer. I think Mr. Potter here needs to be introduced to the special guards.”

With that, he wandered off. He did shout over his shoulder, “Any time you want to talk, Potter, just scream. One of us will be along. Eventually.” His mocking laughter echoed back as he turned the corner and disappeared out of sight. His two nameless goons stayed for a few seconds, one pulling out a stone with some sort of glyph on it from a pocket. They placed it on the floor of the corridor, tapped it with a wand, and with a high degree of intensity, ran for it. I was depressingly certain what the runed stone summoned, and I only had to wait for a few seconds for confirmation.

The sensation of an icy hand running down the back of my recently exposed scalp was as wholly unwelcome as it was familiar. The approaching Dementor came from the opposite direction to where Fudge and his boyfriends had just bolted. It glided gracefully towards my little niche, instantly filling my head with my mother’s screams.

Mumbling, “No, no, no...” I tried to occlude my mind. Even if raising Occlumency shields proved only partially successful at blocking out a Dementor’s aura, it would have been better than nothing. As it was, I couldn’t tell the difference; my mother’s screams still echoed undaunted through my mind. I saw the green flash that took her life. I tried to force the split in my mind, hoping that the unemotional side of me would be less affected. It didn’t work. The unholy creature drifted to a halt in front of my little alcove, and simply hovered there. I clutched the sides of my head and rolled on the gritty sand, screaming silently with emotional agony.

The only defence I had left kicked in. I grabbed hold of the anger that had served me well over the past few years and drew on it. Memories of being manipulated, lied to, and abused flooded into my mind with ease, greased by the Dementor’s aura. It took an eon, since my mind simply wanted to give in to self-pity, but eventually I’d become so angry that the cold slowly slipped away.

I did everything I could to delve into my reserves of magical power. My fists clenched so tightly that my fingernails cut into the palms of my hands. My face reddened, and I trembled uncontrollably. I sucked in a lungful of air and with a shout of pure defiance, *pushed* out as hard as I could, directly at the Dementor.

With all the effort I put in, the foul creature should have been blown backwards like a leaf in a cyclone, crashing against the wall like a suicide jumper hitting concrete. Instead, it merely staggered backwards into the wall, as though my efforts were for naught.

Still, for several seconds, I pinned it to the wall, *pushing* with all my magical might. At the Vatican, I’d been able to keep up this level of effort for well over a minute or two, but now, with the Abrogo wards feeding greedily on any magical expenditure, my already low reserves were being depleted like a sink without a plug. With only scant seconds of strength remaining, I focused my efforts on the Dementor’s toothless face, letting my hatred for the damned thing draw out the last of my power. For just two seconds, I pushed an area on its face a tenth of the size of a knot.

In the instant before I collapsed totally spent to the floor, the Dementor’s head seemed to just deflate, its skull falling in on itself, crushed under my onslaught. The sudden disappearance of the permeating aura of cold left me gasping with relief, leaving the damp, dingy alcove feeling like a summer’s afternoon.

Emotionlessly, I watched the Dementor’s body fall twitching to the sandy floor of the corridor. The thing’s face looked as though it had been stepped on by an oval-footed elephant. A bubble of laughter hiccupped through me, slowly building up until I was howling with amusement. There was a definite edge of hysteria to my mirth, but the whole scene just struck me as incredibly funny.

If I’d had the strength, I’d have jumped into the air and pumped my fist. Mind you, I’d probably have hit my head on the ceiling if I’d done that. That random observation set off another gale of laughter from me.

I was stuck in prison, with no real hope of escape, and someone else living my life. As depressing as it was, believe me when I say that giving your worst fear a face like a car accident does wonders for morale.

Master Potter Sirius Plagiarism

In one of the world's most predictable events, Fudge didn't take too well to the discovery of the Dementor's demise.

Of course, it could have been because when he finally deigned to visit me again, I had drawn myself into a meditative pose, and looked more calm and composed than could possibly be expected under the circumstances. Especially when you consider that those very circumstances included the ragged scraps of dark cloth that were all that remained of the Dementor he'd summoned to torment me. The sight of an empty Dementor's cloak on the ground outside my cell shocked him deeply. Though perhaps not quite as much as the fact that the Dementors now had to be forced, rather than invited, to go anywhere near me. That little factoid sent him down the road to full-blown panic. And it probably sent his under shorts to the laundry as well.

The irony of my greatest fear being deathly afraid of me was lost on our dear ex-Minister. It gave me a nasty, wonderful glow of satisfaction.

While Fudge had to be taken away and probably sedated to prevent him from hyperventilating, I reacquainted myself with some of the meditative techniques I'd used when trying to improve my efficiency in Occluding my mind. Now, I used the same techniques to slow the parasitic wards sucking out my magical strength.

Neither Fudge nor his boyfriends came near me for the next few days except to drop off some food and water. I amused myself by tormenting them at every turn, incredulously demanding why there was no ice in my water, or berating them because the bread they left me was exactly the wrong sort, not being my favourite sour-dough rye twist roll with sunflower seeds on top. Hey, I was being held in a prison off the books, I wasn't going to let them get away with it without at least giving them high blood pressure in return.

The meditation gave me time to think. I knew that the Horcrux was safe with Dobby, so that wasn't what occupied my thoughts.

No, I pondered just how to escape.

The idea that they'd used a bloody age line to contain me was both unexpected and profound. Fudge believed that I could banish without a wand, which was close enough to being true, even if he didn't actually come close to describing the procedure. From his perspective, if I was powerful enough, I could have cast the spell hard enough to knock a cell door from its hinges. Thus, the age line. Of course, even with a wand, I'd be hard pressed to dispel the magic of the line, since the theory behind it had never come up in my studies. A rather inconvenient oversight.

There may also have been a logistical consideration too; if the Minister or a deputy ever did a tour of the place, having a head count of one higher than expected would have made for an interesting confrontation.

In between inventing and discarding strategies to leave, I wondered if there was a way to fuck over the wizarding world. I'd had enough.

The fact that Fudge still had both the power and influence to commit people to Azkaban simply to further his political goals frightened me. He no longer had the authority to do so, but that had never stopped him from furthering his own goals. Despite his assurances that I'd be released as soon as I decided to tell him where the Horcrux was, circumstances dictated that he must be prepared to break his word. I knew the only safe conditions, from his perspective at least, would be me leaving either in a box or as a mindless husk. Anything else would be far too risky for him and his plans.

The prison Azkaban had been an information black hole since the Dementors were commissioned to guard the island. No one wanted to know, no one wanted to care. Without oversight, corruption ran rampant.

Of course, it wasn't as though corruption was only confined to Azkaban. Just personally, I'd been affected in many ways, even discarding the small matter of unlawful imprisonment. There was no oversight when Umbridge sent the Dementors after Dudley and me. There was no oversight when I was dragged in front of the whole Wizengamot to defend myself merely for defending myself. No one in any position of power said peep when a heap of educational decrees were passed that were so extreme that even Mussolini would have raised an eyebrow.

Not that the Ministry was fascist, though before my apprenticeship they were moving in that direction. No, it was the sheer weight of inertia, the bloated bureaucracy that favoured the privileged families over all others. Many of the pure-bloods believed that since it was how it had always been, it should continue to be.

That was the most fundamental problem, the deeply ingrained superiority complex and bigotry that infested the population. Despite the fact that the children of those idiots tended to be less talented than the half-bloods or Muggle-born in terms of raw magical power, they still stubbornly clung to the belief that they were somehow better. As if having five or six individuals fill the role of all eight great-grandparents was actually desirable.

To change that seemingly genetic belief would take something earth-shattering.

My eyes flickered open, and a slow, lazy smile spread over my face. Perhaps that was a way to change the world. An idea germinated in my mind, one which would scare every pure-blood bigot in the country. A plan to terrorise them so that their own actions proved just how stupid their beliefs were.

The idea would need refining, of course. And I needed to work out how to escape to put it into practise. However, it was terribly apparent that I had plenty of time.

The days turned into weeks, though without a calendar or window, I relied on my meal deliveries to keep track of time. I had been obliged to perform a couple of encores in the days that followed, which left another three Dementors temporarily with faces like a warthog's arsehole before they dissolved into dust. I bet Fudge was rather grateful that Dementors evaporated on their death, since it negated the need of a xenobiological mortician – not to mention the inevitable paperwork that would surely follow.

It had got to the point where I hadn't even felt the presence of a Dementor in the past week or so. As a matter of fact, besides Fudge and his two brown-nosers, I hadn't seen another soul. Assuming that a prison the size of Azkaban would need more than three personnel to run, I inferred that dear Cornelius had less control or influence over the rest of the staff. Of course, he could simply be hiding some of his influence from me, but I doubted it for a couple of reasons. One, imprisoning me here was highly illegal and had the potential to backfire spectacularly if his actions became public knowledge. Two, I can't imagine he'd hold back on any show of power if he thought it would intimidate me.

The food was still paltry; I'd received about the same during the summer of Dudley's diet, but this time around I wasn't doing hard yard work for six to ten hours a day. Even with the undersized servings, I felt more lacklustre than I should have, due to the wards. Each time I was forced to rearrange the skull bones of a Dementor, I was all but powerless for a full day afterwards. The wards around the prison fed on my strength like magical tapeworms, gorging themselves and leaving just barely enough for me to live. It took deliberate and conscious effort on my part to hold back power from them, and even then after I relaxed my concentration, the magic seeped away.

My musings one morning were interrupted unexpectedly by Fudge. I could see both him and his bodyguards through my lidded eyes. Odd, with the exception of the first day here, only one of the three had visited me at any one time. Fudge had often stopped by to revisit his woefully underwhelming offer of freedom for information. The fact that his two shadows had joined him this time would normally have raises my spirits, but the expression on his face gave me pause. I had enough strength to cave a Dementor's skull in, but trying the same on an armed wizard was just asking for trouble. They could seriously injure, or even kill me, in the time it would take for my attack to succeed. There was absolutely no way I could *push* three wizards around. Spreading my efforts drew out my power far too quickly here.

"You may want to reconsider telling me what I want to know, Potter. There was an attempt on your life this morning."

I slowly opened my eyes fully, trying to give off the impression of extreme nonchalance at his announcement. "Really? I don't recall seeing anyone new. Of course, that may simply mean that they were as incompetent as you, and didn't even make it to the front door. Or perhaps you prepared my last meal yourself, and your culinary skills are a match for your political efforts?"

His smirk froze. "I mean your impersonator at St. Mungo's," he clarified. "A pair of assassins tried infiltrating the building to kill you. I discovered today that on the continent, there is a rather large bounty on your head. If you want to leave here, you'd best become more cooperative, before the public thinks you dead. If that happens, I can keep you here as long as I like," he finished with a self-satisfied sigh.

I smirked myself at the idea that Falcone was probably spending a great deal of money trying to kill me, and yet even if he thought he was successful, he still wouldn't have reached me. If he did manage to kill the husk imitating me, I'd have to try and organise to turn up at his next birthday party, just to see the expression on his face.

"And the reason you don't collect yourself is that you think getting your fat, sweaty hands on Voldemort's Horcrux will get you more," I said easily.

Fudge's jovial demeanour vanished. With a jerk of his head, one of his guards raised his wand. Sitting in the lotus position, I had no way of dodging any spell he cast, so I gave his wand a subtle *push* to the side as he cast the jolting hex. In terms of effort, it was like moving a bloody statue.

I managed to turn aside a half dozen more hexes coming from both guards before Fudge's irritation at being foiled got the better of him. He drew his own wand and joined the fun. With my concentration split three ways, I couldn't keep up, and had to roll to one side to keep from being hit.

One hex hit my thigh, sending painful twitching and cramps up and down the left side of my body. Even after only *pushing* aside a wand less than ten times, I was exhausted. Another jolt hit me, sending me sprawling face first onto the floor.

I was hit again, making my back arch painfully. And again, twice more in quick succession. An urgent warning bell in my mind told me I was in danger here. Normally, Fudge and his shadows hit me a few times and left. Now, they were not stopping. "Where is it, Potter?" Fudge yelled at me as I was hit again. I growled at the pain, ignoring the idiot while my mind searching for an escape route. The damned wards were keeping me helpless. My right arm started jerking uncontrollably as yet another hex struck me.

Frustrated beyond thinking clearly, I unthinkingly held out a hand, and tried to *push* Fudge's wand from his grip. Experimenting with Zab, I'd never managed to *push* anything towards me; the closest I got to it was *pushing* an object almost directly perpendicular to my body. Zab theorised that when pushing my magic out, it emanated from my body, making it impossible to use the raw magic to summon objects to hand. At the time, I'd practised pushing something into a hard surface in an effort to get it to bounce. It never really worked well.

Now, with one arm reaching impotently towards my tormentors, I changed my thinking, and *pulled* instead.

The sensation was as uncomfortable as it was different. It was like trying to fill your lungs, but breathing in through a tiny straw.

A jolting hex hit my shoulder. I gasped in surprise.

That last spell had hardly hurt. I rolled onto my side, facing the trio of bastards, *pulling* with all my mental might.

Two more hexes hit my chest. Apart from a few twitches, they had little effect.

Suddenly, the three wizards swore. Fudge cried out in alarm, "The wards!" before they scurried off without even saying goodbye.

I stopped *pulling* and rolled myself onto my back. I was gasping for air, but my mind was whirling.

Why hadn't those last few spells hurt?

And why did I feel so energised?

An hour or so after Fudge left, I managed to stand without falling over and walked on wobbly legs around my little alcove, deep in thought.

Something had changed. I felt more magically powerful now than at any time after my arrival in this hell hole. Indeed, I felt as though I'd just woken up from a restful night's sleep.

As gently as I dared, I *pushed* out against some of the sand on the floor. After a few seconds, the Abrogo wards fed greedily, though intermittently, on my magic.

I stopped *pushing*, and began thinking. Something significant had happened. Zab's lessons into ward-breaking had covered the basics and given me a base from which to build my knowledge if I felt impelled to do so. He wasn't a professional ward-breaker, which was a specialised skill requiring several years of dedicated study. But he did know how to identify and negate the effect of some of the more common or generic wards. Things like having a piece of jade against your skin preventing any of the Abrogo family of charms from draining your magical power. In normal usage, those wards slowly drained off your latent magic, or sucked heavily when you were actually expending magic. Now though, the drain was erratic. It was as though the wards had been somehow... damaged.

Well, that would explain why Fudge and his cronies took off so suddenly. I probably would too if wards keeping a large number of dangerous criminals in place were suddenly not functioning correctly. Especially if it was my responsibility to keep the prisoners in place. Though I must admit, I'd have given even odds that Fudge would have run away from the problem.

What had changed though? What could have caused the damage?

The only thing I'd done differently was to *pull* when I would normally *push*.

I stopped still for a second. When I *pushed*, I moved things away from me. But at a more basic level, I expended power. Maybe then when *pulling*... Could I have actually drawn magical energy back? Had I negated the hexes cast at me because I'd pulled the magical strength into my core?

The idea was as shocking as it was fundamental. I wasn't sure it was even possible for something like this to happen, but the fact was that while I was *pulling* the jolting hexes cast at me were far less painful. And I felt great afterwards. Well, that was an overstatement. Less exhausted would be more accurate.

I sat down and steadied myself. It must be possible to draw ambient magical energy from the surrounding area, or the Abrogo wards wouldn't function themselves. Most wards mimicked a spell or spell effect, so perhaps I could manipulate my magic to act like the wards surrounding me.

I used a few meditative exercises to calm my thoughts, readying myself. I exhaled, and then *pulled*.

It was different this time. There was no sense of urgency, there was no danger. And there was no sense of filling up slowly. As obscene as it sounded, I couldn't *pull* hard enough.

Something was different. I had to think about this.

Over the next few days, the wards were repaired. It was fairly obvious when they were functioning again, since my magic was, once again, all but gone one morning. The fact that it took a full three days to put them back in place heartened me. If I could damage them again, I thought then maybe I'd have the same sort of window to escape.

As for the odd sensation when I *pulled*, I had made a working assumption that I was drawing in magical power. Hypothetically, it had only worked when I had been magically exhausted; I had to wait until the wards were repaired before I could experiment. Fortunately, Fudge and Flunkies one and two didn't stick around long enough to be insulted over the period while the wards were repaired, giving me plenty of time to relax and prepare myself.

I'd gone through a mental checklist of things I'd need to do to escape. A quick exit may be to *pull* down the anti-apparition jinx and just leave, but I had no way of testing if that would work completely. Becoming splinched during an escape attempt would be a most undignified, not to mention terminal, error. Leaving that option as a last resort, I would first need to neutralise the age line. Without a wand, I had no way of dispelling it, and even if the wards hadn't been drawing power from me, I wouldn't have been able to *push* myself past it.

Next, I needed a wand. Both Fudge and his pet pustules had them, but Azkaban wardens and staff had charmed wand holsters, preventing anyone other than themselves from drawing it. I could only take a wand from them after they were holding them ready. Hardly the most opportune time.

After that, I'd need to make my way through an unfamiliar prison, past an unknown number of guards, to an undisclosed distance from the prison before I could apparate out of there.

So, hardly any more difficult than anything else I'd managed in my life. It would have been so much easier if I had taken the time to become an animagus. That oversight was another I had added to a long list of inconveniences.

At any rate, now with the wards back in force, I was again drained of magical energy. I had a chance to finally test my theory.

I slowly breathed in and out a couple of times, settling myself. A little tentatively, I reached out with a finger, not quite touching the age line. I could imagine the magic of the line, pulsating and writhing, waiting for me to attempt to cross it. Focusing entirely on my hand, I started *pulling* through my extended digit.

While the process wasn't exactly perfect, I could feel the magical strength of the age line seep up my arm, leaving it feeling like it was submerged in a hot bath. I grinned tightly at the sensation, feeling my magical reserves slowly recovering. I wasn't drawing power from the wards around me this time; it was a directed absorption. At an almost agonisingly slow pace, I fed off the magic in the barrier.

I'm not sure when it happened, but I was starting to cramp from holding myself in one position for so long when I noticed small tendrils of smoke rising from slowly blackening chalk. I stopped and changed position, noting that the age line was looking decidedly worse for wear. I leaned forward for a closer look, noting that the edges around the spot near my finger had charred, and had even developed a rather toasty aroma.

Foregoing patience, I reached out with both hands and violently *pulled*. Instead of a slow heat flowing up my arm, it was a fast burn. I ground my teeth together and kept my mind on the task at hand. A few seconds later, the magic of the line vanished in a tiny cascade failure, the chalk line burning away quickly like a line of white gunpowder.

I stood and stretched, feeling energised and weary at the same time. Soon though, the physical tiredness left me, overtaken with an adrenaline rush almost equal to the time in the Little Hangleton graveyard. I took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, letting the elation at the first part of my escape warm me. Now, energised to the point where I could use my magic effectively, I stepped over the charred line, wondering if there was any residual magic left within.

There wasn't.

I couldn't stop a wide grin from forming on my face. I stepped back into my alcove and kicked the damp, gritty sand from my cell over the ruined line. Once it was covered I was ready to put the next part of my plan into action.

"Oi! Fudge!" I shouted down the corridor. "I want to talk to you! I have a proposition for you!"

Fudge appeared after a few moments, puffing slightly, yet looking rather wary. Since he was alone, I could imagine why he was so cautious. "Well Potter? What is it?" His attention was drawn down to where the age line had been. With a deep frown, he sneered at me. "You think that covering an age line with sand will defeat it?"

I shook my head, keeping my tight grin from wavering. "Nope."

He took in my expression carefully, and feeling a little discomforted at my expression, he drew his wand from his charmed holster, conjured a shield designed to defeat summoning and banishing charms, and took aim at me. I kept my expression still, though my soul soared with victory. Without that wand, my escape would be difficult, if not impossible. "Then what?" he asked warily.

With a sharp *push*, I shoved his wand off target. In the second it took him to recover, I jumped over the burned out line and slammed my fist upwards through the useless shield and into his portly stomach, *pushing* hard as I did so. Given I wasn't sure how much the wards would draw out of me, I *pushed* rather hard. A bit too hard, it would seem.

Fudge doubled over with a wheezing grunt, while his feet actually left the ground momentarily. He fell to his knees, retching violently, clutching at his abused tummy.

Hmm, he'd had a bacon sarnie for breakfast. He really needs to learn to chew his food more.

A wave of dizziness swept over me briefly, as the wards sucked at my power. Well, that wouldn't affect me for much longer.

With his wand out of its tamper-proof holster, it was a simple matter to take it, though I had to step rather heavily on his hand to persuade him to open his fingers. With a super-human effort, he raised his head and glared at me.

I raised my knee swiftly under his chin. The crack of his teeth crashing together resounded loudly in the corridor. I caught a brief glimpse of his eyes rolling back in his head before he fell backwards onto the floor. I reached down and yanked the jade ring off his finger.

The instant I touched the polished stone ring, the drain on my magical core ceased. It was like swallowing a double dose of Pepper up Potion.

"All right!" I said loudly, feeling invulnerable.

I reached to the stone heavens, and *pulled* with all my might, with all my body. The process was still inefficient, filling me with stops and starts, but slowly, I drained the wards of power. One by one, I felt them fracture, causing all sorts of alarms to sound around the island. I knew that making all the alarms go off would make my escape harder, but not as hard as being low on magical power would have. I only stopped when I felt like I was fizzing with energy. Getting your own back on inanimate magical constructs wasn't supposed to be fulfilling, but damn, it was nice to get even with the bloody things.

A few detection charms told me that the wards were still up, just not functioning at full efficiency. I suppose there was no way my core could drain them in their entirety. They were simply too big and strong.

I rummaged through Fudge's pockets, finding nothing of importance among the piss poor collection. A pocket watch that had seen better centuries, a handful of coins (just sickles and knuts), and a spare wand. I briefly entertained the idea of transfiguring him into a stick or a rock and taking him with me, but if there were any defenses around the prison that reversed transfiguration, suddenly having my robes weighed down with fifteen stone of wizard would be inconvenient. I waved both wands, getting a few sparks from the first, and nothing from the second. I repeated the trick I used on Falcone Jnr., temporarily reversing the non-responsive wand's core, before returning it to its hiding place. While I'd really love to be around when he discovered that the wand had been tampered with, I wasn't exactly in any position to begin dictating events. I needed to escape before I started playing around like that.

I cast a disillusionment spell on myself and crept down the corridor, in the direction Fudge and his goons always appeared from when visiting me. I risked a quick glance around the sharp corner, noting that the empty corridor continued for a short distance. I moved cautiously along the sandy floor, before coming to the end of the hallway.

I stared at the blank wall in front of me and shook my head. I knew that escaping from Azkaban would be bloody hard, but I hadn't expected to have my attempt come to an end after just turning the corner. There was nothing but blank stone in front of me, rough hewn from the bedrock.

The only indication that this was a thoroughfare was the fact that there were several footprints in the sand seemingly coming out of the wall. At this point, Muggles would start searching for a secret door. I just swore to myself.

Magic made things so bloody difficult sometimes. The hidden door could work like the one at King's Cross Station, or it could work like the one at Diagon Alley, or like any of a hundred other kinds. Maybe you had to be manually keyed into them, or had to think of a word or phrase. It could be anything. Even if my newfound ability was able to draw the magical power from objects as well as spells, it would be useless. Even if I was exhausted and *pulled* the magic from a door like this, no one could open it.

I gritted my teeth and turned around, figuring I had to take my chances going the other way. Sure it was where the Dementors always came from, and I really didn't want to have to deal with them if I didn't have to.

A voice on the other side of the hidden door stopped me in my tracks. "Warden! The wards are disrupt-- Warden? Are you here?"

I paused, wondering if the speaker would come through the closed door. I pressed my partially invisible body against the corridor wall and crossed my fingers.

Sure enough, the stone face shimmered and flowed like a spiral drain, forming a portal. A bright, cheery light flooded the corridor, forcing me to blink a couple of times. What nearly overwhelmed me was the sudden warmth that washed over me. One of Fudge's silent buddies finished waving his wand and called through the opening, "Warden?"

I surged through, catching the fellow by surprise. I *pushed* at his face, knocking him off balance. His arms flew up in an effort to keep himself from falling over onto his arse. I took the opportunity to curse him thoroughly, enough so that by the time he actually landed he resembled Malfoy on the Hogwarts Express. I stunned him, and took stock.

The portal had opened into the back wall of a comfortably appointed office. The hole flowed backwards to its original state, leaving a seamless wall behind me.

I cast a locking charm on the wall anyway, even though it was highly unlikely to do anything more than annoy Fudge. But hey, I'd go out of my way to do that any day of the week.

The room itself was delightfully warm from the blazing fireplace on the wall to my right, but coldly decorated. I resisted the urge to warm my hands in front of the fire, and examined my surroundings. The walls were bare, except for an ugly painting above the fireplace and a row of book-lined shelves on the other. A heavy oak door dominated the wall opposite. The ugly green bowler hat on the hatstand next to the main door helped identify the current occupant. The desk in the middle of the room had several ledgers open upon it, with a quill dropped haphazardly on an open page; Fudge must have been doing the books when I called. I took a quick peek, but noted that the ledgers were charmed to prevent unauthorised people from reading them. I briefly contemplated burning them, but decided against it. It would do nothing if there were copies, and it would take some valuable time to burn them all.

Oddly, for someone consumed with image like Fudge, there weren't any knick-knacks or ornaments on the shelves or desk. I looked around for anything of value for a potential escapee. Nothing really leapt out to attract my attention. I went to open the main door and leave when something about the painting drew my eye. A closer look indicated that it was a map of the prison, drawn centuries ago when things like scale and accuracy were given a much lower priority than artistic merit. It looked like someone had lovingly painted an ant farm.

Well, even if it wasn't to any particular scale, knowing a rough layout of the place would be most useful.

I pulled the canvas from the wall and threw it on the desk, running my finger over the corridors and levels. It took a few moments to find the warden's office, noting two things in the process. One, the passageway I'd arrived from did lead directly down into the Dementor colony, from which there was no other route out except through the cell blocks, and two, there was only one entrance to the prison complex. It took me a further minute to track a route to that entrance. While I doubted it was the only way in or out of the prison, it was probably the only official egress, and I didn't have time to take up cartography and make my own map. I tore the frame off and shrunk the canvas, stuffing the makeshift map into my tattered robes. Being caught examining the layout of a prison in the warden's office would end my escape almost as quickly as a splinching.

A knock on the door made my heart jump in my chest. "Warden?" The door opened and a familiar, harried-looking wizard poked his nose through the door. "Warden? Are you there?"

I raised Fudge's stolen wand. "*Imperio* !" I cast. Instantly, Ron's brother's eyes went blank. I should have guessed that such a weak-willed idiot

would be easy to dominate. I had no real qualms about using the Unforgivable. After all, I was already in Azkaban, wasn't I?

"Come in the office and close the door, Percy," I commanded.

Percy obeyed, but I could feel him fighting the curse. He wasn't strong enough to break the spell, but he was trying.

I looked over the ex-Head Boy. He had lost even more weight since I'd last seen him, and his hair was even thinner. He didn't look all that healthy, though I suppose that could be because of where he worked. This place wasn't exactly a holiday destination. "Tell me where the nearest apparition point on the island is," I demanded pointedly.

"The anti-apparition jinx extends over the entire island," he said woodenly.

I frowned. That would make leaving difficult. I needed another route. I cast a locking charm at the door. That should give me warning if someone tries to enter the office.

"Tell me how you leave the island."

"Through the fixed floo to the Ministry."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. How damned inconsiderate of them to make it hard to leave this place.

A thought struck me. "If you get here via floo, why do you need a guarded entrance leading outside?"

"We receive supplies by sea."

I nodded. That made sense. It would be a real bugger to try and bring in building materials via a fireplace. "How far do the wards extend out to sea?"

Percy blinked. "I don't know."

"Is there a way to—ah, to hell with it. *Legilimens*!"

Weatherby's mind was rather ordered, making it fairly easy to shuffle through his thoughts. Under the Imperius, he lowered any defenses he may have had and allowed me full access. It was an interesting combination of spells, which I'd have to remember.

I examined his memory of the layout of the prison complex. There were two main sections, the cell blocks and the administrative areas. Nearly all of the security surrounded the cell blocks, which heartened me. I was already behind the Dementors and guards.

Percy's memories of the administrative areas were clearer. He'd obviously spent more time in that area than in the cells. Hardly a surprise, really. There were only two checkpoints between me and freedom. One was at the main entrance, the other in front of Percy's office, through which was the only other way into this room. I pulled my awareness back where it belonged and waved Fudge's wand at the door, removing the locking charm.

"Go and tell the guards outside your office that the prisoners are breaking out of their cells. Make them to go and reinforce the guards there."

Percy stiffly strode to the door and opened it. He bellowed my instructions in a most un-bureaucratic manner. There was a shocked pause before I heard, "I know sir. Everyone else is already over there, dealing with the problem. We're the only ones on this side of the building."

"I'm giving you an order!" Percy yelled back.

"But sir, procedure is that at least two—"

"Now!"

A single response of "yes sir" carried back, followed by hurried footsteps. I shook my head. The idea of Percy the bully would take some getting used to. Percy the sanctimonious twit, not so much.

The exchange had given me a great deal of hope that I would be able to pull this off without having to kill anybody. With the wards functioning erratically, all the guards had gone and secured the prisoners. I suppose they would have had a practise run for that scenario recently.

Still disillusioned, I ordered my captive to the main entrance. He fought harder against my spell, but immediately obeyed my command. I followed behind, through Percy's office, past an empty reception area and into a main hallway.

As soon as I caught sight of the security post at the entrance, I bade Percy stop. The thought of the great outdoors being just beyond that barrier was divine to someone who had been underground for weeks.

The checkpoint looked vaguely like the customs stations I'd passed through in Europe. The only thing that really struck me was how new it looked. Sirius told me that he had just walked out past the Dementors. Obviously, they've upgraded security recently. On either side of the large entryway there were two enclosed booths, both populated by a pair of guards with the same uniform as Percy. Each pair talked between themselves rather urgently. Despite their agitation, they were alert and ready. Even just a cursory glance told me that there was no way I was getting through the gate undetected. Damn.

"Tell me how to get past the guards," I instructed.

You present the guards on this side with your papers. They let you through into a sealed chamber where you are sealed in. The guards on the other side examine your credentials, and if you pass, you are released from the chamber and allowed outside."

I frowned. "What prevents an invisible person from walking through with someone?"

Percy started sweating, but answered. "Charms in the chamber cancel transfigurations like Polyjuice, and camouflage like disillusionment."

I almost swore out loud. I shouldn't have been surprised, Azkaban was supposed to be inescapable. I expended valuable minutes inventing and discarding methods to bypass the main entrance. Nothing came to mind. If I had both my wands, I suppose I could blast my way out with raw power, but with only a moderately suitable wand to hand, I couldn't channel enough power to accomplish that.

I was debating ordering Percy to feign madness and attack the guards when I heard something both wonderful and terrifying.

A stampede of prisoners.

The main passageway leading to the cell block was opposite our current position, and it began spewing forth guards performing a rearguard action. A couple of injured were being helped by one of their comrades, but the rest were firing spells back down the hallway. Shouts and screams flooded my senses.

Despite being disillusioned, I stepped back into the passageway leading to the administrative area. I didn't want to catch a stray curse if I could help it. A veritable rainbow of spells erupted from the passageway opposite, and suddenly prisoners were among the guards, fighting, clawing and biting. I could only assume that back in the cell block, one or two had managed to escape their cells and disarmed some guards. Unarmed, a mob was little more than target practise for a small group of armed guards. Throw a couple of wands into the mix however, and said mob would be a handful.

Attrition could be a problem, I noted as I glanced out into the main hallway. While there were probably twenty or more prisoners for each guard, the home team were holding up well. Not well enough, I thought, but well. Unless reinforcements got here soon, the remaining dozen or so guards would be overrun.

Their morale broke before their line did. One young looking fellow turned and bolted for the relative safety of the final security point. Another guard joined him, and the rest simply collapsed under the sudden strain. Four of the fleeing guards were dropped by spells, and their wands appropriated.

The checkpoint was subjected to a magical barrage that could only be produced by a large group of people determined to escape hell. More than one prisoner dropped to his knees from magical exhaustion, only to have the wand in his hand snatched up by another and used again.

I tore my eyes away from the rainbow storm and looked back at the hallway leading down to the cell blocks. It was littered with dead and near-dead bodies, a dozen prisoners for every guard. A few were slowly recovering, or at least trying to move to safety. A few more prisoners cautiously emerged, many of them holding splinched limbs. Looks like the anti-apparition ward was fractured; it no longer stopped apparition, but exacted a price from those who tried to take advantage.

I looked back down at the checkpoint and shook my head. It was a slaughterhouse. The prisoners had finally decided to work in a coordinated fashion, and were firing blasting and cutting curses from behind group-conjured shields. The guardroom on the near side of the checkpoint was now rubble, and the sealed chamber beyond subjected to a sustained barrage.

I stunned Percy, obliterated him, and then covered him with an illusion of blood and gore. I didn't want him dead, but I wanted any escapee to leave him alone. I *pushed* his body back down the corridor as far as I could before hugging the wall and easing out into the main hallway.

I was still disillusioned, so I trusted that anyone in the midst of a magical battle would ignore me for now. I slid along the length of the wall, moving past the main group, reaching the fallen masonry that had up to recently been a fairly sturdy security station. A couple of metres away, a large number of dishevelled prisoners hurled every spell they could think of at the last physical barrier to their freedom. The guards within the checkpoint were holding steady, despite being outnumbered. The status quo would eventually result in a mass exodus.

Suddenly, spells were flying in both directions up and down the hallway.

Reinforcements had arrived. Aurors spilled forth from the passageway I'd vacated only minutes before, and ferociously attacked the mob of prisoners from behind.

Instantly, the main press divided down the middle, each half seeking whatever cover could be found in the rough hewn wall. It was like a deadly game of musical chairs. In less than a minute, the number of standing prisoners had halved. A second wave of Aurors arrived, further tipping the scales against me. If I took no action, I'd be caught by Aurors with a group of people trying to escape from prison. I'd be lucky if they didn't just kill me on the spot.

I took a deep breath and began levitating the larger chunks of masonry, and then *pushing* them as hard as I could at the final remaining section of the security station. Using spells that left coloured trails would give away my location. Several cracks appear in the outer structure after a dozen or so blows, but my actions attracted some attention, all of it unwelcome. At least a dozen spells angled towards me, away from the howling mob. It was a well executed spread, designed to maximise the chances of hitting an invisible opponent.

I ducked into a tiny niche in the wall, taking stock. My position was rather precarious. A large group of law enforcement personnel at one end of a hallway, a rapidly diminishing mob of prisoners nearby, and a half-dozen or so prison guards holed up in the remains of a secure checkpoint designed around preventing unauthorised people from passing.

Well this was a rather Potter-ish position to be in.

I took a deep breath, and *pushed* as hard as I could at the remaining rubble on the floor, sending tonnes of hewn rocks into the checkpoint. A few screams emanated from the checkpoint. Obviously, one of the guards felt a little uncomfortable at the sight of large chunks of rock heading his way. One large piece of masonry blasted through the damaged wall, letting a ray of light into the hallway. The beam of sunlight illuminated the dust in the air, creating an almost golden shaft in the dim hallway. I leaned against the wall to catch my breath. That had been hard.

Well, time to see if I could do two things at once. I rose from my hidey-hole and charged, *pulling* with all my might. I was hit with a randomly thrown curse, but managed to draw in enough power from it to avoid incapacitation. Fortunately, several other prisoners noticed the glowing arrow to freedom, and promptly abandoned their battle. The sight of several visible hardened criminals charging for a new exit focused the attention of the Aurors and guards, who promptly gave up trying to hit something they couldn't see.

I scrambled through the small hole in the outer defenses, my heart rate around the double century mark. Once I'd wiggled through the tiny gap, I took a single second to luxuriate in the sensation of sunlight on my face, before hitching my robes and bolting.

The path ran down to the side of the rocky island all the way to the sea. The raw, untamed geography necessitated that the path have jinks and twists, though it was a relatively clear way. I heard some shouts behind me, indicating that at least two people had joined me outside. I skidded to a stop at one bend and ducked behind a rocky outcrop. The last thing I needed now was to be hit from behind.

I looked back up the pathway, squinting in the bright light. Well, it was probably not all that bright, but after weeks where the only light was gentle magical illumination, even weak sunlight stung my eyes. Through the glare I could see four people garbed in prisoners robes scatter away from the exit. Two scrambled away from the exit over the rough terrain, obviously hoping to escape pursuit by running in an unexpected direction. The other pair came down the path towards me.

They were running at an incautious speed, desperation fuelling their flight. Even though they had to wave their arms around in wide circles just to keep their balance, they kept on sprinting. I swore to myself. The last thing I needed was Aurors converging on my location looking for temporarily unrestrained prisoners.

As they reached my curve, I *pushed* out at their feet, sending them both stumbling and skidding along the gravel face first into a rocky outcrop. I winced at the dual cracks of craniums meeting stone, but quickly rose from my hiding place and pushed on down the path. I noticed that my hands were becoming a little opaque, so I reapplied my disillusion, fighting to make the charm work. It was not particularly attuned to my touch, and even with the adrenaline in my system it was much harder to force the spell through the recalcitrant wood. I gained a new level of respect for what Neville and Ron had to accomplish in their first years at Hogwarts.

I was almost at the base of the hill when I heard mocking laughter above me. I instinctively fell to the ground and rolled into a rocky ditch.

No spells came shooting down towards me.

I risked a glance over the top of my meagre protective wall. A group of five Aurors were laughing and joking at the predicament of the pair of escapees I left half way up the road. I waited with my heart in my throat as they trussed and bound the pair, and levitated them away back up the path. Distant shouts attracted the Aurors attention, and three of the five broke off and headed overland, obviously hunting down one of the more cerebral breakouts.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat and rose unsteadily to my feet. The concentration of adrenaline in my system was falling, though I still had a fair amount. I pushed off the rocks and jogged down the rest of the path, down to a well maintained pier. I shivered even in the direct sunlight; the wind combined with the spray coming in off the water was biting cold. Even colder than the open living quarters I'd grown accustomed to recently.

At the base of the path, large signs had been posted, admonishing all visitors that the Dementors would not hesitate to attack anyone assisting an escape. I couldn't help but grin at the sentiment. Perhaps I should use Fudge's wand to etch a footnote. Something along the lines of, 'Except anyone who can crush their craniums like an eggshells'.

It's a pity that the Ministry decided to keep them on at the prison. The British Wizarding World had obviously not heard of the phrase 'Cruel and Unusual Punishment'. Or more probably (knowing the kind of people it employs) they have heard of it but decided it was a good idea. At any rate, I can't imagine that after having to guard me, or at least, having to attempt to guard me, that the Dementors are happy with the decision either. Still, I've got a handful of dead Dementors to my credit, and a fair crack at being the one wizard in Britain that they avoid like, well, like Dementors.

The heavy wooden pier was the only man made artefact on the shore. There were four small boats tied to the side, with rope ladders hanging down to provide access.

The wood creaked gently under my feet as I strode across the pier, so close to freedom. I picked a boat at random and cast a few detection charms. The only magic was in the oar mechanism. The boat was obviously propelled by magical paddling. Noting no alarms or traps, I clambered down the rope ladder.

It was about the third time in my life that I'd been on a boat. The blasted thing swayed underneath me like a slippery log, and I fell flat on my hands and knees.

A muffled crack sent a shiver down my spine.

In my smarting hand, I lifted Fudge's wand, cracked and bent. My wand hand had landed hard on the edge of a wooden seat, breaking the wand in my fist. It sagged pathetically, looking like Ron's old wand in second year.

"Oh, fuck me," I said with feeling.

I tapped the oar mechanism with the tip of the useless wand, hoping against hope.

Nothing. And here's me without any spell-o-tape.

Karma shifts in the dinner of my life again.

I rubbed my chin in thought. I wasn't about to go back up to the prison and ask politely to borrow a wand. Or even impolitely. I had to make do with what I had to hand. I tried to pull the oars off to use them the muggle way, but they were well and truly connected.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, figuring that there was one magical means left for me, but it would be rather exhausting.

I gingerly *pushed* behind the boat at the water. Nothing.

Zab had noted during our exhaustive (and exhausting) exploration of my power that it ignored something he called Newtonian physics. Essentially, when I *pushed* something away, I wasn't shoved back in the opposite direction. While that was useful when I was pushing a certain ferret off a landing somewhere in rural Albania, it was less so when I was trying to generate some propulsion.

I tried a few other things, including one that worked in a fashion. I clambered to the pointy end and *pushed* steadily down at the water. A sort of bowl-like depression appeared, which the front of the boat dipped down into. As the boat moved forward, so did the bowl. Gently, but steadily, the small dingy drifted away from the pier and out into the open water.

I ran into trouble almost immediately.

A constant *push* was difficult to maintain, and the moment I relaxed for a rest, the water rushed back into place. A small geyser shot up into my face, drenching my face, chest and arms with icy-cold North Sea water.

I fell back into the boat, gasping and coughing, trying to get the water out of my nose and eyes. Almost immediately, I started shivering.

I shook my head. I was out on open, freezing cold water, with nothing to protect me from a biting cold wind, in old, tatty robes and now soaking wet.

I've had better days.

I declined to try that method of propulsion again. I sat back in the boat, wrapped my damp arms around myself and thought hard. Pushing down the water was very hard, for not much gain. The boat would be clearly visible from shore, and it would only take one person to notice before I would be in a lot of trouble. I needed to hurry.

Gently, I *pushed* out at the inside of the boat's pointy bit. Instantly, the boat surged forward, giving me a far greater return on investment than my first effort.

I guessed it was about quarter of an hour later by the time I'd exhausted myself. The island behind me was smaller, but still visible. I *pulled*, gently at first, then harder, drawing a small amount of power from the wide wards. Bugger me, how far do they extend?

Figuring I needed more power right now, I reached out and touched the oar mechanisms on either side of the boat, and *pulled* through my trembling arms. The hot burn as the magic flowed into my core was heavenly.

I *pushed* out at the boat again, sending it forward. My fingers were blue with cold.

About ten minutes later, the island had retreated much further. I tried *pulling* again.

Nothing.

I was past the wards.

I let out a scream of victory, long and loud. Padfoot, you'd be proud of me.

I was three-quarters frozen by the time I manage to concentrate enough to apparate from somewhere in the North Sea to my study in Grimmauld Place. The sudden flash of warmth I received on appearing in the building caught me by surprise. It felt like stepping into an oven. I fell flat on my face before I could even utter a word.

A whirling bundle of exuberating excitement appeared at my side. "Master Harry is better!" Dobby shrieked in my ear.

"H-h-healing p-potion," I croaked, clutching my freezing arms to my chest.

Dobby squeaked with alarm and vanished with a flash. He appeared a moment later with Blaise's entire home apothecary. I reached out with trembling hands to grab the neck of a Pepper-up potion, downing it as soon as I popped the cork. Steam, raw and burning, whistled from my ears. I groaned with relief as the numbing cold was replaced by vibrant warmth.

No longer in danger of succumbing to hypothermia, I rolled onto my back and sat up. Dobby stood in front of me. Well, stood was the wrong term. He was hopping from one foot to another in agitation. "Is Master Harry well? Does Dobby need to summon Mistress Blaise?"

I shook my head, taking in my surroundings. The grandfather clock indicated that Blaise would be in the middle of her shift, if I remembered her timetable correctly. If the world believed that I was in a ward at St. Mungo's, Dobby asking her to come home would set more than a few alarm bells

ringing. No, I'd surprise her when she got home. "No, thank you Dobby. Just let me look at the rest of the potions."

I selected a few of the remaining vials, a pair of nutrient potions, another Pepper-up and a generic healing elixir for minor flesh injuries and swallowed them all, one after another. With a cocktail of magical fluid in my gut working magic, I felt like a new man. I stood and stretched, noting that while my magic was fine, I felt shockingly weak.

"Dobby, could you run me a bath? And tell me what's been going on," I requested, divulging myself of the items I'd procured during my escape. I placed the shrunken painting, an ugly bowler hat, and the broken wand on my desk.

"Yes, Master Harry," he said, suddenly looking unsure. "Um, which first?"

A grin grew on my lips unconsciously. Before I could answer, Winky spoke from the doorway. "Winky will run Master Harry's bath." She vanished with a shimmer.

Dobby nodded. "Master Harry has been hurt for a long time," he started, before looking incredibly sad. "Mistress Blaise has been very worried."

I nodded, suddenly feeling rather uncomfortable with my decision to not inform Blaise of my arrival home. Maybe I should send Hedwig.

As I was musing, the floo in the room above activated. An anguished cry of "Dobby!" echoed through the house.

Dobby squeaked, and vanished at the call. I tried to run up the stairs, but after three steps, my legs nearly gave out. I staggered slowly up to the next floor, and looked into the drawing room.

Blaise was on her knees, still in her Mediwitch trainee uniform, crying. "H-Harry, is g-gone," she sobbed, before clutching the house elf in a hug.

Instantly, I felt like a bastard. I should have known the Fudge would act without thinking and try to tie up any loose ends as soon as I escaped. A pity for him that I had some items belonging to him. With my doppelganger now deceased, I had him over a barrel.

"But Mistress Blaise, Master Harry is here," said Dobby uncertainly.

Her head whipped up, her red rimmed and bloodshot eyes fixing on me in an instant. I gave her a warm smile, but she shrieked and leapt to her feet, her wand trained on my heart in an instant. Always petite, she looked as though she had lost a lot of weight; an unhealthy amount of weight. I suppose we looked like a matched pair.

"Who are you? How did you get here?" she demanded.

I blinked. I expected some disbelief, but not to this degree. "I'm Harry, Blaise."

She shook her head. "No, my Harry is dead," she sniffed, the wand in her hand trembling.

I shook my head in return. "No, the Harry you were caring for was an impostor. I can prove it."

"Don't move!" she screamed, losing composure.

With a gesture, I gently *pushed* her backwards into a sofa. She landed in the soft upholstery with a grunt, but the expression on her face blossomed into one of disbelieving joy. "Harry?" she whispered in awe.

I nodded sadly. "I'm so sorry for what you've been through."

Trembling, she stood and stepped uncertainly towards me. "Is it really you?" she asked as she gently shifted my fringe out of the way.

I cupped her sunken cheek with my hand. "It's me."

She enveloped me in a hug reminiscent of Hermione at her best. "I thought you'd never wake up!" she sobbed.

I just held her close. "I was never asleep. But I'm home now."

She pulled back and examined my face carefully. "What do you mean?" she asked, before wrinkling her nose. I suppose several weeks without bathing gave me a rather distinctive aroma.

"Winky is drawing me a bath. Would you care to join me? I'll explain everything."

Master Potter Home, sweet home

Hot water is one of the greatest things on the planet, I decided. I lay back in the enormous bath with Blaise lying at the other end. I lifted one of her legs and started rubbing the heel of her foot. It was a ritual of sorts, since her feet were often aching by the time she got home from work. Of course, it would quite often lead to something else.

She purred with pleasure and closed her eyes. "I wasn't entirely sure it was you up until two seconds ago," she murmured, leaning her head back and enjoying the sensation.

I raised an eyebrow. "You got into a bath with someone you weren't sure was me?"

She flicked some water into my face. "Shush, you. I still can't believe you're here. Ten minutes ago I thought that you were gone forever."

"What happened today?" I asked, wiping the drops from my eyes.

Blaise's expression turned grim. "Someone got past security and blew up your ward. That part of the wing is a smoking ruin. They bribed the guards I assume. There have been plenty of offers going around. Reporters, photographers, politicians, everyone wanted to have access to you. A lot of them tried to pay for the privilege. There was another attack a few days ago, and one of the guards was arrested for accepting a bribe to allow unauthorised personnel access."

"Yeah, I was told about an assassination attempt. Was anyone else hurt? In either attempt?"

She shook her head. "There were no casualties, if that's what you mean. There was so much interest in you that you were almost given an entire wing to yourself. A number of patients and staff were hurt, but they were in a hospital at the time, so there were no life-threatening injuries."

"I'm surprised you were allowed to go home."

She winced. "Yeah. There was a call for all hands, but I was in such a state I got sent home. Now, spill! Where the hell have you been?"

I took a breath, organising my thoughts. "Do you remember exactly how long between when I left and when my double was brought into St Mungo's?"

She shook her head. "Does it matter?"

I shrugged. "It could." To her credit, she spoke little as I gave her an accounting of my time in Europe. I explained briefly about finding Malfoy and his goons, about my attempt to steal the Horcrux, and my capture. Her lips pursed rather cutely as I described my imprisonment under Malfoy's orders. She tried to smother a smile as I told her of Kellermann's fate.

But when I got to my ill-fated trip back to England, she almost vibrated with rage.

"An embassy official?"

"Yep. I won't forget him in a hurry. I'll have to make a note to visit him at some point. Anyway, the portkey dropped me in a dark room with lots of spells coming heading my way. I didn't even have time to dodge."

Blaise shook her head, her short black hair whipping damply from side to side. "I'm going to have a talk with Great-grandfather. He might be able to do something."

I raised an eyebrow. Getting Zab involved with my revenge might actually be interesting. He always had a level of inventive nastiness that I could never hope to match. I still hadn't forgotten him making Blaise and I muck out his stables with charmed shovels. "I haven't got to the best bit yet."

She splashed some water into my face. "Well, get on with it then."

I wiped my eyes. "Guess where I woke up?"

She gave me a disgusted look. "How the hell am I supposed to know? You'd made enemies of half of Europe in just a couple of weeks. The Vatican?"

I shook my head from side to side, though it wasn't a bad guess. "I was a guest of our ex-Minister Cornelius Fudge."

"Fudge?" she asked dubiously. "After he was kicked out of office, he lost his pension and Ministerial accommodation. He can't have kept you at his house if you wanted to escape, it wouldn't be secure enough."

I shook my head sadly. "Not at his home, at his work," I clarified.

"Huh. What does he do now?"

I took a deep breath. "He's the warden of Azkaban."

Her eyes bulged. "You've been in Azkaban for three months?"

I blinked. I hadn't realised it had been so long. No wonder she was painfully thin, if she's been stressed for half a Quidditch season. "Yeah. Take my advice;, don't ever think of going there on a holiday. Sure, the beaches are empty, but the nightlife sucks. Literally."

Blaise paled. "Then who was at...?"

"St. Mungo's? Fudge claimed that a kissed criminal had taken my place." I turned my head and showed her how short my hair was at the back. "Polyjuice," I said.

She started spitting, rubbing her lips roughly with the back of her hand. "Yuck," she spluttered.

Huh? "Did you...? You kissed him?"

She glared at me. "I thought he was you!" she exclaimed, indistinctly beneath her ministrations.

I chuckled softly. "You risked your job by kissing a patient?"

"It was only once," she said, defending her position admirably with a final spit. "You were kept in isolation, with only two senior Healers allowed access to you. I only got in because one of them was carrying an armful of potions, and I helped carry them for him. He stuck his head out the door for a second and... why am I justifying this to you? You're the one on trial here, mister. Now stop stalling and tell me! What happened there?"

"It took me a while, but I finally managed to leave today."

That shook her. "What? He let you go?"

I snorted. "Of course not. He wanted me to tell him where What's-His-Name's last Horcrux was. I said I didn't know, but he didn't believe me. He wanted to use it to buy his way back into power. There's no way he would have let me out of there with my mind intact."

"Then how did you get out?"

I smirked at her. "I broke out."

Her eyes bulged. "You what?!" she exclaimed.

"I escaped," I repeated. I'm sure Sirius would be puking his guts out with laughter at her expression. It was all I could do not to show my amusement any more than the grin already on my face.

"How?" she demanded.

I rubbed my chin, which was still covered in three months worth of growth, if you could call the sparse collection of fine hairs on my face a growth. I'd never be able to grow a beard. "Well, telling the long version would mean that the water in the bath would be cold before I finished."

"Is that a problem?"

I shook my head. "No, just that if Ron and Hermione are in a similar state to you over my disappearance, then I don't want to cause them any more grief than I have to."

She glared at me for a second before standing up. I swallowed as I looked her up and down. Normally doing such a thing would give me a raging erection. But I could count her ribs, and her hips were just as prominent. Despite not getting any action for three months, I didn't feel aroused at the sight of her. I felt guilty.

"Stop staring at my tits then, and let's go. We need to visit Granger first." She actually looked sheepish. "I should have thought of that myself. She's in a right state."

Now that I was cleaner than I had been in months, I also rose and reached for a towel. "Tell me, do you know what happens when someone that has been taking Polyjuice dies?"

Blaise looked at me curiously. "The potion wears off at the end of the hour, of course. Why?"

"Well, if my body isn't found in the rubble, what will happen?"

Blaise frowned for a few seconds, then shrugged. "I'm not sure. I suppose it would depend on what they managed to pull out. If the body was mangled beyond recognition, then you might be declared dead. If not, and the body is identified, then you would probably be listed as missing, presumed dead. Again, why?"

I grinned at her. "How cool would it be for me to crash my own funeral?"

Describing Hermione as ‘in a right state’ was like saying that Malfoy was ‘in a spot of trouble’. Her cheekbones were prominent, her eyes sunk deep in their sockets. The skin on her face was pale and sickly; she didn’t look like she’d had any sun since the day she slapped me.

I had the opportunity to examine her in detail, since she fainted dead away the moment she laid eyes on me. Despite the solemnity of the situation, my companion couldn’t help but snigger. Blaise gently levitated her onto her bed. We’d travelled via the secure floo to her Oxford residence, catching her sobbing to herself in her favourite armchair. I felt even guiltier than I had before. Hermione looked even worse for wear than Blaise.

My raven-haired girlfriend bustled around Hermione efficiently, checking her vitals and so forth. Beyond making sure she was still breathing and had a heartbeat, I was lost. “She’s alright, but she’s lost even more weight than the last time I saw her,” she told me.

I rubbed my chin, again encountering the downy hairs. “Pass me Hermione’s wand, will you. I really should shave.”

Blaise looked at me oddly, but complied. “How are you going to get your wands back?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I thought I’d crash Malfoy Manor and rip the place down around me while looking for it,” I said as I turned and left the room. I took the wand into the bathroom, and carefully removed the months of growth. Much better.

I was debating trimming my hair when the main floo flashed. “‘Mione?” called a familiar voice, full of anguish.

I raced out to the main room. Ron stood there, his eyes red and puffy. “Hermio—Harry?” he finished disbelievingly. “B-b-but—”

I grinned at his sudden loss of vocabulary. “Hey, mate.”

“B-but y-you’re dead!” Ron stuttered.

I rolled my eyes. “Hello? Boy-Who-Lived, remember?”

Before I could even focus back on my first friend, I was caught up in a bear hug and lifted from the ground. My vertebrae creaked under the assault. “Ron!” I croaked. “Can’t breathe!”

He ignored me. “Harry!” he shouted, twirling me around. “You’re alive!”

I eventually had to *push* my way out of his embrace. He stumbled back, a comical look of surprise on his face. “Need. Air,” I wheezed, clutching at my abused ribs.

Blaise stood in the doorway to the bedroom, leaning on the doorframe, an amused smirk on her face. “I seem to recall telling you the first time I went to the Burrow that your friends treated you worse than your enemies,” she smirked.

I groaned as I stretched, making sure nothing was broken. “Yeah, well, that was before you met my enemies.”

Blaise nodded happily. “That’s true. Hello Weasley. Nice of you to drop by. We were just about to head over to your place.”

Ron’s demented grin hadn’t shifted. “So, I’m lower on the friendship scale than ‘Mione, eh?”

I cast a meaningful eye over his frame. He obviously hadn’t been missing meals. Mind you, it would take apocalyptic events to make him miss a meal. “More like you could handle a bit of uncertainty a little longer than Hermione. Have you *seen* her recently?”

Ron instantly sobered. Obviously his mercurial emotions hadn’t changed. “Yeah, well, she’s got an excuse, doesn’t she?”

Blaise cleared her throat, glaring meaningfully at Ron. “Shut up, Weasley.”

“What am I missing?” I asked curiously, watching the byplay with interest.

Ron was about to answer when Blaise whipped her wand out and threatened him. “It’s not your place to tell,” she said flatly.

I raised an eyebrow. “And whose place is it?” I asked.

Blaise put her wand away. “Hermione’s,” she replied. “Let’s just say that after you left for Europe without seeing her, things got… complicated.”

After a few seconds thought, I spoke up. “Medical issue,” I guessed. Given what I’d seen of Hermione’s current condition, I wasn’t at all surprised to learn that she’d had some medical problems. I’d get the details from her later.

Blaise nodded sharply, but said nothing.

I turned back to Ron, who shrugged. “What, you think I’m going to risk being cursed by a Slytherin?” he asked, his default setting of exuberant enjoyment of life returning quickly. “So,” he continued, “When did you wake up? Before or after you got attacked?”

I grinned at him. “I’ve never set foot in St. Mungo’s in my life,” I replied.

Ron leapt to his feet and punched the air. “Yes!” he hissed.

Blaise did a double take. “What? You knew?”

He snorted. "Of course not. But the moment I saw Harry here, I just knew there had to be a cool story behind it. And, knowing Harry, something very interesting is going to happen."

My mouth opened and shut as I tried to work out how to dispute his statement. There *was* a story behind it, which I suppose could be defined as cool, so long as you weren't too concerned with conventional definitions. And something interesting was going to happen, if by interesting you meant world-shaking. Finding no point of fact that would sway a jury, I gave up and just grunted, "Fair enough."

"Harry?!" shrieked Hermione from her room.

Blaise was the first to her side, quickly followed by Ron and I. I knelt down beside her bed, reached out and took her hand. "I'm here, Hermione."

She wrenched her hand from my grasp and felt my face. "Oh my God, it is you," she whispered.

I nodded. "Yes."

She threw her arms around my neck and wept into my shoulder. Wracking sobs shook her slight frame, and the four of us just sat there in the odd tableau. Eventually, she sniffed and pulled back. "When did you--?"

"Wake up?" I finished wryly.

She nodded.

With a sigh, I shook my head and gave her a small smile. "I wasn't at St. Mungo's. That was an imposter impersonating me with Polyjuice."

Her eyes were shining with tears. "Then where were you?"

I lost my smile. "I've been in Azkaban."

Ron stepped back in surprise and tripped on the rug, falling on his backside. Hermione gasped and pulled back, looking stunned. "What?" they both yelled in unison.

"I was kidnapped on my way back from Europe." I glanced over my shoulder at Ron, who just sat on the hard floor open-mouthed. "Fudge is the warden there. But he still has toadies around who are interested in getting back into power. They thought I was their path."

Ron brightened, clambering back to his feet. "You tricked them into letting you go? Wicked!"

I sent him an evil grin. "Nope. As of today, the number of escapees from Azkaban increased by one."

Blaise laughed as Ron was stunned into immobility while not quite vertical. He did look rather comical standing half hunched over. Hermione grabbed my cheeks in her hands and dragged my head around to face her.

"You were in prison? You weren't in the hospital?"

Sounds like she's a few seconds behind the flow of conversation. I reached up and took Hermione's hands off my cheeks. They were cold and bony, and the skin was rough and scaly. It broke my heart. "Yes. I got the last Horcrux, and Fudge wanted it. When I didn't give it to him, well, he set Dementors onto me."

Hermione gasped, and threw her arms around my neck again. Ron whispered, "Oh shit!"

I gently stood, lifting Hermione off the bed and setting her down on the floor. "Come on, let's go and get us something to eat. I'm starving. I'll explain everything."

Ron immediately volunteered for kitchen duty, and had his head deep in Hermione's larder before any of us could object. The idea that Ron would pick food over one of my adventures brought a smile to my face. The minute his nuclear furnace-like metabolism shut down, he'd balloon to Hagrid's size in weeks.

Blaise just strode over to him and slapped the back of his head. He stood back up straight, looking down with more than a little trepidation at my feisty girlfriend, the top of whose head was about level with his pectoral muscles. "Dobby!" she called out.

My elf appeared with a shimmer. "Mistress Blaise called Dobby?"

Shaking her head while smirking at Ron, Blaise said, "Could you fix us something to eat?"

Dobby nodded and dove into the kitchen, pulling out half the food in the house. Ron sheepishly came back into the lounge room and sat down in one of Hermione's armchairs. I sat down opposite him on a sofa, while Hermione latched onto my arm. Blaise raised her eyebrows at that, but sat down in a different armchair.

I cleared my throat. "Well, what do you want to know first?"

Ron waved his hand in the air. "How did you escape?"

I winced. "I wasn't housed with the other prisoners. The complex is split up into two main areas, the cell block and the... you know what, I should

have brought the painting with me. It was a piece of crap, but it gives you an idea."

Blaise tilted her head to one side. "Painting?"

I couldn't help but grin. "Yeah, I found a painting in Fudge's office that showed a rough layout of the prison, if you didn't mind the lack of perspective. It was sort of useful when I was trying to work out an escape route."

The reaction from the two girls was unexpected. "*The Prison*?" they gasped in unison.

I glanced at Ron, who shrugged with eloquent incomprehension. "Yeah," I said cautiously.

Blaise held up a hand to stop Hermione. "Wait, Granger. Harry, this painting, did it depict the passages, without showing them crossing?"

I smiled. "Yes! It looked like an ant farm."

Blaise started laughing. Hermione gave a whimper and half rose from the sofa. "You've got *The Prison* at home?" she demanded, her voice an octave higher than usual.

I frowned. "What are you talking about?" I demanded. "I escaped from the prison; I didn't bring it home with me."

Blaise, through her laughter, explained. "Harry, the painting is called *The Prison*."

Ron and I exchanged glances, and shared a bemused shrug. "So?"

Hermione seemed to be hyperventilating. "You've stolen an original Cummersleigh?"

I schooled my face into an expression of incomprehension. "A what?"

Blaise finally managed to get her laughter under control. "Cummingsleigh was a famous wizard artist. He was sentenced to Azkaban two hundred years ago for something or other, and after he bought his way out he emerged mad, but brilliant. His paintings are invaluable."

"Priceless," Hermione interjected quickly.

"What was a painting like that doing on the wall of the Ministry's prison?"

"That was the price he paid to leave. A unique painting of Azkaban. It actually belongs to the prison, not the Ministry."

Ron was obviously calculating. "Hypothetically, how much would you say its worth?"

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed. "Don't even think it. You wouldn't be able to sell such a masterpiece."

Blaise however, answered him. "For *The Prison*? Assuming there was a buyer who offered, say, ten million galleons, he'd be getting a bargain if he could buy a cup of tea with the change."

A dreamy look crossed my friend's face. "Oh, that's just beautiful," he murmured as he stared at imaginary money.

I glanced around my friends, and shook my head. "Incredible. I've been kidnapped, imprisoned without charge, escaped the supposedly inescapable prison, and all you can talk about is an uninspiring piece of artwork."

Ron and Blaise sobered, but Hermione shrieked, "Uninspiring? It's one of the most important paintings in the wizarding world!"

I stared at her pointedly. "An hour or so ago, it was nothing more than an out of date, inaccurate map of a place I was desperately trying to get out of."

She immediately looked abashed. "Oh, my God. I'm sorry, Harry."

Not for the first time, I wondered about her priorities. "It's okay."

Ron waved at me to continue. "Okay, so you broke out of Azkaban, and on the way you pinched something worth more than all the houses on Grimmauld Place. Any doubts I had that it was you just disappeared. What happened then?"

Without explaining my ability to absorb magical power, I gave a quick account of my escape, simply saying that the wards fractured twice in the past few days, and that I was ready to take advantage during the second outage. Ron gave a sort of 'snerk' sound at Percy's treatment, though Hermione paled at my casual description of using an Unforgivable. I glossed over being caught between a group of Aurors with twitchy wands and a closed guardhouse, and simply said that I *pushed* rocks and masonry into a wall until it gave way.

When I described my nautical adventure, Blaise immediately checked me for symptoms of hypothermia, since this time of year the waters of the North Sea are notoriously nippy. She seemed pleased with my self treatment selection of potions. Dobby appeared with a feast worthy of Hogwarts and piled half my body weight in food on a plate.

"So," I said, clapping my hands and rubbing them together, before diving into the tastiest meal in my life. "What's been happening around here?" I asked around a mouthful.

"Not so fast, Buster," Ron said. He had a plate nearly the size of mine in front of him. "We haven't heard what happened in Europe. What was that

thing you said you were looking for? That Horcrux thing you told Hermione about?"

I swallowed. Hot food is almost as good as hot water. "Yeah. I had to go and find the last Horcrux." My girls were also falling to the meal like ravenous beasts. What a pitiful sight we were. Three near-starving wretches. Fudge has a lot to answer for.

He leaned forward, getting food smeared on the front of his shirt. "Cool. That clears that up. Just one thing. What the hell is a Horcrux?"

I figured it was safe to tell him now. "A piece of dark magic. A wizard can split his soul and put a piece in an object. It makes him pretty much immortal. But he has to murder someone for the ritual." I stabbed my fork down and shovelled some more food into my mouth. Pure Bliss.

Ron's face contorted with disgust. "Yuck. That was What's-His-Name's last one? How many did he have?"

I nodded. "Yep," I replied with a spray of crumbs. "Riddle made six of them. That bloody diary, the locket we picked up in Gringotts, his family's ring, Ravenclaw's journal, Hufflepuff's goblet, and Nagini." I raised a hand and ticked them off on my fingers. "He used the soul fragment in Nagini to come back to life after the Tournament. I stabbed the diary with a basilisk fang. Dumbledore found the ring, and we got the locket. I destroyed Ravenclaw's journal in Vatican City, and I've hidden the goblet until I'm absolutely positive all the others have been destroyed."

Hermione coughed. "Where did Voldemort hide the goblet?" she asked before picking up some bread and dipping it in some weird green paste.

I shrugged. "I don't know where he put it initially, but Malfoy had it before I nicked it." I glanced down at my plate. I'd taken maybe three mouthfuls, and I was already getting full. Damn it. Maybe the Romans were onto something when they used a vomitorium.

She frowned. "Narcissa had it?"

I chuckled softly. "Nope. Draco."

That got them. Ron spoke up. "But the ferret is dead," he objected.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Didn't you think I was dead an hour ago?" I asked him.

He conceded the point.

Hermione spoke up again. "Draco... is alive?"

"I smashed half his chest in the last time I saw him, but he portkeyed away before I could finish the job. So yeah, I'm inclined to believe he's still alive. He claimed before the Hogwarts battle he put Madam Pomfrey under the Imperius, and made her say he was dead." I pushed my barely touched plate away. I needed a break before attempting to eat some more.

Blaise chimed in. "That sounds remarkably cunning. For him, at least."

Ron's eyes lit up. "Which bit? *Imperio* ing Pomfrey, or running from a pissed off Harry? 'Cause you're being unclear."

Blaise stuck out her tongue at him.

Ron grinned at her. "So, how did you take it from him?"

I smiled, closed my eyes and began relating my Albanian adventure in more detail. They each liked different things. Blaise appreciated my ambitious, or perhaps audacious, attempt to sneak in and steal the Horcrux, and my subsequent escape. Hermione was impressed with my analytical and logical approach to the problem. Ron of course, simply wanted me to repeat the bit where I nearly killed Draco. It only took three times before the girls insisted that we move on, much to Ron's disappointment.

Blaise frowned. "So, you managed to hide the goblet where Fudge couldn't find it?"

I nodded with a grin. "He was rather put out with me."

She grinned at me. "I bet. Where did you hide it?"

I wagged my finger at her. "That would ruin the surprise," I said to her darkening expression. I didn't want them to know just yet. Not until they knew what my plans were for the wizarding world. While I was pretty sure I could get them on board, there was always a chance that one of them in particular would balk at the idea.

Hermione gripped my hand hard. "How bad were the Dementors?" she whispered.

I shrugged. "Not as bad as you'd think. They mostly left me alone."

"Really?" They looked dubious at that claim.

I smirked. "Yep. After I killed four of them, the rest refused to come anywhere near me," I said nonchalantly.

Well, there's a conversation stopper.

Ron broke the stunned silence with an enormous belly laugh, which quickly turned his mouthful of food into a choking hazard. I was a bit worried for a second before he managed to cough the obstruction out. His body slid down the smooth leather and he ended up on his bum on the floor and his plate in his lap, where he continued laughing out loud. Hermione's mouth was in the shape of a perfect 'O', while Blaise had a sultry look on her face

that I recognised very well. Demonstrations of power always did turn her on.

“Th-th-the Dementors w-were s-scared of you!” Ron said around his amusement. He thumped the floor beside him with his fist. “Man, this is even better than I thought!”

“If you like that, just wait for my plans.”

“Plans?” The three of them asked in unison.

I nodded, directly looking at each one in turn. “Yes. Blaise, if they can’t find my body in the rubble, how long until they declare me dead?”

Ron and Hermione looked confused. Blaise answered, “How on earth would I know? I told you already, a couple of days, maybe? You’d need to ward yourself against owl post and the like if you really want to appear dead.” I suppose I should take some tips from my old Master, in that respect.

Hermione broke in, speaking for herself and Ron. “Harry? Haven’t you told anyone you’re alive?”

“No,” I replied flatly. “Just you three, plus Dobby and Winky. Look, I was kidnapped and imprisoned for months. While I was supposedly catatonic, there were at least two attempts on my life. No, until I figure out what happened and make sure it won’t happen again, I’m going to be dead to the world.”

The three of them leaned back in their chairs, nodding at my reasoning, though Hermione seemed a bit petulant.

“Besides,” I continued, “If I’m going to destroy the current political structure of this country, it would be easier if no one was looking for Harry Potter.”

What do you know, there’s another conversation stopper.

Blaise had eagerly agreed to my plan even before I’d finished my opening summary of goals. Ron was firmly on board when he realised that he would have a chance to exact some revenge against Draco Malfoy.

Hermione however, surprised me. I expected her to resist, to demand to know if I was serious, to insist that I couldn’t just wage war on a subset of the population, even if they were bigots.

No, it was the vindictive look on her face when she firmly agreed to take part that caused me to do a double take. She had been prevaricating up until I had explained my plans for the Ministry. Whatever had happened to her recently, someone at the Ministry was involved.

“I had thought you would have been the hardest to convince, Hermione.”

She had the grace to briefly look abashed, but stared directly at me. “I have my reasons.” She glanced over at Blaise, and bit her bottom lip. “I’m not sure I should tell you just yet. You need to be thinking clearly if we are going to pull this off.”

I frowned. Secrets always bugged me. That is, secrets kept from me. Secrets I kept were fine.

“And if I insist that you tell me?”

She instantly turned submissive, lowering her gaze. “Please don’t,” she whispered.

It took a bit of willpower not to roll my eyes at her. What ever happened to this woman? I used to love the glint of steel in her eyes, the fire in her heart. Even from the very first day I met her, when she stormed into my compartment on the Hogwarts’ Express, she had given off an almost palpable force field of determination. As an eleven year old, it intimidated me. As an adult, it was a fantastic turn on.

But where had it gone?

And would she ever get it back?

The four of us apparated to Hogsmeade a few hours after sunset. It was dark enough to make it difficult for anyone to notice that I was wearing layered glamours, but still early enough that we should be able to blend in to the evening crowd.

“Dumbledore will have put some protections around the Chamber entrance,” I said, heading down one of the streets, away from the castle.

“Um, Harry?” Ron asked, stopping in his tracks and pointing back towards Hogwarts.

Blaise looked confused for a second, but fell into step beside me and snorted. “Right. I doubt it.”

Hermione glanced at her curiously. “You don’t think so?”

I already knew the answer before she spoke. “First years getting the Philosopher’s stone. Sirius Black escaping. Crouch and the Goblet of Fire. Any of these ring a bell?”

I chuckled at her answer. “Assuming he can’t learn a trick or two at one-fifty,” I pointed out.

Ron butted in. “Hey! Where are we going? Hogwarts is that way,” he asked, jogging to catch up with us.

I raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you remember the map?”

“The—Oh! Right. Honeyduke’s?”

I nodded. “Let’s not give the old fart any more warning than strictly necessary.”

The secret entrance to Honeyduke’s looked exactly as I remembered. I wondered exactly how many students had come through this way over the past thousand years. Blaise looked impressed.

“How did you find out about this place?”

Ron gave me puppydog eyes. “Please? Can I tell her?”

I waved my assent and entered the passageway. Hermione slipped her hand into mine as we made our way down the dusty passageway. Meanwhile, Ron regaled Blaise with a rather extroverted story about how a quartet calling themselves the Marauders created a wonderful artefact for pranksters to use for generations to come. Blaise, who I’d already told about my father’s friends, tolerated Ron’s convoluted story to get her answer.

Hermione leaned closer. “Harry, are you sure Professor Dumbledore hasn’t put up more security around the school?”

I shook my head. “Death Eaters could wander around the grounds without being disturbed. Thousands of people pass by the wards every year. Everyone claims Hogwarts is safe, but I think that has more to do with the fact that arguably the most powerful wizard alive lives there.”

She nodded, though it was indistinct in the near darkness. After a few minutes, she whispered, “Are we going to be all right?”

The way she emphasised ‘we’, I knew she wasn’t talking about our current activities. I gave her hand a squeeze. “If you mean, are we going to be friends, then I’d say nothing could ever stop that. If you mean more, well, I really don’t know.”

“You’ve said that before.”

I sighed. “Yes, and that was when we were going to be apart for two years. Until Snape’s death, we’d been together since you finished Hogwarts. But things changed that day.”

She sighed too. “I know. I was wrong to act the way I did.”

“Yes, yes you were. Do you know how Blaise reacted when I told her what happened?”

“Believe me; she made sure I knew exactly how she reacted.”

I took a deep breath. Time to push back, to see just how submissive she had become. “Okay, now, how are you going to react after I kill Draco?”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “Are you really going to track him down and deliberately kill him? Premeditated murder?”

“No,” I replied, frustrated. “I was asking how you were going to react. Chances are that I will end up killing him, but his existence is far too useful to just for me to just murder him in cold blood. He represents everything I’m going to be destroying. If this is going to work, the public will need to believe there is a serious threat.”

“You don’t have to kill him. You could have him arrested. With your memories of him torturing you, he’d be—”

“Out of prison as soon as he could claim he was under the Imperius. Money would change hands; people would be bribed or blackmailed.”

“Harry, not everyone in the Ministry is corrupt.”

I snorted with sad amusement. “Right. Can you name one bureaucrat who isn’t bent?”

“Mr. Weasley!”

“Yessir?” Ron asked from behind us, almost jumping to attention. I’m guessing his coach talks to him like that.

“Nothing, Ron. Hermione was talking about your dad,” I said over my shoulder. To Hermione, I said, “Mr. Weasley hooked Privet Drive up to the floo without permission.”

She stopped walking, causing a minor traffic jam in the tiny corridor. “Harry! He did that to help you!”

I rolled my eyes. “I know that, Hermione. But he didn’t see anything wrong with it. Despite the fact that it was benign, it was an abuse of power. And that sort of thinking is endemic throughout the population. No one cares, because everyone does it. *That* is what needs to change,” I said without stopping.

She started walking again and sighed. “I agree with you on that,” she said emphatically. I got the impression that something had happened to her in the past three months. Perhaps she had been victimised by the Ministry because of her parentage. “I just, I don’t know, I wish you weren’t ready to kill someone when you didn’t need to.”

“What can I say? Azkaban changed me. Though I can tell you I’m certainly not going to kill him in his sleep.”

This time, she actually chuckled and shook her head. “Of course not. You’re going to do something idiotically heroic, and give him a chance to defend himself. He’ll overestimate himself, and you’ll destroy his self-esteem, his ego, his family name and his political power before you kill him. Am I right?”

“About my intentions, yeah, pretty much. The order, no.”

That threw her. “You’re going to kill him first?”

“No. I’m going to destroy his family name first. Then I’ll take out his political power. Only after that will his ego and self-esteem go. I’ll start a propaganda campaign that will make everyone think that Lucius’ mother was Muggleborn, which should destroy the final plank of his self-delusion. Finally, in front of the burning embers of his ancestral home, I’ll reveal to him that I’m still alive.”

Hermione’s eyes were wide in the dark.

“At that point, I can pretty much assure you that he will try to kill me. So technically, his death will be in self-defense.”

Creeping through the corridors of Hogwarts at night was just as fun as I remember. After five years of exploring the place with the definitive map, I knew my way around blindfolded. The four of us took a circuitous route to Myrtle’s bathroom, only to find that we were not the only ones with the same idea. A rather unwelcome voice alerted us to the fact that the bathroom was occupied.

“Quite ingenious, placing the entrance to his personal refuge in such an unassuming location. I am not surprised that it survived undisturbed for so long. Speaking of which, I have located a serpent shaman in Brazil who is willing to assist the Church in this matter,” said the voice of Darius, the Vatican’s spymaster.

Dumbledore’s dulcet tones replied. “Simply obtaining the services of another parselmouth will not ensure success, my friend. I am reliably informed that Harry erected other defenses. He specifically warned against attempted entry without his presence. Your magnificent specimen of basilisk is not the only danger in the Chamber.”

“Albus, the boy is dead.”

“Harry has surprised me too often for me to take his death as fact until his body is recovered.”

The four of us carefully eased backwards around the nearest corner. Myrtle’s bathroom door opened, spilling light out into the corridor.

“In that case, I strongly suggest you reconsider your opposition to the Church stationing a permanent detail here,” the Church wizard said.

This time, Dumbledore’s answer held an uncharacteristic tone of menace I’d only heard a couple of times before. “Have a care, old friend. Threats do not become you. I have made my decision, and in this place, my decision is final.”

“The items below are far too dangerous to be simply left there!”

The voices quickly got louder as the pair moved at a stately pace towards us. I was about to cast a disillusionment spell on us when Hermione’s face set itself into a mask of determination, and she bolted around the corner towards Dumbledore. Blaise hissed softly, as Ron cut off a strangled shout. Almost immediately, we heard Hermione burst into tears.

“Professor Dumbledore!” she wailed. “H-Harry is dead!”

In the time it took for Dumbledore to calm her down, Blaise, Ron and I managed to back away down the corridor and into an empty classroom. I smiled to myself. Hermione’s mind hadn’t slowed at all.

“There, there, Miss Granger. I share your grief. Come, let us retire to my office. Darius, I suspect you have some questions for Miss Granger here. She and Mr. Potter were very good friends before his accident.”

“Quite,” Darius replied. The voices got fainter. “Young Miss, you have my sincere commiserations. I had the honour of meeting Mr. Potter a few times—” The sly bugger’s careful condolences to Hermione faded as the trio departed, presumably to the Headmaster’s office, and his unending pile of lemon-flavoured sweets.

I glanced around at my friends. “Well, that was interesting.”

Blaise let out a breath. “I was almost sure Granger was going to let on about you being alive.”

I nodded. “The thought crossed my mind as well. She wasn’t too impressed with my plans for Draco, but I think she is doing this to prove something to me. And maybe to herself as well. Come on, let’s go. Hopefully Myrtle is spying on the prefects.”

Ron frowned. “The prefects’ what?”

I snickered. “The prefects, Ron. She spies on the male prefects while they are in the bath.”

Ron paled. “What? She does that?”

Blaise snickered at him. “What’s the problem, Weasley? Did you do something in there you shouldn’t have? Take matters into your own hands, as it were?”

I snorted with laughter at Ron's blustering denials.

I stepped through the silencing charms I'd placed around the entrance to the Chamber, protecting my serpentine friend from any randomly passing crowing roosters. I hissed, "*Light*," causing the entire chamber to begin glowing. A minute later, a massive serpent slid soundlessly from one of the pipes in the far wall.

"Ah, I see you have returned, my friend. I must thank you again for bringing me here. These magnificent passages lead all throughout this fine castle. I have had a most interesting time exploring."

I smiled. The basilisk's speech was far more archaic than other snakes. "*I trust you found a wizard down here? I do hope he wasn't an inconvenience."*

If a snake could sound satisfied, it would sound just like this. "*Oh yes. And no, he was not. Are you to thank for my meal then?"*

I nodded. "*The wizard had me prisoner, and was going through my possessions. I tricked him into triggering the portkey. Was he tasty?"* I asked with a wicked smile.

"Quite. It has been such a long time since my last meal of manflesh. Are you here for anything specific from my previous employer's cache? Or were you just aching for my stimulating conversation?"

Well, what do you know? A basilisk with a sense of humour. He seemed in a much better mood than the second time we met. Wonders will never cease. "*I do need to speak with you on a matter, but I seek the remains of the wizard. I need to retrieve some items he had of mine."*

The basilisk gestured with his gigantic head. "*He appeared behind where you currently stand, and didn't manage a single step before perishing. He did drop something, though if the items you seek were concealed within his robes, I'm afraid they are... irretrievable."*

An icy fear clutched at my heart. I spun around and looked at the muck on the floor. A few seconds searching revealed a shape that made me sigh with relief. I stooped and retrieved a twelve-inch yew wand. Instantly, the wood warmed in my hand, and a flood of power raced up my arm. I nearly swooned at the sensation.

"Your wand?"

I nodded. "*One I claimed from a fallen foe. It is remarkably attuned to my touch, though not as much as my first wand."* Inwardly, I was relieved that Riddle's old wand had survived. I hadn't considered that Kellermann would be eaten robes and all. I suppose the time turner is now residing for eternity in a big pile of basilisk shit. A pity. A few more seconds of half-hearted searching through the muck revealed a muddy sock. I smiled at the discovery. For the foreseeable future it would be most useful to have a rechargeable portkey to Hogwarts. I suppose Dumbledore would be pleased to eventually get his clothing back, though etiquette dictated that I launder it thoroughly first.

"One of the wizards who sought your death is in the castle," I said, gently wiping the mud from the wand. Excited sparks shot from the tip. I found it amusing to imagine that after three months of sitting in a pile of mud, the wand was rather happy to be used again.

"Does that pose a problem? You said that only a parselmouth could enter this chamber from above."

"True, but there are other speakers of parseltongue in the world. The wizard named Darius was trying to convince the Headmaster to allow one he has located in South America access."

"Is that likely?"

I shook my head. "*The Headmaster was resisting the idea. Recent events have led the general public to believe me dead. I think he is holding out hope that I will turn up alive."*

The creature let out a series of hissing grunts that I took to be laughter. "*The wizard believes you may turn up, and you are here without his knowledge? Is he bereft of sense?"*

"All wizards are mad. Didn't you know?"

The odd grunting continued. "*Most likely you are correct. Tell me, do you believe I shall have to battle for my life in this place?"*

I paused. "*Perhaps. I shall return soon and install some more active defenses, but we have some time before this place will be violated. The Headmaster is a deceptive man, who I suspect is rather pleased that the Church's dark collection now resides here, in the bowels of his sanctum, despite his protestations to the contrary. If there is any doubt to my demise whatsoever, he has an excuse to hold out against an expedition down here. Darius wanted to install a permanent guard at the Chamber entrance, but that idea was quickly vetoed."*

The basilisk turned and began slithering back to wards the rear wall. "*I shall contemplate my reaction, should I be disturbed. It has been some time since I indulged my capacity for wrath. Go now, lest your companions become distraught."*

I raised an eyebrow. "*My companions?"*

A forked tongue flickered out at me. "*The three whose scent I taste on you."*

I smiled. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised. *"Very well. Take care, and if you need anything, well, you can't really send me a message. I'll be back soon to check."*

"I thank you."

Master Potter Reign of Terror starts with a light shower.

The trip back to Grimmauld Place was uneventful and quiet, with the possible exception of Ron's constant stream of muttered complaints about not being able to visit the basilisk. For some reason, he felt he missed out by not seeing the first one, and the idea of actually meeting a live one caught his imagination. Blaise was sufficiently cautious in that she didn't want to risk accidental death, but Ron's sense of self-preservation had apparently gone the way of his attention span.

"So, what's the plan," he asked as we settled down in the drawing room. "Can we burn down Malfoy Manor tomorrow?" His face was pulled into a puppyish expression of gleeful anticipation.

Blaise looked at me and rolled her eyes. "Why do you surround yourself with Gryffindors?"

I shrugged. "They have their good points. And no, Ron, we cannot go and burn down Malfoy Manor tomorrow. There are a few other things we need to accomplish first."

"Like what?"

I amused myself my absently swishing my recovered wand back and forth, creating a silver cascade of sparks. It was very nice to hold an eager wand again. "Well, first we need to make sure I'm seen as dead. I need to visit dear ex-Minister Fudge, explain in detail just how irritable being incarcerated made me, and take back my belongings. I'd like my invisibility cloak back." I turned to face Blaise. "I need your delightful Slytherin deviousness. I'd like you to compose a will for me to sign, with conditions that ensure that my will cannot be executed unless my body is available or something. If I get recorded as deceased, all sorts of undesirables will descend, vying for a piece of my estate. I need to keep control of it for now."

She frowned, but nodded. "I can go over the wills of the Black family. I'm sure they'll have a few nasty clauses I can use." She rose and headed over to the door.

I smiled at her gratefully. "Excellent."

She paused and frowned in thought. "You should probably visit the goblins though. At the very least, you need to see Rilifa. Your will would cover any personal assets, but the Potter and Black family assets might be handled differently if the last family Head is listed as dead. I know you want to keep as low a profile as possible, but the Wizengamot might take a hand if there are any doubts. The older families would fight like cats in a sack to snatch a piece of wealth from two ancient families. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," she finished, before going into the library.

Ron laughed. "If the goblins think you're dead, you might have to tell them how we made off with the locket to get them to believe that you're the real Harry Potter."

I winced. The idea of admitting to a successful robbery was not appealing, even if the goods stolen did actually belong to me. I couldn't imagine that Rilifa would be too impressed. "We'll cross that bridge later, eh?"

"What do you want me to do?" Ron asked.

I grinned. "Mate, you get to be my official mouthpiece."

"Huh?"

"I'm going to be taking down a lot of people. Part of that is to let people know there is a new group out there, acting in my memory. One that has rather similar ideals to those of the Death Eaters. Instead of advocating the extermination of half-bloods and Muggle-born, though, we're going after the pureblood bigots."

He grinned. "In your memory?"

I nodded. "Poor Harry Potter," I said, feigning wiping away a tear. "He was victimised by Death-Eaters and pureblood supremacists all his life. It's time we showed them bastards what for, eh? Let's make the pricks suffer! Harry would have wanted it that way!"

He gave me a baffled look. "How the hell am I going to do that?"

"As Harry Potter's best friend, I'm quite sure you will be asked for interviews. Rita would probably be delighted to print that sort of thing."

"No, you prat. I'm pure-blooded myself!"

I grinned at him. "Yes, but you're not a bigot. No one in your family is. The Weasley family seems to produce more than the average number of gits, of course, but no one would ever accuse you of being dark."

Ron initially looked pleased at my words, but frowned about three seconds later. “Hey!” he objected. Blaise snorted from the library. Apparently she could still hear us.

An hour or so later, Hermione tumbled out of the fireplace. She brushed the soot from her robes, and smiled hesitantly at me. Ron looked up from his late night snack. “Sorry for jumping out like that, but I just...”

“I know,” I replied easily, pushing away the third draft of my will. “What did the old man have to say?”

She swallowed nervously. “You probably don’t want to hear it.”

“Try me.”

She sat down on one of the armchairs, crossing her legs. “He doesn’t think that you’re dead. He thinks he knows why your body disappeared from St. Mungo’s.”

I blinked, before bursting into laughter. “Oh, that’s rich. That’s perfect.”

Blaise appeared in the doorway, frowning. “What’s going on?”

I grinned at her. “Dumbledore thinks I made a Horcrux.”

Hermione’s gaze lingered on me, and she blushed. I guess she still likes men who can use their minds.

I shook my head. “That old bastard actually believes that I’d make one of those things? Bloody hell, give me a little credit.”

Hermione cleared her throat. “Um, Harry, he only came to that conclusion after he discovered that you weren’t dead.”

Blaise and I shared a glance. “How did he figure that?” I asked evenly, wondering if Hermione had somehow let slip.

“Do you remember the Gaunt family ring? He showed it to us when he told us about Horcruxes. The stone allows the user to commune with the dead. The crack down the centre hasn’t broken its power. And he hasn’t been able to talk to you with it.”

Blaise and I shared a look. “If he was just trying to convince you...”

Hermione shook her head. “No, he proved it to me. I got to say goodbye to my cousin. He died in a car accident near the end of our seventh year. I was in the middle of studying for my NEWTS, and couldn’t go to the funeral.”

I rubbed my chin. That changed things. While there was no way I could have suspected that Dumbledore would have a way of communing with the dead, I really wasn’t surprised that he had some magical way of determining that I was still clinging to this mortal coil. “What about Darius?”

Hermione frowned. “He seemed like a very nice man. Are you sure he was involved with, you know...”

I nodded. “Yes, he was involved. My Master knows him, or at least, knows of him. He said Darius is one of the most brilliant spymasters in the world today.”

“Oh,” she said, sitting down. “I really liked him.”

I grinned. “I’m not surprised. I wouldn’t put it past him to have a charm on himself that makes people in the vicinity more trusting.”

Hermione pouted. “Well, I didn’t tell him anything.”

I nodded. “I didn’t expect that you would. I have something for you to work on, if you like?”

“What’s that?”

“There are charms that make a Muggle ignore places, or people, right?”

“Yes,” she said slowly, wondering where I was going with this.

“Well, do you know of one that makes them ignore sounds? I imagine there was one used at the World Cup, considering how loud it was.”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, there is a charm for that. Why?”

“The Dark Mark was so passé, wouldn’t you say?”

Blaise prescribed another set of nutrient potions for me, cast a couple of diagnostic charms, then sent me to bed. I was rather hoping that she’d join me, but since I fell asleep in the warm, soft comfort in under a minute, it was probably a good thing she didn’t.

Fourteen hours later, I awoke feeling stiff, sore, but rested and energized. I stumbled gingerly out of bed and performed my morning ablutions. Dressing in simple Muggle jeans and sweater, I left my room and headed for the kitchen.

Blaise and Ron were already there. They were laughing, jabbing the cutlery with their wands, encouraging the silverware to battle on the table in front of them. The forks currently held the advantage, using their ability to entangle and trap to good advantage. The knives were holding up well though, slashing through the air like miniature swords. The poor spoons, with no offensive prowess of their own, were relegated to simply bashing their opponents with their convex side, and usually ended up missing.

“Morning,” I yawned.

“Good afternoon, Sleepyhead,” Blaise responded. “I’ve got a potion here for you,” she finished, rising and heading over to the medicine cabinet. “This should be the last one you need.”

“Hey mate,” Ron greeted, waving his wand in a mock salute. “Ready to go to Gringotts?”

I rubbed some sleep from my eyes, and accepted the vial. The potion had an odd metallic taste, but wasn’t unpleasant. “Not just yet. I need some food first.”

Dobby instantly popped into existence next to me. “Master Harry’s breakfast and lunch is ready in the dining room,” he said excitedly.

My breakfast and lunch were indeed ready. Next to a wonderfully smelling plate filled with bacon, eggs, sausage, toast and beans was a platter of sandwiches and fruit. You’ve got to give that elf points for trying.

Deciding on a combination, I began picking at the hot, greasy food, and put some bacon and scrambled eggs into a tomato and cheese sandwich. The odd combination of flavours was unusual, but not distasteful, and I munched my way through one and a half rounds before becoming full. Ron, who joined me at the dining table, picked at the remains of my breakfast. Waste not, indeed.

Blaise appeared in the doorway. “Are you ready? I’ve got your will here, but we need to go and see the goblins first. Rilifa at least needs to know that you are alive.”

I nodded, waving my wand and applying a few glamours. I’d have to find something that worked better when it came to disguising my appearance. I suppose I could make myself some boots that changed my height, and perhaps some robes that would make me bulkier. Hell, even if I just appeared to be average in height and build, it would set me apart. Harry Potter was a short, skinny runt of a man, after all. Everyone knew that.

“What do you think?” I asked, turning slightly for her to get a good look.

She made a show of looking me up and down before reaching out and giving my bum a squeeze. “Nice, but you need some more meat on your bones.”

Ron and I shared a glance, and laughed.

Blaise motioned us into the sitting room. “We can take the floo to the main guest room at the bank. My grandfather used to take me there when he was conducting the family business.”

Ron nodded, and grabbed a pinch of powder. “Am I going to be welcome there?”

I snickered. “At first, probably. If we have to admit to our theft, I’d guess not.”

He grinned at me. “The goblins always look grumpy to me. I can’t wait to see a pissed off one. Dibs on telling them first!”

He disappeared into the fireplace. Blaise looked at me with an eyebrow raised. “Are you sure we need to bring him along?”

I nodded with a grin. “If nothing else, he’s a lot of fun.”

She gave me a sour look. “I suppose so. What the hell happened to me? Consorting with Gryffindors!” She gave one last mock harrumph, before jumping into the fireplace herself.

“Dobby!” I called out.

He instantly appeared at my side. “Master Harry called.”

“How long would it take you to get the goblet I gave you to hide?”

Dobby shifted from one leg to another. “Dobby can get it in two minutes.”

I nodded. “I just needed to know, in case I do need to get my hands on it quickly. Now, I need you to get a few things for me and some for yourself.” I proceeded to give my elf a short verbal list of things he would need for my humble plan. He nodded enthusiastically. “Thanks Dobby,” I finished, before stepping into the fireplace myself.

The VIP reception room at Gringotts was just as I remembered from the last time Ron and I were here. That time, we came in the front door. I’d have to remember the floo address for this place.

Ron and Blaise looked at me curiously. “You took your time. Did something happen?”

I shook my head, deciding not to answer them. “Who do we ask to get Rilifa?”

“She knows you are here.”

The three of us turned around to look at the speaker. Flanked by animated stone golem guards, Rilifa still looked as old and frail as I remembered, but held herself with remarkable stoicism and pride. “Two of you, I recognise. But you,” she said, looking directly at me for a long moment before shaking her head. “You I do not. Remove your glamours.”

I looked around the room. Though it was empty, I had no desire to reveal my identity in a room with an active floo connection. “In your office, if you please.”

Her eyes flickered over me, then my companions. “Very well, Mr. Potter. Your friends will have to remain here. Lead the way.”

At the mention of my name, my heart leapt, though with an instant of thought, I could see how she came to that conclusion. I’d told her about dating Blaise on my last visit, and Ron had accompanied me at that time. She’d made a deductive leap, but had instructed me to take the lead to her office. If I was not who she thought, it would have been unlikely that I’d know the way, especially if I couldn’t pick up hints from my friends. Ron gave a half-hearted grunt of disapproval, but shut up when Blaise kicked his leg.

“Righty-ho,” I said jovially, reaching out and taking the leather document folder from Blaise. “Follow me.” I turned and picked out the corridor Ron and I were led down last time. She followed silently until we reached the door to her office.

“You may remove your glamours now, Mr. Potter.”

I glanced around, noting that there was no one in the corridor in either direction. I did as she requested.

Rilifa watched carefully, nodded, and opened the door. “Come in. May I offer you some refreshments? You look rather peaked.”

I kept the surprise I felt at her unexpected hospitality from my features and shook my head. “No, thank you. I just ate.” I carefully lowered myself into the same chair as last time. “What do I have to do to prove who I am?”

She tilted her head to one side. “Prove, Mr. Potter? Why should I require proof?”

That surprised me too. “Because the papers have probably reported my death by now.”

She waved my comment away. “You are not the first wizard to have faked his death. You know one other rather intimately, I understand. Of course, while I can give you advice and so forth, any changes or account access will require our usual, and more rigorous, identification. But let us continue. How can I assist?”

I leaned back in my chair. “I want to be dead to the world for a while. But without a blood heir, I’m afraid that the Potter and Black family assets would be scavenged by other families with a claim by marriage.”

Rilifa nodded. “I see. I can arrange for documentation to be drawn up, stipulating the conditions required to occur before your families’ assets are disbursed. What conditions did you wish to include?”

I shrugged, really wishing Blaise was here. “My goal in this is to prevent any attempt to take control. Since several Wizengamot members are also distantly related through marriage or inbreeding, I could easily imagine them using the law to force you to release control of the Potter and Black vaults.”

She nodded sagely. “For how long do you intend for this deception to continue?”

I raised a hand and wagged it back and forth. “Not sure yet. A year tops.”

“Have you identified your heirs, assuming you do perish during that time?”

I nodded.

“Very well. I shall obtain advice from our legal representatives. Perhaps something along the lines of there being a year and a day for the selected person to come forward to claim their inheritance before any dissolution of the current family assets could occur.”

That sounded good. “I would appreciate that.”

“Your personal assets will also need protection. Have you accounted for that?”

I nodded, opening the document folder. “Blaise drew this up last night. What do you think?”

Rilifa held up a hand, refusing to take it from me. “I am not your legal council, Mr. Potter. I am not qualified to give legal advice in any case.

I nodded slowly, and replaced the will. “All right. I’ll need to make a sizable withdrawal from my personal vault.”

She gestured towards the door. “As is your right. I shall have the documents you requested owed to you by three o’clock. Is there anything else I can assist you with today?” she asked, rising to her feet.

I paused, wondering if I should bring up the continued existence of Draco Malfoy. The comments she made last time I was here about there being some irregularities in his death now made sense. I probably shouldn’t, I decided after a moment’s thought. It bought me nothing to reveal that information, and it still might be useful in the future.

No. Thank you for your time.”

The ancient goblin nodded briefly, and gestured imperiously towards her door, her head already down in a leather-bound ledger.

Ah, the courtesy of goblins. There’s nothing like it in the world.

Ron had to go to a training session, but consented to have a compulsion charm placed on him, to encourage him not to talk about me for now. With his short attention span, he understood the need. At exactly three o’clock, a Gringotts owl arrived, interrupting Blaise and me as we enjoyed some clothing-less time together. The impatient owl’s hoots and scratches soon became distracting, so we dressed and left the bedroom.

The grumpy bird left as soon as we’d relieved it of its burden. Dobby produced a tea set and pair of china cups for us, and we sat down to examine the documents.

The language was very archaic, but precise. As promised, the selected heir to the Potter and Black families must present himself to the goblins with proof of my choice within a year and a day of conformation of my death. The families’ assets would be administered by the goblins during that time, for a significant fee.

I grinned at that. Looks like Rilifa decided to make me pay for the privilege of being dead.

Since my ‘body’ had disappeared, we used a clause from the Gringotts documents in my own personal will, stating that my wishes must be executed only after my remains had been formally laid to rest, or after a year and a day had passed. It was all very solemn and serious. I especially liked the poison pill clause, stipulating that anyone challenging the wills, either on their own behalf or on behalf of another party, would cause that person or party to be excluded completely.

Blaise and I could hardly wait to see the legal gymnastics people would go to, trying to figure out a way around the clauses.

We finished the tea, and then finished our interrupted business.

We lay on the bed, with Blaise’s head on my chest, her breath tickling my chest. Our lovemaking had been frenzied at first, but slowed towards the end as we both simply took pleasure being close again. Once we were spent, we simply lay there, tangled in the sheets, with my arm around her. I let my hand absently draw circles on the freckled skin of her shoulder.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked, breaking the long, comfortable silence.

I sighed. “I missed this so much.”

I could feel her smirk against my chest. “So you should.”

I sighed. “Now that I have you back, I’m finding it hard to muster the anger I felt in Azkaban. Now that I have something to lose, it’s harder to risk it.”

She tilted her head back, looking up at my eyes. “You were put in prison illegally. Now you are out and can expose them. Do you think they would even hesitate to kill you if they had the opportunity?”

I shook my head. I knew I had to fight back to defend myself. “Marry me,” I said on a whim. It just felt right.

That shocked her. Her eyes shot open so wide I was surprised they didn’t fall out. “What?”

“Marry me,” I repeated calmly.

She blinked, momentarily at a loss. “No!” she said emphatically.

It felt like I’d been hit by a bludger. “Wha-?”

She plonked her head down on my chest again, breathing as heavily as she had been half an hour previously. “No.”

“But—”

She reached around and put a finger to my lips. “Listen to me very carefully, Harry. I love you. I’m in love with you. You are crafty, loving, protective and supportive, and I love those things about you. There are things I hate about you too, or rather, there are things that seem to happen to you that I hate. I’m willing to put up with the bad, because the good outweighs it so much. But I never thought I’d be so emotionally wrapped up in someone that news of their death would cripple me. So no, I will not marry you.”

I started to protest, before she firmly put her hand across my mouth.

“Not until you can stay out of trouble for a year. No kidnappings, no assassination attempts, no getting drawn into quests to kill insanely powerful dark wizards. You need to stay out of trouble for a full year, and then I’ll consider marrying you.”

Well shit. Knowing my life, it might as well be ‘No’.

After our little discussion, which we both agreed not to mention again, we prepared for our upcoming visit to one Cornelius ‘I’m A Daft Prick’ Fudge. Blaise had been to his house for a Ministry ball a few years before, and was excited about trashing what she thought were the most tastelessly

decorated rooms in existence.

Fudge's humble abode appeared to be anything but. Situated in a rather nice crescent in the middle of Mayfair, it was a cut above the other humble abodes around it. The gold leaf trim, the marble steps -- one could only come to the conclusion that even in political exile, Fudge wasn't exactly hard done by from his time in office.

Of course, what really struck me was the fact that there was a squad of Aurors crawling over the place like an ant colony.

From the park at the focal point of the crescent, Blaise and I watched as they methodically searched the house and grounds. I had arrived suspecting that I'd have to break through some rather professionally placed wards. Looking at the blackened anchor stone in the front yard, it appeared that the Aurors had done that part of the job for me. Blaise and I shared a long look. "You've been a naughty, naughty boy, Fudge. You've done something to make the Ministry very curious indeed," I whispered to her with a grin.

She smiled back. "Curious enough that a warrant has been issued to search your home. I wonder what it could have been?" she asked rhetorically.

"If I had to guess, I'd have to say it was the fact that there is a blank wall where *The Prison* used to be."

Blaise snickered. "Nice. You know, one of these days, people are going to get the hint not to mess with you."

I lost my smile. "We can only hope. The vast majority of the wizarding world's population are notoriously hard of learning."

We made ourselves comfortable on a nice bench directly opposite Fudge's home, and settled in to watch and wait. Having Aurors around while I confronted Fudge wasn't exactly my plan. Assuming they were in fact looking for *The Prison*, it wouldn't take them too long to determine that their precious painting wasn't in the house. I was rather looking forward to seeing Fudge's reaction when he arrived back home.

The Aurors had obviously either left the Muggle-repellent wards up, or erected new ones after destroying the anchor stone, because every Muggle that did happen to walk down the street studiously ignored the bunch of robed men and women methodically ripping a house apart.

It was a few hours after dark when the man of the hour arrived. We could hear the crack of an apparation from across the road, indicating that someone with more money than talent had arrived in the home. Less than a minute after his arrival, he came charging out of the front door, yelling incoherently at the robed law enforcement officers. The young lass in charge, who was vaguely recognisable by her vibrant neon green and purple hair, tried placating him, with little success. It was nice to see that Tonks was doing well for herself. A couple of other Aurors had to start fingering their wands menacingly for Fudge to get the idea and to bring his voice down to more socially acceptable levels.

Papers were exchanged; the warrant, I presume. More blustering from Cornelius. Man, the idiot was predictable. He gestured towards the blackened remains of the anchor stone for the wards. Even from here I could see him go almost incandescent with fury. Damn, I should have brought some popcorn or something. This show was good. Tonks shrugged and tapped the parchment with her wand, indicating a specific paragraph, I assume.

Blaise leaned closer, slipping her arm through mine. "Ten galleons that piece of paper gives them the right to break any protective wards to gain access to the property."

"No bet," I whispered back, taking in the scene.

Fudge did not look well. His robes were crumpled and sweat stained, his hair was limp and flaccid. He didn't look like he'd slept since I'd forcefully pumped his stomach and given him an enforced nap. I mentally calculated that it had been over thirty-six hours since my escape. Having to deal with the fallout from the prison break would no doubt have taken up much of our dear Cornelius' attention. Somehow though, I just didn't feel sorry for him.

Eventually, Tonks ordered her squad to leave. She seemed to me to have left it a little longer than was strictly necessary. I suspect that being in a position to royally piss off someone who was held in universal disregard was just too tempting. An understandable point of view.

Fudge was all but jumping up and down at that point. Each Auror joined the assembly in the front yard and apparated away. Tonks was the last to leave, and Fudge threw a stinging hex at her just as she apparated. I couldn't tell if he was trying to miss her, or if he was just displaying his usual level of competence, but she was gone before the spell left the wand.

So, either he was just as incompetent in spellcasting as he was at politics, or he needed to feel macho without actually putting himself in any danger. Even money, I suppose.

Fudge gave his wand a thorough examination, before he turned and stormed back into his house, slamming the door behind him.

A grin formed unbidden on my face. I guess his wand spat out a spell the wrong way as some point in the past day and a half. He'd do well to be cautious for a while. I gave Blaise's hand a squeeze. "Time to move. Ready?"

She nodded, but looked nervous.

"Right," I said as we stood, "I'll take the front door, you've got silencing spells and cover." I disillusioned us both.

Carefully, we picked our way through the front gate and got to the front door. I could detect magic residue all over the place, but there was no direction to it. The only functioning magic in the immediate area was the brand spanking new locking charm on the door. I reached out and tried to *pull*, but felt no warmth of power. I wasn't low enough on power to do my new trick.

Instead, I decided to start with a simple '*Alohomora*' and work my way up from there. Fudge never struck me as the sort of person who practises

his casting.

Indeed, the simple unlocking charm worked, and the door swung open. On silent feet, Blaise and I crept into the entryway and paused, listening hard.

Blaise, who had been here once before at a party, led the way. It took less than a minute to find Fudge, who had gravitated to his luxurious sitting room.

I carefully stuck my head through the door to the expensively decorated room. Fudge was mumbling to himself, while pouring a tumbler of firewhiskey. He threw the first glass back without even a shiver, before pouring another. Again, that disappeared. I couldn't help but smirk at seeing such a deserving man destroy himself. After his third glass, his face screwed up, and he hurled the empty tumbler into the fireplace. "Damn you, Potter!" he shouted.

There was an instant of fear at discovery, though it passed quickly. Fudge quickly grabbed another glass and poured another drink. This time, he just took a mouthful, instead of a gulp. "Damn you Potter," he repeated, in a whisper this time.

There was a flash, and in my peripheral vision, I saw a new face appear in the fireplace. "Cornelius! Are you there?"

Fudge, who was facing away from the fireplace at the time, took a deep breath, closed his eyes and held still for a second. If I didn't know better, I'd say he didn't want to talk to his caller. He threw back the tumbler of whiskey he held, then turned and with a fake smile said, "Ophelia! What a pleasant surprise."

Blaise gasped quietly, and gripped my arm tightly. I guess she knows this Ophelia.

"Cornelius! Where the hell have you been? I've been trying to call you for days."

Fudge grunted, and poured himself another shot, spilling some over his hand. "Just some minor trouble at work, my dear. I had to stay over last night to clear it up. It's all sorted now though."

"Well stop drinking and listen. Our false Potter is gone."

I expected him to agree, or at least give a poor imitation of acting surprised. But he actually stumbled and roared, "What?"

The woman called Ophelia flinched. I almost did too. I thought Fudge had ordered my counterpart's death. Apparently not. "It was an assassination. Those damned Europeans came and, well..."

Fudge yelled incoherently and threw his full glass. "What the hell happened?"

"Does it matter? He's dead. I need Potter's body. If they don't find it in the rubble, this will all come crashing down around our ears."

Fudge collapsed into an armchair. "I don't believe it."

"Believe it! You need to fix this. Give Potter the Kiss, and get him to me." The hairs on the back of my neck stood up at her casual dismissal of my soul for her own plausible deniability.

Fudge shook his head, leaned precariously out of his armchair and grabbed the neck of the firewhiskey bottle. "I can't."

"Why on Earth not?"

He looked like a caged animal for a second, before saying, "He's dead. He died while trying to escape."

I turned to look at Blaise and smirked. Even to his own flunkies, he lies.

"Then get me his body immediately!"

He winced, and took another pull. "I can't. There is an audit at the prison. Until it's finished, I can't smuggle the body out."

"Don't be a fool! We can't wait for some idiotic bureaucrat to decide how big his bribe should be." The woman seemed to size Fudge up. "You need to act on this, Cornelius. Holding on to Potter will come back and bite you. And me."

Fudge mumbled, "I know," and took a long pull from the bottle. "How long?"

A pause. "I can give you another day. After that, the rubble will be cleared. If they don't find Potter, there will be questions, and I don't have the answers."

Fudge nodded unsteadily. "I'll contact you then," he said with the imprecision of someone rapidly becoming very intoxicated.

Ophelia pursed her lips, but didn't say anything before signing off. Her face disappeared from the fire. Fudge leaned back in his chair and took another long drink from the bottle. Pathetic.

For a while, Fudge did little more than drink and mumble to himself.

Blaise reached out and pulled my head so that my ear was next to her lips. "That was Ophelia Babcock. She's the administrator of St. Mungo's. Her first husband was Fudge's brother, I think. I can never remember for sure. If she's part of this, then there's no wonder access to the impostor was so

restricted.”

I nodded while watching Fudge drink himself into a stupor. “No, no, no, this can’t be happening,” he mumbled. I almost snorted in amusement. I guess denying reality actually was Fudge’s usual tactic for dealing with the world. I figured it was time for an appearance.

“Ready?” I whispered to Blaise. At her nod, I dispelled the disillusion charms and stepped out boldly into the sitting room. I stood there for a long moment while Fudge’s unfocused eyes finally reported to his brain what they were seeing.

“Potter!” he wheezed, fear in his eyes.

“Why, good evening, Fudge. So good of you to have me here, old boy.” I waved my wand and conjured a comfortable chair. “Do you mind if I sit?”

“Shtupefy!” he slurred, hope glimmering forlornly in his expression. Time to squash that like a bug.

I absently batted the unfocused spell away. It was pathetically easy to do so. His focus had taken a big hit from the drink, even if I’d let the spell hit me it probably wouldn’t have done much more than made me yawn. “Now, now, that’s not polite. If you want to bring the conversation down to that level, well, that sort of thing will cost you,” I said, and hit him with a jolting hex. He yelped at the pain, and all but jumped from his chair. “Now, sit down and let’s have a civilised discussion.”

Stubbornly, he kept his wand out and fired off another spell. Again, I deflected it, and tossed a pair of jolts back, one for each leg. In his current state, he had no way of dodging, and screamed with pain as his legs started twitching uncontrollably. He fell to the floor in what looked to be a most uncomfortable manner.

“Sit down Fudge,” I said tiredly. “On the chair, if you please.”

Growling, he staggered to his feet and started to mouth the Killing Curse. “Avada—“

I *pushed* him backwards over his chair before he finished the incantation. A quick summoning could have taken the wand from his grasp, but I wanted him to understand that even armed, he was nothing more than a minor nuisance to me. He landed hard with a grunt, and then scrabbled on his hands and knees behind the armchair, using it as cover. I Vanished it and drilled him harshly with three jolts.

The gibbering pile of flesh whimpered on the floor. I sighed. “Cut that shit out. It’s getting old. The next spell earns you four jolts.”

“What do you want?” he whined piteously. “You’ve won. You’ve left me with nothing.”

I smiled lazily at him. “Oh, Cornelius, I haven’t even started the game ‘Let’s Take Everything Fudge Has’.”

He raised his head, looking at me incredulously. “What? You’ve destroyed my political career. I’ve lost my job. My family will disown me. What more can you take?”

“My property, to start with,” I said through clenched teeth.

He actually looked as though he was going to negotiate with me. “I have your wand in my sh-shafe,” he started, blinking rapidly.

“Assuming the Aurors haven’t confiscated the contents,” I pointed out.

He shook his head. “It’s blood warded.”

“Well then, by all means, open it,” I replied. “Of course, if you display any antisocial tendencies, I’ll have to take steps.”

He swallowed nervously, but rose unsteadily to his feet and hobbled across the room to the safe. He gave it a series of taps with his wand, and the metal door swung open. He reached in, but paused.

“If you are thinking what I think you are thinking, don’t even think about it.”

He took a second, but apparently decided that discretion truly was the better part of living like a coward. He withdrew the wand I’d nicked from some German fellow in Albania and tossed it to me.

I let it fall to the floor, where I ground it under my heel, splintering the wood. “Don’t want it,” I snapped. “It’s not mine. No, what I really want are the items in my backpack I had when you kidnapped me,” I clarified.

He almost deflated. “I don’t have them,” he said, before tensing up and screwing his eyes tightly together, expecting some pain.

I ground my teeth together, though I had expected as much. “Don’t be such a baby. I knew you’d hardly keep valuable things like that. Not when you could exchange them for favours or large amounts of money. I do want them back, however, so give me some names.”

Fudge swallowed. “I sold them,” he whispered.

“I figured that out for myself,” I snarled. “Look at me!”

He glanced up, the armies of fear and paranoia marching in step behind his eyes.

Pushing with Legilimency, I asked, “To who?” I demanded. Had Hermione been present, she would probably have corrected my English by saying,

To whom?’

He swallowed. “Croaker. He impounded the invisibility robe.”

I got a flash of truth from the name, but a definite lie from the rest. I almost smiled. The lengths to which this man would go to avoid responsibility were truly amazing.

“An odd definition you have for the word ‘impounded’. Normally it doesn’t involve receiving money in return. Who else?” I demanded.

His jaw worked for a few seconds before any sound emerged. “Anashtasia Royshten,” he slurred.

Ah, now there was a name I recognised. “What did she buy?”

“Your cloak.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And the gloves? The rest?”

Fudge started to sweat profusely. “I pawned them. To Borgin and Burkesh.”

I snarled at him. “I also want the names of the two guards who tormented me in Azkaban.”

This time he sighed and shook his head. “They’re dead. Killed in the shtampeed.” I got a strong sense of truth from my Legilimency.

“And finally, who was the embassy official who gave me the portkey?”

Fudge cringed. “No, please leave him alone.”

“His name,” I demanded.

“Ogilvey,” Fudge replied, a bit too quickly. I got a distinct flash of a lie.

I hit him four times with the jolting hex. It took nearly a minute for him to stop quivering.

“Next time you lie, it goes up to five.”

“Babcock,” he whimpered. This time, I got a strong, fearful truth feeling. Hmm, nice to know he was human enough to care about his relatives. “But he doeshe’n’t know ‘bout thish.”

I rose from my seat. “I don’t care. Are there any others who knew I was at Azkaban?”

Fudge shook his head. Once more, I got a sensation of truth. It must be killing his inner politician, having to tell so much truth in one go.

“Excellent. Well then, let’s get on with things, shall we?”

He actually cringed and covered his head with his hands. I think I’ll bottle this memory and sell it. “Oh, stop that. We’re going to have a little talk about what else I’m going to take from you.”

Fudge looked at me incredulously. “I don’ have anythin’ elshe!” he reiterated.

I gave my wand a flick, sending him flying to the last remaining chair in the room. He seemed a tad nervous, so I levitated the half-empty bottle of firewhiskey over to him. “Oh, you’d be surprised.”

Fudge took it and swallowed maybe half the remaining contents. Without a cough even. Impressive.

I trust you noticed that there was a blank spot on the wall of your office?” I asked.

He frowned, and nodded mutely.

“Well, the Cummersleigh that used to grace your office is now in my possession. Tell me, what would happen if it came to light that you exchanged it to pay off your debts?”

“Wha?” he exclaimed. “Bu’ I n’v’r—”

I rolled my eyes. “I know that, and you know that, but the public? Fickle creatures, aren’t they? Skeeter would be delighted to grind your name even further into the dirt.”

Fudge shook his head. “No pr’f,” he said, drooling slightly. If I wanted this interview to go on much longer, I’d need to get his stomach pumped.

I let a slow, predatory grin flood my face. “Oh, but there is. I have your wand. It’s amazing what a wand signature can accomplish.”

He paled even further, going almost Snape-esque. “No!” he said hoarsely.

“Oh, yes. How do you think people would react to that? More importantly, how would our wonderful Auror force react? This house is worth a pretty penny. They may just confiscate it.”

"Tha'sh illegal!"

I snickered. "Just how long do you think it would take for Rufus to pass a law allowing it? Hours? Minutes?"

He whimpered. "Pl's, no," he begged.

"Oh, come on Fudge, grow a pair, eh? We're only just beginning."

He looked at me incredulously. "Huh?"

"I've only just made you homeless. Let's discuss how I'm going to turn you into a pariah." I gestured at the fireplace. "Ophelia Babcock? The administrator of St. Mungo's? Your sister-in-law, I believe. If she finds out that I'm alive and out of your clutches, exactly how fast do you suspect she would cover her arse?"

He shook his head so fast his jowls flapped from side to side, unable to deny it verbally.

"Especially when the press discovers that you smuggled a prisoner out, no doubt due to rumours of a hefty deposit to your Gringotts account," I continued.

"There wash no deposhit," he exclaimed.

"I know that, you know that, but the pathetic sheeple out there? Oh, they'd love to believe it. You could deny it under Veritaserum and even produce goblin-certified proof that you didn't receive a bribe, and they'll just believe it all the more. I know; because you used that sort of crap against me, remember?"

"Dey won't believe you," he insisted.

"Maybe. They would believe someone who was pure-blooded, from an old family, who was above reproach though."

"Who?"

"Say hello, sweetie."

Blaise stepped into the room, a smirk on her face and her wand in her hand. "Nice to meet you again, Fudge."

He frowned for a second, trying to place her. "M'ss Zab'i?"

She nodded. "You have no idea how much my career is going to rocket after I have a chat with Administrator Babcock tomorrow. She's always had it in for us Slytherins, but I see that turning around real soon."

He slumped. "I..."

"Oh, do shut up, you pathetic waste of flesh. You could offer me nothing that I couldn't get just by telling her that I know about what you've done. When I let her know I'm partial to blackmail, well, I could be the youngest person ever appointed to the St. Mungo's Board of Directors. Imagine that!" she said, moving over to his open safe. With care, she cheerfully examined the contents, picking out some documents and a money pouch. "You don't mind if I help myself, do you? What with my rich boyfriend being in Azkaban for the past three months, I've had to use my *own* money to pay for things, if you can believe that. I figure you owe me."

Fudge actually started to object, before gaping like a goldfish looking for food. It was nice to see Blaise at work. She had her Great-grandfather's sense of nastiness, with an ambitious streak the size of Draco's ego, only with enough talent to make her dangerous.

"Oh, look at this," she said, unrolling one of the sheets of parchment. "You have been a naughty boy."

Fudge looked bewildered, his attention switching between us rapidly as he finally realised that there was absolutely no way out of his situation. "Sho tha'sh it?" He began weeping to himself.

I rose from the chair. "Oh, don't be absurd. Of course that's not all."

His incredulous look was simply beautiful to my soul. His red-rimmed eyes were wide with disbelief. Time to sink the final boot in.

"I fully expect you to still have some pitiful remains of political capital to burn. The dirt you have on those still in power could carry you through any punishment levied for your crimes. No, my final revenge will appear next time you step out in public."

Despite his terror, he couldn't help but be curious.

I stepped over and dropped to one knee, lowering my face to his. "Imagine the general public's reaction when they discover that you were willing to kidnap their hero, unjustly holding him in Azkaban for months, just to get your hands on Voldemort's remains, so you could bring him back to life." I rose to stand tall in front of his face. "Think about all the hexes and curses you'll be getting in the mail the next morning, from people howling for your blood. Imagine the target painted on your back when you wander around Diagon Alley, or even the Ministry. Now, I imagine that you could take steps to protect yourself from the general public, though you really should worry about your allies. You know, those people you have dirt on. The very people who were your friends while you gave them what they wanted. They'd probably notice that just about every person in the country has a motive to hurt you, and take the opportunity to permanently silence you while there are so many people with a motive." I grinned nastily at him. "You are an embarrassment, Fudge, and everyone will know it. And in your final moments, perhaps you really should take a lesson to heart you should

have learned long ago.”

“Wha--?” he blurted dumbly.

I grabbed a fistful of his robes, and pulled him close to my face. “Don’t. Ever. Fuck. With. Me,” I said, enunciating every word.

I let him go suddenly and stood, reaching into my robes and withdrawing his broken wand. I tossed it down on the carpet in front of him and gave him a condescending sneer. Blaise however, felt the need to reiterate something that Fudge may have missed.

“Oh, don’t worry, Fudge. You’re far too useful for us to just destroy like that. No, we’ve just got a few things for you to do. We don’t want to do them ourselves, since they’re exceedingly illegal, not to mention life-threatening. But now you know what’s hanging over you, you’ll do them without hesitation, won’t you?”

I wasn’t even halfway through my next breath before Fudge put his unbroken wand to his head and cast the spell that ended his life.

Master Potter
Cloudy, with a chance of freak explosions

Blaise swallowed, her expression grim. "It's over," she said, looking pale but determined.

I nodded. "He knew I was alive. He would have tried to kill me. He had to die."

"I know."

There was an uncomfortably long pause.

"It's better that we convinced him it was better to take his own life."

"I know," she repeated, staring down at Fudge's body.

Another pause. "The alternative was either a compulsion charm encouraging him to kill himself or for one of us to kill him," I added, probing tentatively. "Both would have left evidence."

"I know," she said mechanically a third time.

We both stood silently for a few more moments. Nothing I said was going to make things better. "Right," I said eventually, "I'll look in his study and bedroom; you take the library. I doubt that there's anything of value outside the safe, but you know what to look for."

She nodded, and turned without a word. I guess seeing someone kill themselves in front of you would be a little disconcerting. I spared the corpse one final glance, before beginning my own search.

As the fifteen stone lump of fat and protein gently cooled in the next room, I carefully rifled through his effects, taking care not to move anything I couldn't replace. Besides a lot of letters between Fudge and members of some highly prominent families, there wasn't a lot of raw material. Besides some minor blackmail opportunities, the letters were benign. After half an hour, I wandered into the library and looked questioningly at Blaise. She shook her head.

"Nothing really. The stuff from the safe is the real gold."

I nodded. "Are you all right?"

She clenched her jaw. "Let's talk about this later, shall we?"

I nodded. "All right. Are you ready for some pyrotechnic redecorating?"

That put a smile on her face, tentative though it was.

Disillusioned in the park, we watched as the Muggle fire fighters struggled to put out the flames that consumed the house. A large number of wealthy subjects of Her Majesty milled around a hastily erected corral in their nightclothes, watching their neighbour's house go up in flames. Not one of them paid any attention to the modified howler screaming from a protected portion of the house.

"PURE BLOOD BIGOTS BEWARE! YOUR TIME HAS COME! PURE BLOOD BIGOTS BEWARE! YOUR TIME HAS COME!"

Hermione had done well, ensuring that no Muggle would even notice the magnified voice. I admit, it was less than subtle, but sometimes you had to really hit a wizard over the head for them to get a message.

The bewildered firemen were having a great deal of difficulty with the enchanted fire. For some inexplicable reason, it refused to be extinguished, it didn't seem to be spreading to the houses next door, and seemed to be fairly contained, despite the intense heat. It wasn't until some wizards showed up that the fire was extinguished.

Blaise craned her head and checked my watch. "Eight minutes and twelve seconds between alarm and arrival. A pretty poor effort."

I shrugged. "Maybe, but it's good for us. If that is their usual response time, I can use that well enough. Once more prominent pure bloods get attacked, the time will go down."

She stiffened briefly, but quickly relaxed. I took a stab at what was bothering her.

"You don't have to come along with me if you'd prefer not to."

She didn't reply. She just held my hand tighter and sat silently, as we watched Fudge's place burn to the ground.

I stretched myself awake, feeling the cool air of the bedroom on my exposed arms. Besides me, the bed was empty.

I glanced at the clock. Blaise would have gone to work. We hadn't spoken about Fudge since leaving the scene; she had been oddly silent all night. We had cuddled platonically in bed; neither of us had felt any sort of arousal.

I suspected that she was beginning to have second thoughts. After all I'd been through, I wasn't prepared to continue to be a doormat to the world. Blaise however, had only involved by proxy up to now. And she hadn't even had the five years of Hogwarts adventures that Ron and Hermione had shared with me.

I rose, showered and dressed. Hedwig was waiting for me at the breakfast table with a copy of the Prophet. "Good morning, girl. Let's see what you have there," I said, turning on the wireless.

As gentle music drifted over me, I munched through Dobby's cooking, looking at the paper's headlines. I was expecting some spin, but I could hardly believe even the headline.

ANOTHER HERO MURDERED

Comelius Fudge, ousted two years ago as Minister for Magic under dubious circumstances, was brutally murdered at his Mayfair home last night.

Emergency workers dispatched to the scene uncovered the gruesome find after battling a magical blaze set to cover the murderer's tracks. A modified howler was left on the ex-Minister's body, warning of future attacks on prominent members of society.

The investigating Aurors refused to comment on the crime.

Wizengamot member Anastasia Royston, a long time friend and supporter of Fudge, told of her devastation at hearing the news.

"He was a great man, a great wizard, who had the poor luck of simply being the Minister at the most difficult time in recent history. He will be remembered as a fine, upstanding wizard who did his utmost to serve the people of this country," she said from her Blackpool residence.

Minister Rufus Scrimgeour insisted that the population was safe. "This crime will not go unpunished. Our Aurors will find the perpetrators, and bring them to justice. We did not survive years of terror courtesy of Lord <redacted> simply to roll over at a new threat."

Not everyone shared the Minister's confidence. Several prominent members of the Wizengamot and Department Heads have petitioned the Minister for greater funding for Auror forces.

Comelius Fudge was most recently the Warden of Azkaban. He had come under intense fire from the Ministry for two recent ward failures at the maximum-security prison, the second of which resulted in the much publicised attempted mass breakout. Fudge had emphatically denied any wrongdoing on his part, or on the part of his staff for the failure of security.

Continued on page 2.

I turned the page. From the quotes on the page, it certainly hadn't taken long for the pure-blooded bigots to start yowling for help once they were the targets. Already, after just one attack, it sounded as though they were shitting themselves. Their hypocrisy was already on show, they certainly didn't call for more Auror funding when Voldy and Co. were only attacking Muggles and Muggleborn.

One interesting bit of information from the article was that the Royston matriarch lives in Blackpool, so that should probably be my next stop. The fact she had my invisibility cloak meant that she would be receiving a visit from me sooner rather than later, but having her name so prominently associated with Fudge would provide a nice cover for my next attack.

Rufus seemed to be developing a spine, if he was referring to Voldemort by name. After a few more attacks, I might have to pay him a visit to scare him, if only to add to the perception that none of them were safe.

I skimmed the rest of the article. The actual story didn't sound much like what had actually happened, so I didn't bother trying to wrest many details from it. There was nothing about missing artefacts and documents from a blood-warded safe, nothing about the Aurors breaking the wards an hour before his demise, or anything about his idiocy that cost the Wizarding World more than it could imagine.

The news on my apparent death was on pages three, five and seven. My body had still not been recovered (obviously), but there had been twelve reported sightings of me all over the country. Oh, and a further three people had actually claimed to *be* me. One had even gone so far as to etch a lightning bolt into his forehead. Pity it was on the wrong side. He really needed to do his research better. Oddly, those people hadn't gone to the goblins for access to my wealth, probably because as much as they enjoyed the notoriety, they probably enjoyed life more.

My plans had revolved around staying dead in the public's mind. However, if there were a number of 'Harry Sightings' each day, then it probably wouldn't hurt to appear in front of the odd witch out in the country, or couple on a romantic date. No one would take their claims seriously, and the more it happened, the less people would pay attention. Maybe I could even get Luna to convince her father to run a game in the Quibbler. The best 'Potter Spotter' of the week wins a prize.

It was something to think about. I ate my breakfast in silence while formulating plans.

I wonder how many Dark Lords plotted over Eggs Benedict.

I was mentally miles away when Ron's voice intruded on my thoughts. I blinked in surprise at the fact that he was talking on the radio. I'd missed part of his rant through my inattention.

"Absolutely! They are completely out of line!" Ron said with conviction.

"Um, yes, Mr. Weasley, but as I said, we were in fact looking to speak with—"

"And another thing," Ron interrupted. *"I was there when Fudge was first told What's-His-Name was back, and he refused point blank to believe it. And after a year, he finally had to admit it anyway! You know, when he actually turned up in the Ministry building. I was there too! And you know what? All these same people did then was to hand out leaflets telling people how to hide."*

I winced. In his haste to get air time, Ron wasn't exactly being clear. He sounded far too excited to actually be interviewed on the radio, and his subject matter jumped around.

"That is a point of view, certainly," the announcer said diplomatically, trying to shut Ron up. *"As the man who became Cornelius Fudge's successor, could I speak with your fa—"*

"One bloody attack on a cretin and they're falling over themselves to demand personal protection," Ron continued, talking over the poor fellow. *"Seriously, entire Muggle-born families were slaughtered in their sleep for years, and these people couldn't give a stuff. What's up with that?"*

I sighed. Subtle-Ron was still a fair way off. Maybe a century or two.

The announcer finally managed to get Ron to hand over control of the fire to Mr. Weasley, who took over the interview with far greater tact and diplomacy. He reiterated that he felt in no more danger this morning than he had yesterday, and that he trusted that the Aurors were up to the task of protecting society.

A rational, calming influence after Ron's outburst.

Damn.

Hermione arrived through the fire soon after Ron's outburst ended. I had finished breakfast and was flicking through the rest of the paper.

"Morning, 'Mione," I said.

She swallowed nervously. "H-Harry, did you... I mean, I know you didn't, but I need to know if you..."

I looked at her intently. Her posture screamed discomfort, and she looked on the verge of bolting. "What, Hermione?" I asked, knowing exactly what she was trying to articulate.

She lowered her gaze. "I, I read today's paper. Is it true?" she finished in a whisper.

I sighed deeply, realising something very fundamental. "It's the Prophet. In my experience, it gets things true only by accident," I replied, turning my attention back to the paper in question.

She actually started sobbing. "You said you were just going to neutralise him. I thought you meant you were going to oblivate him."

I dropped the tabloid and rose to my feet. "And then you read the paper and found that he had been murdered," I finished for her.

She nodded quickly. She looked up at me tentatively, her eyes red rimmed with tears. "Please tell me you didn't."

An old, familiar feeling stirred in my gut. The anger I harboured for so long after leaving Hogwarts began to return. "Why should I?" I demanded, my voice rising. "Don't you remember why I left the Wizarding world in the first place? Well? I was sick of having to justify myself every time someone said something about me. Now you've come here and demand the same thing?"

She burst into tears. "Oh, Harry, I don't believe it, but I'm scared it's true," she babbled.

I gave a derisory snort and made a dismissive gesture. "You know what? You seem to be more worried about people who tried to kill me than about me."

That got her angry, even through her tears. It was *good* to see her fire again. "Damn it Harry, I don't give a stuff about Fudge!" she shouted. "He can rot for all I care. I'm worried about you! I'm terrified that you are turning into a murderer, and I don't want that to happen."

My expression softened, but I wasn't prepared to back down entirely. "Ron didn't need to ask, he just believed in me."

"I'm not Ron."

"You just need to know."

She nodded. "I need to know."

I sighed, and shook my head. "No, I didn't kill him. I explained some things to him, and threatened that I was going to be using him in the future. He decided that death was preferable to being manipulated by someone who didn't care whether he lived or died, so he suicided." I tilted my head to one side. "I didn't even have to put a compulsion on him. He actually had the balls to end it himself."

She swallowed. I could tell that the truth was closer to her fears than she wanted, but still far enough from them that she was placated somewhat. She nodded. "Thank you," she whispered.

I raised an eyebrow. "That's it?"

"You were expecting something else?"

"Well, yeah, demands for proof at least."

She shook her head. "No, I trust you, Harry, I really do. I just needed to *hear* it from you. I couldn't stop the images in my mind of you murdering someone."

I stepped over and put my arm around her shoulders. She slipped both arms around my chest and held me tightly.

"From the way you jumped on board my little conspiracy, I assumed that you would be all for anything that attacked the Ministry."

She sniffed. "Not that part of the Ministry."

I ran my hand up and down her back. "What happened to you? What did the Ministry do?"

She stiffened. "I can't tell you. Not yet."

I sighed. I'd been thinking about what happened to her ever since I saw her condition. Something medical, something she didn't want me to know, something that could emotionally cripple her. Time to let her know I could still use my mind. I picked the most probable cause I could think of. "You were pregnant," I said, more a statement of fact than a question.

She gave a sort of strangled gasp and pulled back. "How did you...?"

I swallowed stoically through the sudden icy tendrils around my heart. "Deduction," I said shortly.

Tears welled in her eyes again, and she clutched at my chest once more. "I'm so sorry!" she wailed.

I extracted myself from her embrace and led her to the sitting room by the hand. I pushed her down on one of the sofas and sat next to her, gathering her slight frame in my arms again. "You think I'm going to be angry about it, or that I'll hate you," I said matter-of-factly. "That could mean that the baby wasn't mine, or that you lost it through something you did."

She shook her head, burrowing deep into my embrace. "Please stop."

I forced the split in my mind as my rage threatened to overwhelm me. "The way Blaise and Ron acted on the night I returned indicates that the baby was mine. You are angry at the Ministry, or at least, someone in the Ministry. So that tells me who is responsible for—"

"It was Croaker," she said with her face buried in my chest.

"Croaker, the Unspeakable," I clarified. Her nod, I asked, "What in Merlin's name did he do?"

She was silent for a long while. "He summoned me to the Ministry to be interviewed about what I knew about the Horcruxes. He slipped a potion in my tea that made me erratic. Blaise and your old Master think it was to make you come home to make sure I was alright."

I stiffened. Potions that controlled or influenced emotions did weird things to your hormones. "It was the potion that...?"

She started weeping softly again, clutching me tighter. It was all the answer I needed.

"Why did he want me back? What the fuck was so important?" I demanded, before working the answer out for myself. "Those bloody Horcruxes. He wanted to know what I knew about them."

Hermione nodded, still crying softly.

"Damn him," I growled, my anger rising to new heights in moments. Hermione gripped me even more tightly and held me down.

"Don't. Please!" she pleaded.

"He killed our baby!"

She refused to let me go. "This is why I didn't want to tell you! I don't want you to do something you'll regret!"

I closed my eyes briefly and took stock. I was breathing very heavily, as though I'd just got back from a Quidditch training session. I held out one hand, noting that my fingers were trembling badly. Hermione was right. Acting now would be a bad idea. Acting when I'd calmed down and had thought through the consequences would be better. Well, worse for Croaker.

"All right," I said, relaxing muscles I didn't know I'd tensed. "Have you pressed charges?"

“I can’t. He’s got immunity.”

“Huh? Immunity from what?”

She sniffed again, and pulled away enough to look into my eyes. “You can’t press charges against an Unspeakable for anything they do in the course of an investigation, their actions are considered protected. There’s nothing the law can do. Tonks was kind enough to explain that to me when I was at my worst.”

“Fucking wonderful. Yet another delightful aspect of the Wizarding world that needs fixing. I’ll add it to the list, shall I?” I asked rhetorically. She struggled from my grip, and stood up. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m sorry Harry, I can’t... I didn’t want... I need to be alone,” she said through her tears, before disappearing.

I paused. Following was probably the chivalrous thing to do, but she wasn’t the only one who needed to be alone with their thoughts. I needed to decide what to do about this. I summoned my coat and apparated away.

I was in a foul mood for the rest of the morning. I wandered around London’s parks, kicking pebbles and scaring pigeons and small children.

Croaker had all but murdered an unborn child with his wilful neglect. He had put Hermione’s health at risk, simply to get me to come home from a trip early. That sort of blind arrogance in someone in a position of power was supremely dangerous. That he was protected from any consequences to his actions was completely believable, given my experience of the Wizarding world, and totally unnecessary.

As angry as I was with politicians and bureaucrats in general, some of my anger was directed at me.

I certainly wasn’t ready to be a father, and the instant Hermione had confirmed that she had indeed been pregnant, I felt a flash of relief that she had miscarried. I studied the feeling tentatively, not particularly wanting to discover something like this about myself.

I could tell myself that I didn’t want to bring a child into the world now. Or that it would be in danger simply because if who sired it. Or that I would be a bad father, like Vernon. I thought up a dozen reasons that explained why I could have felt that sensation of relief, but there was only one that was true.

I had enjoyed my life since finishing my NEWTs. Despite being dragged into another idiotic quest to fight Riddle’s legacy, I had finally been living my life. Enjoying my responsibility-free time.

And I didn’t want that to stop. I didn’t want the responsibility that went with parenthood just yet.

And finally, I was pretty sure I didn’t want Hermione to be the mother of my children.

Once or twice during the morning I was on the verge of apparating to the Ministry and confronting the Unspeakable. Each time, I contented myself with a fantasy of somehow punishing him painfully.

Eventually, however, I calmed down. The most damaging thing I could do to these bastards was to bring my plan to fruition. Breaking cover and charging in half-cocked would do nothing in the long term, no matter how satisfying. No, I added Croaker’s sins to my mental list of trespasses against me, and tried to put it out of my mind.

I spent the afternoon in London, lingering in various Muggle shops that dealt with wigs, makeup and disguises. Ironically, I discovered that it was their so-called ‘magic’ shops that provided the best equipment. I figured that appearing with non-magical disguises when I went hunting was the best way to prevent accidental unmasking. A simple *Finite Incantatem* could remove a glamour, but not makeup. I spent a great deal of money on some very pretty things.

By the time I got home, darkness was falling. I took my purchases upstairs to my room and practised making myself look different. My efforts were largely successful, in that they changed my appearance. They did little to make me unremarkable. I looked like a panda after my first attempt.

It was getting late by the time I gave up and simply combined a wig and false nose with liberal use of glamours. It made me look different, but I smoothed out the imperfections with illusions. I told myself that I’d get better with practise, and that it wasn’t bad for a first go, but damn it was annoying to waste an hour putting on makeup only to have to wipe it off and start again repeatedly.

I picked up a few things, and apparated to Diagon Alley.

Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes in Diagon Alley looked very like I last remembered. Though it was late evening, more than one owl arrived unburdened and left carrying a parcel, so it looked like business was still good.

Deciding to surprise the twins, I carefully removed the obvious locking charm on the front door, and then spent a minute or so gently removing the rest of the enchantments. Well, the ones that I knew about, anyway. Gritting my teeth, I silenced the door and entered.

Nothing. No bangs, no flashes, no unexpected transfigurations.

I was vaguely disappointed. The twins were losing their touch.

The entire store floor was dark and silent. The only light in the store came from behind Butt, giving the statue a sort of whole body halo. I made my way over to the statue and whispered “Voldemort’s a wanker.” Butt obligingly grinded out of the way.

One of the twins was making notes in a ledger, while the other was seeing to a line of three owls, carefully assembling an order and tying it to the relevant bird. Both turned to face me on my entrance. My disguises did their job, since they drew their wands in an identical, threatening flourish. A fair reaction, given the fact that I had my own out and ready.

“Who are you?” they demanded in unison.

I grinned. “The Ghost of Christmas Past,” I replied in a harsh whispered voice.

That didn’t go down well.

“Should we call the Aurors, Fred?”

“Maybe later, George. I think we should take advantage of this trespasser.”

“Oh, absolutely, Fred. How many experimental wheezes to we need to test?”

Before answering, George snapped his wand in my direction. An intense seven second flurry of magical energy followed as spells were exchanged.

“I’ve told you two before that you need to vary your tactics,” I said in my usual voice, pulling off my wig and false nose. “When you two fight together, you always use the same opening combination. Being able to fight effectively in a co-ordinated manner means nothing if your opponent knows what to expect.” I removed my remaining glamours with a wave of my wand.

“Mmammmfff,” they said, indistinctly.

“Yes, yes, your opening salvo combination is exceedingly likely to overwhelm an unprepared opponent, perhaps even one ready and expecting an attack. That is exactly what we designed it for. But as I just demonstrated, a modified Aegis charm works perfectly well to deflect both initial hexes, and a pair of overlapping duelling shields negate the three following curses, making it trivial for me to counter-attack in the time it takes you to recover,” I continued, most amused at the sight in front of me.

My spells had the pair lip-locked, with their arms stuck tightly around the other. They were struggling mightily to free themselves from the embrace, which only added to the scene.

“Fred, you need to keep you wrist straighter. George, you need to kick your brother’s arse every now and again. He’s getting lazy.”

With that, I wandered over to the triangular table and sat down at the visitor’s end. I threw my discarded disguises onto the table and put my feet up. “Are you two ready to talk, or did you want to curse each other some more?”

“Mmmmpfffff!”

I gave my wand a wave, removing the enchantments. Immediately, the twins burst apart, coughing and spluttering.

“Fred, you really need to use the mouthwash you got for Christmas,” George complained, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Likewise, brother mine.”

“Good. Now that we’ve established that, what shall we do with the dead man walking in our shop?”

“Ask him just how he is actually alive, perhaps?”

I chuckled at their banter. “Hello? Boy-Who-Lived, remember?” I said, pointing at my chest with my thumb.

“Harry!” they burst out, leaping forward and grabbing me in a dual hug. I only just managed to get my feet down in time to avoid being knocked over backwards.

“Ugh, guys, you weren’t kidding about the mouthwash thing.”

“You know what this means, Gred?”

“I think I do, Forge. But I’m not sure we can get our hands on a colony of Veela at this time of night.”

I shrugged myself out of their embrace. “Nice to see my death hasn’t affected you at all. How’re things?”

“Oh, no, you don’t get out of it that easily! What the hell happened?”

I smiled wickedly, and gestured at the table. “Take a seat guys, you’re going to need it.”

They sat. I spoke.

“Let me get this straight,” George finally said, once I’d finished my tale. “You were kidnapped, held in…” he paused and shook his head disbelievingly before continuing, “in Azkaban for three months, stole a priceless work of art, escaped, and made old Fudgie believe you would blackmail him so badly that he preferred to commit suicide. And if that isn’t enough, you want to remain dead for a year. Is that about right?”

I nodded happily. "Pretty much. The year thing might be a bit inaccurate. That's about the longest I want to stay dead."

Fred actually pouted and gave a juvenile whine. "I want to prank the world like you!"

I snickered. "Well, I do have some plans involving the humiliation and impoverishment of a certain group of people, who may just happen be pure-blood bigots. It's not exactly a *harmless* prank though. While there are a few tedious tasks I need someone to do, I do expect that in the meantime there will be large amounts of mayhem and chaos. Enormous explosions may well feature. At least, I hope so. Are you both, mayhap, interested?"

Hook. Line. Sinker.

Hermione's house was dark.

It was with trepidation that I stepped out of her fire. We needed to finish the conversation that she'd walked out of, but I sure as hell didn't want to. But, if our relationship had taught me anything, it was never to let a ruinous conversation go unfinished.

I stood there in the dim light working up the courage to speak to her when the lights flicked on, momentarily blinding me.

"Harry?"

"Hi, Hermione," I said, blinking, holding my hand up in front of my eyes. As they got used to the sudden illumination, I noted that Hermione was wearing the same clothes that she had been wearing this morning. Her hair was rumpled. Well, more rumpled than usual. With my hand up, I could see my watch. It was after midnight.

She swallowed, but lowered her wand. "What are you doing here?"

"I—, you know, I'm not entirely sure."

That brought a small smile to her face. "I hoped you'd come over."

I looked around the room and picked an armchair to sit in, gesturing to another for her. It was a deliberate choice. I wanted her to be comfortable, but equally wanted to keep out of reach. The rest of our interrupted conversation from this morning needed to be conducted at arm's length.

She sat in the indicated chair, looking resigned. "Am I going to read about some Ministry attack in the paper tomorrow?"

I shook my head, burying the flash of anger at her lack of faith in me. I had been fantasising about exactly that scenario for a sizable part of the day. "I doubt it. Not unless someone else independently decides to take the initiative." I paused. "Or the twins decide to surprise me. That's possible too."

Her head rose in surprise. "You've told the twins that you're alive?"

I nodded with a smirk, and related my latest Weasley adventure. The mental image of Fred and George kissing even got her to giggle a bit. We sat in comfortable silence for almost a minute before she continued. "I'm sorry I ran out again. I wanted to wait until this was over before telling you, but you figured it out and all the memories just came flooding back."

I nodded, sobering up quickly. "I understand. No, wait, I can't say that. I understand how I feel, but I imagine that you feel a lot worse."

She smiled weakly. "Thank you, but I've had several weeks to come to terms with it. You've had a day."

I swallowed. "Right, now that we've had a chance to justify the other's feelings, can we talk about this?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, with a nod. "Okay," she said in a childish voice.

"When did you find out?"

"Five weeks after you killed Snape," she replied. "You were gallivanting around, looking for the remaining Horcruxes. I was feeling run down and exhausted, and went to Madam Pomfrey to get checked. While I was there, Professor Dumbledore came down to see me. I think he has the Map."

Naturally. "I thought Ron gave it to Ginny?"

"He did. But you know the Headmaster."

I sighed. "Yeah, I suppose I do. What did he say?"

Hermione swallowed again. "He was apologetic, but insistent. He said there was someone in his office who wanted to speak to me."

"Croaker?"

She nodded. "He gave me a sort of official speech, and then invited me to the Ministry the next day to do a proper interview. Professor Dumbledore looked surprised at that, and objected on my behalf, but Croaker insisted."

"And we all know what you are like at defying authority," I said with a wry grin.

She took a second to see if I was making fun of her, before accepting the small jab with good grace. "I know. I agreed, went there, and answered

his questions. We spoke for a long time about how the fake locket was protected, but he was very eager to talk to you. I told him that we weren't on speaking terms at the time, that you wouldn't come back just because I asked you to. That surprised him a bit. It was then that I made a big mistake. I clarified my answer and said that I'd have to be in some distress for you to come back. I only meant that it would take something more important than just me asking, but he left the room, then came back with the spiked tea, and asked me more questions about you."

I wasn't sure I was quite comfortable with being the object of interest to someone who had no accountability. "Anything interesting?"

Hermione made a face and tilted her head from side to side. "Yes and no. He wanted to know everything about the diary, but wasn't interested at all in the basilisk. He asked what I knew about Ravenclaw's journal, and how you destroyed it. He was *very* interested in Voldemort's resurrection. Even after I showed him every memory I had of you talking about it, he wanted to know more. I couldn't tell him much about Nagini, or about the locket. I only saw the fake."

I leaned back in the chair and nodded. "It sounds like he really is just interested in the Horcruxes and how they are used. How did you feel after taking the tea?"

She shuddered. "At first, not too bad. I just thought the tea was poor quality. I began to feel anxious within about an hour, after which he just sort of lost interest in me. For days afterwards, I got progressively worse; I argued with my parents, with Blaise, I even thought about dropping out of university."

"Wow, that's a powerful potion," I jested weakly.

"It's not funny, Harry. I was a raving and shrieking mess before Ron came to visit. He almost knocked me out to take me to Madam Pomfrey. I was in the infirmary when I miscarried," she finished in a whisper.

I felt my hands clench into fists unconsciously. Once more, I was ready to hurt someone. "I'm sorry. I wish I was there."

She shook her head sadly. "You were in St. Mungo's by... no, you were in prison. There was nothing you could have done."

"That doesn't stop me wishing differently," I pointed out.

She smiled softly. "Thank you."

We sat in silence for a time. While there was still a great deal of emotional baggage between us, I couldn't help but feel that our friendship would grow stronger. But I couldn't say the same for our romantic relationship. "Can we talk about us?"

Her breath hitched, but she nodded. "I still love you, Harry."

I closed my eyes. "And I never stopped loving you." She started to speak but I held up a hand. "Please, let me finish. I love you, Hermione. But you need to understand that I love Blaise too." I opened my eyes to look at her.

"I know that, but we can..."

I shook my head. "That sort of relationship won't work unless the two of *you* love each *other*. And you don't, you never have. You've always been rivals, even in the midst of our lovemaking. Even before we entered our relationship. You resented her from the moment you learned that we had been staying together when I began my apprenticeship." I chuckled softly. "Oddly enough, she resented you even before that."

"What? What do you mean?"

"She was jealous of you. I discerned that from her mind during one of our conversations that summer. The more I learn about women, the more confused I get, but I think she had a crush on me before then, or at least that she was interested in me."

Hermione swallowed audibly. "So you're picking her over me?"

I clenched my jaw. "I wish you wouldn't put it like that."

"But it's true," she said, her eyes filling.

I sighed. "Crudely, I suppose it is. When you left me, I was a wreck. I must have stood in the doorway to your room at Grimmauld Place for ages, just staring in, wondering what the hell happened."

"I'm sorry, but you need to understand that--"

I shook my head. "I know. I don't blame you." At her dubious expression, I quickly continued. "Seriously, I don't blame you. But consider this; I committed myself to both of you. The night the three of us became lovers I decided that I would love both of you for as long as you both would let me. But the majority of our lovemaking was in separate beds. I can count the number of times the three of us made love together on one hand. No matter how much you protest, our relationship was not stable.

"You left for your own reasons. It does not matter what they were, if they were good or bad. It's the consequences that matter now. Tell me, would you want to get back with me, if it meant that I had to leave Blaise? Would you, could you, ever really be happy, knowing that I would readily leave one girl for another?"

Her eyes brightened momentarily during my little speech, before clouding. "She doesn't want me back."

I shook my head. "No."

"And unless she does, you won't have me back."

"It's not quite that simple, but yes."

She drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around her legs, resting her forehead on her knees. "So that's it? We're over?" she asked, her face hidden.

Man, this was painful. It was seriously tempting to tell her that Blaise was prepared to accept her as my girlfriend, but Zab had drilled me mercilessly about thinking past actions and to the consequences. "Mione, say we chose to go down that path, back to the way things were before. No matter how good things would be now, it would be much worse later on. The two of you would eventually go from respectful rivals to bitter competitors, and I would be stuck in the middle. Eventually, I'd be forced to make a decision that would to alienate one of you, and I would lose one or both as friends."

She raised her head, looking at me indecipherably.

"I'm not prepared to do that. If hurting now means that we will always be friends, then I am prepared to do that."

She blinked a few times, then lowered her head back to her knees. A few moments later, her shoulders started shaking. I tentatively reached out to comfort her, only to pull back when I made a sudden realisation.

She wasn't crying. She was chuckling.

"You are a complete cad, you know that," she said, her voice muffled. "You sit there, and patiently explain exactly why we can't get back together, and make me realise that I'm the one not thinking clearly." She looked up at me ruefully. "You are as sexy like that as I can possibly imagine, and I can't do a damned thing about it."

I joined her in chuckling ruefully. "It is a weird situation, isn't it?"

She took a deep breath and let it out with a shudder. Even though she did find some modicum of humour, it was clear that she was still devastated. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry it turned out this way," I said.

Hermione put her legs down. "You wouldn't be the Harry I loved if you weren't. And if I'd been honest with myself before, I should have realised that you wouldn't have been the Harry I wanted if you had accepted me back against Blaise's wishes."

I swallowed and nodded. For a long minute, we sat in silence. Eventually, when a yawn threatened to overtake me, I asked, "How are you going with University now? Is it better?"

She nodded. "Now that you're back, I'm slowly catching up. I've been reviewing the work I did between being under the influence of the potion and your reappearance. Quite frankly, it was disgraceful. But I should be back on track in two months, just in time for my exams."

I nodded. "Good. After that, are you able to take some time off?"

"I get a couple of months off, why?"

I grinned at her. "Things should be coming to a head around then. It could get exciting. I wouldn't want you being distracted."

The next afternoon, I bought some props and travelled to the outskirts of Blackpool.

Blaise's father and grandfather had received invitations to a private wake being held in honour of our recently departed ex-Minister, held by the delightful Anastasia Royston. My lovely girlfriend had given me the details and wished me luck before heading off to work. I wasn't sure if she was unhappy that she wouldn't be there to get me out of trouble, or relieved that she wouldn't have to potentially be involved in another death. In all honesty, I hadn't wanted her to come along on this one, and was pleased that she couldn't get out of her shift.

The Royston residence was not the grand mansion or sweeping villa I'd come to expect. It was on a beautiful bit of property, but the house itself was unimpressive when compared to Zab's manor or Fudge's old Mayfair house. At least, before some complete bastard burned the later to the ground. The house in front of me had the kind of view that many land-locked people would kill for.

The modest bluestone building was much too large to be referred to as a cottage, though still retained a sort of homely feel. You could imagine that generations of ennobled country folk had resided there during some part of their annual twelve month holiday. The front face was well presented, with geometric flower beds leading up to the front door and ivy framing the ground floor windows. It stood tall, overlooking the beach, and out over the water. On a clear day, I'd be surprised if you couldn't see Ireland, if not Iceland. The grounds were beautifully maintained, and expertly manicured. A large number of white chairs were being arranged in the orchard, and several marquees were in the process of being erected.

I continued up the white gravel path slowly, peaking out through the thick foliage I was carrying. A pompous chap with a clipboard intercepted me before I could get close to the house itself.

"The flowers were supposed to come later," he said sternly.

I peaked around my recently purchased blooms. They were my excuse to be here without an invitation. To enable the subterfuge, Hermione had been rather helpful, and oddly eager, in creating a stereotype that would be ignored by most people. "Que?"

He blinked. Raising his voice, he said slowly and clearly, "THE FLOWERS ARE SUPPOSED TO COME LATER!"

I blinked several times, and looked down at the flowers in my arms. "Delivery," I said back, with the thickest Spanish accent my untrained ear could manage. Practising with Hermione had actually set her to giggling.

She had looked through my collection of disguises and picked out several pieces, helping me put them on correctly. Apparently, in my black slacks, white jacket, bowtie and facial disguises, I was the spitting image of someone called 'Manuel'. Whoever that was, Hermione seemed to find his appearance amusing. Every time I asked her just who it was I was impersonating, she just kept breaking down into laughter. Also, apparently, I was not supposed to mention a war. Which war, I've got no idea, my delightfully infuriating ex-girlfriend couldn't keep a straight face long enough to tell me.

I shifted uncomfortably as the moustache became itchy under the man's gaze. "Merlin preserve us from bloody foreigners," he muttered, before ticking something off on his clipboard. "I'll be speaking with your supervisor!" he threatened.

"Delivery," I repeated. Hermione had advised incomprehension as a defence. Looking at the reaction it got, I'd say it was more of an offence than defence.

"Just get over there," the man spat in disgust, pointing at the group of women setting out the chairs. A delivery van arrived as I departed, and his attention was drawn away.

Hiding a smirk in the flowers, I made my way over to the indicated people.

One flustered woman who was issuing a stream of commands and setting out a rather generous portrait of the dearly departed paused to look at me. "Flowers here already? Go and put them over there, love, until the chairs are all out. Do you need to get more? There was supposed to be one bloom for each guest.

I shrugged, looking at the number of chairs. If I didn't know better, I'd say the Roystons were hosting a wedding, not a wake.

"Well, don't just stand there, get to it. There's a lot to do," she said forcefully, but not unkindly.

I carefully followed her instructions, placing the flowers on one of the tables, and began separating them. Surreptitiously looking around, I drew my wand and gave it a little flick, sending a silent hex towards the closest marquee. It creaked, and folded in on itself, burying equipment beneath it.

In the commotion that followed, I disillusioned myself and quickly made my way to the house proper. I almost gave a sigh of relief as I pulled the itchy moustache from my lip. Avoiding the white gravel paths where possible, I reached the house unmolested and stood listening near an open window, trying to get a feel for those inside. Nothing.

Quietly moving around the building further towards the front, some voices became audible.

"Honestly, Mother, why must you persist with this charade? You've opened up the grounds of our holiday home to the masses as if it were the sort of uncultured carnival destination like those that infest the town below. And with all the riff-raff in the kitchens, we may need to fumigate afterwards. Grandfather would be horrified at the fact that there are deliveries being made using *Muggle transportation*, of all things."

I froze and pressed my back against the bluestone wall, listening hard.

I recognised the next speaker's voice. "It is distasteful to me as well, but we must do what is necessary to repair the damage to our family's name. Cornelius was an imbecile, but for all his faults, he did manage to amass a sizable amount of power. If opening the property and honouring him after his death is the price to pay for that, then so be it," said Anastasia Royston.

There was an unladylike snort. "The name Royston is mud. This farce won't change that. If it wasn't for that idiot..." the first voice said sulkily.

"If the Dark Lord had been successful, we would have been rewarded well for your cousin's actions."

"You don't honestly believe that, do you? That half-blood was insane."

"His parentage may have been sullied, but his vision was noble. If his father had been from one of the great families, he would have cleansed this country of the low-born mongrels by now. Blood will out, dear, always remember that."

"Yes Mother. It is our family motto, after all. I fear that I may get a migraine dealing with all the social posturing. Malcolm and Gertrude will no doubt try to be so crass as to offer their spawn for betrothal to my little Julius again."

"The unsubtle social climbing efforts of half-bloods bore me too. Remember that the house is off limits to everyone but you and me, dear. If they won't take a hint, claim a headache and retreat to your rooms."

I heard a couple of clinks, and a liquid pouring. The two women were probably having tea. I crept along the side of the house and around the back, expecting to find some sort of servants' entrance.

I suspect that normally, such a portal would be well secured. But today, with so many new faces working inside, security would be a little more lax. Indeed, with all the people coming and going into the house and from property, it wasn't even locked. I grinned and entered quietly, finding myself in a short hallway. The nearest doorway on my right opened into a generous kitchen, while the doorway on my left led to a laundry. This was definitely the end of the house where the real work was done.

The kitchen was filled with a kind of orderly chaos, with several caterers putting the finishing touches on some very elegant looking trays of hor

d'oeuvres. I slipped down the hallway, further into the house.

The portal marking the transition from servant's area to living area was quite profound. An archway with a bi-directional privacy charm prevented anyone on either side from seeing or hearing what was on the other. Stepping through was a study of contrasts, between spartan and decadent. Worn grey slate floors gave way to thick, plush carpeting. Unadorned stone walls turned into vibrantly coloured plaster, with impressive artwork liberally scattered around. For a holiday home, this was really rather opulent.

I stopped and listened hard for a conversation between two whiney, bitchy women. Faint strains could be heard coming from down the hallway in front of me. Heading in that direction, I heard a woman say, "That will be all, Farnsley. You may go."

I had to press myself against the wall as an elderly man in a butler's uniform drifted past with a tea set delicately placed on a silver tray. The scene wouldn't have looked out of place in an old movie, except for the fact that the tray drifted along unsupported behind the man.

I readied my wand, but didn't need to use it. The butler passed me and disappeared without incident into the warded archway. I took a moment to erect and *Confundus* charm on the portal, making it confusing for anyone walking through to remember what they were doing. That done, I took a breath and quickly moved down the hallway towards the doorway from which the butler had appeared. I peeked into the room.

The two women were running through an internal, pre-flight checklist, making sure their pointed hats were straight, that their makeup was just so, and that their robes were sitting exactly right. Foregoing subtlety, I simply stunned the younger witch and turned my wand on the Wizengamot member. In the time it took for her to draw a breath to scream, I snapped off an Imperius Curse.

It occurred to me that I was really racking up the lifetime sentences. Good thing I knew how to escape Azkaban.

"Be quiet," I ordered, feeling her struggle uselessly against the spell. "Tell me what the most valuable things you have in the house are," I demanded, figuring that my invisibility cloak would definitely be at the top of the list. The plan was to make her believe that I was funding my activities through the theft of valuables from my targets. I didn't want her to know what I was really after.

She paused before answering. "A Cummersleigh, an invisibility cloak, and my engagement ring."

I grinned tightly. Perhaps I should start an art collection, specialising in stolen masterpieces by insane magical artists. "Speak to no one. Go and get them, along with all your jewellery, and bring them to me. Do not put the cloak on."

She wordlessly walked towards the door, and left the room. I grinned tightly at the idea that my thieving would possibly terrify the rich more than simply attacking them. I reached into my robes, pulled forth the portkey sock and extracted a red envelope, which I secreted upon the unconscious witch's person. I then spent the next few minutes pulling out all the goodies I'd picked up from the twins' storeroom. Five years of Potions lessons with a Longbottom meant that I knew of dozens of ways to make things fizz, ooze, turn acidic or bubble and spit. Most importantly, however, I knew how to make things go boom.

Adding a few Muggle ingredients would give the process a little more kick. With a few pointers from the twins, who'd had to refurbish their testing lab a few times, I finished setting up my explosives and began preparing the triggering ward.

Anastasia returned, carrying a small mahogany frame, a polished box and a pile of silvery material that made my heart leap with recognition. I snatched the cloak from her and pushed it into the sock. The painting and jewellery box followed. "Right, sit down over there on the sofa."

She obeyed.

I finished up with my amateur demolition preparations and turned back to them, erecting an anti-apparition jinx with clear, concise wand movements. I wanted them to know exactly what I was doing. "Pure-blooded bigots like you don't deserve to live. You've led a privileged life built on the sweat and toil of those who aren't as inbred as you. You are social parasites, and will finally be exterminated, just like Fudge. Enjoy your last moments. They should be exciting. Explosively so, if you take my meaning. Anyone who tries to apparate in or out will be history. Or at least, geography."

With that, I turned and left the room.

I made my way to the front door and carefully opened it and made sure no one was looking before I stepped through. I quickly placed the anchoring trigger ward on the doorstep. With my booby-trap set, I surveyed the beautifully presented grounds and selected a visible spot with the characteristics I had in mind. I apparated there as quietly as I could.

In my new position, I made myself comfortable. I could see the house, and the area set up for Fudge's wake. I could still feel the old woman desperately try and break my curse, but her efforts were pitiful. I guess that inbreeding really does weaken the will. I took out my robe, and examined it for any damage.

There was none. It had been looked after well. I gently rubbed the slippery, silvery material between my fingers. It helped to confirm that I had a piece of my father back in my possession. I slipped it on over my head.

After nearly fifteen minutes, several well-dressed people began to arrive. In small, sombre groups, they made their way towards the pavilions and marquees. I didn't recognise any of the early arrivals. Eventually, in the midst of a full Auror escort, a pair of wizards appeared who were simple to identify. One I recognised from his whiskers as the Minister. The other had several titles – the Supreme Mugwump, Chief Warlock, Grand Poobar and Royal Pain In The Arse.

Well, I was hoping for a high-profile witness. That ought to do it.

I allowed the Imperius Curse to fade, and began counting under my breath. I got to seven before the two witches exited the front door at high speed, screaming for help. Their shrieks managed to attract the attention of everyone on the property before the ward triggered the potions, giving everyone a nice view of my handiwork.

The explosion was pretty in many ways. Pretty loud, pretty powerful and pretty frightening. Even though I was expecting it, the sudden flash startled me, and the impressive boom that hit me a moment later made me wonder if I'd over done it just a little. Every visible window shattered, and judging by the way the upper floor sagged a few seconds later, I'd probably done significant damage to the load-bearing sections of the front quarter of the house. The house wasn't exactly a smoking crater with chunks of bluestone raining over the grounds, but the damage was certainly visible.

Within seconds, the Aurors on detail around the Minister apparated him away. Pity, I would have liked to see Rufus' reaction to the scene.

More amusingly, most of the guests decided to depart too, leaving the two flattened women to fend for themselves. Dumbledore appeared to be the one Gryffindor among them, instantly apparating to their aid.

I didn't bother sticking around to see if the two Royston women were alive. I certainly hoped they would survive, to tell the world of their harrowing ordeal at the hands of a crazed maniac. It would make drawing parallels to how they acted when Muggles and Muggleborn were targeted by Voldemort so much easier.

I apparated home, only to discover that I was officially dead.

Grimmauld Place had been decorated with rather vivid tastelessness. There were plenty of banners and home-made posters celebrating the announcement of my death on display, each more eye-catching than the last. I ran my eye over the many congratulatory cards and notes sitting on the dining table, before pondering my response to the twins.

A few bumps and thumps from the next room caught my attention, which indicated that a long fantasised throttling was in fact in progress. Ron's voice easily carried through the wall, berating the twins for telling everyone that I was alive. From the occasional jumping of the artwork on the wall, I'd say that Ron was using his larger size to great advantage, and that I'd probably need to hire a plasterer.

Through a flash of irritation, I forced myself to remember that Ron still had trouble making connections. I knew that the twins would not be the ones to let my secret slip; at least not deliberately. It wasn't in their nature. What was in their nature was to prank the hell out of everyone and everything. Cautiously, I picked up a pair of the cards, noting that they were all written in the same messy handwriting. My grumpiness quickly dissipated, replaced with humour, and I picked up several other cards, chuckling at the signatures.

Apparently someone called Tom's Marvellous Giggle was pleased to hear of my death, and so was somebody called Luscious Malfart. Oh, how sweet, I even got a card from 'Bellytricks the Strange' and her husband, whose name the twins apparently couldn't remember. Poor guy. Imagine being defined by who your wife was. Well, I suppose Prince Phillip could commiserate. And, oddly enough, his eldest son.

I put all the cards back except for Mr. Giggle's, and wandered through into the next room to save the twins from their vengeful brother. "Afternoon, Ron. Hey Fred, George. Nice to see you. What's happening?" I asked as I nonchalantly wandered past the trio and poured myself a drink from the sideboard.

Ron had one twin in each hand. Fred (I think) was pressed hard against the wall and George was being shaken back and forth so vigorously that his toes were dragging along the ground. "Harry! Did you see what these idiots have done?" Ron shouted, his face almost purple.

Fred and George tried to speak, but were silenced by another abrupt shaking. I imagine that they were beginning to rue some of the pranks they'd played on their younger brother over the years. Having someone you always looked down to suddenly become two metres tall almost overnight does wonders for introspection.

I took a sip of my drink. "Of course I did. Nice work guys. I especially liked this one," I said, holding the card out.

Ron blinked, and looked down at the card in my hands. "Huh? They told everyone you were alive!"

Finally given an opportunity to mount a defence, the twins blurted, in slightly out-of-synch stereo, "No we didn't!"

I smirked at them, and read from the card. "Congratulations on your death. So sorry I wasn't involved. If you are ever passing by my level of hell, do take the time to stop by and catch up. I'm sure the imps would enjoy a break from torturing me. Regards, Tom's Marvellous Giggle." I looked up. "Nice work guys, I like it."

One cleared his throat. "Thank you, my dear investor. My twin and I were wondering if you could possibly convince our esteemed younger brother here to perhaps let us go?" he asked hopefully, obviously figuring that a kind word would get further with someone who was actually listening.

Ron blinked rapidly looking between me and his captives. Eventually, he appeared to catch up to the flow of the conversation. "They didn't tell anyone?"

I burst into laughter as both twins shook their heads vigorously. "No Ron, they didn't."

He absently lowered them to the carpet enough so that they could support themselves. Both seemed rather relieved to be able to take some of their own weight. "But all those cards..."

"Were jokes. From Voldy and his henchmen. Luscious Malfart and so forth. Tell me guys, why the big party?"

One of them pointed over at the newspaper on the sofa. "You're dead. Front page."

"Oh," Ron said, still holding onto his brothers' robes. "Well, I suppose that's pretty funny," he eventually decided.

"Quite, brother mine."

"Indubitably. Now, could we convince you to unhand us?"

Ron let them go, apologising with a shrug. "Good one," he mumbled.

Fred and George straightened their clothes. "No harm done."

"Indeed. Fred my twin, it's nice to know that our efforts were not in vain. As a matter of fact, I'm rather chuffed that they invoked such a reaction."

"Quite, George. We must have outdone ourselves. No hard feelings then, Ron?" Fred finished, holding out a hand.

Ron took it rather bashfully. George dutifully patted his large brother on the shoulder. With that gruff action done, the pair turned and made a beeline for the door, almost colliding in their haste to exit. Ron turned to me and shrugged. "Sorry about that, I just thought that—"

I held up a hand to stop him. "Mate, you might want to check your shoulder," I said, delicately pointing towards the offending area.

"My what?" he said looking down to where George had patted him. A green patch of cloth was sitting there, which began rippling. "SHIT!" he finished, brushing it away as though it was a live spider. It landed on the floor, where it began to smoke.

"Come back here you bastards!" Ron shouted, barrelling out the door after his brothers. Dual apparition cracks echoed through the house, right before Ron's own. Ah, a game of magical tag. So much more interesting than the usual kind.

The green cloth patch suddenly bubbled and burst with a foul-smelling goo. I'm quite sure the prank would have been amusing to watch through to its conclusion, but Ron was my friend after all. I just shook my head at his gullibility. Imagine trusting Fred and George when they appeared contrite. You'd have thought he'd have learned by now.

I picked up the paper and sat down on the couch. The formal announcement of my death was front page material, knocking the story of the new terrorist into the bowels of the paper. "Boy-Who-Died," screamed the headline. Skimming the article, I discovered that my body was 'unrecoverable' from the wreckage. My mini-biography was light on facts, and heavy on rumour, only getting things right by accident. Like being involved with Hermione – that was right, but four or so years after it was first 'reported'. Apparently, since I was the last member of an Ancient and Noble House, and the last Potter as well, my will would be executed publicly, in a week's time, despite my objections.

I flicked through the rest of the usual tripe. From the initial negative public reaction, a lot of people were backtracking from their initial demands for more Auror funding, though not withdrawing them entirely. I wondered absently if their stand would change when word of another attack on a Wizengamot member surfaced tomorrow morning. Some of them however, definitely needed to speak to a PR consultant before opening their mouths. One Wizengamot member even managed to blow his own buttock off with one comment, saying that he now realised how dangerous it was to have a homicidal maniac on the loose, and that the Aurors needed to focus specifically on protecting those being targeted.

The reporter who took his statement actually did some digging, and found that he was one of the co-authors of a bill introduced during Voldy's first reign, designed to make Aurors give priority protection to pure-bloods. I sighed with pleasure. There's nothing like watching a politician's career go down in flames.

I folded the paper up and put it on the sofa next to me. Slowly sipping my drink, I carefully worked over in my mind how I wanted things to go at the reading of my will. Not to mention, crashing my own funeral.

Master Potter Gathering storms, with a handful of deaths

It was after sunset by the time Blaise returned home from work. She appeared through the fire looking exhausted. She looked around the room at the banners and congratulatory cards and decided with a bemused little shake of her head that the mental effort required to comprehend the twins' handiwork could be delegated to a later time. She threw her bag onto the floor and sank into her favourite armchair.

I wordlessly rose from the desk and poured her a glass of wine. She took it from me and drank deeply.

"Ugh. I needed that."

"Tough day?"

Her eyes focused on me intently for a few moments, before she broke into a tired smile. "You could say that. Apparently, there was another attack by this new, unnamed Dark Wizard. With all the press around, fourteen healers, including five of the hospital Directors, were present to treat two cases of mild concussion and temporary deafness. And one of the Directors was the Financial Controller, who doesn't actually have a medical background. You couldn't even move in the ward for all the egos."

I gave a throaty chuckle. "Never before have so many done so little to heal so few."

Blaise smiled, and drained the rest of her glass. I refilled it quickly.

She gave out a relaxing groan and tilted her head from side to side, letting the vertebrae creak. "Oh, it's good to be home."

I sat down in the chair next to her. "Any other news?"

She scratched her neck absently as she kicked her shoes off and put her feet up on my knees. "Hm, not really. Nothing special, anyway. The media all got the same story – two prominent society members were admitted to St. Mungo's with injuries sustained in a terrorist attack by a new Dark Lord." With a tight grin, she continued. "Oh, the howler he placed on one of the women worked wonders. It went off while just about every damned senior healer in the hospital was in the room."

I raised an eyebrow, though a grin was threatening to escape me. "Really? Fancy that," I murmured and I began rubbing the balls of her feet.

Blaise snorted at my words, but then purred with pleasure. "There were more injuries from the stampede for the door after that than there were from the attack itself. I had to treat four of those injuries myself." She grimaced. "Healers are truly the worst patients."

That surprised me. "The howler caused a stampede?"

"Of course, what did you expect? Most of the healers in the hospital are pure-blooded, or at least from families that are wealthy enough that the odd marriage outside of the norm is overlooked. They all thought that you were going to appear on the spot and blast them to Atlantis."

"Atlantis is on the bottom of the ocean."

"As if that would bother them. Look, it couldn't have been better timed if you wanted. Don't worry about it."

I paused. "I'm not really. I am worried about you."

She grimaced. "I know. I knew your plans for Fudge before we went there, but..."

"Seeing it happen was different."

"Yeah," she nodded. "He was a direct threat to you, and I wanted to make sure you were safe. I knew he had to die, but watching it happen, knowing that I was in part responsible for it, well, I just couldn't stop thinking about it."

I stopped rubbing her feet, reached over and took her hand. "You know what I have planned from now. Do you still want to be involved?"

"I am involved, no matter what I want. But yes, I'm still behind you. All the way."

I smiled at her, and leaned back in my chair. "What do you think of the decorations?" I asked, gesturing around the room.

She eyed the gaudy banners carefully. "Congratulations on your death?" she quoted.

I nodded, waving my wand and floating the paper over to her. "I'm dead."

She frowned at me, but took the paper and read it briefly. A ghost of a smile flickered over her face. "Oh, I see. I wasn't sure letting the Weasley twins in on our little conspiracy was a good idea, but they've really got their own style."

"Oh, yes," I said, gesturing towards the damaged plaster. "Ron didn't quite get the joke until it was spelled out for him, and did a bit of damage to the wall with the twins."

She frowned. "Do you mean, 'and' the twins or 'with' the twins?"

I shook my head. "'With'. He picked Tweedledum up by his collar, and slammed Tweedledee against the wall. I was waiting until you got home before I repaired the dent."

Blaise smirked, and leaned her head back against the upholstery. "Oh, that would have been lovely to see."

I chuckled. "It was indeed. But don't worry about retaliation. It's going to be safer around here, at least for a few days."

"Safer?"

"Mmm hmm," I murmured. "Fred is taking a well deserved break."

She stared straight into my eyes. "A break? At your direction?"

I nodded with a smile. "I'll tell you why later. Oh, by the way, I found something useful on my next target in Fudge's papers."

That intrigued her. "Really?"

I nodded, summoning the pages. "Check this out. The Notts own a lot of the shops and buildings in Parti Alley, right?"

Blaise took the proffered pages. "Yes, but that's common knowledge."

"Yeah, well, did you ever wonder why they always seemed to have an inordinate level of political clout, even though they weren't the richest family around?"

"The Notts aren't poor, Harry. Ted's school stuff was always of the highest quality. Why wouldn't they have the ear of the Ministry?"

"No, they're not poor," I agreed, "but they're not exactly rich either. And I don't mean just having the ear of the Ministry. I'm talking about getting legal action against them quashed."

She raised her eyebrows. "I'm listening."

"Look here," I said, pointing to one of the pages. "A few years ago, when Fudge first got into office, some Muggle-born tenants brought legal action against the Notts, claiming discrimination. It was refiled several times. Fudge had it thrown out of court three times on technicalities, got the paperwork misfiled twice and stacked the panel when the verdict was actually decided."

Blaise leafed through the pages. "Okay, I believe you. So what? He was corrupt. We knew that."

I grinned, and shook my head. "The financial statements tabled during the legal action are over there on the desk. They show that the rent the Notts charge those of *proper* breeding wouldn't be enough to cover the maintenance costs on the buildings. But they charge exorbitant rents to those with tainted blood."

Blaise frowned. "Unfair, yes, but I wouldn't expect anything different from Teddy's family."

I chuckled. "Teddy?"

A faint smile flickered over her lips. "That name always annoyed him."

"Heh, I could imagine. But look, some Nott in the past obviously had the bright idea to fleece as much money as possible from all those infernal Mudbloods cluttering up the place. And displaying the exceptional idiocy I've come to expect from that particular segment of the population, not one of them have challenged the basic premise. There aren't enough purebloods with businesses out there to fill their properties, and the prospective Muggle-born tenants can find cheaper rents elsewhere."

I grabbed the Prophet again. "Look in the classifieds. Just today there has to be nearly a fifty-percent vacancy rate in Nott-owned properties. They get no income while a property is empty, and those that are filled with 'desirable' tenants cost them money."

Blaise's eyes lit up with realisation. "So they're hardly making a profit? Even with over a hundred properties?"

"Exactly!" I snapped my fingers. "The Notts are cheating themselves out of a fortune by proudly sticking it to the Mudbloods. Doing what they think is a public service. What they're not doing is making the obvious connection between their piss-poor profit margins and their fucked up business strategy."

Blaise again looked down at the pages we rescued from Fudge's safe. "So where did Fudge fit in?"

"It wasn't exactly spelled out, but I think he decided that he could get some political mileage out of the situation. He stepped in and stopped the legal challenge, and then asked the Notts for campaign contributions."

She frowned. "Really? I would have thought it was the other way around."

I shrugged. "Usually, I suppose that's how it would work. Maybe that's how Fudge operated towards the end of his time. But at the start, he actively greased the wheels, and then stuck out his palm. Rather than wait to be approached, he actively went looking for situations he could turn into future support. Arrogant, but it was certainly effective. He managed to stay in power longer than you would have expected. Even at the end, he still had a lot of support."

Blaise nodded in appreciation, and handed back the pages. "Anything else in there?"

I shrugged. "I haven't gone through the rest yet, but there are a lot of pages charmed to not be readable by anyone else."

She rose to her feet and stretched. "So, what are your plans for the Notts?"

I grinned at her. "Oh, I was thinking about picking out a few of their buildings and trashing them in broad daylight. How does a little bit of wanton arson appeal to you?"

Without speaking, she simply started undressing.

Damn, sometimes it's good to be me.

Two days full of furiously impotent denunciations and scathing letters to various editors passed quickly.

The descriptions of the Roystons' harrowing tale of survival at the hands of a psychopathic monster were terrifying, though oddly devoid of some relevant specifics. A few people found it curious that the length of time during which the Royston pair were apparently tortured and abused was rather inexact. Initially, the papers gleefully reported that they were tormented for hours.

When pressed on the seeming discrepancy between the time they were last seen by the butler and the explosion less than half an hour later, the duration was conveniently not mentioned again.

When some people pointed out that the two women were admitted to St. Mungo's and then promptly discharged within the hour, descriptions of the torture to which the pair were subjected suddenly disappeared from future publications.

However, the fact that the attack occurred at an event with high-profile society members, when coupled with how Fudge met his end, meant that the inbred wankers were suddenly terrified to the point of collapse. Many wrote letters to various politicians and newspapers, threatening to remove their children from Hogwarts, stating a preference to send them to Beauxbatons or Durmstrang. If even half the authors followed through with their threats, Slytherin in particular would be decimated. Less than half their number at the beginning of the year would still attend.

And all that just two days after I got my cloak back.

Of course, not all the viewpoints were negative. Indeed, to begin with, it was nice to see how well my predictions worked out. Though in the minority, there were voices that spotted the differences between how the bigots were acting now to how they acted back then. There was a short wave of sympathy for my cause. I was initially rather pleased with how much noise was being generated, but as more days passed, I started to become alarmed. By the end of the week, the panic was spreading through all parts of wizarding society, not just my target segment. A propaganda campaign funded by my very targets began to make people think that everyone was in danger, with the Prophet taking the lead. Despite Ron (and to a lesser extent, the twins) doing what he could to keep the focus on the real targets, his voice was drowned out in the sea of fear.

These people had just got out from under the thumb of a cowardly thug and his goons; I suppose it wasn't really surprising that their fear would be so ingrained. My next target would need careful selection and planning, both to keep the fear contained in the correct population segment, and to get my message into the hearts and minds of the general population.

I needed to create and manipulate a situation where certain people were in danger, but others weren't. My plans for the Notts evolved. Symbolically, I decided to execute them after the reading of my will.

I looked at my three different views of the auditorium. Owing to the fact that there had been three Muggles invited to my will's reading, Hermione had hired a room in an expensive London hotel. Set up for business presentations and the like, the room was well-appointed and spacious, with everything from a projector and remote controlled lights to refreshments covered with plastic wrap at the back of the room, something that was sure to baffle at least some of the invitees. The temporary stage had been set up and furnished with a single chair, a table and a lectern. There were almost a hundred seats for the audience, and despite there only being thirty or so official invitations, nearly all of them were full. The one non-magical person in the room was my cousin, and he was fidgeting wildly sitting in the far corner, trying to keep as far away from the freaks as possible. The scene was made even more amusing by the fact that the pure-blooded bigots who decided to show were trying to do the same thing.

Personally, I was in one of the hotel's guest rooms, watching three television screens. The hotel had quite happily set up a trio of cameras to video the actual will reading. That is, they were quite happy to accept a large payment to set up the cameras. Given who was on the invitation list, I sure as hell wasn't going to be in the room, even disguised, disillusioned, under my invisibility cloak and whistling nonchalantly.

The centre camera had been set up with sound as well, so I could hear what was going on. The drone of conversation coming through the speakers was occasionally interrupted by a loud squawking. It took me a second or two to find the source of said animal noise, and when I did, I burst into laughter. At the stroke of eleven o'clock, a sudden wave of silence flooded over the room, immediately cutting off all sound, conversation and otherwise. A few people looked put out at that, but nearly everyone else took it as a sign that things were about to begin. Blaise stepped up onto the temporary stage with my pensieve in hand and a folio under her arm.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for coming here today. My name is Blaise Zabini and I am the executor of the last will and testament of Harry James Potter. This reading has been brought forward in defiance of Harry's wishes," she said with a steely glint in her eye. "He *specifically* requested that his will not be executed until a year and a day after his death. However, because he was the Head of two houses, and *some people* want a chance to scavenge his estate, it has been brought forward.

"Now, there is one thing that needs to be said first. Those of you without invitations are welcome to stay. However, by remaining you are agreeing to abide by the terms stated in the will in their entirety. Any person who does not wish to accept the will as written must leave now." With that, she paused, waiting for anyone to take her up on the offer. No one did, though a couple of people did appear tempted.

"Also, no monetary disbursements will occur until the specified time. Harry has specified a couple of non-monetary bequests, which I will distribute today. No doubt you have many questions, but I'm afraid they must wait until after the will has been read. The auditorium is spelled with silence for a reason. Harry has left a written will which will be made public, but he wanted to give you his instructions in person." She gently placed my pensieve on the table. "If everyone is ready, we shall begin."

Blaise tapped the rim of the pensieve with her wand. My silvery image slowly rose from the bowl. My three different vantage points were covering the audience mostly, so I couldn't make out any details, but that didn't really matter. Blaise, Hermione and I had done a half dozen or so 'drafts' of my memory before we got it right. I knew it off my heart.

"Greetings and salutations to all my friends, and a sincere 'sod off you bastards' to all the politicians and hate-mongers who turned up today.

"Apparently, I'm dead, and I've been dead for a year. I can't say I wasn't expecting it, but I had hoped to put it off a little longer. My life has generally been a disastrous series of crazy adventures, beginning before I was born, with that bloody prophecy. Recently, I had thought things were quietening down, but I suppose I should have known better. I've left a piece of paper in legalese with all my wishes, but I wanted to give some of you a personal message. A message from beyond the grave, so to speak.

"Well, enough of the maudlin talk, let's begin, shall we. As people say, 'where there's a will, there's many a pissed off relative'. Well, I know a lot of you are going to go home very pissed off indeed. Now, some of you are here at my invitation. Some of you are here no doubt because you believe it would do your public image some good. I personally don't care. A few of you are here because you intend to scavenge as much of my estate and family wealth as possible. To you I say, HA! You've wasted your time. I have made arrangements and have named my successor following all legal and traditional guidelines. You'll find out who the current Head of Houses Potter and Black are soon enough. He has a year and a day from my death to come forward before anyone else gets a shot at the cake. Essentially, anyone that is here only to try and snatch a bit of the Potter and Black legacies, too bad. And I seriously doubt you'll like the wizard I've chosen to succeed me."

That caused quite a bit of shuffling amongst the better dressed portion of the assembly. Under the spell of silence, they couldn't make a sound, but it was easy to spot the large number of annoyed wizards.

"Right, on to the specifics. My personal assets, with some exceptions, are to be converted to hard currency, and divided into thirty-two equal shares. Now, starting with my Muggle relatives. To Vernon and Petunia Dursley, who may or may not have decided to show their faces here today, I cannot leave anything, since I have no Muggle assets. I have taken steps however, to ensure that you shall be looked after for the rest of your lives. The hospitality you showed me during my childhood will be repaid tenfold over the coming decades. Words cannot describe how much I appreciate your actions, but I know that you are both fully aware of how I feel. Please, sit back, relax and enjoy what is coming to you for the rest of your lives. Dudley, we'll get to you in a minute."

It was a pity my Aunt and Uncle declined my invitation; it would have been most amusing to see their expressions. Dudley's face was almost worth it though. The blood drained vividly from his face listening to my recording. I wonder if he was beginning to harbour some regrets. Of course, I hadn't actually spent any money on getting my revenge on them. No, after today, any bad luck that happened to befall my 'beloved' family will most certainly be blamed on my legacy to them. That would be my revenge, and the best thing is that I didn't even have to raise a finger. Mind you, if I ever did see the Dursleys again, I would raise a finger at them.

"Cornelius Fudge, if you could stand? Thank you. I leave to you the sum of thirty sickles and my everlasting contempt. Given how you betrayed the wizarding public with your petulant denial of Voldemort's return, I figured that amount was appropriate. Sit down you pathetic excuse of a wizard."

My vitriol at a dead man caused a bit of a stir in the crowd, but many of them nodded their heads at my words. We figured it was important to put Fudge in their somewhere, if only to give the impression that the recording of the will was older than it actually was.

"Dolores Umbridge, sorry, Umbridge. No, don't stand up; I wouldn't want to inflict eyestrain on anyone I actually like, which is something the fashion disasters you customarily wear would no doubt cause. For your illegal torture, slander, incompetence and bigotry, I leave you the sum of ten million galleons from the Black Family Trust. This amount is to be paid in ten equal, annual instalments, but only beginning after ten years of marriage to my cousin Dudley. You will either live with the knowledge that your bigotry prevented you from being insanely wealthy, or you'll live with a Muggle for the rest of your life. I honestly don't know which would hurt you more."

The expression on dear Dolores' face was a study of contrasts. Initially, surprise, delight and greed battled for supremacy. A second later, horror, disgust and loathing successfully mounted a combined offensive, before falling to bickering among themselves. Several of her ex-students had rather inappropriate expressions of satisfaction themselves at her reaction.

I didn't bother adding that I had already paid for a full, magical investigation into the events of Dudley's death, should he pass untimely. Any poisons, toxins, spellwork or nefarious means would be found. That sort of thing should only be sprung on the unsuspecting after the fact. At any rate, I felt comfortable offering her the choice. Even besides the fact that I was still alive and my will was not yet valid, I hardly thought she would jump at the

opportunity. Mind you, if Dudley thought that marrying a toad would get him closer to a seven figure inheritance, then he's likely to be stalking 'Bitch for a while.

"Right, idiotic politicians and Muggle relatives dealt with. Now, onto my Black relatives. Narcissa Malfoy, or Black, or whatever you are calling yourself these days. I leave to you these items." My ghostly image gestured behind, to where Blaise had positioned herself. She obligingly withdrew a tightly corked bottle and a thick sheaf of documents from her folio. With a deft flick, she floated the pile of parchment towards Draco's mother.

"The documents are copies of the negotiations around the contract for your marriage to Lucius. I'd like you to know exactly what you were worth to the Black family. You may find it interesting to know that your father was aware of the fact that Lucius' mother was actually adopted by her family. Apparently, her birth parents were impoverished Muggles, who were happy to give up their daughter so that she would both learn of magic and live in luxury. Yes, believe it or not, your posturing pervert of a husband was a Mudblood, and your family were more than happy for you to be sullied by such a disgusting creature in return for a fifteen-thousand galleon payment. You are nothing but a moderately priced whore. Rather amusing, no? Rita, if you're here, I've sent you a copy too. Be a dear and make sure the details are disseminated as widely as possible. You owe it to your readers."

Narcissa had gone white, though her cheeks were tinged red with rage. She snatched the pages from the air and began leafing through them furiously. Despite the fact that they were as genuine as a brass galleon, I really hoped that she would try and confirm their authenticity. During his brief holiday in France, Fred had visited a few relevant places where the odd official record or two was kept. On his return, he reported that some anonymous, untraceable, yet roguishly handsome red-head had torn out the page of the ledger that corresponded to Lucius' mother's date of birth, and a few other similar pointed acts of vandalism. Anyone trying to confirm her 'Muggle' status would be confounded by a rather detailed and specific trail of destruction.

Hermione had said something about absence of evidence not being evidence of absence, or something, but the sheeple who read the Prophet wouldn't care.

Blaise followed the documents with the bottle filled with a silvery memory. It hovered in front of the Malfoy widow for a few seconds before it too was snatched from the air.

"Inside the bottle is a memory. Do enjoy it."

I'm not sure what effect watching Lucius' face smash on cobblestones will have on her, but then again, I didn't really care. How she would react to the memory of the old Malfoy house-elf giggling insanely over the recording of Lucius' death, however, I did care to find out. Oh to be a beetle animagus.

"To Andromeda Tonks, my apologies for your treatment at the hands of your family. As I never reached the age that enabled me to reverse a decision by a former family patriarch, I could not rescind your expulsion. I do however offer you the right to call yourself a Black, if you wish to do so. I couldn't blame you if you chose not to have anything to do with such a bunch of bigots. I have encouraged my successor to accept you back into the family, but it will be his decision. In any event, you will get one share of my personal assets."

A woman who could only be Narcissa's sister gave a sort of half-smile and wiped her eyes with a dainty lace handkerchief. She had the same Black figure and sculpted cheekbones of her sisters, but her features bore no sign of the familial sneer. Her countenance betrayed no hint of the bigotry or hatred that filled those of Narcissa and Bellatrix. I couldn't help but think that Ted Tonks must be a remarkable man. Not to mention lucky.

"To Nym-, er, to Andromeda Tonks' daughter, I leave one share of my personal assets. Thanks for livening up that dreary summer."

Tonks clutched her mother's hand and wept softly. She was in a rather inconspicuous form. Perhaps the solemnity of the occasion got to her? Her hair was a sort of mousy brown, which stood out more to those of us who knew her.

"To Fred and George, my thanks for believing in me when nearly everyone else didn't. I leave each of you half of my share of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. You guys had the vision, drive, intelligence, ambition and determination to make the business a success. I simply gave you the capital. The business belongs to you guys, it always did. Each of you will also get one share of my personal assets."

I shook my head at the pair. To their mother's obvious mortification, they'd turned up to the reading in pirate outfits, complete with brightly plumaged parrots on their shoulders, eye-patches and cutlasses. I suspect that I'll never get tired of their antics.

"To Luna Lovegood, I leave my sincere thanks and two shares of my personal assets. I hope you use it to finally track down a Crumpled-Horned Snorkack."

Luna looked as odd as usual, though she spent a great deal of time looking around the room, rather than paying attention to my image. Ginny, who was sitting next to her, prodded her to focus her attention on the pensieve.

"To Arthur and Molly Weasley, who treated me as one of their very own, despite the way I treated you, I leave each a share of my personal assets, and my deepest respect. Anyone who managed to raise Fred and George deserve it."

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley looked pretty much as I expected. Molly in a state of hysterical tears and Arthur stoically supporting her.

"To Percy Weasley, I leave some advice. GET OUT NOW! Merlin's balls man, the Ministry is draining you of your very life! Look at a picture of yourself after leaving Hogwarts, then look in the mirror! You've aged twenty years in the past five! I leave one share of my personal assets in a trust fund to pay for your enrolment in a good law school. Become a respected solicitor. Or at least a solicitor, if the respected bit is too hard."

Percy blinked in surprise at his unexpected fortune. Up until now he had been glaring intently at my image with the expression of someone trying to remember something important. I wonder what would happen if he managed to break my memory charm. I suspect nothing good for his worship of the Ministry.

"To Ginny Weasley, I leave two shares of my personal assets. Thank you for being with me when I needed it most."

Oddly, Ginny wasn't crying. She looked sad, and had glistening eyes, but there were no falling tears.

"To Neville Longbottom, my thanks and utmost respect for putting down the rabid dog of the Black family. You were a good friend, and you are a good man. You will also receive two shares of my personal assets."

Neville sat next to his Grandmother, and nodded towards my pensieve.

"To Remus Lupin, I leave condolences that you are the last Marauder. I'd like you to take two shares of my personal assets, and to work with Fred and George. Enjoy your life as much as you can, Moony."

I wasn't surprised the Moony couldn't make it, given that it was the full moon tonight. Still, it would have been nice to see him again.

"To Alastor Moody, I simply say, Constant Vigilance. I owe you a great debt for setting me upon the path that has enabled me to succeed so well. A share of my personal assets to you too."

At my words, the grizzled old Auror perked up, and his blue eye began spinning wildly. Fortunately for me, I was in a very different part of the building. Of course, I'm not entirely sure what he'd do if he did see me.

"To Rubeus Hagrid, my first friend of the wizarding world, I leave two shares of my personal assets, and my hope that you finally get the respect you deserve."

Taking up three seats, my old friend blubbered silently into a hanky nearly half the size of a bedsheet.

"To Ron Weasley, my best friend, I leave five shares of my personal assets and my Firebolt. We've got into a lot of trouble over the years, haven't we? I've been told that a parent is someone you call to bail you out of prison, while a true friend is someone who is sitting next to you in the cell, saying, 'That was a blast, eh?' Thanks for being that friend."

Ron, who had decided that he couldn't fake tears, had taken a potion to mimic the effect. The rivers running down his cheeks looked out of place, given that he was grinning like an idiot. I sighed softly. He'd never change. And that was oddly comforting. Susan was sitting next to him, and was crying almost as much as he was.

"To Hermione Granger, a woman I've loved, I leave five shares of my personal assets and the entire library at Grimmauld Place. I owe a debt to the troll whose actions brought us together. Thank you for sharing my life."

Hermione had taken a different route than Ron, and was daubing her eyes with a dainty square of material that had been rubbed with cut chillis. Her tears looked very authentic indeed.

"To Blaise Zabini, the woman to whom I proposed, I'm sorry I didn't manage to meet your demands. I leave to you the remaining five shares of my personal assets, and number 12 Grimmauld Place. Please take care of Hedwig for me. I love you dearly, and I wish we could have spent the rest of my life together."

Blaise smiled sadly at my image, blinking rapidly. The revelation that I had asked her to marry me sent a shockwave through the assembly. It certainly wasn't what they were expecting.

"And finally, to Albus Dumbledore. I've been told that in death there should be forgiveness." My silvery image smiled evilly at him. *"Shall we see?"*

From my perspective, I could see the old man pale quickly at my image's words. He obviously remembered the last time I said them to him. My image slowly sank into the pensieve, still smiling. As soon as I'd disappeared the enchantment of silence broke, and people started yelling objections. Blaise smirked at the commotion, easily showing how much contempt she had for their behaviour. A handful of voices managed to drown out the rest, before one eventually managed to take control.

"This is intolerable!" screamed one fellow with three chins and a belt that looked like an equator around his waist.

"What is intolerable?" Blaise enquired.

"This farce!" the scarlet-faced man bellowed. "I did not come here today to be insulted by some snot-nosed child who obviously didn't appreciate the honour bestowed upon him."

Blaise let a slow, predatory smile grace her lips. "You came here on your own accord. I don't believe you were given an invitation."

"That is beside the point! The Wizengamot will hear of this!" A chorus of indignant agreement followed.

Ron stood up quickly, and bellowed back. "Oh yeah? What will you tell them?"

That stumped the fat chap momentarily, as having someone a head taller suddenly yelling back tends to. "I— I won't have an Ancient and Noble house be corrupted by filth!" he retorted, his tone indicated he was a little less sure of himself than he had been a moment ago.

Ron frowned at him. “What could that bunch of cowards possibly do about it?” he challenged.

Blaise cleared her throat and held up a hand. Even Ron, who had gone a Vernon-esque purple and looked about to leap over and strangle the speaker, turned to face her. “More to the point, why is it any of your business, Mr. Yaxley?” she asked.

Seeing someone he could intimidate more easily, he turned to face my petite girlfriend. “I will make it my business, Miss Zabini! I will challenge this will and the delay!”

Blaise smirked back at him. “On whose behalf?” she asked lightly, with no sign of the hook behind the worm.

He frowned. “Why, my own, of course!” he spluttered, before deciding that he needed to add a less selfish amendment. “And that of the Wizengamot, too!”

Blaise, Ron and Hermione winced. “Oh, ouch. You’re not going to have many friends after today, are you?” Blaise snickered as she made a note on a legal pad she extracted from her folio.

“What are you babbling on about, Zabini?” The Yaxley patriarch demanded.

Ron gave Blaise some puppy-dog eyes. “Can I? Huh? Can I? Pleasepleaseplease?”

Blaise rolled her eyes theatrically and gestured her assent. Ron spun back to the obese man. “Clause number, er...” he started before looking to Blaise for help.

“Thirteen,” she said pointedly.

“Thirteen, right! Clause thirteen of the will Harry left for the Potter and Black families,” he said with finality, before sitting down with a nod and a self-satisfied smirk.

There was an embarrassing silence for a few confused moments. Ron had clearly managed to lose track of his thoughts (since they weren’t about food or Quidditch), believing that just giving the clause number would inspire denunciations. It wasn’t the first time that Ron had lost the plot recently, and I was beginning to worry about him. Hermione sighed and rose to her feet.

“What Ron meant to say was that Clause thirteen is a poison pill. Any person or body who challenges the will cannot receive a thing.” To Yaxley’s dawning horror, she continued with a smirk. “Basically, your outburst just ensured that you are under no circumstances eligible to receive a single knut from Harry’s estates.”

Blaise withdrew another sheet from her folio as Ron gave an embarrassed “Oops”. A few faces I recognised from my trial were nodding with a hefty degree of self-satisfaction.

“As a matter of fact,” she said, reading down the page, “If you want to be technically correct, I believe that Mr. Yaxley’s outburst means that no one on the Wizengamot is eligible. Harry’s will states... let’s see... here we are. Blah blah blah, *any person or body who challenges, or has a challenge issued on their behalf by another person or body, shall be ineligible* ...”

The eruption of noise drowned out the rest of Blaise’s answer. More than one person seemed rather annoyed at Blaise (and I suppose by extension, me), but the vast majority seemed to strenuously object to Yaxley’s outburst costing them their opportunity. Blaise raised her hands and called for quiet. Eventually, she was given it.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, please, let us be civilised about this. I know several of you are upset, but this is not the forum to assuage your disappointment. Now, are there any questions regarding the will itself?”

A rather vocal minority in the audience seemed to want to continue to air their complaints, but Blaise simply ignored them. Eventually, someone else managed to gain attention. “Why did Harry think he’d been dead for a year?”

Blaise cleared her throat. “As mentioned, Harry’s actual written will is not to be executed until either his body is laid to rest, or a year and a day has passed. Harry was very specific in that. I believe he suspected that any disappearance on his part would be taken advantage of. I can see that his vision was remarkable,” she said, staring at a fidgeting Yaxley.

“Is that legal?” a voice shouted.

Blaise nodded. “According to all legal advice I have received, yes it is.”

“But that was his personal will. What of the Potter and Black families?”

Blaise sighed. “As he said, he has chosen a successor already.” Her face hardened slightly. “I do not know who he chose. It could be one of you here today, it may not be. I honestly have no idea. The goblins have confirmed that since Harry’s death, a wizard has accessed both the Potter and Black family vaults, so the wizard in question is fully aware of his status. As such, the Potter and Black family assets have already been claimed.”

More cries of foul play. I chuckled at the antics of those whose hopes had been dashed. Many were shouting their intention to get legal advice of their own. To my surprise, Dumbledore rose to his feet.

“While I am not a member of the legal fraternity, I believe I can answer some of your concerns. Despite long-standing tradition, it is not a requirement that a newly-anointed family head publicly present himself.”

There was a chorus of phrases like, “Here now!” and “Now see here!” Dumbledore held up a hand.

“I am quite aware of the extenuating circumstances. However, Mr. Potter’s body has not been recovered. Despite the wishes of many of you here today, there is little that can be done in this case. Both I and my legal advisors have reviewed his wills, both personal and familial, and he has been most diligent in expressing his wishes.” Dumbledore paused, before looking at Hermione and Ron. “In fact, given that his body was not recovered, it is entirely possible, though astronomically unlikely, that it is Mr. Potter himself who has accessed the vaults. He may well be alive.”

I smothered the sudden cold sensation in my gut, before shaking it off. He was a crafty bugger; he knew I wasn’t dead from the fact that he couldn’t contact me on his little necromantic rock. Dumbledore had been watching my friends as he made that last announcement, so he was looking to gauge their reactions.

Reading Ron would be difficult; his expression of surprise could simply be explained away by the fact that he had finally noticed all the food at the back of the hall.

Trying to read Blaise was an exercise in futility. She had inherited the Zabini poker face.

Hermione on the other hand, was honest to a fault. Her hoarse, “What?!” squeaked out, but the tears on her cheeks pretty much made her grief look real. She covered for her outburst with a relatively authentic sounding, “You think so? Really? You haven’t found him with that stone? Harry could be alive?”

Blaise, who had been dispassionately been watching the proceedings, jumped in too. “What stone?” she demanded. “Harry’s alive?”

Ron, of course, frowned and said, “Huh?” His mother, however, screeched like a banshee and started babbling like an Italian mother whose baby had just been randomly picked up on the street and blessed by the Pope. In an instant, nearly everyone in the room was entertaining the idea that I might be alive.

Bugger.

Dumbledore’s expression grew alarmed as his ad-lib sociological experiment ran out of control. Quite a few people were speculating wildly. Many were loudly expressing their disbelief. A few were pestering Dumbledore about this ‘stone’ of his that could find someone who is dead. Holding up his hands, the old man pleaded with the audience. “Please, I do not mean to say that Harry is alive, I was merely remarking on the, admittedly, faint possibility. His presence at St. Mungo’s is incontrovertible, up until the explosion. He was in no way responsive during his time there, though that does not discount the possibility that he did wake up on the day of his attack. If he managed to escape the assassination attempt, then he may well be the mysterious wizard who has accessed the Potter and Black family vaults.”

“Then why hasn’t he contacted us?” Molly blubbered.

“Molly, please,” Dumbledore begged. “I did not mean—“

“What did you mean then?” Ginny demanded, rising to her feet. It would have been more impressive if the diminutive witch had been more than five feet tall.

A sudden prickling on the back of my neck was the only warning I got before the few wards I placed in the room fell. I was out of my chair in a defensive crouch with my yew wand in hand just before a disillusioned wizard popped into existence inside the hotel room. I only noticed his all but silent arrival by the slight distortion around the edges of his body.

We immediately began exchanging spells. I evaded a hex that would have burst my eardrums, and deflected the follow-up curse that would have frozen the blood in my veins. My bone-shattering curse and firewhip were sidestepped and extinguished respectively.

The new arrival didn’t waste time hiding behind shields. He simply apparated across the room and launched another volley of curses and hexes.

Hmm, where had I seen that tactic before?

I banished the mattress on the massive bed at my visitor, and transfigured a couple of lamps into dogs. Bowled over by canines and aerial furniture, the wizard tried banishing spells himself.

Another soft detonation signalled the arrival of another person in the room. I apparated myself, rather than spend time trying to figure out the location of the undoubtedly disillusioned arrival, but instead of jumping around the room, I went up, appearing in the room on the floor above. I spent a few seconds formulating a plan. With two on one, I couldn’t waste spellwork dispelling their disillusionment; I needed to attack them from the outset. I needed something that would reveal them, but not take the half second to cast that a normal spell did. To that end, I conjured a fragile glass globe and filled it with powdered graphite. The silvery dust should coat everything, including any nearby hostiles. I mentally rehearsed my next spells before disillusioning myself and apparating back down.

I thought I would have about two seconds before my presence was detected. My pursuers were craftier than I expected. The instant I arrived, my disillusionment was stripped away. My only consolation was that the ward they had erected to perform that feat also stripped them of their near-invisibility. I was already halfway through the first spells of my plan - I conjured a pair of whirlwinds. Due to my haste and the confines of the room, the swirling eddies couldn’t gather enough momentum to buffet anything larger than a serviette, but they were enough for my purposes. My assailants reacted to my presence as I expected; each hurling two or three curses in rapid succession. I didn’t have time to respond with magic, so I simply threw the graphite-filled globe at the spells and apparated again, this time down to the room below.

There were positives and negatives to my choice to vary my destination. On the bad side, I appeared a metre in front of a woman wearing nothing but a towel. She screamed at my sudden appearance. The fact that she was wearing the towel around her head was a definite plus. Fortunately, her

charms did not distract me enough that I missed the appearance of one of my attackers, who'd obviously followed the noise. The soft pop of his arrival indicated that he was behind me.

I snapped off an obliviation charm at the naked Muggle, before diving to the side, avoiding a curse from one of my rather determined groupies. The woman's eyes went blank as she collapsed to the floor in a rather compromising position.

I rolled onto my back and grunted with effort as I *pushed* out hard and broadly, shoving every item of furniture in the room away. The disillusioned wizard didn't stick around to be blown backwards; he apparated away.

I couldn't keep the excited grin of anticipation off my face as I cast a bubblehead charm and followed suit, apparating back up into my room, aiming for a corner. Instantly, I regretted my decision to just cover my mouth and nose. Graphite dust filled my eyes, blinding me in less than a second.

My only consolation was that muffled swearing in the room indicated that my friends were suffering the same ailment. One snapped off a hex at me, while I simply *pushed*.

Unable to see, a blob of goo slammed into my right arm and pinned me to the wall behind with a wet squelch. My magic had a similar effect, bodily picking my attackers up and shoving him into the wall.

I blinked my eyes clear. Pressed against the wall on the far side of the room were my anonymous attackers, along with all the airborne graphite dust. Every dark speck coated the wallpaper like a smoggy piece of art.

The tableau was held for a few seconds before something else caught my attention. Apparently, the graphite had been a bad idea. It was a bad thing to have around Muggle electronics, if the sparks and smoke were any indication. Each television was sizzling and emitting smoke. Just to make my day worse, the sprinklers in the room set off.

I remained dry, since I was continually *pushing*. The water drops arced down towards the floor before suddenly changing direction and following my magic. This meant that the men I was pinning to the wall were getting a very cold shower.

I couldn't hear them over the noise of the sprinklers, as one of them spluttered and wheezed something to the other.

"Bugger that," I whispered shortly. I changed my tactic, and instead of *pushing* a broad area, I focused on just *pushing* hard against their chests and abdomens. Immediately, the pair had trouble breathing. After thirty seconds, their panicked gasps began subsiding. Another ten seconds later, and one fainted. Ten seconds after that, so did his partner.

With a sigh, I stopped *pushing*. With my arm pinned against the wall by the translucent goo, I couldn't use my wand. I *pulled* instead.

Slowly, the goo thinned as the spell lost strength. Bit by bit, I was converting the stuff to a living warmth that flowed up my arm. In moments, I'd absorbed enough of the magic of the spell to pull my arm away. Once free, I stunned both men before looking around the ruined room.

The bed was broken and overturned. The other furniture would only have a future as kindling. Muddy graphite covered the walls in damp streaks, and was soaking rapidly into the carpet. The electronic equipment the hotel set up for my surveillance could only be described as scrap.

I shook my head as I quickly packed up and salvaged what gear I could. This hotel stay was going to be rather more expensive than I had initially anticipated.

"Wake up, Sunshine."

My prisoner startled awake, desperately looking around to get his bearings. The dark room gave no indication whatsoever as to his location. I simply sat back on my haunches and observed his actions.

His eyes darted around for a few seconds, during which time his breath came in panicked gasps. Almost like flicking a switch, he calmed and measured his breathing. He turned his gaze to me and stared for a moment.

"You'd better let me go, if you know what's good for you," he snarled.

I just blinked lazily, not reacting to his taunt.

He started breathing more heavily. "I mean it; you don't know who you're dealing with!"

"I will," I said softly.

He sneered at me. "I'll tell you nothing!"

I shrugged and rose to my feet, standing tall over him. I drew my wand and took aim. "Let's see, shall we?"

He braced himself.

"*Imperio ! Legilimens !*"

His will was strong. He fought back valiantly, but he was already off balance from expecting a painful curse rather than one that made him feel blissfully good. I ordered him to lower his mental defenses, and dove straight into his mind.

A minute later I withdrew from my consciousness and cancelled both spells. He slumped down, mentally exhausted from fighting my cerebral invasion. I didn't bother taunting him with the knowledge I'd just taken from his mind, I simply stunned him and left him alone.

Blaise was waiting for me at the top of the stairs. I closed the door to the cellar and sealed it with the Blood Magic of the Black Family. "What did you learn?" she asked.

"Not much from the first. A bit from the second. Neither of them are agents of your Great-grandfather, but they have received some combat training from someone who may well be. Zab keeps his informants and agents in cells, with no interaction between them. He gives orders by owl, and they send information back to him when an owl appears. These guys downstairs got their orders in person."

Blaise made a face. "Huh. I guess I was wrong."

I pursed my lips and shook my head. "Of course, that's not to say that Zab isn't behind the scenes, directing the traffic. I wouldn't put it past him to have some level of influence with these guys' boss."

"Do you know who that boss is?"

I winced, but nodded slowly. "Fellow called Kellermann."

Her eyes bulged. "Isn't he dead?"

"Unless he could survive a basilisk's gaze and an extended stay in its digestion tract, yes. But it wasn't *that* Kellermann who those two buggers report to." I paused, thinking deeply.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Am I going to have to torture you to get the whole story?"

I gave a short, sad snort. "No, I'm just wondering how many enemies I've made, simply by defending myself. I saw the Kellermann they report to in his memories. I've met him before, in the Vatican. He was with Dumbledore, and was introduced as being a mugwump of the ICW."

Blaise calmed down. "Are they related?"

"Yeah," I confirmed. "Uncle and nephew. Said uncle is looking for said nephew. He must have managed to find some of the wizards who decided to bugger off from Albania between rounds one and two of the Potter/Malfoy rematch."

She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. With a heavy sigh, she said, "Damn it Potter, can't you be like normal people and make mortal enemies who don't have obscene levels of magical or political power?"

"What can I say? It's a gift."

She snorted at my quip. "Seriously Harry, you don't want to fuck with the mugwumps. On the vanishingly remote chance you manage to survive the next fifty years, with your level of power, you'd probably be considered for membership." She sighed. "Oh well, at least you aren't pissing Great-grandfather off by kidnapping his people."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure Zab is trying to find out who this new Dark Wizard is. Just as I'm sure that he will figure it out first. But as long as he doesn't, I doubt anyone else will either."

Blaise shook her head. "He'd be a better ally than just a yardstick for how well you are hiding your identity."

"Maybe," I conceded. "But I'd prefer to wait until after a few more targets have been visited. I'd rather he have a good idea of my goals before approaching him."

I could tell she wasn't convinced, but was willing to defer to my judgement. "What about those two?"

I smiled. "How long would it take you to brew a couple of doses of the Draught of Living Death?"

"An hour and fifty minutes. Are you sure you want to dose them both?"

I nodded. "It will keep them from trying to escape. Once they are dosed, I'll transfigure them into bricks or something, to keep them from being found accidentally by Hermione or the twins. How long can someone survive under that potion?"

"Three or four days, usually. It depends on how hydrated they are. Transfiguring them would extend that by weeks though. You'd have to reverse the transfiguration every so often to give them water and nourishment; say, once a month. So long as they aren't injured, they should survive indefin—"

There was a crash from upstairs. "Harry?" screeched Hermione.

I closed my eyes and apparated to the reception room, finding Ron and Hermione waiting there. "Hi guys, are you alright?" I asked.

Hermione flew into me and wrapped her arms around my neck in a manner very reminiscent of old times. Ron probably would have followed suit, but he was holding two full platters of sandwiches. His expression however quickly turned from anxiety to one of amusement.

"Oh thank God you're okay. What happened?" the human limpet demanded.

I carefully disentangled myself. "Some government types went up to the room, broke the wards I set up and charged in. I fought and managed to

incapacitate them. The room was trashed though.”

She pulled back and began running her hands over my face, chest and arms. “You really are all right,” she said before looking back into my eyes.

“I really am,” I replied. “You should see the other guys.” Ron snorted, but otherwise stayed silent.

She took a deep breath and sighed. “They aren’t dead, are they?” Her eyes widened suddenly. “Oh, Harry! I didn’t mean it like that! I just meant—”

I covered her mouth with my fingers. “Shh. I know what you meant. And no, they aren’t dead, though they probably wish they were. How were the hotel people? How big was the fuss they made?”

Oddly, Ron answered for her. “They actually apologised to us,” he said with a chuckle.

“Huh?” I said eloquently. “The room was ruined. Why were *they* apologetic?”

Hermione pushed my fingers away from her mouth and gave a thin smile. “Look at it from their point of view. A wealthy client books a room and a hall at short notice, paying the full charges without blinking. That is the sort of client you want to keep. Someone uninvited came in and asked questions, finding out about the room we booked, and went up there and started a fight. It is strictly against their policy to direct the public to specific rooms, so the manager who gave them that information has been fired.”

I shook my head. “He was confounded. It wasn’t his fault.”

She frowned. “How did you know that?”

I grinned at her. “I might have accidentally rifled through their memories.”

The frown didn’t waver. “How? No, scratch that. Who were they? No, wait! When? When did you get a chance to do that?”

I struggled to keep a smile from my face as her internal checklist of questions jockeyed for the top dais of the podium. “How long do you think the fight lasted?”

Her expression became doubtful. “I— I don’t know. Two minutes at the most.”

I chuckled. “Nope. A bit less than that.”

“Did they see you?”

I shook my head. “Yes, but I was wearing my ‘Manuel’ disguise,” I replied, gesturing towards the discarded wig, moustache and infernal choking device, or what she called a bowtie. “Anyway, they are in no state to report what they saw. We’ll be okay.”

Her eyes suddenly held a touch of awe. “Harry, just how powerful *are* you? You’ve escaped from the inescapable prison, broken into Gringotts and the Vatican, stole a Horcrux from a heavily guarded compound, and that’s not even touching on what you did to Riddle. And now you were ambushed by two men, and emerged unscathed after a fight that destroyed the hotel room. Seriously, how much magic do you control?”

I smiled, reaching up and gently grabbing her chin between my thumb and forefinger. “Enough. Not as much as Dumbledore or Riddle, but more than most. But I’d say the reason for my success has more to do with my tactics than magic.” I didn’t add I’d decided that I would never be captured again, and that I’d do anything in my power to prevent that from happening again. I was no longer a determined but well-meaning little boy.

Hermione nodded uneasily, but grabbed me in a hug again. I looked over to Ron. “What happened after Ginny stood up? That was when I was interrupted.”

He shrugged. “Dumbledore got a bit of a pounding from everyone there.”

Hermione interrupted. “A bit?”

Ron grinned at her. “Well, a lot then. Blaise kept asking for quiet but no one was interested. Just about everyone there was shouting at him, demanding to know what was going on. I saw Blaise slip out, so I assume she’s here.”

I heard Blaise arrive behind me. “Well spotted, Ronald.”

“Here,” he said, handing her one of the platters.

“What’s this for?”

He blinked. “Um, you, Harry and Hermione. I thought you’d like to share it.”

She graced him with a small smile. “How thoughtful. Thank you. What about that one?” she finished, pointing at the platter he still held.

Ron circled it with and arm and half turned away, obscuring it from view. “What about it?”

The four of us had lunch, and began preparing for our afternoon outing. I donned my Manuel face while the other’s practiced their spellwork. Around four hours after the will reading, Fred and George arrived with great fanfare, eager to set off. I suppose the prospect of blowing up several buildings

was enough to get them thoroughly interested.

Leaving the others to finalise their parts, taking potions and whatnot, I apparated to Parti Alley and mentally ran through the plan's checklist.

While Fred had been in France performing some rather specific, yet useful vandalism, George and I had done a bit of scouting, he in the flesh and I in paper. Of all the Nott-owned buildings in Parti Alley, we'd managed to identify a specific group of four congruent buildings owned by the Notts. They were off towards the far end of the Alley, where there was little random traffic. Blaise and Hermione both had objections to my selected target, for different reasons, but there was one overriding fact that made my choice easy. What the fourth building in the group was used for.

The leftmost building was a retail establishment; it sold and repaired expensive charmed jewellery.

The shop to the right belonged to a wardcrafter, who sold not only services, but wardstone sets and anchor stones.

The next shop was the empty storefront that was going to be used as the reason for our attention.

And finally, the main object of my attention, a large, tall warehouse, filled with the raw materials that supplied a number of other businesses; many of which I had an interest in seeing fail.

The three occupied buildings were rented by friends of the Nott family. Though there were larger groups of Nott-owned buildings throughout the Alley, I picked that group for my attention due to the customer base of the businesses. Also, targeting that group would minimise any damage done to nearby businesses owned or run by those of less-than-pure heritage.

Hermione was actually rather enthused about my plan of attack. She appeared relieved that for this round I was targeting not people, but property.

She had her own reasons for supporting it, mostly revolving around the concept that attacks on people only made those without adequate levels of protection feel unsafe. The rich and powerful would strengthen their wards and hire extra guards to feel secure. Destroying property, on the other hand, was a sure fire way to get a lot of rich people pissing their pants in both fear and anger.

At the heart of this venture, Hermione would ostensibly be looking for a property to open a bookshop, using her upcoming inheritance from me as capital. Fred and George would be the local, familiar faces offering advice. Hermione would be the naïve, prospective tenant, while Ron and Blaise would be her polyjuiced Muggle parents. I, of course, would be the mysterious and terrifying dark wizard, a role that was starting to grow on me.

Disguised and under my newly returned cloak, I apparated to Parti Alley and carefully entered the warehouse.

The modestly sized building had been extensively enlarged on the interior. Crates were stacked high all over the building, sometimes from floor to ceiling. A handful of middle-aged wizards were busy lounging around and directing a dozen young men who were actually moving and stacking the stock. I could make out six enormous fireplaces where entire pallets of goods were sent and received through the flames.

It only took me a second or two to identify the management offices, since it was the only part of the building that wasn't cavernous and filled with stuff in boxes. The offices sat in the corner closest to the front door, and the only real clear path in the whole place was the carpet leading to the door.

On silenced feet, I followed the carpeted path.

Opening the door unnoticed would take some doing. My friends all had their own opinions on how best to get through.

Ron of course, favoured the 'blast the bloomin' thing off its hinges' approach. If it's not part of a chess strategy, the man can't even recognise the word subtle.

Hermione thought that creating a distraction would be best to attract the attention of those inside. She even went so far as to conjure different types of glass to see which made the most distinctive noise when hit with a hammer.

The twins just suggested picking the lock, and gave a great deal of advice on just how to accomplish that.

Blaise had rolled her eyes at the Gryffindors in the room, and just suggested waiting for someone to go in and follow along under my cloak.

I love my friends, but sometimes, the most obvious solution is the best.

I knocked on the door.

A few moments later, the door swung inward and a frowning gentleman of advancing years peered out. "Hello?"

"Imperio."

His eyes went blank. Yep, the Imperius is an incredibly useful spell.

Under my direction, the foreman helpfully rounded up all the paperwork, ledgers and correspondence in the office for me. He was even kind enough to remove the warding charms on the massive safe in the back room, though he didn't have the key. No matter.

I shrunk the safe down and charmed it featherlight. It went into my backpack whole. I'd crack it later at my leisure. I spent the next few minutes splashing some rather flammable liquids around the office. No one was going to notice any missing files from the office after my visit.

I gave my victim some more instructions, and left the warehouse. I paused at the front door, making sure I wasn't followed. Once on the street, I

spent some time setting up the rest of our plan. Using my experience from robbing Gringotts, I had taken three of the Black family's uglier vases out of storage. The never-ending jug of drinks in Sirius' vault had been an incredibly well made item, requiring dozens, if not hundreds, of enchantments. Around one in five of those would have been strengthening, stability and permanency charms, designed to make it as indestructible as possible. 'As possible' in that case meaning, 'everything up to dragon breath, after which, all bets are off'. Destroying it had released the power of the enchantments in a single destructive instant, something I intended to duplicate.

Of course, I didn't have a nice, useful pissed off dragon on hand, so instead, I had added as many useless enchantments and charms as I could to the small vases, dangerously overloading the pitiful stability charms already in place. A simple concussion hex would easily break them, and release the magic pent up within.

I carefully stuck the disillusioned vases as high up as I could on the façade of the warehouse and two shopfronts. Objective completed, I apparated to the roof of another Nott-owned building on the opposite side of the alley, from where I had a good view of each of the four buildings of interest. It was mid-afternoon, and the crowd was rather thin. More people would be coming out onto the streets to finish their business before heading home for the day.

Hermione and Co. were taking their time. I'd begun to check my watch twice a minute by the time my friends appeared in the street below. Fred and George were playing tour guide to Hermione and her 'parents', much to the irritation of the Nott's building manager, who was trying to show off the various vacant sites. Ron made a point of examining each of them, eager to play the protective father figure being asked for advice. The rather portly 'John Granger' came off looking like someone who knew nothing about what he was doing, yet didn't want anyone to know.

The group stopped in front of the vacant shop we had identified. Hermione immediately began gesturing excitedly towards the building. I could faintly make out her words. "This one, this one is perfect!"

The face of the building manager was priceless. He paled at her enthusiasm and immediately began dissuading her. I guess his job would be at risk if the three pure-bloods surrounding the store suddenly had a filthy Mudblood in their midst. Fred and George also looked wary, suggesting that they move on. Figuring that it was pretty much time, I sent a mental command to the poor chap under my command.

Blaise and Ron however both loudly agreed with Hermione's assessment. Ron shielded his eyes and leaned close to the front window, to get a better view of the interior.

Their actions attracted the attention of a few locals, who watched in bemusement. In stereotypical Muggle clothes, Ron and Blaise stood out quite well. Ignoring the conversation, I focused on the overall flow of events. Soon, the nearby store owners began to take interest. The wardcrafter was the first to notice the Muggles in his midst. He just crossed his arms and began insulting my friends from the safety of the door to his shop. Hermione studiously ignored him, and told her companions to do the same.

The jeweller actually closed the door to his business and joined the first, their unoriginal insults becoming louder. The *Imperio* ed manager in the warehouse followed my final orders, and brought out all the wizards in the warehouse to gape and gawk at the Muggles. All of them soon joined the growing crowd on the street. Once the newcomers appeared and joined the original pair, they began to get cocky. It was rather amusing to see their courage improve as the likelihood of being individually singled out reduced.

Hermione, of course, refused to be intimidated. She shook off warning hands from Fred and George to give the increasingly hostile locals a tongue-lashing. A larger crowd formed, with many there muttering insults themselves. Hermione was obviously recognised; even from my vantage point I could hear the words 'Granger' and 'Mudblood'. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that she was identifiable by sight - she was, after all my friend.

A couple of the more belligerent idiots down below had drawn their wands as a threat, so I decided it was time for me to intrude. I pulled off my cloak, stuffed it into the portkey sock and cast a mild concussion hex at the vase attached to the warehouse's front window. The disillusioned vase, almost thrumming with pent up power, exploded. Since it had been stuck to the outside of the window, the blast blew the shards of glass into the building, away from the crowd below.

At this point, I expected certain things to happen.

I expected the crowd in the street below to panic, during which I would use a Sonorous charm to threaten those who supported Voldemort with destruction. I expected that Hermione would then engage me in a carefully choreographed duel, during which I would claim that I had no intention of hurting her. She would claim that my tactics were not the correct way to change society, to which I would refer her to the verbal abuse she had just endured as evidence for my position. I expected that Fred and George would join in the fight, which I would make it obvious that I was taking care not to hurt them. While I didn't expect any of the bigots would join in, I was prepared to hurt those who did. Once the expected battle with my allies had concluded, I expected that I would blow up another of the vases, and then start destroying the contents of the warehouse. I expected that Aurors would arrive eventually, at which point I expected that I would blow up the remaining vase and leave during the commotion. Afterwards, Hermione and the twins would be interviewed by the press, where they would make full use of the contrast between now and then, pointing out that I had not attempted to injure anyone not a bigot or pure-blood, that I had just specifically targeted the property of a bunch of supremacists.

Unfortunately, some unexpected things actually happened.

There must have been some 'unlisted' stock in the warehouse; stock that was a little more unstable than the rest of the benign inventory. Whatever it was, it didn't like being hit with a minor explosion. The resulting fireball was anything but contained, and that created a massive secondary explosion. The collapsing expansion charms probably added to the second fireball.

The shockwave from that set off the other two vases.

Even from my distance and vantage point, I was knocked backwards onto my arse by the sudden rush of superheated air.

I scabbled quickly to the edge of the building, looking down at the alley with a horrible feeling in my gut.

Fortunately, there didn't appear to be copious amounts of blood. A few cuts and grazes were definitely on show, but only a few people lying on the street below were conscious enough to be clutching their ears. A quick census indicated that maybe half of the crowd of people were lying completely still, more than enough to make my blood chill.

The only good thing was the fact that each of my friends had been far enough away from the front of the warehouse that they were among the moving.

Without thinking, I apparated down to ground zero and began checking the vital signs of each of the immobile figures. I detected a heartbeat in the first few, and my breathing became less laboured. It was a short lived relief though, as one by terrible one, I found corpses among the living.

As I found a pulse on the last unconscious wizard, I drew a shuddering breath and actually took the time to check my surroundings. A small gaggle of civic minded witches and wizards had joined me in administering first aid to those lying on the street. A much larger number were in a pair of huddles at either end of the Alley, looking down at the carnage with trepidation – ready to bolt if necessary, but not willing to help.

I swallowed past a lump in my throat. I'd killed people in a fight before; repeatedly, in fact. But the dead on the road here had not been attacking me as I forced them onto the next great adventure.

I took a deep breath, and began giving orders to the few who were helping. Initially they were bewildered, trying to do everything at once, but after a few moments, I had them working in a cohesive manner. I began conjuring blankets to wrap around those who looked to be going into shock. Being consumed by guilt would not help here.

Twin cracks indicated the arrival of the Ministry's finest. The pair of Aurors stood flatfooted for a moment, before demanding that nobody move.

I rolled my eyes. "Go and get medical help, you morons," I snapped at them, more angry with myself than them. One looked to be in his early thirties, while the other I vaguely remembered from my time at Hogwarts. He was in the Gryffindor upper classes when I first started school.

"What happened?" the older one demanded.

I glanced around at the dozens of injured people. Well, I suppose I should own up. "See that bastard there?" I asked, pointing to the wardcrafter as he lay recumbent on the ground.

"He did this?" the younger of the Aurors demanded.

"Idiot," I said not all that quietly. "No, he and his friends were threatening Miss Granger there, simply because she is Muggle born."

"Granger did this?"

"Oh for fuck's sake," I spat, deciding that subtlety would be of no use in the face of such idiocy. "No. *I* did this." I said, jabbing my chest with my thumb. "I blew up his shop to teach those pure-blood supremacists a lesson. His stock blew up, and the shock wave set off the stock in the other shops too!"

Both Aurors blinked owlishly at me, completely dumbfounded. It gave me plenty of time to ready my wand for the first spell.

It was a stunner, naturally. I deflected it easily, and decided not to counter with a spell, but with words. "Trainee, right?" I snorted at the one who sent the spell.

That got their hackles up. Both tried drilling me with powerful curses. I caught both spells with the strongest shield I could manage. "Is that it? That's your best?"

The more seasoned Auror judiciously raised his own shield, while the younger one wound up to deliver the most powerful spell in his arsenal. I gave my wand a casual, theatrical wave in their direction, giving the pair a hard, sharp *push*.

They did a wonderful impersonation of leaves in a wind. Everyone within earshot was staring intently at me, making me suddenly very glad that I had Muggle disguises on, and not just glamours.

"DID YOU HEAR THAT? PURE-BLOOD BIGOTS WILL PAY! THOSE WHO SUPPORTED VOLDEMORT WILL DIE!" I screamed at the crowd.

Finally, something happened as I planned; the screams and running for cover part of my plan. Amid the chaos, Hermione had managed to get to her feet, with a little help from Fred and George. She blinked at me, looking a little dizzy. I nodded to her, as though in greeting. Hopefully she would take it as the signal to begin.

Keeping to the script, Hermione steadied herself and snapped at the twins to get her 'parents' to safety. As Fred and George grabbed Ron and Blaise, Hermione defiantly tried to stun me. Her underpowered spells splashed impotently on my shield as the four apparated away.

"Stop that, Miss Granger," I said casually.

"No!" She shouted back, a little uncertainly. "This is not the way to change society!" She followed that pronouncement with another curse.

I batted it away casually. "I respectfully disagree. The actions of these pathetic worms show that they refuse to change and mature peacefully. Now stand down, I have no interest in harming you," I responded, sending three spells down at her. The first two batted down her shield, and the third snatched her wand.

One of the other shopkeepers had managed to gather enough courage and wits to draw his wand. With a shout of what he probably hoped was pure defiance, although it warbled rather amusingly, he launched what was obviously the most powerful spell he could.

I rolled my eyes as I casually flicked away the reductor curse. Its power could have been exceeded by any DA member above third year. “Oh please,” I sneered, waving my wand at the man with a broad, casual movement. Once more, rather than cast a spell, I *pushed* at him, knocking him over backwards and pinning him to the ground. He whimpered, begging for his life.

I raised my voice and spoke to the crowd. “YOU ARE WEAK. YOU ARE ALL WEAK. YOU CLING TO THE PITIFUL BELIEF THAT YOUR BLOOD MAKES YOU BETTER. I WILL PROVE YOU WRONG!”

Halfway through my speech, more Aurors arrived. I was taking an awful risk, letting myself become increasingly outnumbered. But the deaths I’d caused today meant that I needed to ensure it was worth it.

The newly arrived squad of four wasted no time in trying to restrain me. In contrast to the tactics of the first Auror pair, one member of the group immediately sent out ropes, another transfigured glass shards into a cage and a third threw up and held a shield that covered the quartet. The last began the process of erecting anti-apparation wards.

I concentrated and disappeared just before the new wards could take effect. I appeared diametrically opposite to where I had been, and tossed a concussion hex into the ground at the rear of the group. Though protected somewhat from the blast by the shield, I augmented the effect with a powerful *push*. To witnesses, it appeared as though my spell was strong enough to send four fully-grown wizards flying.

“YOUR PATHETIC MAGICS ARE USELESS,” I shouted at their backs as they landed in various positions, each looking more uncomfortable than the last. In the stunned silence that followed, I said in a more normal tone of voice, “I shall destroy every last one of Voldemort’s supporters! You have been warned.”

With that, I tossed Hermione’s wand back to her and theatrically turned away with billowing robes. Never again will I say that I learned nothing from Snape. Another squad of Aurors appeared just in front of me at the edge of the anti-apparation jinx.

Their momentary disorientation was enough for me to both recognise one of my new assailants and to bring my wand to the ready. The group spread out immediately. “Don’t move,” she ordered.

I shrugged and kept walking. Tonks instantly took the offensive with a pair of darkish curses that would have hospitalised me for a week. Nice to know that there were Aurors who were prepared to break out the big spells straight away.

I sidestepped one and batted the other away. She had improved from her performance in the Department of Mysteries. “Ah, Auror Tonks, I presume? You are the metamorph, yes? It is so nice to finally meet you.”

She paused, wondering why I wasn’t retaliating. “You know me?”

I held my wand high, then slashed it down, pointing directly at my feet. With all my strength, I gave a powerful, pulsing *push* against the whole world. The shockwave rippled out in all directions, like a circular earthquake. Everyone within twenty metres was knocked over backwards; those already on their arses were shoved and rolled away. Windows shattered and walls cracked under the assault.

I looked back at Tonks, who had ended up on her backside with a surprised expression on her face. I gave her a slow, lazy smile. This was too good an opportunity to pass. “I know everyone who belongs to one of my adopted families, my dear,” I replied slyly as she struggled to rise to her feet.

Her skin went white in a manner that had nothing to do with her abilities. “No,” she said, aghast.

“Oh, yes, my dear. Now, if you will excuse me, I have other commitments. Cheerio.”

She reacted quickly, snapping up her wand and taking aim at my heart. I waited patiently for her to finish, before giving her a wave.

I simply muttered, “Chamber,” and was whisked away by my portkey sock.

Master Potter Some flash flooding, with expected loss of property

The Chamber of Secrets was just as grimy as I remembered. I carefully made my way into the main grotto. Salazar Slytherin's massive bust stared down at me.

"Arrogant bastard, weren't you?" I muttered.

My serpentine friend was not at home; probably out hunting. I made my way over to the Dark Collection, and used a desk that looked as though it had once been the property of the Marquis de Sade.

Putting the deaths I had been responsible for temporarily out of my mind, I pulled out all the papers I'd taken from the warehouse and spread them out over the desk. Carefully, I began making piles, sorting the documents. Unsurprisingly, the majority of them were orders and invoices. It appeared that the warehouse was mainly used as a sort of holding area for the importing and distribution of potion ingredients, but raw materials and manufacturing components were also stored there before being sent out. Nimbus Brooms seemed to be a customer, so unless they had a stockpile to mitigate events such as this, brand-new Nimbus brooms were probably going to be a little scarce on the market in the not-too-distant future. A company called LXM Holdings purchased nearly forty percent of all the potion ingredients and reagents that passed through the place.

Nearly half an hour later, I'd put together a reasonable view of the top customers of the warehouse. Two of them really stood out.

Melinda Bobbins' family had used it as a distribution point for their UK-based apothecaries' imports. They also sent all their locally harvested ingredients there to be bundled and exported.

LXM Holdings purchased nearly all the other potion ingredients that were stored there. But they paid far more than they should have, if my rough calculations were correct, based on the cost of other similar, though smaller, orders. That was odd. One thing I remember Vernon being pleased about was getting stuff cheaper by buying in bulk. Perhaps there would be more information in the safe.

"I smell a battle on you. I trust you were victorious?"

I managed to suppress my reflex to jump and whip out my wand. I suppose that as a snake, silence came naturally. *"Not really. Well, I was victorious, but not as successful as I wanted,"* I replied, turning to face the giant serpent.

"Were you injured?"

I shook my head. *"Not a scratch."*

"Then you were successful, were you not?"

I almost chuckled at his medieval notions of success and failure. *"Oh, I won the magical battle. But it is the battle for the hearts and minds of the public that I wanted to win today, and that didn't go so well."*

"Hearts and minds? You are striving to become a leader of men?"

"Not exactly. I am trying to change public opinion."

That concept seemed to confuse the enormous snake. *"Opinion? The opinion of the public? What does the opinion of lesser mortals matter? You have skill. You certainly have power. Simply dominate them. Force them to act as you would have them."*

Perhaps 'medieval' was a little too modern for this creature. The longer this conversation went the further back away from the renaissance he went. *"But that tactic wouldn't have a long term impact. I'm trying to make people effect change on themselves. That way, I don't have to keep dominating them,"* I replied.

The basilisk gave that notion some thought. *"Perhaps, though such a path does seem fraught with myriad variables, many of which you have no control over. No, I urge you to follow the simple solution, for its simplicity is its strength."*

I rummaged through my pockets and pulled out an adamantine necklace I'd charmed the day before. *"Your church tried that during the crusades. The holy land isn't exactly the most peaceful place on the planet at the moment."*

For a creature with no shoulders, it could do a remarkably eloquent shrug. *"Do as you will. It makes no difference to me."*

"I will keep you council in mind," I finished as diplomatically as possible. *"I am trying to piece together a plan. I want to determine my enemies'*

weakest point, and attack there .”

“A sensible course of action. It is good to see you once again .”

I smiled. *“I have a gift for you .”*

The basilisk seemed taken aback. *“A gift?”*

I nodded, reaching into my backpack. *“I enchanted this necklace for you .”*

A massive serpentine head drifted close; close enough that I could feel the cool breath on my hand. *“I do not believe it will fit me, my friend,”* the basilisk said, followed by his odd grunting laugh.

I chuckled along. *“It is adamantine. I want to use a sticking charm to attach it behind the ridge on the top of your head .”*

“To what purpose?”

I gestured towards the entrance to the Chamber. *“The silencing charms I put up are easily broken. This is charmed to enclose a radius of seven feet in a silencing bubble if a rooster comes within the Chamber .”*

A metaphorical chill in the air indicated that I had said the wrong thing. *“I am not some feeble beast, to be coddled and protected! I am the king of serpents!”*

“I know...” I started.

“My mere gaze is the most fearsome weapon of all creatures. My venom is almost as lethal. I can crush the life from a dragon with my body. Not even a mighty nundu could stand before me!”

“Yes, but...”

“And you stand before me, the mightiest of the mighty, and dare to offer yet another cowardly shield for me to hide behind?”

Bugger. This was going to take a lot of fast-talking.

Having a basilisk become enraged at your actions is the world’s best laxative, I decided as I left the Chamber. It had relented, eventually, and acquiesced to my suggestion, though not before letting me know in no uncertain terms that it was the very last thing he would accept from me regarding his safety. With Dumbledore no doubt called away to examine the scene of the latest attack by the new Dark Lord, I felt comfortable in making my way out of Hogwarts under my invisibility cloak. I made a mental note to try and get my map back. Once well clear of the castle, I apparated to Dobby’s quarters, rather than into Grimmauld Place’s sitting room, as was my custom. I suspected that there would be at least one visitor at my home that I didn’t want to meet.

I was right. There were raised voices.

“Damn it, I need to know!”

Hmm, sounds like Tonks is a little upset by today’s little revelation.

“I’m telling the truth!”

Well, it didn’t sound like Blaise was too happy with Tonks either.

“Listen, Zabini, if you’re lying, I’ll have you charged with obstructing an Auror in the course of her duty.”

“Grow up, Tonks. Besides Harry, his old Master, the Weasleys and Remus, there hasn’t been a wizard in this house since Shacklebolt and Dumbledore were permanently kicked out.”

“He said he was the new head of the Black family. That means he has access.”

“No, it doesn’t. This house was left to Harry personally, not as part of the Black family. It was his to do as he wished. Even if this new wizard wanted in, he couldn’t cross the threshold without being invited.”

There was a pause, and the voices lowered enough that I could hardly make them out.

“I can’t believe this. Why would Harry pick him? Who is he? Where did he come from? What the hell kind of spells was he casting?”

“Surely you don’t think I have the answers. I told you at the reading that Harry didn’t confide in me.”

“But weren’t you and Harry engaged? And what about Hermione.”

Blaise's "No we weren't," merged with Hermione's "None of your business."

So both girls were here. I wonder if Ron was here too.

"But he said..."

"He proposed, I turned him down."

"What? Why?"

"Again, none of your business."

"Then why would he leave this house to you?"

"Just get out, Tonks. There has been no new wizard in this house in over a year, and I don't know who Harry picked as his heir. I have nothing else to say to you."

"Can you at least tell me where he visited in Europe? Or even who his old Master was?"

"He didn't tell me where he went, and I can't tell you the other. Now, out!"

"Fine. I'll go. But listen, I can appreciate what he's trying to do; it's just the wrong way..."

Neither girl responded before the distinctive rush of the floo.

Time to see just how badly things had been messed up.

"All clear?" I asked, sticking my head through the doorway. I could see two figures in the room, Hermione and Blaise. Blaise, who was in the process of opening the door to the next room, turned with a small jump to face me. Through the door, I could make out Ron lying on a couch with a bandage around his head. In defiance of all literary expectations, it was not soaked in blood.

"Harry!" Hermione screeched. "Are you all right?" Her eyes were red and puffy, and her voice sounded hoarse. Her voice elicited a groan from Ron.

I nodded with a frown. "Shouldn't I be asking that?" Ron's groan turned into a sort of snort. "Is he alright?" I asked.

"Not too bad," Blaise replied, stepping over to my friend and waving her wand over him.

"How bad is not too bad?" I asked warily, moving to her side.

"I've had to treat him here," she said. "His worst injury was a pretty nasty knock to the head, but he's safe. Taking him to St. Mungo's with concussion wounds and polyjuice in his system right after an attack he wasn't seen at would have set at least some alarm bells ringing.

"As for Granger and me, well, there were no major injuries. I was partially deaf for a while, but we weren't hurt."

I slumped into a chair. "That's a relief."

Blaise nodded, her features hard. "I think you put a few too many charms on those vases."

I winced, but shook my head in disagreement. "There was no way that explosion was the result of my charms. It was the stuff in the warehouse."

"You are a powerful wizard, Harry."

"Not *that* powerful. Look, the other two vases on the shops didn't explode with that force. It wasn't the vases."

Hermione frowned. "But the tax and customs records from Fudge's safe didn't show they were storing anything there that should have reacted like that!" she snapped accusingly.

"The warehouse had been enlarged way beyond the safety limits for those charms and I think it had a fair bit of unlisted contraband. The unexpected stuff must have been a bit more volatile than the rest. It was the secondary explosion that was the big one."

Blaise glanced sideways at Hermione. "Yeah, who'd have expected some people who support criminals who have some unlisted items in their warehouse? I can't imagine."

I glanced between the two. Blaise's tone was reminiscent of the ongoing argument the pair had after Hermione had left me. It would seem that they had been arguing prior to my arrival.

Hermione sniffed with indignation. "There's no need to be snooty about it. I just didn't think about it, that's all." She looked as though she was about to burst into tears.

"To be fair, neither did I," I said, trying to stave off an imminent argument. "But I should have. I'm going to need to spend a lot more time planning than I have been, and only act when I have much more information."

Blaise raised a sculpted eyebrow. “That’s going to make your job harder.”

I snorted and shrugged. “Story of my life.”

She frowned, but nodded. Hermione’s expression softened a little, from diamond to merely granite. “The wireless is reporting hundreds of deaths.”

I blinked. Snape’s death had set her off. If she thought hundreds of people were dead, I’m surprised that she hadn’t gone to the Aurors. “Hundreds? I counted seven.”

“Seven? Are you sure?”

I gave a helpless shrug. “As sure as I can be, given I was only really doing a quick unofficial nose count. But there weren’t even fifty people in the alley when I set the explosion off.”

Blaise cleared her throat. “What about inside the warehouse? You said it had been enlarged. Could there have been more people inside?”

I frowned, thinking of the orders I gave to the manager there. “I don’t think so. I compelled the wizard I found in the management office to order everyone out the front door to ‘look at the Mudblood making a fool of herself’. I guess if there was anyone he didn’t know about they may have been left behind.”

“But not hundreds?” I guess she needed confirmation.

“No way. If I had to guess, I’d say the number will be quietly revised downwards in subsequent reports. This may work to my advantage.”

That seemed to calm one of the two girls down a bit. “But still…”

I nodded, and sat down rubbing a hand tiredly across my face. “Seven deaths I hadn’t planned on. I guess I have made you an accomplice to murder, Hermione.”

She paled, though was acting far more accepting than I had expected. Or even dared to hope. “So what now? Are you going to stop?” she asked.

I shook my head slowly, staring straight into her eyes, gauging her reaction. “No. Our child was killed because of this government’s attitude towards non-purebloods,” I reminded her, in the hope that it would mitigate her reaction.

She pursed her lips, but I could sense a small amount of relief at my proclamation. Something was going on here. Something had happened that had changed her outlook.

“What happened?” I asked her. “I expected you to be a lot less accepting.”

Her eyes flicked over to Blaise before coming back to me. Tears welled in her eyes, and her shoulders began trembling.

“She had an epiphany,” Blaise supplied after an uncomfortable pause. “After you disappeared, everyone who didn’t apparate away was taken to St. Mungo’s for evaluation.” She looked over at Hermione, and her expression changed to one of disgust. “A Muggle-born witch was removed from her ward so that there was a private room available for Maximillian Nott.”

I frowned. “I presume there was some difference in their relative conditions?”

Blaise snarled. “You could say that. The witch had acid burns to eighty percent of her body from a potions accident a few days ago. Maxi had tinnitus.”

“Tinn-what?”

“Tinnitus. Ringing in his ears.”

It was all I could do not to let my mouth hang open. “Are you fucking *serious*?”

Hermione almost burst into tears and began babbling. “She was naked on her bed, and they just left her in the waiting room!” she bawled. “Private rooms were given to people who had nothing wrong with them while she just lay there crying.” Her voice quietened. “She just cried and cried and no one would help her,” she finished in a whisper. She stood and went over to the window, trying to get under control.

Blaise took a deep breath, glaring at Hermione. “And so, since she got back, I’ve been on the receiving end of Granger’s rant about policies at my workplace which I have no control over.”

“Is that really what happened?”

“It’s probably pretty close as far as it goes, but there are some details she missed. Usually, if there is a private ward free, they’ll move a public patient that needs close attention into it, even if they can’t pay. But if a private patient comes in and needs it, they’d get moved out again. I’d say that with the sudden influx of purebloods you injured, every single public patient would have been shifted out into the public wards. That specific patient would temporarily have been taken out of the ward she was in. There would have been no point in taking her to the public wing and then just moving her back again an hour later.”

“But keeping her in the waiting room?”

Blaise's eyes flashed with anger. "It wasn't my decision! I told you that I don't have control over those policies!"

I held my hands up placatingly. "Yes, I know." I glanced over at Hermione. She looked to be pulling herself together, and didn't need me to point out how unwarranted her accusations had been. Instead, I turned back to Blaise. "Then perhaps it's time for you to use your leverage?"

Blaise looked at me as though I was simple. "Harry, I'm a student healer. No matter what blackmail material I have, I can't be on the Board until I'm qualified."

I raised an eyebrow. "I didn't say anything about your plan of being put on the Board. You've got enough to end the career of the Administrator, why don't you lean on her? Get her to begin to change the policies. That way, any backlash is on her, rather than you."

Blaise gave a soft snort and shook her head admiringly. "I love it when you think like that."

I gave her a grin before turning to Hermione, who was still trying to hold back tears. "Hermione?" I said softly.

No response.

"Hermione!" I said, rather more loudly. She jumped slightly and looked at me. "Are you okay? Are you holding yourself together?"

She swallowed, but nodded. "I, I just... Dammit, things have to change!" she said forcefully.

I blinked, taken aback. "You swore!"

"Oh bugger off. I always knew that I'd be disadvantaged because of my parentage, but we really are second-class citizens, aren't we?"

I nodded. "Yep."

She looked down thoughtfully. "So what will you do differently?" she asked.

I took a deep breath. "I presume you mean so that no more unforeseen deaths occur?" At her affirmative nod, I continued. "Mitigate. I've shown that I can attack in broad daylight, and escape from a large group of Aurors at will. From now on, any attack on someone not on my list will be a hit and fade at night, destroying the assets and support of certain companies."

"Companies?" Blaise asked.

I nodded. "I grabbed all the documents from the office in the warehouse. I had a quick look while I was waiting for the basilisk to get back from his hunting. A lot is pretty useless, but it supplements the papers we took from Fudge."

"They're not going to leave sensitive documents just lying around in an office, Harry," Hermione pointed out.

I grinned at her. "I know. That's why I took this," I replied, extracting the shrunken safe from my backpack with a flourish.

Both girls looked at the tiny metal cube in my hand with a doubtful look on my face. "What's that? A canister?"

I snickered, but put it down on the ground and reversed the shrinking charm. "Nope. This, my gorgeous girls, is the safe from the warehouse."

Blaise's eyes widened, but quickly turned to humour. Hermione tried to maintain her expression a little longer, but eventually settled for a wry grin.

A pair of apparition cracks echoed through the house.

I took a deep breath. "Sounds like the twins are here." I rose to my feet. "I'd better go and placate them before they get all destructive on me."

Though it took far less fast talking to placate the ginger bookends than it did the basilisk, it was still an uncomfortable conversation. In the end, it took me tempting them with the opportunity to crack a professionally charmed safe that distracted them.

I moved the safe to the basement where a couple of unobtrusive bricks sat in the corner. As the twins talked strategies, I wandered around the edges of the room, reinforcing the walls as much as I could at short notice. After ten minutes, the twins were ready to start and I'd ensured the room could take an explosion from any spell in the twins' repertoire, and probably any accidental potion brewing mishap short of a Longbottom special. Hopefully, we wouldn't need to test that out.

"Are you sure you got this from the warehouse?" Fred asked, a bit dubiously.

I nodded. "Of course, why?"

George glanced at his brother before answering. "This is a Burleigh Special. Short of a blood-warded safe, it's the best on the market."

With a chuckle, I said, "And having such a secure safe for a mere distribution centre is overkill, right?"

They nodded, but in the opposite of unison. When one head bobbed down, the other went up. I had to blink to stop myself getting dizzy. "We've got a smaller one at the shop. How'd you manage to get it out of the place? Usually, this model Burleigh is charmed to be locked in place. A dragon couldn't shift it."

"The manager at the warehouse took the charms off it for me. If it's holding the sort of incriminating evidence I'm hoping for, the owners would

probably want the ability to take it and run at a moment's notice."

The pair grinned. Fred rubbed his hands together while George interlaced his fingers and extended his hands to arms length, cracking his knuckles. "Righty-ho, brother mine, let's get to work."

It was instructive watching the would-be safe crackers. Their first plan of attack involved probing the safe's perceived weak points first; namely, the hinges. Unfortunately, these were also the most strongly charmed. Within a minute of starting, George was jumping around shouting with his electro-shocked hand under his armpit while Fred ended up looking like a cartoon character that'd just been holding a lit stick of dynamite.

"Right," Fred said, getting to his feet and patting down his smoking hair. Even though he'd just taken an explosion at close range, he seemed even more excited than before. "I feel a somewhat different tactic is warranted, George."

"Indeed. To the storeroom!" George shouted exuberantly, pointing at the ceiling with his good hand.

The pair apparated away without another word. "Huh," I said to the now-empty room. Their theatrics were almost as amusing as their pranks.

I drew my own wand and sent a few mild hexes at the safe. The warding structure built into it was quite powerful, easily absorbing anything I threw at it. It only responded violently when I cast some damaging spells. Interesting.

Twin cracks echoed through the small enclosed room. I turned to see the twins back again, loaded down with armfuls of products from their store. Once more, I stepped back and let them work.

Conventional explosives had little effect, and despite their increasing enthusiasm, I vetoed the suggestion to scale up the munition size. In the end, I had to point out that I wanted the stuff inside the safe to be whole.

Fred's suggestion of a dragonscale saw blade was blunted quickly, much like the blade itself, to George's mirth. He bet his brother that a bottle of concentrated acid would have more of an effect. The acid scorched the surface of the metal, but did little to the structure itself, costing George three galleons. As each item they tried was foiled, the pair grew ever more excited. I'm quite sure that had I not been present, eventually Grimmauld Place would be a smoking hole in the ground with a still-intact safe at the epicentre.

In an effort to duplicate Ron and my feat at Gringotts, they even tried freezing the safe, hoping to make the metal brittle. The damned thing even had an inbuilt heating charm, keeping the metal room temperature. It seems that Burleigh employs some Muggle-born who know a thing or two about physics.

They eventually got me to levitate the whole safe, and then rotate it rapidly. Once it was spinning so fast it was just a blur, they tried using an unbreakable chisel to chip tiny pieces away.

Not a good idea. When an unbreakable item hits another unbreakable item, whatever is holding them gets a bit of a jolt.

As Fred took George upstairs for some medical attention on his broken hand, I stopped the safe spinning, and lowered it to the ground. I reached out and touched the surface, now marked and discoloured. Gently, I *pulled* through my hands, getting a tiny warmth in my arms.

I wasn't magically drained enough. I stepped back as far away from the safe as the confines of the room would allow, and using as much control as I had, I gently *pushed* up under the safe.

It was the magical equivalent of trying to life a barbell with a straight arm. Almost immediately, sweat began dripping down my forehead and dripped off my nose. Though not physically difficult, it did remind me of all the effort I put into learning the Patronus Charm. Once I had the heavy safe hovering, I began trying to control the horizontal movement. Soon, I had it drifting from side to side, all while constantly *pushing* it up into the air.

After a few minutes, I lowered it as gently as I could to the ground. Once more, I stepped forward, placed my hands on the upper hinge, and *pulled*. This time, I devoured the magical power, my arms feeling as though I'd plunged them into hot water.

I moved my left hand from the hinge to the middle of the door, and continued to *pull*. Converting stored magical energy to my own core was proving to be enjoyable, even pleasurable. At one point, there was a sharp flash of warmth, after which the warmth I got from the safe was far less. Perhaps I'd broken the major charm?

Almost reluctantly, I stepped back, tingling with power.

I tossed a few of the spells Gred and Forge had used on the hinges. I grinned as each had the desired effect, without the offensive response. I soon had the hinges off and the door quickly after.

I stared into the safe, rather hoping that the twins wouldn't be too upset that I'd finished the job for them; though I suspected that they'd be more upset at losing their entertainment.

"Well, you were right. There was contraband stored in the warehouse," Hermione said, pouring over a pile of parchment we'd taken from the safe.

I looked up from my counting. I was up to sixteen thousand galleons, and probably only half-way through the gold. Apparently, it was policy to keep a fair stash of coin in the safe. "Like what?"

Hermione just handed me a pair of handwritten sheets of her notes. "These are the main culprits. Honestly, keeping those things near each other without containment was asking for trouble."

I ran my eye over the sheets. I couldn't spot what was wrong with storing the listed items together, though I did recognise some items that were very heavily regulated, if not illegal to import. "Dried warthog testicles? Pureed nundu bowel? Ugh. Such lovely images."

Hermione gave me a mock glare. "These people are idiots. Can you believe that they actually stored elemental mercury in the same building as ashwinder eggs? I'm surprised the place didn't go up in smoke years ago."

"Ashwinder eggs? They're legal, aren't they?"

She nodded. "Of course, we used them in potions at Hogwarts. Er, that is, in our sixth year. You were gone by then. I was referring to how they react with each other. Even a whiff of mercury fumes causes them to undergo spontaneous combustion. Whatever idiot decided to store them in the same postcode, let alone the same building, has no concept of risk management. But they are both legal, the illegal things are listed here." She pointed to a group of things on the first sheet.

"See here? Look at it all. I mean, for goodness sake, *bunyip hide* ! It's illegal all over the world." At my blank look, she continued. "The first British wizards who went to Australia discovered that the hide was even better at resisting heat and acid than the best dragon skin, and infinitely easier to work with. Of course, that meant that bunyips were hunted almost to extinction within twenty years. Now, there are only about a hundred left in the wild, and they are heavily protected. The last person caught smuggling hide was imprisoned for sixty years."

"Who was getting that?" I asked.

"A company called LXM Holdings."

I blinked. "That would be why they paid far more than they should have for the legal stuff they bought."

She actually pouted at me. "I wanted to tell you that!"

I grinned at her, pleased that she was beginning to show signs of her usual self. "Do you know anything about that company?"

At Hermione's negative response, Blaise sniggered. "You would if you'd been in Slytherin."

That caught my attention. "How so?"

"Draco was always going on about how his Daddy's business was so profitable, and how rich the Malfoys were. LXM was started by one Lucius Xavier Malfoy, to consolidate the Malfoy family assets. St. Mungo's buys all sorts of stuff from them. Nearly half of all the medical potions I use come from the LXM production house. We get medical equipment, beds, security guards, hell, even food for the patients from them."

I glanced down at my notes. "I don't suppose the other half of the potions you use come from the Bobbins family?"

Blaise blinked. "That's right! How did you know?"

I tapped the sheet in front of me. "LXM buy most of the stuff that gets imported, but Bobbins buy a heap too, as well as export a lot of potion ingredients. I figured that they'd be involved in potion production too, since they're already supplying the raw materials."

Blaise nodded and grumbled, "Bobbins-brewed potions are better than the mass-produced gunk LXM makes, but I wouldn't use either on any member of my family if I had the choice."

"They're that bad?" Hermione asked. "Why would they be used at the hospital then?"

Blaise shrugged. "Because they have the supply contracts." At Hermione's aghast look, she continued. "Don't worry. Any patient in a critical condition gets the quality stuff." She paused. "And those wealthy enough to afford it," she added.

"The quality stuff?" I asked. "St. Mungo's has different quality potions for different patients?"

Blaise looked at me as though I'd had a recent lobotomy. "Of course. Potions are expensive. Staying at St. Mungo's would be out of the financial reach for most if they only used the best."

I hummed to myself, as an idea germinated. "Tell me, if LXM and Bobbins make the crap stuff, who makes the good stuff?"

"The best? There's dozens of specialised boutique brewers out there that make individual potions, like the Wolfsbane. The ones that require specialised skills to brew. Generally they only make one or two." She shrugged. "Some potion recipes are family secrets; only certain people know how to make them."

I frowned. That wasn't going to work. "Are there any good quality mass producers? Ones that make the same potions as LXM, but high quality?"

Hermione chipped in. "Matthias?" she suggested to Blaise.

At Blaise's nod, I asked, "Who?"

"Matthias Potions. They make some of the best quality potions on the market, outside of specialised production houses. The hospital gets a small supply from them, to use on the most critical patients." She paused and grimaced. "And the wealthiest patients too."

I rubbed my chin in thought. "Do they make a broad range of potions?"

"Yeah." She grimaced. "As a student healer, one of my tasks is to check the potion consumption tally, and put an order request in. They make pretty much everything that LXM makes, but they don't have a supply contract with the hospital. I don't know who owns or runs it, but they make the best generic potions."

"Jeremy Matthias owns it," Hermione said, giving Blaise a superior smirk. "He employed me between our sixth and seventh years for some work experience."

I looked down at my notes, and began to plan. Usually, when trying to convince someone to do something, you offer a carrot and threaten with a stick. Zab however, always seemed to get far better results by making the carrot and the stick the same thing.

"Uh-oh, I'm not sure I want to know about any plan that makes you smile like that, Harry."

With a grin, I said, "Oh yes you do. Tell me, when was the next major shipment of supplies to the warehouse due?"

It took a week of intense planning, but I was eventually once again ready to turn the screws on the purebloods. I'd insisted on doing this myself, with each of my co-conspirators either at a Weasley family get-together, or on night shift at St. Mungo's. Air-tight alibis were the go after the last episode.

Three nights ago, I'd gone to the warehouse manager's home, and reapplied the Imperius charm. An entire month's supply of potion ingredients and reagents was due on the docks ten hours ago, and I needed it to go to a specific place. Given my plan, I probably hadn't even needed to use the Unforgivable to convince him.

This very moment however, I was scouting the manufacturing plants of LXM Holdings. One thing I had noticed about the Magical world, when they had to scale up any business other than retail outlets, they simply expanded their current base, rather than sourcing other locations. There was one Ministry building, while the Muggle government had dozens just in London. There was one bank, which dug deeper the more they needed room. And with LXM and Bobbins, they had one place they made potions, and just expanded it as and when needed.

It was located in an old coal plant near Newcastle. If it wasn't for all the Muggle-repellent wards, I'd have had a heap of trouble finding it. Even at this late hour, there were still workers there. I was rather hoping that it was a late shift, and not a graveyard shift.

By midnight, I'd done three circuits of the place, and had mapped out all the entry and exit points. Still the workers slaved away inside.

Checking my watch, I decided that I needed to get a move on. Much longer, and I'd be cutting into the time it would take me to neutralize the Bobbins' factory.

I located the ingredients storage facility, making it my first target. It was separate from the main factory floor; unsurprisingly really, since some of the stock held there was worth more than gold, weight for weight. Of course Malfoy would keep it away from the greedy hands of the great unwashed.

It was guarded by a statue, not dissimilarly to Dumbledore's office. Still, a stone guardian is just made of stone.

I packed a small portion of the explosives that the twins had furnished me with at the base. I retired to a safe-ish distance and covered myself with a silencing charm and a shield. Set and ready, I sent a wordless hex at the package.

Though my ears were protected from the noise of the blast, the pressure wave almost buffeted me from my feet. The top part of the statue shot into the air trailing flames like an angel suffering from excessive flatulence who'd just heard about the joys of lighting your farts. The bottom part of the statue was only fit for a rockery.

With the door to the supply room now permanently open, I began cycling through my repertoire of every incendiary charm and curse I could cast silently. It only took four spells before the fires inside overwhelmed the safety charms in place, setting off every inflammatory item at once. The walls of the storehouse were flattened, and a massive fireball leapt into the air, lighting up the landscape for miles around. It was an eerie sight, especially since the fire was every damned colour you could imagine. The wash of heat on my face was quite enjoyable. Maybe I have some latent pyrophillic tendencies.

After getting their attention with the first boom and scaring them witless with the second, I pulled out the howler I'd prepared earlier, and banished it into the fast-forming crowd.

Still under my silencing charm, I couldn't hear when the red letter began screeching dire threats to the bigots, but the effect was quite recognisable. Of the twenty or so people in the group, maybe three quarters of them apparated away in fright. The half-dozen left all ran screaming in different directions into the night.

Well, that would do.

I cancelled the silencing charm, and was immediately bombarded with my magically enhanced voice. I sent a quick "*Incendio*," towards the red letter, burning it to a crisp. The only noises remaining were the slowly fading screams of the panicking masses as they legged it out of there. Several spells cast at the warehouse revealed that there was no human present.

I moved over to the open door and placed my backpack on the ground. I then began (with great care) to withdraw package after package of high-grade magical explosives. The twins weren't sure how much destructive power would be needed to bring down the factory, so they were generous in their supply, on the proviso that I ensured that there were no people in the building. Since I had other plans for the rest of the night that didn't involve large booms, I used the entire lot. Hey, it wasn't as though I needed to bring any home with me.

Sirius once told me that my father was so good at Transfiguration that he could turn a lump of manure into a spider, and control it well enough that he could get it to move itself to his prank target's pillow. Not having my father's sublime skill in that art, I played to my strengths, transfiguring the packages into snakes.

"*Enter that building there*," I ordered, sending wave after wave of serpentine packages of explosive death. Once the transfiguration on them wore off in a couple of minutes, it would only take a lick of flame to set them off. I pulled out more packages and repeated the process.

I was all but done before some apparition cracks echoed in the night. I finished the final pair of snakes and sent the off before packing up my backpack. I remained under my cloak. I wasn't about to give away an advantage unless it gained me a greater one.

Two Aurors stood nearby, wands out and ready, examining the flaming ex-storeroom and ignoring the open door to the factory floor.

I glanced around, frowning. Only two? How insulting.

I was about to pull my cloak off and leisurely blast the two arse-over-tit before I had a thought. I'd instilled a great deal of fear into the powerful members of society. It's not really likely that they'd just send a pair of Aurors to a suspected arson attack. Unless there were a great many such attacks, and I would have read about them in the paper if there had been.

No, if these two were the only ones here, then being cocky gained me nothing. If they had backup, being cocky would be disastrous.

Remaining under my cloak, I simply raised my wand and took aim at one. "*Imperio*."

He fought valiantly, but I was only interested in dominating him a short time. He dropped his wand, and leapt onto his partner's back, wrestling him to the ground.

The rather amusing scene was interrupted nearly immediately by the arrival of six more Aurors, who appeared armed and ready. I *pushed* the entire group from their feet, then silently disappeared, appearing a good twenty metres behind them.

Before I'd even gathered my own bearings, another two groups of Aurors had appeared, one roughly where I had been initially. The other, rather alarmingly, appeared not spitting distance from where I now stood.

Well, this could be interesting. Twenty-four Aurors. Three full squads.

One of the squads moved towards the factory, and my heart leapt into my throat. The last thing I wanted was eight dead Aurors on my hands. I needed to attract their attention.

With a broad sweep of my arm, I used the same dark cutting curse Malfoy tried on me, opening up deep wounds on at least five legs of the group nearest me. The sudden screams attracted the attention of everyone in the area.

Using my tried and true tactic, I *pushed* the bleeding group away, and disappeared again.

Of the two dozen Aurors here, I'd inconvenienced less than a quarter. That still left way too many for me to comfortably take on. I told myself that I needed to blow the building, scare them, and leave quickly, but there were some who were still too close to the building for comfort. Dozens of spells were being tossed about; some were detection charms, others were defensive in nature. If I didn't leave soon, I'd have a hell of a job taking them on.

I threw an Everberus curse at one unshielded wizard who was in the process of putting up an anti-apparition jinx, breaking his pelvis and thighs. Before the sound of my voice could attract more spells, I disappeared again.

"They're disillusioned!" screamed a familiar female Auror. 'They'? Maybe I should take off my cloak.

Following Tonks' proclamation, the many of the Aurors cast something on their eyes. Well, I couldn't expect my invisibility to last forever. I tossed a conjunctivitis curse at the nearest Auror and disappeared again, to the far side of the burning storeroom.

Peeking around the corner, I noticed more Aurors moving towards the explosive-laden building. Damn it, get away from there.

Dropping my bag and putting my cloak on top, I crept around the side of the flaming building only under a disillusion spell. I needed to be able to move freely, and my cloak was cumbersome. More of the Aurors were moving towards the main factory building. Shit, I had to get them away from there.

Two Aurors stood near me, shouting out to their friends something about their status. I touched my yew wand to the ground and sent a dark curse towards the pair. The ground around them rippled momentarily, before erupting into a quartet of sharp, six inch-long spikes. They went down in a duet of screams that must have attracted the attention of every non-deaf person within a mile. I pinned them both down with same gooey hex that was used on me at my will reading.

Despite the shrieks filling the air, Auror discipline won through. I counted an entire squad checking the primed factory. Gritting my teeth, I figured that there was one way to get every Auror in the area to pay attention to me. I erected the strongest shield I could, before dispelling my disillusion. Almost instantly, my position was called out and spells angled their way towards me.

I raised my wand and slashed it down towards the ground, *pushing* out hard in all directions, duplicating the same tactic I'd used in Parti Alley. I wanted to make sure that all the Aurors here tonight had no doubt who it was they were fighting.

The wave rocketed out, faster and even more powerful than the last time, knocking over everyone in its path. Instantly, the spells sparking off my

shield ceased.

"You're under arrest!" one cocky youngster shouted as he scrambled to his feet.

I snorted contemptuously and *pushed* him as hard as I could from the side. He gave a despairing yell as he flew to his right, landing in a crumpled heap. I conjured a ball of flame as more of the Aurors rose to their feet a lot more cautiously than their colleague. Though some of them were too close to the factory for comfort, it was about as far as I was prepared to push my luck. Gritting my teeth and praying for a non-repeat of the debacle at Parti Alley, I shouted, "Do you wish to arrest me, or save the building?"

Tonks recognized the danger, instantly screaming at the team closest to the building to fall back. I tossed the fireball into the air and *pushed* it hard towards the factory.

Tonks screamed, "Blue squad, scatter, Green and Red squads, bring him down!"

"As you wish," I said calmly. I reinforced my shield and silenced my head as my fireball smashed through a window. I *pushed* out broadly in front of me, hoping to blunt the force of the explosion.

I covered my eyes as a wave of intense heat washed over me. Even shielded, I was knocked backwards a few steps by the shock wave, though I managed to retain my footing.

Not a single Auror managed my feat. I looked around, noting that most were still conscious, if dazed. The few who were moving under conscious direction, I quickly stunned.

The fireball rising majestically into the air lit the scene like high noon. I was quite sure the Muggle emergency services would be here soon.

Well, having two dozen unconscious Aurors at my feet was an opportunity too good to waste. Especially since one was someone who apparently thought that my goals were worthwhile, if not my methods.

"*Enervate*."

Tonks blinked herself awake, gulping with fright. For a second, her eyes flashed around, taking in her surroundings.

"Auror Tonks, so nice to meet you again."

Tonks swallowed, and slowly sat up. "Where are we?" she asked, before recognising my disguise. Her eyes widened in fright, and she stiffened.

I pointed over the dark hills. "About two kilometres from Hogsmeade. If you look closely, you can see the lights of the town and the school over there," I replied calmly.

Everything about her screamed 'confused'. "Why did you..." she started before I held up a hand.

"Please. I did not bring you here to answer your trivial questions."

She took a breath and steeled herself. "I won't tell you anything, monster."

I gave her a slow nod. "Hmm, you call me a monster. Yet you work for a corrupt organisation which tolerates, if not condones, bigoted members of the public attacking, maiming and killing defenceless people. And yet I'm the monster?"

"The Department of Magical Law Enforcement does not tolerate that at all!" she shouted hotly.

I shrugged lazily. "Individual members, perhaps. But your Ministry does. In any event, you are not harmed, I am not holding you against your will, nor have you even been disarmed. Your wand is in your pocket. So why do you believe that I am a monster?"

Tonks seemed surprised at my words, especially since she confirmed their truth by drawing her wand. "Don't move."

I rolled my eyes. "Do be civilized."

"*Stupefy*!"

I flicked the spell away easily. "Do not try my patience, girl," I said menacingly. "You are no match for me."

The instant she began another spell, I whipped out my hand and *pushed* her down hard, pinning her to the ground. Against my magic, she could hardly breathe.

I snarled as I strode towards her prone form. "I do not wish to harm you, and it is beyond your capabilities to harm me. So perhaps we can begin this conversation again, without your insignificant posturing." I stepped closer, so that I was standing directly over her, one leg either side of her hips, my hand extended out over her body. *Pushing* with extra effort, I cut off her breathing. "But make no mistake; I do have a limited amount of patience. Do not try it."

She stared up at me, still defiant. With a small smile, I dropped my hand and stopped holding her down, stepping back to give her some room. She sat up clutching at her chest and gulped in a few deep breaths, but stayed silent.

Good. Now, first of all, I suspect you are wondering about your colleagues. The three squads you led after me tonight.”

Tonks swallowed, but nodded. “Y-yes.”

I reached out my hand, chivalrously offering her help to stand. “They are all alive, though some will require medical attention. I was pleased you ordered your squad away from the factory, it cut down on the unnecessary deaths.”

She looked from my hand to my eyes a couple of times, seemingly even more confused than before. Eventually, she accepted my hand, and pulled herself to her feet. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome, Auror Tonks.”

Still, she looked around, searching for an advantage. “If you are not going to hurt me, why did you bring me here?”

“Ah, yes. I have an offer for you.”

Her eyes instantly went hard. “An offer,” she said flatly.

“Indeed. You are a Black by birth, if not in name. I intend to make the Black family name the greatest of all the Noble houses.”

A look of dread appeared. “What does that have to do with me?”

“I want you to help me. Harry Potter was quite fond of you; he held you in quite high esteem.”

She was silent for a moment, just staring. “Where did you meet Harry?”

I waved the question away. “I do not require an answer now. Give it some thought. Be aware that I will never ask you to betray your oath to the Aurors.”

Tonks frowned. “Do you honestly expect me to join you?”

I shrugged. “Honestly? No. You are a respected Auror, in so far as a member of that corps can be considered respected. You actively fought against Voldemort and his Death Eaters, something that I myself respect far more than most. Those two points alone would mean that you are very unlikely to come under my wing. But you are a member of the Order of the Flaming Peacock, and that is both the reason you are most unlikely to join me and why I am making the offer.”

“Wait, because Harry told you I was an Order member, that’s why you want me to join you?”

I nodded. “Despite what you may think, I have no desire to kill.”

“You threatened to kill those who supported Riddle!” she said hotly.

I grinned at her. “Indeed. And since all those who had a tattoo on their arm are now dead, that particular announcement is making a lot of people who gave him their implicit support very nervous.”

“What about the people who died at Parti Alley? What were they? Collateral damage?”

I lost my smile, and took a moment to reply. “I know you are unlikely to believe me, but I did not intend anyone to die that day. My spell to damage the warehouse overloaded the expansion charms in place, which failed catastrophically. The contraband inside didn’t take too kindly to being assaulted like that, and exploded.”

She looked as though she didn’t believe me, and I wasn’t really surprised. “Are Blaise Zabini and Hermione Granger under your wing too?”

I tilted my head to one side. “Now why would you think that? Because both of them were friends with Harry?”

She stayed silent.

I rubbed my chin. “No, you’d have included the youngest four Weasleys, Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom were that the case. No, you saw them together, probably at Harry’s home on Grimmauld Place.” I was tempted to use Legilimency on her, but decided against it. If she detected my intrusion, it would be difficult to gain her trust, and at the moment that looked like an impossible task anyway.

“You must suspect that already, which means that you believe that I have been in contact with them. And since those two witches are hardly likely to socialise together, you think I have been inside that house.”

I waited for her response, but she just stared at me, poker-faced.

I let a grin grow on my face. “Ah, I see. You think that I have been in the house, even though it still technically belongs to Harry. Auror Tonks, you know what wards are on that place, it is impossible for anyone not specifically invited to enter without tearing down the magical protections.”

That didn’t seem to convince her, which meant that she didn’t suspect it, she knew it.

“Hmm, so what is it? What is it that makes you certain that I’ve been inside that house?” I wracked my brains, thinking hard. The obscuring charms meant that no one outside could see in, and I felt everyone who entered the place while there. If no one saw me there, then there must be evidence I’d taken out. What had I taken out of the house?

I blinked. “Ah, you found the remains of the vases.”

Her lips tightened slightly, but she nodded. “I recognised the patterns.”

I smiled lazily. “Harry did some redecorating before he left on his journey to find Voldemort’s Horcruxes. He took all the old, cursed, hexed and just plain ugly junk from the house and put it into the Black vault at Gringotts. I picked up quite a few knick-knacks while I browsed.”

Tonks blinked, suddenly a little uncertain.

I sighed and looked up at the night sky. “Auror Tonks, you are the daughter of the only Black sister of the previous generation worth more than a damn. Should you wish to join me, you would be welcome. However, for now, I must depart. I am running behind schedule this evening.”

That startled her. “Wait, you are going somewhere else? Where?”

“Good evening, Auror Tonks.”

I apparated away, to a few different places, making it difficult for her to track me. With any luck, she’ll go back to the old LXM potions factory. If not, then her squad-mates were going to get very cold unless there was a squib among the Muggle Emergency Services.

A couple of hours behind schedule, I arrived at my second stop in the Cotswolds, between a pair of charming little villages rather amusingly named Upper and Lower Slaughter. The hamlets seemed as peaceful a place as there was on the planet, so I assume that there was a story behind the names.

I had no real beef with the Bobbins family. They were purebloods, but preferred to stay neutral on the whole blood-supremacy ideology. Hermione had apparently done some extra-credit work at Hogwarts with Melinda, who I’m told is a lovely person.

That made this part of the operation a distinct problem.

How did I remove the manufacturing capability of the Bobbins family without destroying it?

The Muggle-repellent wards around the building kept everyone in both villages from wandering too close, or from paying attention if they did. As it was almost one in the morning, there wasn’t a lot of random traffic in the area.

The building itself was not particularly notable. It straddled the stream that fed both villages with crystalline water, presumably using the water as the base for the potions produced inside. There were no other security layers besides the obscuring charms on the surrounding land; my approach would have been trivial, even had I been travelling overland.

As it was, on my Firebolt and wrapped in my cloak, I made no noise and cast no shadow. I could look through the high windows and skylights easily.

With liberal use of expanding charms, the inside of the building probably covered five acres or so. There were literally thousands of cauldrons simmering away inside, grouped by potion. Using the same charm Dumbledore used to see through invisibility cloaks, I scanned the inside, looking for any late-night workers.

There were two.

Judging from their profile, they were fast asleep in their chairs, so I assumed that they were either security guards or brewers who had to stir some potions at certain times during the night.

Well, had they been alert, their presence would have made my job a little more difficult. Hopefully, they’d snooze the next half hour or so away; if what I had in mind worked, they wouldn’t know until it was too late.

I flew slowly around the perimeter of the building three times, noting the places I would need to place the wardstones I’d brought along. Once I’d mapped out the alignment, I descended and began the painstaking work of positioning the stones. It took me nearly half an hour to get it right, hampered as I was by the darkness and having to continually scout out the snoozing guards.

Once they were in place, I took a breath and began the spell.

The *Fidelius* was a difficult charm to cast, but it was particularly effective.

Within ten minutes, the charm was in place, and I was the proud secret-keeper.

I packed my belongings, and stepped over the threshold. Walking boldly up to the door, I hammered on the front door, shouting at the guards inside. “Wake up, you lazy sods!”

From the sounds of it, at least one of the pair’s chairs fell over backwards. The muffled swearing was amusingly creative; at one point, I thought I’d have to take notes.

A minute or so later, the door swung open to reveal a wizard blinking the sleep out of his eyes. “Sorry sir, but I—” was as far as he got before I stunned him.

Stepping over the body, I scanned the interior of the building for the second guard. There he was, with his head in a fireplace. One more stunner

later, and I was alone.

I summoned the chap who was face down in the fire and his colleague who was doing a stand-up job as a doorstep. I'd have to release them somewhere outside the new boundary of the *Fidelius* charm. I doused the fire, preventing any flooding visitors, and began moving around the building, looking for other fixed entrance points.

Once I was sure there were no more fires in the place, including those under the simmering cauldrons, I was ready to leave for my final stop this night. I levitated the two recumbent guards out onto the lawns of the building. Looking back one last time, I grinned at my handiwork. If my last stop didn't go as I hoped, at least I had the facilities to make as many potions as needed.

Heh, I'd just stolen an entire building. I silently disappeared.

The brisk night air caused my breath to cloud in front of my face.

I took a deep breath, and let it out through pursed lips, creating a short-lived wispy cone. After the massive destruction and larceny I'd wrought in the past two hours, it seemed oddly inappropriate to act so childishly – which, of course, was exactly why I did so.

Inner child indulged, I loosened my scarf from around my neck and covered the lower half of my face with it. It wouldn't do to have a disillusioned form emit such a visible clue to its presence. I blew hard through the scarf, producing a barely visible fog. I nodded, satisfied that under normal conditions, it would prevent my breath from giving me away.

I glanced around, looking for street signs to help me get my bearings. This part of Greater London was not as densely residential as the area around Grimmauld Place, though there were still many cars lining the streets.

I pulled out a book of roadmaps Hermione had provided me, and worked out which street I needed to walk down. I scanned the area as Zab had shown me, looking for threats in an unfamiliar place. Seeing none, I began making my way down the serpentine streets. It only took a few minutes to find the address I wanted.

Compared to the other two places I'd visited this evening, it was easy to bypass the security spells and slip undetected into the office. While being able to drain the magical energy of the wards and spells made entering simple, in this instance the 'undetected' bit was just as easy, since the owner had his head in the fireplace, yelling obscenities at someone. Presumably a goblin, since he sounded rather put out by the fact that he no longer had any gold in his accounts. I simply settled down into a chair and looked around the room while I waited for him to finish.

The office was not overly large, but every flat spot was used efficiently. Plants whose fragrance cleared the mind were placed on the tops shelves and other hard to reach places, while ledgers and other important looking books lined the shelves at eye level. The desk itself had two computers on it, indicating a Muggle influence.

It took some time, but eventually, the fire call ended. Swearing to himself, he rose to his feet and turned back to his desk. Plonking down in his chair, he snatched up a pen and began scribbling furiously.

"Good evening, Mr. Matthias," I said casually.

The man looked up at me with a frustrated sigh. Curious; I had expected him to jump with fright, or at least surprise. Perhaps he often received visitors at odd hours, or maybe he was expecting someone. Whoever he was expecting to see, it wasn't me. A frown touched his forehead for about a quarter of a second before recognition struck. He leapt into action, whipping his wand out and aiming it at me in a single movement, hampered a little by his fatigue.

Too bad I already had mine out and ready.

"*Imperio*."

I really was getting used to that spell.

"Put your wand down on your desk. Good, now, come over here and sit down on that chair."

He followed my instructions, though was fighting mightily. He settled down into one of the chairs he obviously reserved for his business associates. I turned another identical chair to face him, and sat down myself. I put my wand away immediately after cancelling the Imperius.

"Now, perhaps we can begin again. Good evening, Mr. Matthias."

"If you're here to kill me, I'd prefer you just dispensed with the pleasantries," he snarled, gripping the arms of the chair with white knuckles.

I sighed. "*Good evening*, Mr. Matthias," I repeated, through eyes ever so slightly closed with menace.

He swallowed. "Good evening," he replied.

I gave him a smile. "Excellent. Now, forgive me for just barging in without an appointment, but I have a business proposition for you."

He blinked comically. "Excuse me?"

I kept my smile in place. "I have a business proposition for you."

He appeared momentarily speechless. "You're not here to kill me?"

I gave him a look of polite incomprehension. "Did you support Voldemort?"

He snarled at me. "That bastard killed my parents and brother! Just because they were Muggleborn and he was a squib! I wanted nothing more than to kill him!"

"Then I have no reason to kill you. You have nothing to fear from me."

"But you— Why would— How—?"

I held up a hand. "Please, don't believe everything you read in the papers. I have no interest in killing anyone except those who evaded justice after supporting Voldemort. While many people suffered under his reign of terror, I lost more than most. Now, if you allow me to outline my proposal, I suspect many of your questions will be answered."

His eyes started flickering around the room. "I, er, very well."

I nodded. "Splendid. Now, my proposition involves you becoming the major potion supplier to every medical facility in the country."

Not surprisingly, he snorted and leaned back in his chair. "That's not going to happen."

"Oh?"

His eyes narrowed. "Look, I just told you that my parents were Muggleborn. St. Mungo's buys over ninety percent of all medical grade potions produced in the country, and that bitch Babcock gives LXM and Bobbins a stranglehold on the supply."

I grinned at him. "LXM and Bobbins being the two major potion producers in the country?"

He sneered, but nodded. "If you can call what they produce 'potions'. They use poor quality ingredients, sloppy brewers and all but illegal equipment. But because they are owned by purebloods, they get the supply contracts for the hospitals."

"But you do supply some potions?" I pushed.

Matthias' eyes flickered with annoyance. "Of course. They need *my* potions to treat the very purebloods that produce the crap that gets shoved down the throat of everyone else who goes through the doors. But the demand is low. Not that it matters. I can't cover my payroll this week now that the goblins have cleaned me out."

I smirked. "Imagine that."

Matthias was quick. "What did you do?" he demanded.

I gave a nonchalant shrug. "Where would you like me to start?"

He slumped lower into his chair. "You've ruined me."

"Hardly."

"What would you call cleaning me out of every damn knut to my name? Those blasted goblins have accepted the note I gave to my suppliers, and took every damned coin I had in the bank as payment! And I still owe them over three thousand galleons!"

I shook my head. "You were going so well. Tell me, what did I do last week?"

His eyes narrowed. "You killed dozens of people in Parti Alley."

I shook my head. "Did I? Imagine that. I recall the first reports saying that hundreds were dead. Is it now merely *dozens*? I suppose that when it eventually comes out that less than ten people actually died when the illegal charms on the warehouse catastrophically failed, it will be glossed over. But enough of that, you probably won't believe me and I don't have the inclination to attempt to convince you otherwise. What is important is that my plan was simply to destroy the warehouse owned by the Nott family. It was the bottleneck for the vast majority of all the potion ingredients and reagents sold to suppliers in the British Isles."

He frowned. "Are you saying..."

I chuckled softly. "That there may be difficulties in storing shipments for the next month or so, yes."

"Wait a minute, is that why I have eight and a half tonnes of potion ingredients sitting in front of my warehouse?"

"Well, yes. When the entire monthly shipment arrived on the docks with no warehouse to be delivered to, it needed to be stored somewhere. I, shall we say, *encouraged* the inventory manager at the warehouse to adjust your monthly order, and dump the entire lot on you. He was convinced that you would need to resell back to him at a loss in a few days to remain solvent, which would give him time to arrange for secondary storage space and reduce his operational costs, enabling him to pay for the new space."

Matthias' eyes lit up for the first time during my visit. "If I can find some storage space tonight, I can resell the product back to him at a profit! I'd make a fortune."

Maybe he wasn't as quick as I'd thought. "No, no, no! I want you to use it. According to my sources inside St. Mungo's, your company produces the best quality potions on the market."

He frowned at me. "Are you simple? I just told you that I don't have the supply contract!"

I slowly let an evil smirk grow on my face. "I have it on good authority that, as of tonight, the production lines at both LXM and Bobbins are, shall we say, offline for the foreseeable future."

A tentative, though just as evil, smirk appeared on Matthias' face. "As much as I appreciate the idea that my major competitors are temporarily out of business, I don't have the funds to pay my employees this month, let alone ramp up production to compensate for two major production houses in the country." His tone betrayed his greed.

"If you did, can you upgrade your production?"

He snorted. "I am damned good at what I do. I can expand my facilities tonight. I have enough people bribed at the Ministry that I can make all the portkeys I need to transfer all the reagents. I can even have two dozen exceptional brewers on staff by the lunchtime tomorrow, so long as you don't mind them being Muggleborn. But it doesn't matter at all, because I don't have the money, and the goblins won't lend to me while I have an outstanding overdraft."

"Why would I mind your employees begin Muggleborn?" I asked, curiously.

He looked annoyed. "Because, er, well..." he deflated. "I guess you don't worry about that, do you? I've had to for my entire business life."

"How much do you need?" I asked, hoping fervently that I had enough with me.

"Ten thousand galleons, minimum. Twelve would be better."

With a nod, I reached into my bag at my feet. I drew out a pouch holding a thousand galleons. "One thousand galleons," I said, levitating the pouch onto his desk. Again, I drew out another pouch. "Two thousand."

Matthias unconsciously licked his lips as I withdrew pouch after pouch. I counted out fifteen thousand galleons before closing my bag. It had been rather fortuitous that the warehouse kept its cash reserves in the safe, rather than at Gringotts. The naked avarice in his eyes was a sight to behold. "Three to pay off the goblins. Twelve to hire new staff and ramp up production. I want you to produce enough potions to supply St. Mungo's entire needs by the end of the week. Can you do it?"

He tore his gaze from the gold and back to me. "Just. Barely. I mean, I have to..."

I held up a hand. "I'm not interested in whether it can be done easily, just barely, or anywhere in between. I'm only interested in the fact that you *can*," I emphasised.

Matthias took a deep breath and nodded slowly. Even without Legilimency, I could almost hear him calculating odds, running scenarios through his mind.

"I need an answer."

He blinked. "An answer?"

"Yes, Mr. Matthias. You have two options. One, you decline my help. If that is your answer, then I shall simply take my money and leave. You can take advantage of your competitors' recent misfortunes as you see fit. Sell or use the excess inventory you have been lumped with, and pull your own way out of debt with the goblins.

"Two, you accept my offer, sign this receipt for fifteen thousand galleons, and finally become as successful as you deserve," I said, pulling a charmed sheet of parchment out of my robes and placing it on his desk.

There was a lengthy pause. Eventually, Jeremy Matthias nodded, picked up a quill and scribbled his name on the receipt. "All right, I'm in."

I folded the sheet of parchment, and put it in my pocket, before I gave him a very direct look. "Excellent. Be aware that should you pick the third option, your own manufacturing capabilities will be similarly... reduced."

He paled. "Third option?"

"The one you are thinking about right now. The one where you decide to keep my money, and go to the DMLE."

A lengthy pause. "I wasn't..."

I held up a hand. "Then you're not as devious as you need to be." I tapped the pocket with the receipt. "Regardless, since you have signed a binding magical contract, it no longer matters."

He paled even further. Hell, Dobby's clean sheets weren't that white. "What?" he demanded.

Heh, all that research into the Goblet of Fire actually paid off. Hermione used it to great effect for the DA. I just modified her work. You don't need to enter them willingly; you just need your signature on a sheet of parchment. "You heard me. Breaking the contract will have... consequences."

He actually started sweating. "You realise that if it comes out that I've colluded with you, I'll lose everything."

I snorted as I got to my feet. "I put you under the Imperius for a reason, Mr. Matthias. It certainly wasn't because I was threatened by you. Good evening."

As I apparated out of there, I thought about how Zab would react to my version of his tactic. Show them the stick, and then threaten to choke them with the carrot.

Master Potter Coastal gale force winds, watch out for falling termites

The sudden scrape of wooden hoops along dowel (accompanied by the sudden burst of morning light through what had up until then been the curtain-covered bedroom window) pulled me unexpectedly from my slumber. With a loud groan, I covered my eyes with my forearm and rolled away from the unholy light. "Piss off!" I wheezed at the universe.

"Oh no, I've been tidying up your mess all bloody night. You don't get to sleep while I'm up."

Through sleep-encrusted eyes I stared blearily at my girlfriend. The golden light from the window gave her sleep-blurred form a messianic look. "What time is it?" I asked in a hoarse voice.

Though I couldn't make it out, her voice told me that Blaise had an evil smirk. "Just after eight."

Her answer made me groan once more. "Three and a bit hours sleep does not a happy Harry make," I grumbled, grabbing a pillow and covering my face with it.

"Oh stop complaining you big baby. We had close to a hundred panicking people arrive after midnight, all sure that the end was nigh. Then, we had all their relatives arrive, and all of them were panicking and screaming about how the light graze on their precious little bubby's cheek was a life-threatening injury. We had reporters, politicians, Aurors and the occasional sick person all milling about screaming for six hours. I've been working my arse off all night."

"So have I," I pointed out, my voice muffled by the thick, fluffy pillow.

She snorted and pulled the pillow away from my face. "You blew stuff up and stole people's property. You don't get paid to do it; therefore it does not count as work. Now spill!"

I ground the heels of my hands into my eyes, rubbing the sleep away. "Spill what?"

She gave a growl of annoyance herself. "How did last night go, idiot? From the rumours flying around St. Mungo's, you'd have thought that war had broken out."

I took a deep breath. "LXM's factory is probably still burning. I got jumped by twenty-four Aurors, but I left twenty-three of them under a Notice-Me-Not charm, buck naked and tied up in a conga line." I pointed towards a bag I'd left on the floor of my bedroom. "Their uniforms, wands, and some hair samples are all in there."

Blaise gasped, and looked for a moment seemingly incapable of speaking. "Y-you took on twenty-four Aurors? And won?!"

I coughed a couple of times, shifting a night's worth of ash, dust and phlegm. "Not exactly. I was under my cloak when they arrived. I took a few of them down before they saw me, and lured the rest away from the building. Once they were clear enough, I blew it up. I was ready for the shock wave, they weren't. The blast knocked them down, and I took the opportunity to stun them. Afterwards, I just couldn't resist humiliating two-dozen Ministry employees."

Blaise seemed a bit relieved at my answer, but was sharp enough to spot the discrepancy. "Did you miss one?"

I nodded, lying back and covering my eyes. "Tonks. I apparated with her to the road to Hogsmeade, woke her up, and gave her an offer to join me."

Blaise blinked. "I know you wanted to bring others on board, but an Auror? Are you insane?"

I shook my head. "Nope. I want her to go back to the Ministry and to Dumbledore, and tell them that I was recruiting her. At least one of them will probably encourage her to do so undercover, and I can start passing misinformation back to the old man and the Ministry."

Blaise plopped down on the bed next to me. "Your plan isn't really so complicated that you need to start playing with double-agents. Is such a risk really necessary?"

I shrugged. "For my final gambit, it would make it easier if a trusted source of information sent them in the wrong direction."

She frowned at me. "How do you intend to make sure that she's a trusted source? If you pass misinformation through her back to the Order and Ministry, they'll soon know not to trust the information she gives them."

I blinked my eyes, getting them as focused as possible without my glasses. "Not if they don't think it's misinformation."

Blaise plonked herself down on the bed next to me gracelessly. "Fair enough. So, what's next on the agenda?"

I coughed again. "Three things. Third, Croaker's head."

She looked at me carefully. "You really want to kill him?"

I nodded slowly. "I know I shouldn't. I've been trying to put what he did out of my mind, to see if looking back on it dispassionately changes things. But it doesn't. I want to kill him. I want to hurt him. I want him to pay for what he did."

Blaise just looked at me silently. Eventually, she said, "I won't help you do this. I can't. And I will do what I can to talk you out of it."

I nodded. "I know. I need you to do that; to tell me when I'm doing the right thing for the wrong reason, or the wrong thing for the right reason. Besides, Hermione has more right than I to veto this."

"Granger won't let you kill him."

I grinned. Even through my fatigue, the smile came easily. "Oh, I know. But I doubt she'd mind if he managed to kill himself. I just need to work out what sort of trap to set." I grinned wryly, less painfully now that I was becoming accustomed to the brightness of the room. "I already have the bait."

Blaise pursed her lips. "And second?"

"My wand," I said shortly. "I want it back, and I'll take Malfoy Manor apart stone by stone to get it."

She nodded. "I understand. But are you sure Draco has taken your wand to Malfoy Manor? He's trying to let the world believe that he's dead; living in his ancestral home doesn't exactly strike me as being the most cunning plan."

I shrugged. "Maybe. But my guess is that I'll find him going through others. He was always chummy with Parkinson at school; maybe I should visit her parents and have a rummage around."

"Around their house? They won't have left anything on display that would point to him."

I shook my head. "No! Around their minds."

Blaise made a face. "Ugh. I always get nauseous whenever I try Legilimency. Great-grandfather always said that I had no real talent for it."

"You should use the Imperius your subject first. That makes it much easier."

"Huh, I suppose it would at that. So, what's first on the agenda?" she asked, quite calm at my casual suggestion to use an Unforgivable.

"What it always has been," I said dramatically. I struck a pose, pointing my index finger towards the ceiling. "To take over the world!"

She hit me with a pillow. "Prat. Ron's downstairs, if you want to go and say hello."

I frowned, both because she called him by his first name and because he was actually in the house. "What's he doing here?"

She snorted. "Trying to empty the larder, I think. Here," she said, slapping a newspaper on my chest. "Go and see your friend while I wash up." She rolled off the bed and stood straight, lifting her robes over her head. I lay back to enjoy the sight.

Hey, you've got to take advantage of life's simple pleasures.

The morning papers had little detail about my efforts last night, but I suppose that was to be expected, given how late it had been when I forcibly spread LXMs inventory around the English countryside. The Bobbins trouble was not even mentioned, and Matthias had simply managed to place a late ad, offering employment to any brewer who had certain qualifications, no questions asked.

The LXM factory bombing was front page news. There was bugger all in the way of facts; the story was basically a great number of quotes from the poor victims on site. An unnamed spokeswizard for LXM condemned the attack, lamenting that there were now hundreds of people out of work, and that St. Mungo's and other medical institutions would now not have a guaranteed supply of medical potions and salves.

"Fun night?" a familiar voiced asked with a hard edge as I wandered into the kitchen, head deep in the paper.

I looked over the top of the Prophet at Ron, who'd asked the question around a large mouthful of muesli. "Some of it, yeah," I replied.

"How come you didn't give me an invitation to come along?" he asked, spraying tiny particles of breakfast cereal.

I raised an eyebrow. "Because I need all of you to have rock-solid alibis should this whole plan go pear-shaped," I said firmly. "You know that. I'm sorry if you think I'm stealing all your fun, but this is something that I can get away with because I'm dead. Besides, you're not angry, you're waiting for me to tell you what happened."

He nodded encouragingly. "Well, go on then. Tell me what happened!" He shoved another heaped spoonful of grains into his mouth.

I waited until he had chewed the mouthful a few times before picking just the right time to answer. "I gave an Auror an offer to join us."

Ron's eyes and cheeks bulged, and he gave the kitchen table a sort of pebble-dash finish. I had to hold the paper up to avoid getting hit with a fine spray of milky mist. "Are you crazy?" he demanded.

I shook my head. “Oh, mate, look what you’ve done,” I said despairingly. “I honestly didn’t think people actually did spit-takes in real life.”

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “You did that on purpose!”

I shrugged, not bothering to deny it. He wouldn’t believe me, and in any event, it was true. “There’s a smoking field where Target One used to be, a *Fidelius* up around Target Two, and Target Three is on board.”

Ron rolled his eyes, and loaded another ladleful. “Getting details out of you is like a bloody potions lesson, you know?” he said sourly, before chomping down on the new mouthful.

Again I waited for a few chews. “I also left three squads of Aurors butt naked and tied up to each other in a compromising position.”

Heh. This time he got bits of the table he missed the first time.

“That’s it,” Ron spat, again wiping his mouth with his sleeve. “You need someone to come along with you. Not to help you, but to keep you from doing something stupid.”

I could hardly keep a chuckle from bubbling up through my throat. “By ‘stupid’, I assume you mean, ‘so much fun I’m not missing the next time’?”

Ron sent a rude gesture towards me. “I’m flying with you next time. I don’t care about alibis, plausible deniability, or giving statements to the Prophet after the fact. I’m going next time.”

I nodded. “All right. What I have in mind could use some backup. Finish your breakfast, and meet me in the library.”

The next few days turned out to be rather busy. For my friends at least.

The Ministry announced my state funeral. In a delightful act of civil disobedience, Hermione and Blaise waited until the event had been formally scheduled before announcing a private event for precisely the same date and time. In the true tradition of bastardry, they then invited just about everyone I’d ever spoken to in the Wizarding World to that wake, noting on the invitation that if the ‘official’ funeral changed time, so would theirs’.

I couldn’t wait to see what the Ministry would do when not a single one of my friends turned up to their PR event. No friends, classmates, hell, not even my teachers would be there. I wonder who they’d get to speak.

The fact that two dozen Aurors were overcome at the LXM potion factory was leaked, which appeared to send a wave of panic through at least one specific subsection of the population – those who had enough time on their hands to send letters to the editor of the Prophet. Calls for old Scrim to resign were loud but ignored. A blanket ban on Aurors talking to the media was enacted, which presumably meant that the Prophet was still free to make up whatever quotes they liked, claiming they were from an anonymous source.

Two days after my night of larceny and arson, there was a riot in Diagon Alley. I had nothing to do with it. Well, directly, at any rate. Apparently some Muggle-born wizard was attacked by a pure-blood, or the pure-blood was attacked by the Muggle-born. Either way, when the Aurors showed up, they immediately placed the Muggle-born wizard under arrest, but not the pure-blood. The crowd that had gathered numbered quite a few with less than pure heritage, and things got ugly pretty quickly.

The result was fifteen arrests, twelve hospitalisations, and a lot of suddenly nervous Aurors. The idea that a large, armed, sub-section of the population would suddenly fight back against injustice seemed to rattle them. I suppose investigating the minor disagreements between wizards in a public place had been up til now relatively safe for them. They were having enough trouble with the thought that there was a single wizard out there who could take down three squads. The idea that the wizarding population at large wasn’t going to accept any bullying was quite alien.

Supposedly, recruitment was down and resignations were up, despite an increase in funding and a decrease in educational requirements. For some reason, people started thinking that being an Auror was dangerous...

The next day saw an attempt at rushing hastily-penned new laws through the Wizengamot. The standout contender for the ‘Law Which Would Never Be Enacted More Than Once’ stated, essentially, that anyone who so much stood in an Auror’s path could be charged with impeding him in his duty. Given the mood on the street after recent events, it would be a brave (i.e., Gryffindor) or stupid (i.e., Slytherin or (admittedly) Gryffindor) Auror who tried arresting someone over that one.

An honourable mention went to the law proposed by one Wizengamot member, who was obviously not living on the same planet as the rest of us. He submitted a draft bill that would make it illegal for a non-pure-blood witch or wizard to carry a wand in public.

I grinned tightly as I read the rest of the paper. It didn’t take any divination skill whatsoever to know that this wasn’t going to turn out well.

Just occasionally, I’d like to be able to plan to bring around the end of the Wizarding World without getting interrupted every five minutes. But interruptions were a big part of life, or at least a big part of my life. Given how things turned out the last time I’d received an unexpected communication from my account manager, it was with some trepidation that I flooded to Gringotts and made my way to Rilifa’s office.

“Mr. Potter, welcome, welcome. It’s nice to see you again. Please, sit down.”

I blinked at the completely unexpected courtesy from the ancient goblin. “Thanks,” I replied cautiously. “I got your owl.”

Rilifa nodded. “Yes, thank you for coming so quickly. Tea?”

I glanced around the room carefully. There didn't seem to be anyone else here. "Are you performing for anyone in particular?"

She sighed, setting the teapot down and assuming her usual gruff demeanour. "No. I'm afraid I have some bad news."

I narrowed my eyes at the cunning goblin. "You know of something that affects me, and you're worried about my reaction."

She held my gaze for a handful of seconds before nodding. "Yes. The Ministry is beginning to express quite an interest in the contents of your vaults."

I raised an eyebrow. "From a taxation perspective? Or from a let's-confiscate-everything-Harry-has perspective?"

Rilifa snarled, though it appeared to be at the Ministry, rather than me. "I wouldn't presume to divine their motives. Periodically, we get requests for information on vault contents. For taxation purposes mostly, as you so succinctly guessed. In those cases, legally, we are required to give any information requested to both the Ministry and the owner of the vault."

I grimaced. "But, because this is me, it's different."

She nodded. "Quite. The documents I provided for you to retain control of your financial affairs during your period of... official death... prevent the Ministry from obtaining information for estate tax until your will is probated. That is causing some consternation amongst the more goblin-like of the humans who work there, who are rather put out that they are not going to get a portion of your estate some months yet. That, however, is something they can do nothing about. No, we are coming under a rather undue amount of pressure for access to your personal vaults. Ostensibly to make sure no dark artefacts are being stored within, but such a request is unusual enough that it bears being noted."

I thought for a second. "Pressure? From anyone in particular?"

Rilifa's expression turned into what I could only describe as a 'cat-butt' look. "This request is anonymous, but insistent, which tends to mean it comes from the Unspeakables."

Croaker? "All of my vaults? Or just *one* vault in particular?"

Rilifa paused. "The request is for access to your personal vaults." She shuffled some papers on her desk. "Hmm, yes, the request is for access to a vault specified by number and all other personal vaults belonging to you."

I tapped my chin. "Just my personal vaults? Not the Potter and Black family vaults?"

Rilifa shook her head. "Of course not. The Ministry would never create a precedent by accessing an Ancient House's vaults. It would be political suicide for anyone to even attempt it. Requesting access to personal vaults however, is considerably less politically damaging."

I tried to fight a grin from appearing. "How... fortuitous."

That seemed to surprise her. "Fortuitous? Mr. Potter, I'm not sure you understand what I'm telling you."

"That Christophe Croaker of the Department of Mysteries is trying to gain access to the vault that was originally opened by Regulus Black to confiscate the jewellery box that was stolen recently."

Rilifa looked shocked. "I, er, yes."

I rubbed my chin, thinking hard. "Has the door to that vault been repaired since the... theft?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I don't see any reason Mr. Croaker shouldn't have access to that particular vault. Just let me nip back home for a couple of things to put in there for him to find. Stonewall him as long as you usually do to avoid suspicion, and then allow him access, provided he agrees not to remove anything from the vault."

Rilifa frowned. "He will not abide by that restriction. He will certainly take whatever he desires, by claiming it under the Department of Mysteries purview."

I grinned at her evilly, so much so that she actually leaned back in her chair, looking apprehensive. "I know."

I rose to my feet. "Move everything from each of my personal vaults into the Black family vaults. I suppose we'll have to leave the three coins in Sirius' old vault. I want them all empty before I get back."

Rilifa's eyes narrowed, not caring for my tone or my orders. "Am I going to regret whatever your plans are for Mr. Croaker?"

I shrugged. "Not unless he is a particularly profitable customer."

That got a small smile out of her.

"On the plus side," I continued, "it may even stop the Ministry from attempting to gain access to your other customers' vaults."

That seemed to mollify her rather more than I had expected. She suddenly looked rather keen. Her smile gave even my vengeance-filled heart pause. "Well then, what are you waiting for?"

I flooded back home, suddenly rather eager to get away from the goblin. Hermione had been reluctant to talk about my plans for Croaker; had been reluctant to even discuss the man. For good reason, I suppose, my ideas always involved a great deal of pain and suffering. Dismembered body parts featured heavily also.

But she and Blaise were right that acting on those ideas was far different from simply fantasising about them. But as I told Blaise, Hermione would shed no tears if Croaker just happened to remove himself through self-chlorination of the gene-pool.

It took me two trips home and the rest of the afternoon, but I'd set up a wonderful welcome for our dear Mr. Croaker.

I checked my watch, and then went home one final time. I needed to get to bed early.

Ron and I had a big day coming up.

The crisp sea air blustered against my face, stinging my eyes with salt. The English Channel is the busiest shipping lane in the world, and from my vantage point, it showed.

Dozens of vessels, from tiny one-man yachts to gigantic tankers dotted the waterway beneath me. Hovering on my Firebolt, I almost got the feeling that the broom was offended by my decision to remain in place. It was built to go fast after all.

For about the twentieth time, I cast a detection charm, wondering when the blasted ship would come into range.

Carlton Benson, the inventory manager at the Parti Alley warehouse (of whom I had taken some liberal advantages recently), had been a little upset that Matthias had politely refused his offer to buy back the homeless stock at a discount. He got even more upset when my new partner refused to sell it back at the same price as he'd been charged. And I'd only seen Snape go that colour when Matthias even refused to sell back at increasingly healthy profits.

This of course meant that suddenly, the brand new warehouse Benson had rented was burning money, and he didn't have a thing to fill it up with.

I wasn't the only one taking advantage of the sudden gap in the market, though my timing was better. Dozens of businesses, who up til now had been producing maybe ten cauldrons worth of potions a month, suddenly tripled their output, consuming their stores of ingredients in days. Hell, even people who'd only bought potions retail were suddenly buying cauldrons and ladles, presumably in order to brew what they couldn't buy.

Bobbins were well placed to provide locally harvested ingredients to sate the sudden spike in demand, but had no way to produce potions on the same level they could before. While they weren't really up to speed on Muggle business tactics, I didn't think it would be long before they were sub-contracting their labour to several one-wizard shops. The *Fidelius* around their factory was holding up well. Over the first few days, it had been amusing to sit on the lawn at the edge of the *Fidelius* and watch surveyors, lawyers, businessmen, and labourers shout, point, and berate each other, especially when the building they were looking for was only spitting distance from where they were standing.

I prised my cold-stiffened hands from the Firebolt's handle, and flexed my fingers. It wouldn't do to miscast a spell due to stiff digits. I reapplied a warming charm, and resumed my vigil.

Benson had been, er, *encouraged* to splurge, and ordered a gigantic shipment of potion ingredients from his suppliers on the Continent. Usual means of magical travel tended to be bad for ingredients that had a low tolerance for sudden acceleration, flame or impact. This meant that there was quite a flourishing sea trade between the magical communities in different countries. The extra shipment Benson ordered was due to hit the wizarding enclave at the London docks in an hour, but it was nowhere in sight. Given how fast a container ship travels, it should have drifted beneath me hours ago.

I considered Blaise's suggestion that the dock's arrival and departure records could have been forged, in an effort to throw off the very scheme I had in mind, as I idly watched the largest oil and gas tanker I'd seen so far do some relatively intricate manoeuvres for such a behemoth. It wasn't really critical if I missed the ship, or if it arrived early or late, or even if the cargo had been split over a number of boats. Ron would be hovering a few hundred metres above the docks soon, watching to see if and when the ship arrived. If Plan A failed, he'd enact Plan B. I grinned at the thought of all the ships near the docks having to get out of the way of Ron's surprise. They'd almost have to do a naval dance to let all the ships and boats to safety.

Suddenly, I frowned, my thoughts on ships moving out of the way of other ships making a connection with what I was watching. Such a large ship in a waterway the size of the Channel shouldn't have to move so. My heart leapt, and I once more cast a detection charm.

Still nothing. But I wasn't convinced.

I flew straight down, halving my altitude in ten seconds. Closer to the water, I could make out the turbulence on the surface of the water originating from the supertanker. The sudden change of course had added an unexpected deviation in the chaotic stream. There was some other turbulence on the Channel's surface that looked out of place, given that there was no ship visible for it to have originated from.

Damn, they'd hidden the ship and were using wards to keep the Muggle vessels from getting near it. And judging from the 'tracks' it was leaving, the ship was travelling at extraordinary speeds.

Sometimes, magic makes things bloody hard.

Again, my charm found nothing. Security had been upgraded.

Heh, who'd have thought that pure-bloods could learn.

Bloody inconvenient timing though.

I swooped down, trusting that my disillusionment charm was enough to prevent any Muggles on the nearby tanker seeing me. My original plan had been to conduct my affairs from above the ship, out of range of any defences. Without being able to see my target, I needed to actually land on the deck. A hassle, but not an entirely unforeseen one.

I could easily make out the wash behind the invisible ship, I could see the unblemished sea in front of it, but I couldn't make out exactly *where* the turbulence was generated. My eyes just slid over the area without registering what was actually there. I nodded in appreciation. It was a damned fine warding schema. Attaching such magic to a moving vessel was impressive work.

I gripped the Firebolt's handle, and locked my eyes straight down. Positioning myself around five metres over the turbulence, I flew forward. The closer I got to the ship, the more I had to concentrate to keep my broom on course. Occluding my mind helped.

Under the mental strain, I almost missed the slight pressure change as I limped over the outer ward boundary. Wards that I had presumed to be passive turned offensive in an instant. For what seemed like a full minute, but was probably closer to seven or eight seconds, my senses were besieged with deafening chaotic shrieks, strobing lights and the stench of rotting flesh. If I hadn't been Occluding like mad, the shock would have overwhelmed me. As it was, I couldn't stop myself losing control of my broom.

My first glimpse of the ship was made as I descended increasingly rapidly towards the water. With the Firebolt in one hand, I managed to direct my descent enough that I landed on the deck, and slow it enough that I wasn't killed on impact. Gasping hard, the wards finally expired, leaving me in the relatively dark, quiet and scentless midday ocean sun. The ship was hardly more than a large fishing trawler. Despite living in the Magical World for nearly half my life, I was still essentially a Muggle-born. Things that wouldn't faze Ron still made me stop and think.

The little ship was bounding along, almost leaping from the top of one wave to the next. With each impact of hull on wave, an enormous geyser of seawater mist filled the air behind, making my eyes sting and water. If not for the impervious magic on my glasses, I'd have been blinded with salt water. The mixture of cold air and freezing water reminded me uncomfortably of my escape from Azkaban.

Through it all, I pushed myself up, standing gracelessly on the stern deck. I fell forward onto my knees with a thump as the deck surged, angling back in a most disconcerting manner. The pitching and heaving turned out to be a boon, as three spells from unseen assailants shot past me, well wide or high. My heart jumped with the excitement of battle.

Well, it looks like precision spells are out for this fight. Fortunately, I had a method of attack that required not so much an attack vector as a compass heading.

But I'd get to that later. Trading spells with an unknown number of partially visible opponents was idiotically suicidal, even Gryffindor-ish. I had no intention of inelegantly smashing my way through the ship's defenses.

I aimed my wand off the starboard bow and summoned as much seawater as I could. A veritable tsunami washed over the railing and drenched the ship's deck. I cancelled the magic before I was hit, just ending up with freezing legs as the icy Channel water pooled briefly around my shins, before sloshing off the deck and back into the sea. Curses shouted in Latin turned to swearing in French as the outline of several bodies became obvious among the deluge.

Inelegantly swamping the ship's defenses was far more to my liking.

Attempting to apparate on a wildly pitching vessel sounded like a case study for Splinching Yourself 101, which left moving around under my own power. I took the time to shrink and pocket my Firebolt before setting up my shields. I estimated that I had around half a minute before they were brought down.

The mercenaries on board obviously thought that I was trying to hijack the ship. They positioned themselves in defensive formations around the cabin structure that housed the bridge. It would be highly unlikely that I would be able to enter without significant effort on my part, and casualties on theirs.

I grinned to myself. Talk about 'assumption' being the mother of all fuck ups. I had no intention of taking control of the vessel.

I used a sticking charm to fasten my feet to the deck, before tapping it with my wand, transfiguring the metal in the ship's hull into weird, random shapes.

Instantly, the ship heaved and flexed as the bulkheads failed. What had been a smooth, hydrodynamic hull was now something that resembled a child's clay sculpture.

I was thrown forward as the ship's momentum was severely arrested. My ankles screamed in protest, since my feet were still stuck down to the deck. Despite the pain, I left the sticking charm in place. I had three very pointed object lessons in view about the results of not being tethered down when a ship loses structural integrity. It looked painful, though I'm sure that with medical attention, the three sailors would walk again.

A loud, low groan spread through the ship, and the sound of tearing steel filled the air, making my teeth ache. Rivets popped and shattered. In one giant heave, the entire vessel shuddered and turned to the starboard.

The sudden change of direction forced me to roll to my left. The further strain on my ankles sent a pulse of pain through my brain, helping to clear it of any lingering disorientation. Through the heaving chaos around me, I saw two of the wizards go overboard. A flash of light signalled the failing of the mobile wards. The ship was now visible to all.

I could hardly believe just how much damage to the ship my configurations had caused. I extracted my broom and cancelled the shrinking charm. I dispelled the sticking charm on my boots and leapt into the air, abandoning the trawler to the dubious mercy of the ocean and Muggle physics.

Like an explosion in slow motion, the expanding charms on the internals of the ship failed one by one, causing the whole vessel to simply disintegrate on the open water. Around twenty people were forcibly ejected from the ship as it fell apart. Most of them wore robes, which I imagine would be rather difficult to swim in.

A spell shot up at me, clipping my shield. At least one wizard below had kept his wits enough to fight back.

No matter. Not even a wizard as skilled as Dumbledore could hit me on my Firebolt if I didn't want them to. I began swooping down, firing off stunners and levitation charms, pinning those I'd forcibly sent into unconsciousness to the sky. Twice, one particular wizard got too close to comfort, almost knocking me from my broom with a spell, then by using the very jinx that Quirrell used in my first year.

Fortunately, that particular jinx rather requires the caster to maintain eye contact, while holding still. Bobbing around in the English Channel was not particularly conducive to either condition.

It took three sweeps to get him. He'd attack, then take a breath and dive under the surface of the water as I passed over. Clever, but once his pool of allies grew thin, it was simple enough to hover nearby until he ran out of breath. I took him out, but not before I recognised something familiar about his casting style.

Once I was finished, I spent a couple of minutes shattering any floating crates that were still in one piece before taking the time to pull the twenty-two passengers to safety. I shrank and collected each in turn before heading for home, leaving a rapidly spreading pile of flotsam and jetsam. Eventually, it would sink or be washed ashore. Either way, the cargo of potion ingredients would be ruined and wouldn't reach the docks.

Mission accomplished.

After a two hour flight inland, I arrived back at Grimmauld Place cold and wet, but triumphant. As expected Ron was there to greet me. What was unexpected was his expression.

I rolled my eyes at him. "You dropped them, didn't you?"

He spread his arms. "Not deliberately!"

"What happened?" I asked evenly.

He looked sheepish. "One of the termites got out and started eating my broom. I had to knock it off, but I sort of dropped the rest of the bag."

I shut my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. I'd seen Dumbledore do that very action, often after I'd explained why I'd done something particularly... heroic. I was beginning to develop a sense of empathy for the man. "Ron, you were supposed to— you know what? Never mind," I finished. "I'm going to have a hot shower."

"You're not, ah, not mad?"

I shrugged, dropping the bag containing the stunned and shrunken sailors and mercenaries. "I'm too buggered to be mad. Besides, we can take advantage of it."

He frowned. "Can we? How?"

I smiled. "Well, for starters, we can invest in the new docks they're going to have to build."

Deep in the basement of Grimmauld Place, I trickled a few drops from a vial into my prized prisoner's mouth.

"Good morning, Master," I said as the antidote flushed the sleeping potion from Zab's system.

Zab's robes were still damp from their forced dunking in the English Channel, but hung from his lanky frame. The Polyjuice potion had worn off hours ago, and the person he had been impersonating was of a much larger build. His usually neat hair was clumped with salt. He blinked a couple of times, showing a remarkable ability to shake off his stupor, and focused on me quickly. "So, if it wasn't you in St. Mungo's," he mused after a moment's consideration. "I presume that means that you were being held in Azkaban?"

I shook my head, both in answer to his question and marvelling at his mental clarity. He went from unconscious to an impressive leap of deduction in only a few seconds. "No, it wasn't."

His gaze flickered over me and around the basement, searching for clues. "I presume that means that you have *The Prison* in your possession?"

I couldn't help a small smile from appearing on my face. "Well done," I said, genuinely impressed at his deductive skill. I wondered who noticed the painting missing. I wasn't about to ask, however. Either he'd tell me of his own accord, or I'd have to figure it out myself. Instead, I decided to change the direction of the conversation. "How long have you known it was me?" I asked.

His eyes went flat. "I didn't answer your questions when you were my apprentice, and I certainly won't while I'm a prisoner."

I nodded amicably, having expected his answer. "Yeah, I sort of figured that. I am under no such constraint, however, so if you've got any for me, ask away."

While that surprised him, he was still cautious. He knew that I'd be able to infer quite a lot about what he knew simply by examining the questions he asked.

That, of course, meant that he would probably ask innocuous questions instead. Thinking like a Slytherin was interesting, but tended to a little too convoluted for my Gryffindor-ish side.

"Where are my men?" he asked.

Hmm, concern for his minions. Interesting. "I took twenty-one people from the water, not including you." I pointed to a pile of innocuous bricks. "They have been given the Draught of the Living Death, and have been transfigured into bricks. Eighteen of them had identical portkeys. I presume they are your men, and the other three were operating the ship."

He followed my finger, sizing up the mound. "There are twenty-three bricks in that pile," he said, not answering me. I didn't expect anything different, though a certain relaxation in the set of his shoulders seemed to indicate that I hadn't left any of his team behind.

I grinned. "I can't get anything past you, can I? There are two agents of the Mugwump Kellermann at the bottom."

Zab looked directly into my eyes. I carefully engaged my mental shields. "They encountered you in the course of their mission?"

I nodded. "They were looking for Kellermann's nephew."

Zab nodded. "The failure of his men to report in at their assigned time has him on edge." The unasked question hung in the air like a chord from harp strings.

I decided to answer it anyway. "He's dead."

"At your hands?"

"Indirectly."

Zab sighed. "You have made a very powerful enemy."

I shrugged. "Yeah well, I've had them before."

"I've warned you before about being blasé"

"Yes, yes you have," I agreed. "But I wasn't dead then."

Zab shook his head in disgust. "What exactly are you trying to achieve? "

I raised an eyebrow. "Haven't you been listening to the news? I literally shouted out what I intended to achieve."

"I taught you two years ago that a man's stated objectives can bear no resemblance to his true goals," Zab said pointedly.

I grinned at him. "You thought that the new Dark Lord was building a powerbase," I said, with humour in my voice. "You discounted what I said, and assumed I was in it for the power."

"Aren't you?" Zab retorted sourly.

I rocked back slowly, thinking deeply. "Besides my friends, you know me better than nearly anyone else in the world. I don't think you did know it was me until now."

Zab didn't say anything.

I continued. "No, you thought that whoever the Dark Lord was, he was after power and money. I took my invisibility cloak back from that bigot Anastasia Royston, but I also took some other things, an act that was designed to make people think I needed funding. I 'stole' the Bobbins' potions factory rather than blow it up, so you thought I was going to steal the potion supplies coming into the country. That's why you had such a large force guarding it. You didn't even consider that all I intended to do was sink it."

Zab glowered at me, and I silently rejoiced at the truth of my deductions. "Do you have any idea how much that cargo was worth?"

I nodded soberly. "Two million, one hundred and twelve thousand, eight hundred and fourteen galleons and change."

There was the blank look he had whenever I surprised him. He wasn't expecting that.

I filled the silence that had filled the room. "Don't look so shocked. Charlton Benson has been my unwitting pawn ever since the day I blew up his warehouse in Parti Alley." Zab appeared unconvinced. "Alright, consider this; his first order of potion ingredients was a quarter of the final size. I *convinced* him," I said, wagging my fingers in front of Zab's eyes, "to buy more reagents, stretching his already sizable overdraft with the goblins to the very limit. I was there watching him as he signed the order, so I know exactly how much it cost him. He and by extension LXM, since Benson is their main financial controller, are now sufficiently in the red that they are vulnerable to all sorts of things. Buyouts, hostile takeovers, forced bankruptcy proceedings, the works."

"Have you any idea what sort of impact this is going to have on the economy of our world?" Zab demanded.

I shrugged. “One of the things you taught me was that in general, people who live comfortably can only be roused by that which takes their comfort away. Look at what happened at Hogwarts in my fifth year: mail was intercepted, pets were slaughtered, people were slandered. But so long as Mr. and Mrs. Wizarding Public could watch Quidditch, eat three square meals a day and complain about how things were so much better in their day, no one cared.” I held up a hand and clenched it into a fist. “But now, suddenly, things are different. Businesses failing, jobs lost, medical supplies supposedly gone. Their comfortable lives are threatened, and all of a sudden,” I spread both arms. “BOOM! The Ministry can’t seem to do a thing. People are dead, Aurors are found tied up naked. And when the Ministry’s Finest try to impose a bit of unjust order, the public turn on them.”

“It won’t last,” Zab whispered.

I nodded. “I don’t need the public sentiment to last long, just to burn brightly. You know that riot that happened the other day? Nothing to do with me. But those laws the Wizengamot debated and passed the next day; they couldn’t have done more for my cause even if I’d dictated them myself. It’s fantastic. Once these people’s comfort is threatened, I hardly have to lift a finger. The armies of paranoia will do my work for me.”

Between clenched teeth, Zab hissed, “So you intend to simply destroy the world to save it?”

I lost my smile. “I was kidnapped and held by dementors for three months simply because Fudge was desperate for a way back into power. He saw nothing wrong with that. Fudge, a former Minister of Magic, a man once charged with upholding the laws of the land,” I said evenly, glaring at my former Master. “Sorry, *Master*,” I continued sarcastically, “Despite what you personally think, the world is already broken; it’s just stumbling along, held up by inertia, bigotry and distrust, until the inevitable crash.”

“And so you’ve just decided to hasten the process,” Zab snarled.

I shook my head. “No. I’m positioning myself to shape the direction the world heads in after the crash.”

“By targeting civilian vessels carrying much needed cargo?”

Wow, the tone in his voice suggested that he was taking my successful campaign against his ship personally. “For what it’s worth, I won’t need to do that again.”

“You’re damned right you won’t,” he spat. “LXM is up against the wall. Their contract with St. Mungo’s has all sorts of liquidated damages for non-compliance. They’re having to sell entire businesses for a pittance just to pay the fines. Not that it matters. They can’t afford to import any more. In any event, I doubt any shipping firm would be willing to export goods to the British Isles for the foreseeable future. Congratulations, you’ve condemned hundreds of people to painful months once our potion supplies run thin.”

I chuckled, earning a glare that would have made Snape green. No point in telling him that I’d guaranteed the country’s potion needs for the next few months. “Actually, I was referring to the fact that the dockyards on the Thames have been destroyed, but I concede the point.”

“Destroyed?”

I shrugged. “It was plan B. If I failed to scuttle your ship, the docks themselves were to be destroyed as it made berth. You took so long to arrive that my agent decided to drop his bag of male Brazilian Irontooth Termites.” Zab paled. “While all the Muggle structures in the area are made of brickwork and stone, the magical docks are simply charmed wood. Built and partially owned by LXM, oddly enough. The termites will gorge themselves stupid, eating hundreds of times their own weight in charmed timber, before falling catatonic from being unable to find a mate. The docks will be too damaged to use, and hopefully too damaged to repair. They’re need tearing down and rebuilding. Unfortunately, funding is a little difficult to come by at present.”

“You’re killing us,” Zab whispered.

“No, I’m just introducing the concept of ‘risk management’ to the wizarding world. Take a look at the place. There’s one bank. One Ministry building. One school. One all-wizard settlement. One dockyards. LXM has... excuse me, had one potions factory. If something happens to any them, there is no backup. After a few well placed strikes, it is now starting to dawn on the public that maybe, just maybe, the pure-bloods in charge aren’t actually doing such a sterling job of leading the country after all.”

Master Potter Breaking Storm

Zab and I stared at each other for a long time. The still-damp robes made him look smaller than I remembered. As cold as he must have been in the chilly air of the basement, he stoically refused to show any discomfort. Eventually, he spoke. "Perhaps you are correct. Perhaps the ruling class has made some errors," he offered.

"Some errors?" I asked incredulously.

Zab continued without acknowledging my objection. "But is it necessary to act as you have? Was there no other way? You said that you were held at Azkaban for three months. That sort of information would have rocked the establishment had you taken it to the press."

I raised my eyebrows. "Do you honestly think that I would have lived to do that? Fudge wanted me dead. Babcock wanted me kissed. Whoever hired the assassins that hit St. Mungo's wanted me killed with extreme prejudice. I presume that Kellermann would have wanted me dead, after he found out that I assisted his nephew to commit suicide. There were at least two Aurors at Azkaban who knew I was there, so I had no way of knowing if I would survive making a complaint."

Zab's eyes narrowed. "Do not insult my intelligence. You could have come to me. You could have gone to Dumbledore. You could even have gone to Arthur Weasley. You are not being forced into this course of action."

I leaned forward. "I could not go to you without involving Blaise. Going to Arthur Weasley would have made his entire family targets. Going to Dumbledore would have put me in a position to trust everyone he trusts." I shook my head. "No, with me 'dead', no one I care for is in danger from simply being close to Harry Potter, and I can work to make necessary changes."

Zab stared directly into my eyes. "These changes are *not* necessary," he stressed.

"That is, of course, a matter of opinion."

Master and Apprentice stared at each other for quite a while. I was rather enjoying the verbal sparring. Zab eventually spoke again. "So, how do we progress from here? Are you going to kill me?"

"Kill you? Why in Merlin's name would I want to do that?"

"You are not an idiot," he snapped, even in his fury unwilling to answer a direct question.

"Neither are you," I retorted. "What does it mean that I am not going to kill you?"

Zab glowered, suddenly getting a taste of the torment he put me through for two years. "There are other alternatives to death. Perhaps you intend me to live my life out as a stupefied brick. I would have been killed in all but the technical sense."

I chuckled softly. "A pretty bloody important technicality, if I may say so."

My flippant remark did little to soften his mood. "But one that would allow you to make the promise and not, in effect, keep it. Or, you may intend to convert me to your way of thinking."

I snorted. "Let's stay within the realms of probability, shall we?"

Zab's voice trailed off slightly, becoming softer as he began to ponder the consequences. "Whatever you plans, leaving me alive means that you intend to be identified; or at least do not fear being identified. Convention indicates that, should you be successful, you would be in charge, and thus have nothing to fear from your identity becoming public knowledge. You, however, do not follow convention if you can get away with it."

I watched and listened, fascinated at his thought processes.

"From your specific targets, you do not appear to be revelling in destruction simply for destruction's sake. You do have a plan." His attention flickered over the pile of bricks in the corner. "You kill some without mercy, yet spare others. That indicates a pattern, or at least careful target selection. Fudge you murdered because he held you in Azkaban, yet you have let Babcock, his co-conspirator live. Did you spare Anastasia Royston and her daughter, or just fail to kill them? The DMLE are convinced that you failed, but as my apprentice, I know that you could have succeeded had you wished.

"You escape without difficulty from a single Auror squad when in a public place, but stay to fight three squads at night in a remote location. The Aurors are spared, yet humiliated, despite some of them holding questionable views about the recently deposed Dark Lord." Zab trailed off, staying silent for a few moments.

You are not trying to take over the world. The important deaths – Fudge and Kellermann, – were carried out not because they were important to your plans, but because they knew you were alive.”

I couldn't help but smile. While not quite correct, it was close. Kellermann was dead before I was captured.

“No,” Zab continued, watching my expression thoughtfully. “Fudge’s was the only murder you committed to directly keep your secret. Kellermann died before you were captured. Babcock is still alive because she thinks you are dead. The Aurors you claim you saw at Azkaban probably died in the mass-breakout attempt.”

I made a connection in my mind. “That’s how you deduced that I was held in Azkaban. Fudge died straight after a breakout. With all the official prisoners accounted for, you thought it must have been done by a prisoner who was being held off the books. You just didn't know it was me.”

Zab made no move to confirm or deny my deduction. “You use misdirection, stealing when you do not need to. Your recent economic targets were all owned by Purebloods. You destroyed some, but others you simply neutralized. The Malfoy family holdings have been significantly damaged, yet it makes little sense for you to do so. Lucius and Draco are both dead, and Narcissa is either under arrest or under Auror protection, depending on how long it has been since one of your extracurricular activities.”

I tilted my head to one side. “Are you sure? About the Malfoys being dead? Or is this some misdirection on your part, trying to lead me to believe that you are not as informed as you should be?”

Zab stared at me for a few moments. “So, Draco is alive,” he said seemingly devoid of emotion. But even in his carefully modulated voice, I could hear the tension, the anger, indicating that he hadn't known the ferret had survived.

“He had the goblet we were looking for,” I confirmed. “Kellermann’s nephew was working for him or with him; I never got a chance to determine the details of their relationship.”

“Yet you don't know where he is, if you are only attacking his financial interests.”

I snorted, covering the flash of annoyance that he was correct. “Draco Malfoy is irrelevant. I got the goblet from him in Albania, and once I've confirmed the destruction of all the other Horcruxes, I will decide its fate. I am attacking LXM's assets simply because they were aligned with Voldemort and I have detailed information about them. That is all.” I wasn't going to let slip that the bastard had my wand, and that I was still hunting him down.

“Then we are back to what your goals are,” Zab murmured. “You are making no direct political moves that I can discern, instead letting fickle public opinion to drive the change.” He paused. “Unless you are simply waiting...” Eventually, he shook his head with an expression that clearly stated that he was not interested in continuing this avenue of conversation. “No, I need to process what I have learned before I make a deduction. So, are you going to release me?” he asked, holding up his bound wrists.

“Are you willing to discuss something we were studying?” I asked.

Zab looked wary, but curious at the apparent non-sequitur. “We studied several things.”

I nodded. “I was referring to my ability to push things around. Something has changed.”

He paused, but the curiosity in his eyes was too much. “Changed the way you use your ability, or changed in the ability itself?”

I pursed my lips, gathering my thoughts. “It is changing. I still have control, but it is getting stronger, and I don't know why.”

Zab frowned. “Stronger? Any magical ability will grow stronger as you practice. We spent many evenings debating the difference between achieving a magical effect with power versus achieving it with skill.”

I nodded. “If it was just incremental improvement I would agree. But the power is increasing far beyond what I would expect. To start with, I would get tired when I used it. The first time I used it deliberately, I only cracked windows and plumbing, but ended up unconscious. Over time, as I practised, the weariness after using it pretty much vanished, unless I was using it overmuch.” I took a breath. “When we began our documenting of it, I could push one person around, maybe two. At Parti Alley, I knocked over a squad of Aurors. They were in close proximity, and it didn't tire me. Last week, at Malfoy's potion factory, I did the same thing, with what I thought was the same effort, and I blew away three squads of Aurors in open area.”

Oddly, it was something incongruous that got his attention. “You were alone when you destroyed the potion factory?”

I nodded. “I suppose that people assumed that I had an entire army there.”

Zab shook his head slowly. “There were... conflicting reports.”

I nodded, not really surprised. “Well, it was true; my entire army was there,” I said with a small smirk.

Zab glanced down at his hands, ignoring the taunt. “Release me, and I will continue this discussion.”

I shook my head. “No. You need to make an Unbreakable Oath to be first, that you will not divulge my identity to anyone. If not, as soon as this conversation is over, I'm dosing you with the Draught of the Living Death, and transfiguring you into a brick. In a few weeks, when this is all over, I'll release you unharmed.”

His eyes narrowed. “I am your best chance to determine what has changed about your ability. Confining me is not in your best interests.”

gave him a casual shrug. "As I said, it's only for a few more weeks. You won't even know the time has gone. I can wait."

He shook his head. "No, I do not think so. At Azkaban, you would have been under the wards there. By your own description, you force raw magic to be expelled from your core. Abrogo wards drain magic from your core. If you were under their influence for an extended period of time, who knows what effect they would have on you, especially if you used your ability while there. At worst, perhaps you are damaging your core, perhaps to the point of destroying your ability to do magic in the future. At best, perhaps you are forcing it to grow. Who knows? We would need to study it objectively. Something that you are not capable of doing."

The idea that I may be damaging myself with my over reliance on my pushing ability brought me up short, but Zab's apparent willingness to assist his captor set warning bells ringing in my mind. "I think that I could conduct a series of tests, despite your reservations."

"Not on an ability that you alone possess. You have no way of objectively measuring it. If your core is being damaged, then any measurements you made would be tainted."

I tilted my head from side to side, weighing his words. "Maybe. Either that or I can simply stop using that ability until this is all over."

Zab's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You are presuming that I would be willing to assist you afterwards."

I gave him a pout. "You would deny assistance to your Great-grandson-in-law?"

His breath caught lightly in his throat. "You haven't!" he mouthed.

I shrugged. "Not yet," I said, smiling at the wave of relief that showed in his suddenly-relaxed shoulders. "Your oath?"

I closed the basement door and locked it with the magic of the Black House. It had been an interesting discussion with Zab, but it was time to get some more things done.

I made my way back upstairs, noting that Ron had left already. I checked the clock on the wall. He was probably off to training. I sat down in a library armchair, and began to think.

Holding Zab in the house was a risk, even transfigured as a brick. I had no way of knowing if he had some contingency plans in place to assist him in escape. Even with his oath, he could cause me no end of grief with the resources he commanded.

"Dobby," I called.

The little elf was by my side before I finished saying his name. "Master Harry called Dobby?"

I nodded slowly. "I'd like you to implement stage one of my discovery protocol."

Dobby nodded, and vanished with a pop. Within a few moments, all the objects I brought back from my expeditions would be removed from the house, and stored in a secret location under an aversion charm.

It would make it inconvenient to access without Dobby, but not impossible. And it was exceedingly unlikely that anyone would find it.

All that would remain in Grimmauld Place would be my clothes, some money and my disguises. Dobby was under orders that if the wards surrounding the house were attacked, he was to implement state two. He would collect every personal possession of mine and take them to the attic of 4 Privet Drive. Anyone breaching the wards would find an empty house left just as I had before heading off to Albania.

I was lost in thought when Blaise walked through the door with a glass of wine in hand. She sat down next to me, kicked off her shoes and tucked her legs under her to one side, while leaning against me. "Interesting day?"

"Passably," I replied. "You?"

She chuckled softly. "Around midday we got notification of another attack. Babcock and the other directors went into a panic and ordered every nurse and healer on the payroll into the hospital."

I gently gripped her wrist and brought her wine up to my lips for a sip. "Did any patients actually show up?"

She shook her head with a snort. "A grand total of two people came in with lacerations to the soles of their feet. Stupid idiots tried to stamp on Irontooth Termites without thinking about the name. The pincers cut through to the bone."

I winced. "Sounds painful."

"No kidding. The overtime bill is going to be huge this month, and all we got out of it was a fairly realistic drill. So, how was your day?"

"Productive. Successful."

"Really? I thought Ron wasn't supposed to release the termites unless you failed."

I gave her a shrug. "What can I say? He claimed that one of the termites got out of the pouch. He dropped the bag while brushing it off the broom."

Blaise groaned and dropped her head backwards, leaning on the headrest. "Why did you let him go along?"

“Heh, you’ve got to admit that whatever he manages to do, ranging from impressive failure to wildly successful, it’s almost always funny.”

She grunted. “If one’s sense of humour isn’t particularly refined, I suppose. Are you going to let him go along with you on any more adventures? I’m not sure we could afford it.”

“Hey,” I started, feeling that I should stand up for my old friend. “The last thing I’d want while sitting on a wooden broom several hundred feet in the air would be a magically starved xylophage.”

Blaise gave me a mocking look. “That’s a big word.”

I grinned. “I ran across it while looking for something to destroy the docks with. I had no idea what wood-eating creatures were called before that. I just wish Hermione was here; she’d have been quite impressed.”

Blaise rolled her eyes, but gave a soft chuckle and snuggled closer. “So the docks are destroyed as well?”

“As far as I know. If they have been, I’m going to get Ron to put withdraw his contract signing bonus from Gringotts and start a syndicate to fund the rebuilding. The Black and Potter Family trusts will be heavy investors, to make sure it happens, but it will need a single pure-blood to be the figurehead, or chairman, or whatever you call it.”

Blaise’s eyes sparkled. “You’re building a financial empire?”

“Why not? I’d rather not have to rely on the goblins to manage my affairs if I can help it.”

“No, I like it. It’s good to see you with some ambition. So, everything else went as expected?”

I tilted my head from side to side. “Well, I did have one surprise; I’m still trying to determine if it was good or bad.”

“Oh?” she asked.

“Mmm,” I said, taking another sip of her wine. “My old master was on board the cargo ship.”

Blaise jerked back, nearly spilling some rather nice wine. “What?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I couldn’t believe it either to start with. I honestly didn’t think he ever took an active part in his operations.”

“So what did you do with him?” she asked pointedly.

With a tilt of my head, I indicated the basement. “He’s doing a particularly fine impersonation of a brick.”

Blaise looked directly into my eyes, shock easily read in her own. “You’ve kidnapped my Great-grandfather?”

I nodded. “Yep. I even had a chat with him a couple of hours ago.”

She half rose. “But we have to let him go!”

I gently pulled her back down into the chair. “We will. I already promised him that I would.”

“But...”

“No buts,” I said calmly, but firmly. “Zab knows who I am, but didn’t work it out until he saw me. So I’m going to assume that no one knows. He swore an oath not to reveal it, but he is rabidly against what we are trying to achieve. I can’t let him go until things have played out.

“Well, what have you found out from him?”

I shrugged. “Not much in the way of facts, you know how he is for answering questions. There is a fair bit to be deduced however.”

“Like?” she prompted, as though as an admitted kidnapper, I could hardly be trusted to come to a conclusion unless she helped.

I held my hands up in supplication. “Fine. Voldemort actually did me a favour by trying to take over the wizarding world.”

“Really?” she asked doubtfully.

I nodded. “Yep. In the same way that the British Army is always ready to fight the last war, the Ministry is now ready to fight off a Dark Lord trying to usurp power.”

Blaise nodded in understanding. “Right. So when you jump around and make threatening noises, they’re looking for someone building a powerbase, something to launch from. Not a one-man, guerrilla-style irritant.”

I nodded halfway through her explanation before freezing at the end. “Irritant?”

She smirked, but waved her hand in a circle. “Get on with it. What else have you ‘deduced’?”

I gave her a mock scowl. “The first thing they saw of me was a high-profile assassination of an ex-Minister, combined with a moderately large theft. Next, what appeared to be a failed assassination on a Wizengamot member, plus another large theft. So they are looking for someone who is both

ruthless, but somewhat lacking in resources.”

“Hence, why the boat with the potions cargo was so guarded.”

“Yep,” I agreed. “They thought I was going to steal it. I was surprised at the level of protection the shipment was afforded. But, given that I’d just stolen the second largest potions factory in the country, levelled the largest, and that they were expecting that I was going to steal two million galleons worth of stuff, it wasn’t really too astonishing. If I was trying to build up a financial empire capable of funding a sustained attack on the government, then such a shipment would be a clear target.” I smiled to myself. “The real fun is going to happen when they try to figure out if the loss of the cargo was a success or failure.”

“But it was successful. It was exactly what you wanted.”

I felt a twinge in the wards, indicating a new arrival by floo. Figuring that it was Hermione back from university, I just nodded, still smiling. “I know, but they think that I’m trying to fund a revolution. From that point of view, keeping me from getting my hands on two million galleons of highly resalable materials is a success for them.”

“But that’s stupid. They’ve lost all those potion ingredients. Mattias is the only person in the country able to produce a variety of potions at the moment.”

“Yep, and he’ll probably be in Auror custody, helping with their enquiries sooner rather than later. It wouldn’t surprise me if the Ministry tried to nationalise his operation under the guise of ‘keeping the country supplied with potions’. It will probably not occur to the readers of the Prophet that he was doing just that.”

A voice came from the door. “They can’t.”

We both looked up to see Hermione shaking her head.

“Since when does acting illegally stop those in power?” I asked rhetorically.

She gave me a look. “No, I mean that they literally can’t. He’s protected his assets from forced acquisition. What are you have been talking about?”

I gave her a sanitized recap, leaving out little inconsequential things like the identity of my newest guest. “What has Mattias done to stop the Wizengamot from taking over his operations? They could pass a law that allowed them to do just that.”

“Jeremy invited me and some of the other work experience crowd to his factory to offer us employment after you gave him a monopoly. He’s not some idealistic newcomer, Harry. He’s a seasoned businessman operating in a hostile environment. He put his own factories and warehouses under a *Fidelius* less than a week after you visited him. And he’s not the secret keeper. He gave us each a slip of paper with the location on it, but I didn’t recognise the handwriting.”

I took a deep breath and let it out with a relieved sigh. Mattias was always going to be the weak link in my plans. It would have been safer for me to remove him the same way as I’d removed LXM and Bobbins, but that would have left the country in a medical crisis.

“As good as that news is,” I said, “Mattias has little to do with the fact that the Ministry will probably try to spin the fact that they kept a fortune’s worth of bat shit and warthog testicles out of my hands is a success. With any luck, people will wake up to the fact that they can’t afford too many more successes of that nature.”

Blaise drained her glass and rose to her feet. “Shall we?” she asked Hermione.

“Shall we what?” I asked curiously.

Hermione smiled at me. “We’re finalising the details for your funeral.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. In almost all other circumstances, that would be taken as a threat.

Blaise’s gaze flickered towards the corridor leading to the basement as the pair left the room. Logically, I should move the bricks from down below to a place she didn’t know about. But if she did go to check on Zab, and he wasn’t there, that lack of trust would damage our relationship.

I guess I just had to trust her. And hope.

I wonder just how many people got the chance to crash their own funeral. There can’t be that many.

Two days after my aquatic adventures in piracy, the theatrical farce that was my ‘official’ funeral was taking place.

Despite various rounds of pleading, bribing and eventually threats, Blaise and Hermione refused to change their own plans for my ‘unofficial funeral’, leaving the Ministry circus light on people who I’d actually met, but heavy with self-serving, grandstanding wastes of space. If you had any more egos compressed into the available space, we’d probably pass the event horizon of self-centredness.

The dark, heavy grey skies threatened to flush the turds of wizard-kind gathering below into the sewage system that was the main Ministry building. The well-kept gardens of the temporarily-expanded Ministry courtyard rivalled Hampton Court Palace. The massive, obviously out-of-season blooms dominated a stage dominated with a large, framed picture of Yours Truly. The photograph had been taken at the unveiling ceremony of the fountain outside Hogwarts, celebrating those who had given their lives the day of Voldemort’s official death. I suppose it was the only stock photo of me where I wasn’t wearing school robes, a sour expression or making some obscene gesture at the camera.

Thanks to the wonders of Polyjuice, I was wearing the face and body of a Muggle I'd literally bumped into on the Tube. I had debated taking the form of an Auror I'd stripped naked the night I'd attempted to send a potions factory into orbit, but decided against tempting fate. Knowing my luck, I'd end up trying to get past him at the front gate. I settled for wearing a set of Auror robes, covered in a glamour. I'd picked the Muggle out specifically because of his size; so similar to my own. I knew from experience just how uncomfortable it was, having to adjust your suddenly overlarge underwear after losing a foot of height and several stone of weight. I shuddered at the thought of actually wearing the clothes of someone smaller than myself when the fateful hour was up.

The crowds around the gardens drifted and flowed in chaotic tides around clique-islands and battered up against the shores of the main dais, where stony-faced Aurors directed the throng away from the hastily-erected stage. Several empty chairs, set two rows deep, flanked a central podium, from behind which the inevitable flowery speeches would no doubt be delivered.

I carefully eyed the Auror positions, both in the gardens themselves and on the surrounding roofs. There seemed to be a rather disproportionate number guarding the empty stage, presumably to prevent unauthorised access before the event got underway.

There were three Auror pairs I could see in high vantage points on the roofs around the garden. I recognised Tonks in one of the duos. I winced. She was in a highly visible, extremely vulnerable position. Any physical attack on her position would be in full view of both of the other two pairs, and from anyone in the funeral audience who cared to join in the fun.

I bit my lip, thinking hard. I had come prepared to make a fairly large, noisy distraction in the hope that I could isolate and talk to Tonks. That looked like wishful thinking, given the security here. I glanced around, looking at the individual people in the gardens, looking for inspiration.

I barely recognised anyone in the crowd. There were a few faces that had familiar features, but that meant little given the lack of genetic diversity in the upper-echelons of pure-blooded society. There was an elderly chap with silvery-blond hair whose cheekbones and nose bore a familial resemblance to the late Lucius Malfoy. A gaggle of babbling witches looked as though they shared some blood with the Parkinson and Greengrass families. I even saw the red-cheeked, pocked-skinned features of Xavier Zabini, though I only recognised him from photographs in Blaise's possession; my girlfriend had taken a great many features from her mother's family.

I drifted slowly, occasionally sipping from my hipflask and suppressing the grimace at the horrible taste of Polyjuice. I had a further two flasks in my robes, should it be necessary for me to assume another, different face. A familiar wizard in my peripheral vision caught my attention, and I suddenly had another use for one of the currently unused flasks.

A group of identically-robed wizards surrounded the familiar, elderly mage, dressed in the colourful national robes of Italian wizards. Salvatore Falcone looked much older and far frailer than I remembered, and his cadre of rookie bodyguards had no idea how to avoid standing out in a crowd. I grinned at the thoughts running through my mind. My Plan A distraction, involving Umbridge, the Imperius Curse and as many amphibians as I could conjure had suddenly been demoted. My new scheme was going to be a great deal of fun to watch, not to mention less stomach-turning.

I moved through the crowds again, this time looking for someone who was both from a family on my shit list and was around my size. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be anyone really fitting that description who was below eighty years of age.

I selected a weed-thin wizard who looked vaguely familiar. I think he was a Slytherin upperclassman when I first started Hogwarts, though it looked like he'd spent the intervening time avoiding anything with even miniscule nutritional value. He was projecting a sort of sullen, hormonal menace, looking as though he had been dragged here against his will by an older family member, and was going to be damned if he was going to talk to anyone. Giving a mental shrug, I casually pulled a couple of hairs from my arm. Under the folds of my cloak, I opened one of the unused Polyjuice flasks and dropped the hairs in. Voila, instant Harry Potter in a can.

It was a little more difficult to position myself to fire off an Imperius curse at my selected target. It was even more difficult to time the spell so as to avoid any telltale hints that the wizard was suddenly not under his own control. I patiently waited for the right moment, ready to apparate away at the first hint that anyone had detected my spellcasting.

It wasn't. My target stiffened, but quickly relaxed his stance at my silent urging. His mind hardly struggled under my imposed will as I ordered him to walk slowly towards me. We passed each other nonchalantly, with the flask of Harry Potter-imbued polyjuice changing hands.

That done, I hardly needed to order him to go to the edge of the crowd and huddle to himself.

For the next ten minutes or so, I simply watched the crowds, noting the mood and conversation topics I could overhear. While many people expressed dismay at my demise, most of those I could hear were more upset at the end of the Potter and Black lines than by my demise.

A gong rang through the garden, and a fat wizard moved to the lectern on the stage. He requested that we all take our seats, as the service was about to begin. The various cliques drifted as one towards the seating arranged in front of the stage. I watched Falcone carefully as his bodyguards quickly selected and cordoned off a group of chairs, three chairs abreast and three deep, giving their employer physical protection from the mob. I mentally directed my thrall to sit in the row behind, and slightly to the left.

The remaining mass of humanity surged towards the precisely laid out seats with tectonic speed and a lackadaisical attitude. There was a sudden faint panic as it became apparent that the number of chairs was rather outnumbered by attendees.

I stayed at the back of the crowd, making only a token effort to push my way forward. It wouldn't do to stand out in the crowd.

The service droned on and on.

A few minutes in, I'd instructed my new vassal to drink the potion I'd slipped him, on the assumption that most people would be paying attention to

the speakers at the beginning of the service rather than at the end.

He'd done so.

Even watching it, I had hardly noticed the slight change of body structure. With the hood up, his outline had hardly changed at all.

Finally, the first speaker finished his speech. He ceded the spotlight to the Minister, and the crowd took the opportunity for a quick stretch and shift in posture. My heart began pounding in earnest. Here we go.

I instructed the wizard to slowly draw his wand, and send a light tickling hex towards Falcone.

He did so.

Falcone snapped his head around, his glare searching out the person responsible. Under my mental instruction, the unlucky wizard pulled back the hood of his robe slightly and gave Falcone a smirk and a quick, mocking wave with the last three fingers of the hand that held his wand.

Just as Scrimgeour took the spotlight, Salvatore Falcone leapt to his feet with a savage roar and struggled to draw his wand. By the time he'd managed that feat, Falcone was the centre of attention and in the crosshairs of every Auror within earshot. Before they could react, he hurled a dark curse at my hapless victim.

I blinked with a surprised grunt as the feedback through the Imperius gave me a light but unexpected pain in my temple. Because of that, I missed the impressively colourful counter attack.

Aurors acted immediately to take down the instigator, though the eight young, belligerent bodyguards quite happily took up the gauntlet and began spraying all sorts of vile magic around indiscriminately. Some people began apparating away, but many others let loose with their frustrations in ways that would have many healers (not to mention psychologists) in business for quite a while.

As cries and spells erupted from the crowd, I drew my wand and cancelled the glamour on my robes, reverting them back to easily-recognisable Auror field robes. Without giving anyone near me a chance to note my change of attire, I closed my eyes and carefully apparated as quietly as I could to the rear of the raised platform Tonks and her partner were using.

Both Aurors had moved to the front of the small, square dais for a better view down at the writhing mass threatening to explode beneath them. My arrival did not go unnoticed; Tonks spun to face me.

I snapped of a stunner at her partner, and a body bind at her. Tonks showed that she was a squad leader for a reason, deflecting my spell harmlessly skyward. My red spell washed over her partner's back, and he crumpled silently to the floor.

Tonks began her own attack the instant she finished deflecting my spell. Even so, I was ready, *pushing* her wand high, hard. I hit her with a silencer before she could bring her wand back to bear.

"Quiet, Auror Tonks," I said, holding a finger to my lips. "I just wish to continue our conversation from the outskirts of Hogsmeade."

She hesitated. Screams of agony began to punctuate the shouts of rage below as the festivities began spiralling out of control.

I stepped forward and tapped her companion on the back, disillusioning him. She struggled against my raw magic, trying to protect her partner from my unknown spell, only relaxing when she recognised the effect. "Lower your wand, I have no interest in harming either of you," I said evenly. "But for the moment, we need to appear as though we are the two assigned Aurors on this platform."

Slowly, she complied glancing at her companions on the platforms on either side of us. The commotion below appeared to have attracted their attention. Enough that the half-dozen seconds it took for our little act to play out apparently went unnoticed. Tonks cancelled the silencing charm with skill, tentative though it was. "What are you doing here?" she hissed. "We all thought you'd be at the other funeral."

I glanced down into the throng of spellcasting below, affecting an air of concerned attention. "Is that why security is so lax? I walked in through the front gate."

I could see Tonks bristle at that, so I held up a hand to placate her. "Never mind. I simply wished to ask you for your answer."

Tonks bit her lip, but took my lead and pretended to look down at the crowd below, slowly being brought to order by the Aurors stationed in the gardens. Falcone's bodyguards seemed to be a little less than willing to give up on the fighting. "Ever since you took me to Hogsmeade, I've been under surveillance. I can't even go to the loo without questioning looks," she said reproachfully.

I let a small smile grow. "How traumatic. Constantly being observed by others who are making unwarranted assumptions. Harry wouldn't sympathise."

Tonks' features softened, a hint of loss washing over her face. "I suppose not." She gestured down to the shouting mob below. "Did you do that?"

I let my smile vanish. "I only have a limited amount of time here. If you wish to discuss my tactics, you will need to join my little rebellion."

She swallowed, still with her lower lip between her teeth. "I won't hurt or kill anyone."

I waved a hand. "I wouldn't dream of putting you in a position to do so."

"Why do you need me, honestly?" she asked. "I mean, you said that you wanted me not because I was an Auror, but because I was a member of the

Order.”

I sighed, looking at my watch. “Short answer, because if I know what the Order is doing, I can modify my plans to keep them from causing harm to the members. They all fought Voldemort when the Ministry did nothing, so I would prefer not to involve them if at all possible.”

Tonks stared at me for a few moments as the crowd below quietened down and the severely hexed bodies of Falcone, his guards, and several bystanders were carried away. “All right,” she whispered, nodding. “I’ll help you.”

I gave her a wry smile. “Given a couple of seconds, can you remove the disillusionment charm and enervate your friend here?”

“Of course.”

I nodded. “Well then, think up an excuse for the gap in his memory. I shall be in contact soon.” I paused. “Oh, by the way, Salvatore Falcone down there...” I indicated with a tilt of my head.

“Yes?” Tonks asked.

“He’s the one that put the hit on Harry. Just thought you’d want to know.”

With that, I apparated away.

I jumped around the country a bit, visiting my empty potion factory, Hogsmeade and a few other places. It wasn’t too difficult to trace an apparition jump if you acted within a couple of seconds, but following multiple jumps took a degree of mental clarity that few wizards possessed.

I finally apparated into the main reception room at Grimmauld Place, happily musing on Falcone’s fate at the hands of a vengeful Tonks. I started to shrug out of my pilfered Auror robes before pausing.

I had a bad feeling. Something was wrong.

I looked around the room, before noting that there were a couple of photos missing.

Photos that contained Blaise and I.

I apparated directly to my bedroom, finding to my growing horror that Blaise’s clothes were gone. There was nothing of hers left in the room.

She’d left.

“Oh, bugger,” I whispered, racing from the room and leaping down the stairs four steps at a time. I reached the door to the basement at a respectable clip, skidding to a halt just in front of the door.

A little mental probing showed that the locking magic had been bypassed.

I didn’t bother trying to figure out how it had been done. I whipped my wand out and around the door, dispelling the charms keeping it closed. I pulled the door open, ready for an attack from within.

Nothing.

I willed a globe of light into existence, lighting up the room. With all the adrenaline in my system, it was brighter than any time I’d performed the feat in the past.

Nothing seemed out of place. The bricks were still where I had left them.

But finding the locks bypassed made me far more paranoid than usual. I crept into the room, sweeping my wand back and forth, searching for traps. I wasn’t sure if it was a good or a bad thing that I didn’t find any.

Standing next to the pile of bricks, I slowly stooped, ready for an attack.

Nothing.

The bricks were still there, and there were still twenty-four. Two that were Kellermann’s agents, three sailors, eighteen agents and one seriously pissed off ex-Master.

They weren’t dusty.

I blinked, looking more closely. Two bricks were dust-free -- the two that had been the wizards who attacked me at my will reading. When I had added Zab and the rest to the pile, they had been covered with a light sprinkling of powder.

Gently, I probed with my wand.

I felt the faintest wisp of a notification ward evaporate. The bricks below were not transfigured people, but conjured masonry.

“Shit!” I shouted, pulling my wand. I connected to the wards and set Zab onto the ‘excluded’ list, joining Dumbledore and Shackbolt. It would take too long to change the wards to put him on the ‘attack on sight’ list. “Dobby!”

Dobby flashed into existence next to me. “Mast—,” he began,

“Execute stage two, immediately!” I snapped. “Take everything, including Winky and Kreacher, and go to the attic at 4 Privet Drive! Stay there and out of sight until I come to get you.”

Dobby didn’t even wait to blink before disappearing. I’d taken two steps towards the door before I felt the wards forcibly deny access to someone. I’d hardly smiled with satisfaction before the wards came under sustained attack.

“Shit, shit, shit!” I muttered, clambering out of the basement. I shut the door, but didn’t lock it. No point really.

Darkness covered the windows of the rooms as I raced through the house, making sure that there was nothing left that indicated that I’d been living here. A muffled boom echoed through the air, shaking the foundations and filling the air with tiny, short-lived billowing clouds of plaster dust.

I could have engaged the active wards, but that would only have bought me a minute or so, at the cost of advertising that I was still alive. Not even the fact that it would seriously piss off the Aurors’ ward-breakers outside could make me give into temptation.

Dobby had done his work well. In just fifteen seconds since I’d given him the instruction I could see nothing among the remaining pieces of furniture that would give any indication of my presence here in the past six months.

I pulled out Dumbledore’s old sock one more time. Time to leave.

Once the familiar, yet distinctly uncomfortable sensation of being dragged through every dimension via a fishhook through the navel vanished, I allowed myself to fall to my knees onto the damp stone floor of the Chamber of Secrets. A tsunami of nausea washed through my abdomen, and I struggled to keep from vomiting.

Had Blaise betrayed me?

I could still feel the attack on the wards, even from this distance. Zab’s forced denial of entry had been a slap in the face to the proud wizard, and he was leading an attack on my home’s magical defences that they were never designed to deal with. Could never be designed to deal with.

I dry heaved again, barely managing to keep my stomach from emptying itself.

Had Blaise betrayed me? Had she chosen her Great-grandfather over me? It certainly appeared so. I bit down and swallowed my rising anger. It wouldn’t do to destroy parts of my only truly safe refuge at this point. Not when there were many more deserving targets still standing.

I took several deep breaths, feeling the dank musty air. Eventually, my heartbeat returned to normal, despite the continuing assault on the wards at home.

I shook my head. Grimmauld Place was now a write off. I couldn’t return until events had played out their course. I groaned. With Zab’s escape, I was going to have to enact my contingency plans. Of course, he couldn’t reveal my identity without violating his oath, but he could let Blaise do that.

With a growl, I hammered my fist on the hard, muddy ground, indulging my anger in some small, non-destructive way. “Damn it!” I shouted into the dark, hearing the echoes return for many moments.

Once more, I took a deep breath, and this time let it out slowly, letting my anger go with it. I was relatively safe here. I had two other bolt-holes I’d furnished with supplies I could use temporarily, and of course I had the Potion Factory in the Cotswolds.

There would be time enough to let my anger loose later. I would enjoy that, I promised myself as my heart rate returned to double digits. For now, I needed to see if there was anything in the stash of demonic riches down here that could be useful in my inevitable counter-attack. I’d also check on my serpentine friend, to see if he needed anything.

I turned towards the main Chamber and immediately stopped short.

In the dim light, I stared at the sight of several statues filling the exit. My eyes flickered over the group, counting and cataloguing. “...eleven...twelve...thirteen. What the hell was thirteen people doing down here?” I muttered to myself.

If the mode of dress and equipment were any indication, the group consisted of six Muggle soldiers and seven wizards. I couldn’t imagine that any wizard worth his wand would be caught dead carrying a heavy machinegun.

Shrugging at the tastelessness yet almost pinpoint-accuracy of that thought, I moved over to the group. Twelve of the thirteen statues were locked in a stance that bespoke readiness for battle, even if eleven of those had toppled over. The only figure that remained upright was down on one knee, his weapon up and readied, the petrified finger permanently holding the trigger down. Around him, scattered like brass pebbles, were ammunition casings.

The lone figure in a passive stance was a wizard who was dressed much differently from his companions, attired in garments seemingly made from the scales of serpents. His arms were raised as though he was speaking to a crowd, though now it simply looked like a statue in the midst of doing a set of push ups.

Each statue’s face was covered by an identical mask made of a thick, opaque material with an elliptical glass aperture that would have restricted the wearer’s peripheral vision greatly. Attached to the part of the mask that covered the nose and mouth was a full gas filtration system. I gently tugged the mask off one of the wizards, getting a bit of a shiver at the expression my action revealed. Terror and surprise intermingled on the

unfamiliar face, etched in place for eternity. Or at least until some mandrakes could be harvested. Which may be quite a while, since there was a bit of a shortage of potion ingredients these days.

Pulling the mask apart soon showed its purpose. The glass opening at the front let light in onto a series of mirrors, which did nothing but direct the light back to the wearer's eyes. While technically redundant, it would have prevented certain specific magical attacks, say, the gaze of a basilisk, from being fatal.

Further examination of the area around the statues revealed several dead roosters, rotting in the dark, dank environment.

Ah, Darius' merry band of hand-picked church wizards and Swiss guards, no doubt, with their hired serpent shaman in tow. I hope the Holy See was offering a decent pension and danger pay. It looks like they got all the way from the entrance in Myrtle's bathroom almost to the inner Chamber before being attacked. One of the soldiers even managed to get his weapon readied and discharged before being caught in the current resident's gaze.

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. All of the statues were in the doorway. It was rather poor tactics to allow your entire force to be taken out in one go. There were no statues or corpses in supporting positions on either side of the portal or in the antechamber to the main entrance, so either the group had been led by an idiot or the basilisk had allowed the rest of the force escape without exacting a brief but rather effective retribution. Knowing the parties involved, neither scenario seemed entirely feasible.

I patted down the robes adorning the statues with some distaste. It turned out to be a rather fruitless exercise, there was no identification, no valuables and, beyond the somewhat specialised equipment carried, no real useful gear. Each of the wizards carried a pair of unlabeled, tightly-stoppered flasks, but with no access to a fully stocked potion laboratory or Potion Master on my payroll, I had no real way of determining what liquids within actually were. Wands were gripped tightly in petrified fists, making it impossible to remove them without rendering the fragile wooden tools useless. The massive firearms carried by the non-magical soldiers would have been more useful, except that they too were in a death-grip. Even the staff carried by the serpent shaman couldn't be pulled from its owner's hand. It looked interesting though, the gnarled wood carved into a very realistic looking serpent.

Suddenly, I couldn't hear my breath in my nose. I frowned, and snapped my fingers. Nothing. No sound could be heard whatsoever.

I rose to my full height and turned to face my serpentine friend. The basilisk coiled and loomed over me, flicking his tongue at me in irritation. The thrashing of its tail was ample evidence of its mood.

It only took me a couple of seconds to work out what the problem was. Mentally kicking myself, I drew my wand and gestured for him to turn his head.

The enormous, scaled neck twisted and lowered, presenting the adamantine jewellery I'd stuck to the basilisk's skin. Casting the required anti-sticking charms in forceful silence, the silvery band came away.

Instantly, the angry hissings became audible.

"Finally!" the basilisk all but shouted at me. *"Your cursed gift has left me bereft of hearing for too many days!"*

I winced. *"Forgive me. I should have —"*

With a hiss that bordered on being a snarl of frustration, the basilisk turned and slithered away, moving deeper into the dank grotto. Once it came to the massive bust of Salazar Slytherin, it positioned its massive head underneath an outcropping of sculpted granite, and began scratching the area from where I'd taken the charmed adamantine. Bits and pieces of carved rock rained down in a shower guaranteed to induce a concussion in an unwary bystander.

The basilisk gave an odd sort of echoing hiss, which I took to be a sigh of pleasure. Despite having arguably the most dangerous creature on the planet angry with me, I couldn't help but grin at the sight. A casual glance around the dim room showed a thick carpet of gravel around the edges of the room that hadn't been there the last time I had visited. The deep gouges along the walls and ceiling hinted at my friend's discomfort over the past couple of weeks.

Eventually, the basilisk stopped his frenetic scratching, and gave a long, low hiss of satisfaction. *"Ahhh,"* he hissed.

"Better?" I queried.

"Inconceivably," came the response. *"That infernal metal chain shall never touch my skin again, wizard."*

I nodded. *"Fair enough. I'm sorry. I didn't realise that it would become such an irritant. I didn't even think that it would continue to keep you in silence in the presence of dead roosters."*

The basilisk coiled briefly, then with one final crushing rub on the wall, slithered back to me. *"As much as I loathed having it bonded to my skin, I cannot deny that it saved my life. The wizards yonder tried to slay me in my sleep three nights before the last full moon."*

I frowned, counting under my breath. *"Seventeen days ago."* I looked back at the rotting rooster carcasses. I suppose they looked like they died two and a half weeks ago, thought I was certainly no expert. *"It saved you?"* I waved my wand, looking for my previously erected silencing charms. They were gone.

The basilisk actually looked sheepish, which was quite impressive on a creature with a noted lack of facial muscles. *"To my eternal shame, they managed to catch me off guard. I had gorged myself in the hours beforehand, and was in deep slumber when I first caught the scent of the"*

cursed cockerels. I was only partially roused by the time the intruders had advanced to where you found them. The one dressed in the skin of my cousins raised his arms at me, but your thrice-damned enchanted chain prevented me from hearing any utterances. My gaze swept over the vanguard, killing all where they stood, but not before one of them began peppering me with his fire-spitting device .”

“*Vanguard ?*” I asked, privately amused that a massive machine gun that looked capable of mowing down a herd of rampaging elephants had an effect that had only been described as ‘peppering’. If the statues back there represented only those in the front line, then they weren’t being led by an idiot.

The basilisk actually sounded pleased with himself. “*Yes. Only those first through the portal to this Chamber perished by my gaze. The remainder fled with much haste and little decorum .”*

“*You didn’t chase them down to feast ?*” I asked, before holding up a hand. “*No, wait, you just said that you had eaten your full just before. Sorry .”*

“*No apology is necessary, wizard ,”* he responded. “*In any event, I was still befuddled with weariness by the time the rout was complete. By the time I had fully regained my senses, I was alone once more. Please, would you use your sorcery to remove all trace of the cockerel corpses? The stench is making this place all but uninhabitable .”*

Despite the events of the past hour, I couldn’t help but laugh at the situation. A well-armed, well-funded and well-trained group of soldiers and fanatics came down here to deal with a known threat. They cancelled my silencing charms easily enough, but then the roosters died, their pet-parsemouth proved ineffective and the front lines were turned to stone. The rest ran from a reptile too sluggish with food and sleep to do more than note their presence.

Oh, I’m just going to have to send a note to Darius and Waldorf.