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Apprentice Potter

Prologue

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This was going to be a very long ride. Very long indeed.

I stared sullenly out of the window, absently watching the passing buildings on the almost oppressively silent ride back to my home. Well, back to Privet Drive. The tension in the air was palpable; I'd bet my entire Gringotts vault that if I suddenly clapped my hands or shouted 'Boo!', Dudley would die of fright, Aunt Petunia would have a heart attack and Uncle Vernon's inevitable aneurism would burst on the spot.

Hmmm, tempting.

Nah, not worth it. With the speed Uncle Vernon is driving, and the number of cars around, some poor bastard would end up with a ton and a half of out of control scrap metal rammed up his exhaust. The traffic is hectic, and London drivers are insane, but I wouldn't wish upon anyone the fate of having to be surgically separated from my relatives.

I let my head rest against the window and sighed softly, trying to ease the emotional pressure. It didn't work at all, I still felt hemmed in. Up ahead, like a red wave flowing towards us, brake lights lit up on car after car, and my Uncle was forced to hammer his foot down onto the brake to avoid hitting the car in front. I was glad I was wearing my seatbelt, and I bet Dudley wishes he had been, once he pulled himself back in his seat.

You know, my Uncle really does swear rather well. And his face really can turn a truly astonishing shade of purple.

I would have sworn that you wouldn't be able to find that colour in nature.

I again found myself sorely tempted to give him a fright. Just to see exactly how he would react. Again, I resisted with a sigh.

After a few long moments, the traffic started to move along again. I glanced over at my Uncle, a man who seems to exude antisocialness from ten feet away.

For the first time, I really looked carefully at this man, the man who married my mother's sister. His size gave him the natural air of a bully and now, frustrated as he is, his bulk quivering with barely concealed rage, it made him even more intimidating. He leaned forward, the fungal growth on his upper lip he calls a moustache, twitching violently. Not a good sign. I silently switched my perspective to observe his indistinct reflection in the windscreen, and I noted with wry amusement and a small smile that his right eye was twitching noticeably.

It wouldn't take Hermione to know what set my dear Uncle Vernon off like this. I'm quite sure that

anyone, even a powerful wizard, would be highly stressed after being publicly threatened by a werewolf, a red-headed lunatic with an unhealthy obsession, a witch with technicolour hair and grizzled freak who looks like a walking advertisement for personal injury lawyers sporting a magical blue eye that wandered so much it should have its own fucking passport.

You know, I could almost hear the blood flowing through his veins. I could certainly see the vein in his neck throbbing. I wondered what his blood pressure is right now. I seriously doubt that there is a blood pressure meter in the average muggle doctor's office that goes that high. Whatever the bloody things are called.

A sudden cacophony of car horns sounded ahead of us, and the car swerved suddenly. I grunted involuntarily as my head thumped against the window. I surreptitiously rubbed my temple and look over to Dudley. No one noticed though, since Uncle Vernon had mashed his fist onto the horn and leaned even further forward to scream invectives point blank at the windscreen. You know, for such an intellectual cripple, he can really be quite inventive if he needs to be. Though given the fact that the subjects of his ire are ignoring him to shout their own insults at the person ahead of themselves, I'm not sure what it accomplishes. Except of course, for having to wipe down the inside of the windscreen once he ran out of breath and imagination.

Wonderful. Another job for me to do when we get home. Wash the car, inside and out.

I really hate the annual trip back to Privet Drive. Taking my Potions OWL was more enjoyable than this. Hell, sitting through a double potions lesson was better than this. According to Dumbledore, I have to return for long enough each year that I can call it 'home'. I snorted softly, causing Dudley, the fat lump sitting next to me, to jump slightly.

I have never thought of Privet Drive as 'home'. Prison, yes. Torture, most definitely, most of the time in fact. Never 'home'. The term 'home' conjures up images of fun and laughter. Of happiness and acceptance. Of love.

No, number four, Privet Drive is not my home. It is merely where I live when away from school.

I suppose I'm unique among the students of Hogwarts, in that I prefer to be at school than on holidays. Well, almost. Tom Riddle definitely preferred his time at Hogwarts to spending time in an orphanage.

What a bloody wonderful thought that was. I wonder what the difference between us is. Was. Whatever. Both of us had parents who vanished from our lives. We both grew up in places devoid of love. What makes us so different?

I suppose Dumbledore was right about one thing at least. That our choices make us what we are.

Thinking of Dumbledore made my stomach cramp with anger. I forced the memory of my ex-divination teacher's silvery form reciting my destiny in Dumbledore's pensive from my mind. For such a long winded prophecy, it boils down to four simple words. Murder, or be murdered. What fucking wonderful options.

You know, since apparently real prophecies exist, I suppose it is no great logical stretch to believe that fate exists. And if I ever meet Fate, I certainly won't hesitate to punch him in the mouth, as hard as I can.

A little thank you, for giving me such a wonderful choice.

If I even get the choice that is. So far, every time I've faced Voldemort I've either run away or been saved by something outside of my control. My mother's sacrifice saved me as a baby and then again as Quirrell tried to strangle me. I ran from him when he was drinking unicorn's blood, and it took Fawkes to save me in the Chamber of Secrets. Even my parent's and Cedric's 'echo' saved me after the bloody tournament, even though I managed to get him killed in the first place. Not to mention Dumbledore himself riding to the rescue a few days ago. To my rescue.

He was too late to save Sirius though.

My anger at Dumbledore was instantly smothered by the intense pain of my guilt. My stupidity had cost Sirius his life and put five of my friends in mortal danger. At the very least, my actions put them all in the hospital wing, not to mention that I almost gave Voldemort the information he desperately sought.

Not a bad effort all up. I seriously doubt anyone could top that. No matter how hard they actually tried to screw up.

Thinking of Sirius caused boiling tears to form in my eyes. I swallowed to move the stubborn lump in my throat and closed my eyes tightly to stop the tears from falling.

Dudley, who in the past has developed a reputation of not seeing anything that happens in front of his nose unless it is on the telly, notices my efforts. This stunningly out of character accomplishment was quickly overrun by a far more conventional Dudley, and he started teasing me.

Merlin, from the insults he sent my way, you'd think he was six years old. Five years in a snobby school, and he can't come up with anything better than that? Uncle Vernon is certainly not getting his money's worth.

I sighed again, and tried to ignore my idiotic cousin.

This was going to be a very long ride.

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*Dear Remus,*

*Things are going fine here, and the Dursley's are treating me well. Well, my Aunt and Uncle are, but Dudley is starting to really get on my nerves.*

*You might want to tell Tonks that she needs to do a muggle refresher course if she wants to blend*

*in more, I noticed her on patrol a couple of times in the last few days. Yes, even disguised as she was. No muggle trips over every second crack in the pavement and wears a striped skirt with a polka-dot top. Not around Privet Drive at any rate.*

*Anyway, I must say that it certainly is a change not having any homework. Any word on when our results will be released? It's just that I'd really like to know what subjects I will be able to apply for, and I'd prefer to get the texts earlier rather than later. If I'm going to be an auror, and I just happened to get the 'O' I needed to get into NEWT level potions, I'm still going to need all the revision I can get.*

*I can't believe I'm actually volunteering to spend another two years with Snape. Ugh.*

I put down the quill and stared out the window, idly wondering if Hedwig would return from her nightly hunting any time soon.

I'm still smiling at my Aunt's reaction to my pet the last time she had the nerve to enter my room unannounced. Hedwig, who was dozing on the top of my wardrobe, was startled awake by her rather vocal entrance, and promptly regurgitated her last meal on my mother's sister's head.

Having a half digested mouse land on me is not something I want to experience, ever.

I gently rubbed my eyes, noting that my black eye must be fading quickly, since it no longer caused me pain, just a little discomfort. On arriving home, it soon became obvious, once Dudley got me away from his parents, that he had not forgotten what happened last summer. It quickly became even more apparant that he held me responsible.

Bastard.

His anger at me overtook his fear of retaliation, and Uncle Vernon physically pulled Dudley off me three days ago and scolded him for the first time in memory. I was immediately banned from venturing outside of course, woe betide one of those freaks was to see that I've been mistreated.

As though living in a fucking shoe cupboard for a decade was just an inconsequential thing.

Looking down at what I'd written, I scowled to myself and forcefully grabbed the sheet of parchment. I crumpled it quickly then, with a shout, I threw it at the wall as hard as I could.

I've been getting very angry at everything lately. Everyone and everything just seems so stupid! What is the point of all this?

With a snarl, I snatched up my quill and tore off a corner of a sheet of random notes.

*Remus,*

*I'm fine.*

*HP.*



## Apprentice Potter Consequenses

A gentle tapping on the door of my room partially roused me. I grinned wryly to myself while rubbing the sleep from my eyes after this rather unusual method of getting me out of bed; Aunt Petunia had not forgotten what happened the last time she burst into my room screaming. I suppose having to wash a partially digested rodent from your hair would focus the memory somewhat. The thought of having to do the same quickly washed all traces of fatigue from my mind.

"I'm up." I called out as I swung my legs over the edge of my bed and grabbed my glasses from the bedside table. The world swam into focus to reveal that Hedwig had pulled her head out from under her wing and was giving me a filthy look.

"Sorry. Go back to sleep." I yawned, stretching my arms. She gave me a hoot of annoyance and put her head back beneath her wing.

"Not a morning owl, are you?" I whispered fondly with a smile.

So far this summer, Hedwig has been the only one I can talk to without getting angry. My Aunt learned this pretty quickly and has avoided me as much as possible. Recently, the only communication I've been getting from her is a tap on the door in the morning and a timid admonishment some time during the day not to step outside. My Uncle has been putting in a fair bit of overtime this summer. As such, he's generally gone before I get up and gets back late in the evening when I'm in my room reading over my old textbooks from last year or practicing occlumancy.

He claimed that business isn't too good at the moment, even going to the extent of blaming the Patterson's water usage at number eight for driving up the water rates, somehow extrapolating that the economy was being ruined as a result. I'm not sure exactly who he was trying to convince, and I'm quite sure that anyone who actually believed him must have a lower IQ than my Uncle themselves.

In my opinion, he's just staying as far away from me as possible, for as long as possible.

And that's fine with me.

Dudley on the other hand has been much braver this summer. I was stunned to learn that in the

past year he managed to win the South-Eastern England amateur boxing title for his age and division. He still resembles a beached whale, though in all honesty, perhaps a youngish beached whale. Maybe even a youngish beached whale that has been on a diet for a while.

His success in the ring has given him the confidence to face up to his fear of magic, at least his fear of my magic. I only had two days of peace when I suggested putting in my three-daily letters that I was recovering from a black eye. While the respite was welcome, he didn't grab his backside and whimper as he usually does. Maybe I should owl the twins for some 'assistance' in making my beloved cousin wish he'd been a little nicer to me. Yes, I do believe that would be a good idea.

I grabbed an old, frayed towel from the back of my chair where I last hung it, and wandered into the bathroom for a shower. Less than a minute later I was standing under a hot spray, letting the heat soak into and relax my stiffened muscles.

I got a exactly one second's notice in the form of the sound of a toilet flushing before the temperature of my shower changed by what felt like two hundred degrees. My startled yelp elicited a horribly familiar laugh from the toilet in the next room.

Oh yes, Hedwig will definitely be visiting the twins some time today.

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The worst time of day this summer is, without a doubt, breakfast time. I'm still expected to cook for my Aunt and cousin, which in itself isn't too bad. After all, compared to previous summers, only having to prepare breakfast is a real holiday. But being required to sit opposite Dudders at the table and watch him inhale his food is just the ticket should you feel an urgent need to go on a diet.

Merlin's beard, he's disgusting. Five bacon rashers, four sausages, three fried eggs and two grilled tomatos have just been sucked into his gaping maw in under a minute. I honestly doubt any particular item touched the sides. I could probably write some new Christmas carol lyrics dedicated to Dudley's breakfast; all I have to do is work out how to get him to eat a partridge in a pear tree.

Oh shit. He's grinning at me. What is he-

A sharp pain shot through my leg, and it took a great deal of discipline not to cry out and grab it. The bastard had just kicked me under the table.

That's it.

"Did you enjoy your breakfast, Dud?" I asked, once I was sure my voice wouldn't waver.

"Uh-huh." he said, smirking at me.

I let a slow grin grow. "Are you sure? You started looking a little peaky when you swallowed that third bacon rasher." I said slyly.

Dudley's grin faded just as slowly. "What?" he asked dumbly.

"Oh, nothing Dud. I was just making sure that there was nothing wrong with the bacon." I let my grin become a smirk. "I wasn't sure if I added the right amount of... seasoning."

I really must remember that one. Dudley rushed up the stairs to the toilet, where seconds later it became obvious that he had stuck his fat fingers down his throat. I made a mental note to include this morning's events in my pending note to the twins. I'm sure they'll get a good laugh. Mind games really are much more fun, plus I'm not likely to get a warning from the Ministry. Unless of course Fudge decides that I need even more character assassination. Which I suppose is highly probable, a least now, after it came out that he has been covering up the Dark Wanker's return for the better part of a year.

Publicly consorting with Malfoy senior before his unmasking as a Death Eater wasn't a terribly bright move either. Rita Skeeter has been making a big deal of the fact that I told Fudge exactly who was present at Voldemort's rebirth after the events of the Third Task. Publicly throwing your support behind someone who you've been told is an evil prick, and then having to admit you were wrong to the world isn't precisely a world class political move.

Aunt Petunia came running at the sound of Dud chucking his guts up. How she expected to fit into the toilet with Dudley kneeling in the way is something I doubt she's considered. It was surprisingly tempting to follow her. I'd give a great many galleons to get a photo of Dudley 'driving the porcelain truck'.

I calmly finished my breakfast before Aunt Petunia discovered that her presence was probably not appreciated by her son, and she stormed into the kitchen.

"What did you do to him?" she demanded.

I gently wiped my mouth with a napkin before answering. "Do you mean before or after he kicked me under the table?" I calmly replied, putting the cloth down neatly next to my plate.

Before she could reply, something behind me caught her attention, and she gave a short scream. A massive owl swooped through the kitchen window, only just able to tuck its wings in enough to fit through the narrow opening. It landed on the table in front of me, fluffed its feathers and blinked at me expectantly. The bird was a little over two feet tall. Huge for an owl.

"See! I knew you did something!" my Aunt crowed, once she recovered.

My confusion was quickly overtaken by anger. Has the Ministry or Dumbledore increased my 'protective surveillance' so much that a simple suggestion or threat of using magic is caught? Even so, how on earth could that be a crime?

With confidence I did not feel, I gave the enormous owl a bacon rind and removed the missive attached to his leg. "I bet your name is Goliath." I said to him, trying to force some humour into the situation. I couldn't have my Aunt thinking I was afraid of the Ministry.

Looking at the seal on the scroll, I gave a little sigh of relief. It wasn't from Mafalda. The wax seal had a large, ornate and stylised 'W' surrounded by a emblem that looked vaguely familiar.

It wasn't the twin's store's logo though, and I'd recognise the Weasley crest anywhere. Steeling myself, I broke the wax and opened the scroll.

Ah, it was from the Wizengamot.

Dear Mr. Harry James Potter,

We hope this missive finds you and your family well.

As you may be aware, a full investigation is underway into and surrounding the events of the evening of the 26th of June, 1995 in the Department of Mysteries. The Wizengamot has been charged with obtaining statements from those present, and has been given the power and privilege to question those involved.

It is our understanding that you played a significant role in the aforementioned events on the aforementioned date.

You are therefore summoned, by the authority invested in the highest wizarding court in the land, to appear before the full Wizengamot to deliver your statement and to be questioned about your recollection of events.

Due to your unique circumstances, a senior member of the Ministry will be charged with escorting you and all required and relevant documents and artifacts to the Ministry offices on the 14th of July, 1995 at precisely two o'clock.

You will be required to divulge any information and/or culpability related to the capture, injury or death of those-

With a snarl, I quickly stood and violently tore up the note in two without finishing it, then screamed, "Get the hell out of here!" point blank at the Ministry's owl. Feathers ruffled in shock, the massive owl gave a terrified hoot and instantly scrabbled backwards in an effort to put as much distance between me and him as possible. It turned and took off, leaving an indication of its fright on the table in the form of a white stain. Rage flooded through me, and I clutched the edge of the kitchen table and heaved upward, sending the entire breakfast setting flying. The sound of breaking plates and bowls didn't register on me.

In the last year, I've been forced to defend myself against both Voldemort AND dementors sent by the Ministry, and now they think that with a polite letter they can just demand my cooperation? That I trust anyone in a position of power in the Ministry enough to escort me anywhere?

Not going to happen. Not in this lifetime.

I turned and grabbed my chair in both hands and raised it above my head. An instant later, I smashed it down as hard as I could with a shout, feeling the heavy wood twist and break nicely in

my grip. I threw what was left of the chair still in my hands at the window, shattering three of the four panes of glass easily.

Sirius' haggard features came unbidden to mind. His hatred of his family home as his new jail, his frustration at not being able to do anything. More memories surfaced, of Snape goading him, of Dumbledore's condescending platitudes. I felt his sense of impotence, of being unable to do anything. The feelings were so similar to those I've felt my entire life, of never being in control, always being controlled by others.

No More! Never again! I will not be manipulated! I will not be controlled!

I pushed my fists into my temples, clenched my eyes shut and screamed. Months of anger, hatred and frustration combined in my belly. I forced it out, pushing out hard against the world, wanting nothing more than to be left alone by everyone and everything. I distantly noted the sensation of power flowing through me, as I tried to purge myself of my fury.

Every single breakable object in the kitchen shattered, including the one remaining intact window pane, my glasses and the chipped porcelain coin jar on the top of the refrigerator. The plumbing burst too, showing the room with a high pressure stream of water.

The blurred expression of fright on my Aunt's face was the last thing I saw as darkness gathered in my field of vision.

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The next thing I remembered was a cool, damp feeling on my forehead. As I focused on that single sensation, voices intruded on the blessed silence. Instinctively, I refrained from moving a single muscle, waiting to determine if I was safe or not.

One voice seems anxious. "But how much longer will he be unconscious?"

"I cannot be sure, Miss Granger. With the amount of power he expended, he may not respond for many hours yet."

Well, I guess I'm safe if Hermione is here. But the stern tones of Professor McGonagall caused me to remain silent and still.

Someone, I assumed it was Hermione, replaced the damp cloth on my forehead. A small trickle of water ran down the side of my scalp, lightly tickling me. "Professor, if you want to reassure the Dursleys, I'll stay with Harry."

A small pause, and I can just imagine McGonagall's stern features evaluating Hermione's suggestion. I heard the door close quietly. Perhaps McGonagall nodded instead of replying.

"Is she gone?" I rasped softly, my throat dry and hoarse from my earlier screaming.

"Harry!" exclaimed Hermione, and I felt her hug me tightly. After a few seconds she let me go.

"Harry James Potter! You frightened me half to death!" she continued.

I slowly cracked my eyes open. "What have I done now?" I croaked.

"Your little pyrotechnics show." she huffed. "Professor McGonagall escorted me this morning to the Ministry to give evidence before the Wizengamot, when alarms started going off everywhere. Professor Dumbledore must have increased the wards over Privet Drive after what happened last summer." Hermione started blushing. "I sort of demanded to come along."

I snorted softly, which causes me to cough. We both took a moment and manage to get ourselves composed and under control. Hermione wordlessly handed me my newly repaired glasses.

"So am I in trouble?" I finally asked.

"No. The wards picked it up as an unfocused, psycho-kinetic surge, similar to the one three years ago when you inflated up that awful woman. Only-"

"What?" I asked, after a long pause.

Hermione was clearly uncomfortable. "It was a huge surge, Harry. Larger by far than the other one. At first the aurors thought it was a powerful adult wizard, and that you were under attack."

"Like they care."

"Don't say that! Of course they care."

"Yeah? When was the last time someone had to defend themselves from both Voldemort and the Ministry?"

"What do you mean?"

"Has a Ministry official ever ordered dementors to attack someone who was simply claiming something they wanted to cover up?"

"That was Umbridge's fault Harry, not the Ministry's."

I forced myself up onto my elbows. "The Ministry seemed pretty keen to claim everything that cow did as official policy last year."

"They wouldn't have condoned an attack on a student."

I again felt my anger rise. "You forget they were trying their damndest to make sure I wasn't a bloody student." I snapped. "You know, you're beginning to sound remarkably like Percy."

Hermione bit her lip, an expression of dismay on her face. "Harry! Please, I'm not an apologist! I didn't mean-"

I waved away her response and slowly climbed out of bed. Even without looking at her, I could feel her watching me uncertainly as I stretched and twisted, loosening my muscles. Even after my little 'nap', I felt drained.

"Harry, what happened today?" she asked timidly.

"Nothing." I said sullenly, not turning to face her. "It doesn't matter."

Her slim arms encircled me from behind and I stiffen in reflex. Even though we've been friends for five years, I could count the number of times Hermione has hugged me on one hand. "It does matter Harry." she said.

"Oh yeah? What would have happened if the same surge came from Neville's place?"

"Well-"

"Nothing! That's what! He'd get a letter saying a surge had been detected, and to please explain. When it's me, I either have to defend myself from expulsion, defend myself in the press for getting special treatment, or defend myself from attack because no one else will! I'm sick of it! I'm tired of having to justify my actions to others."

"They only want to make sure you're all right."

"Bullshit. Dumbledore just wants to make sure his bloody secret weapon isn't damaged." I growled.

I closed my eyes tightly in shame. Bugger. I didn't mean to say that.

"Weapon? What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

Hermione let go, only to put her hands on my shoulders to gently but firmly turn me around. I kept my head turned away from her. "Harry? What's wrong? Why are you so angry?"

I slowly shook my head, feeling my stomach tighten. "I can't. I'm sorry."

"You can tell me." she said softly.

Again, I shook my head. "I know, but not just yet."

Hermione's lips pressed tightly together, reminding me of our Transfiguration teacher downstairs, but she hugged me again anyway. Almost as if summoned, the door to my room opened to reveal the presence of the head of Gryffindor house. Despite the manner of her arrival back at Hogwarts, she has obviously not quite fully recovered from being hit with multiple stunning spells, as she was walking with the aid of an glass and amber cane.

"Ah, Mr. Potter. You are awake. Good. There are some people downstairs who have some questions for you."

I'm not sure whether it was her condescending tone or her presumptive command that instantly made me defiant. My heart rate quickened, and I ground my teeth together in anger. How dare she just come in here and issue orders. School is out, and I am not bound to listen to her. I gave her a long, flat, unfriendly look. "Get out." I said from between clenched teeth.

McGonagall's eyes widened slightly in surprise, and I felt Hermione stiffen. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Potter?"

"I said get out!" I shouted, pulling myself out of Hermione's suddenly slackened arms. "Get out of this house! You are not welcome! You are not wanted! Piss off!"

I ignored Hermione's shocked gasp of, "Harry!", and continued to march up to McGonagall. The stern teacher hadn't moved an inch, and it was only the slight tinge of red in her cheeks that indicated she heard me.

McGonagall took a deep breath. "Mr. Potter! You appear to forget to whom you are speaking!" she snapped, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"I know exactly who I'm speaking to! Someone to fucking stupid to understand when their presence is not wanted!" I took a deep breath myself, sucking in all the frustration I've ever felt. "GET OUT!" I screamed, as loudly as possible.

It felt good to push against the world again, trying to get her out of my life. Cracks shot through the windows in my room.

McGonagall's eyes widened. "Mr. Potter, you need to control yourself. You are not in control, and you may pose a danger-"

I stood on the tips of my toes and leaned in until my nose almost touched the tip of her own. "LEAVE! ME! ALONE!" I yelled in her face as loudly and as clearly as I could manage with a rough throat. I'm quite sure my face was a similar shade of purple as Uncle Vernon's when he lets loose.

I pushed past the stunned teacher and stormed downstairs, where a pair of aurors were coming to investigate the noise. "That goes for you too." I shouted. "Out! Get the hell out of here!"

The pair shared a look, before turning to face someone in the lounge. I followed their gaze to see Kingsley Shacklebot rise from the couch, a deep frown on his features. I'm quite sure he is the first and only black person ever to enter this house while the Dursley's were present. Hell, probably the first and only bald person too.

"Harry, you need to calm down." he said, keeping his deep voice level.

"Don't tell me what I need to do! All of you, get out and don't come back!"

"Harry, you need protection." he continued calmly.

"I can protect myself! I've done it before, from both Voldemort and from your precious Ministry. I don't want your help, and I sure as hell don't need your help." I screamed straight back at him.

The look of relief on my Aunt's face was almost comical. I turned to her. "Make sure Dudley is alright. I'll take care of this." I commanded, my tone leaving no room for argument.

She nodded quickly, a grateful look on her face, and she ran off up the stairs. I turned back to Kingsley, my face again darkening. "Well? Why are you still here?" I snapped.

"Harry, listen to me. You need to calm down right now."

"I won't ask you again! Get out!"

"You need to tell us what happened here."

"I don't need to tell you diddly squat."

Kingsley gave me a disappointed look before looking behind me. "Can you talk sense into him?"

"I wouldn't presume." McGonagall said stiffly. "It appears that Mr. Potter would prefer to keep his own counsel."

"Minerva, that surge was-"

"I know, Mr. Shacklebot." she interrupted. "However, Mr. Potter has spoken. Come along, Miss Granger."

"If you don't mind, Professor, I'll stay." Hermione replied from the top of the stairs, an uncharacteristic hardness in her voice.

McGonagall turned and gave her an appraising look. "How do you intend to get home?"

Hermione waved the question away. "I can order a taxi Professor."

"Very well. Come along gentlemen."

McGonagall walked past me with her nose so high up in the air she resembled Narcissa Malfoy. Kingsley and the other two aurors followed, but not before he gave me one last disappointed look. I stared back challengingly, my eyes wide, just daring him to say anything. With a sigh, the auror finally left, closing the front door behind him. I put my hands on my hips and let out a deep breath I didn't realise I was holding.

"Are you proud of yourself?" asked Hermione in an unfriendly voice.

"No." I answered truthfully. "Why would I be?"

Hermione blinked at the unexpected question. "Harry, you were awful. There was no need to treat them like that."

I slowly raised my head and stared steadily at her. "If there was no reason to, why do you think I did treat them like that then?" I asked softly, all traces of my anger gone.

It amused me no end to see her blink in surprise. After five years of dealing with my default setting being defiant and impetuous, I guess she expected me to be sullenly defensive. It is good to know I can surprise her occasionally.

"I have no idea." she finally managed.

"Then are you in any position to judge my behaviour?" I replied, an identical hard edge to my voice.

"So because I don't know everything that is going on, I can't offer my opinion?"

"I think you just answered your own question. You don't know what is going on." I said, turning away and walking to the kitchen to inspect the damage.

The room was impeccable. Even the slight rust stain no amount of my scrubbing could remove around the sink drain had disappeared. I sat down at the newly repaired table and covered my face with my hands.

I heard Hermione sit down opposite me. She just sat quietly, waiting patiently for me to begin.

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## **Apprentice Potter Grievances**

### **Grievances**

I couldn't believe Hermione actually managed to sit there quietly for almost ten minutes without bursting with agitation and curiosity. In all the time I've known her, I honestly cannot think of another time where she has sat still for so long without anything to keep her attention. I was incredibly glad for the respite, given my earlier performance. Now that I was sitting down calmly, my recent magical exertions began catching up with me.

"Harry? Does this have to do with what happened at the end of term?" she offered, her voice a little rough from non-use.

I took a deep breath in an effort to dispel the fatigue I felt, and looked up at her. It took me all of my will power not to jump at the sight of Dudley and Aunt Petunia standing in the doorway waiting for me to answer her. I paused for a few seconds to get my heart rate back under a hundred and nodded.

"Over there." I said abruptly, gesturing vaguely towards the torn scraps of parchment that remained of the missive those bastards in the Wizengamot deigned to send me. She swallowed nervously and stood, quickly moving over to retrieve the fragments.

Damn, she's a fast reader. In less than five seconds she had the bloody letter reassembled, scanned, understood and probably committed to long term memory. No wonder she can study so much in so little time. My gut lurched as the thought of just how much better I could have been at protecting my mind if I'd accepted her help.

"Oh, Harry. This doesn't mean that you are responsible! That is just a standard letter they send to everyone."

I raised an eyebrow, clearly displaying my skepticism. "Yeah. Right. Did your letter tell you that you would be required to admit culpability for a death and several injuries to some idiotic students who were in the wrong place?"

Hermione swallowed, but shook her head. She opened her mouth to reply when Dudley butted in.

"What the hell is going on? What did you do?"

I focused my gaze on my fat cousin, feeling nothing but contempt for him. "Do you remember those dementors, Dud?" I asked. Now there's a bloody rhetorical question if there ever was one.

Heh, there's something else I really should commit to memory. I haven't seen his face pale so quickly in years. Not since just after the pig tail incident. He stepped slightly behind his mother and gave a small squeak, sort of like you'd expect if you trod on a mouse. Maybe I won't need to ask the twins for help after all.

"Well, the woman who set those on us was pretty high up in the Ministry." I continued, before being interrupted quite suddenly.

"What do you mean, 'set them on to you?'" my Aunt snapped, her gaze so piercing I was afraid I was going to start having McGonagall flashbacks.

"She works for the Ministry. After I used magic to drive the dementors off, she tried to have me expelled for using magic out of school. They wanted to discredit me for saying the Voldemort was back at the end of school last year. Now that he has actually shown his ugly face in public, at the Ministry of Magic no less, they are trying to cover their arses so quickly that they're giving themselves rather painful wedgies." I continued flatly.

Aunt Petunia's face coloured almost as quickly as her son's had gone white a few seconds before. "My Dudley was attacked because they wanted to expel you?" she shrieked in a disbelieving voice. "He almost lost his soul just to make you look like a liar? I'll kill them myself! Those bastards!"

My surprise must have shown on my face, there was no way I could have keep it hidden. I had never really thought of her as being smart, especially since she has made deluding herself a full time job when it comes to Dudley and his gang. But I had really expected her to blame me, just as my Uncle did right after the incident in question. After this outburst though, I'd wager that she can be far more intimidating than her husband.

Before my Aunt could explode, Hermione butted in. Maybe she isn't as smart as I thought. "Mrs. Dursley, that is what the letter Harry received was about. They are trying to find out exactly what happened. The woman who sent the dementors after Harry and Dudley has been arrested. Harry has been asked to testify at a hearing. The letter was worded to suggest that he was somehow responsible for-"

"I can speak for myself, 'Mione!" I snapped, much more sharply than I meant. I turned back to my Aunt who, while extremely angry, was still more than a little afraid of my reaction to the letter. "I want nothing to do with them. Nothing. If they make me go to this witch-hunt, I'll make sure they wish they never sent that letter."

"Witch-hunt! Good one." chuckled Dudley nervously, obviously trying to inject some humour into the situation. With very little success, I'm afraid, it would be better if it came from someone who hadn't had his sense of humour surgically removed a while ago.

"Shut up Dudley." I said absently, looking down at the remains of the parchment arranged on the

table into some semblance of originality.

"Mum!" he whined.

"Shut up Dudley." she said, just as absently, all her attention focused on me. While I'm used to being under her intense gaze, it is usually accompanied with a verbal barrage. This time, she is thinking deeply. Damn, it's disconcerting.

"Who were those people? The ones you just kicked out." she asked evenly.

"The bald, black fellow was the guy the Ministry put in charge of tracking down my godfather after he escaped. In actual fact, he worked with him against Voldemort. The woman who walked around like she had a broom shoved up her arse was a teacher from Ho-, from school. The other two were aurors, but I've never met them before."

It was Hermione's turn to pale suddenly, though I'm not sure whether it was more due to the fact that I'd just insulted McGonagall or that I had nothing but disdain and contempt in my voice while doing so.

"Then I imagine that when you do go back in September, you'll get a nice reception." Aunt Petunia smirked.

I was not going to be baited. "I don't care. I've had it with them. All of them." I spat.

"She has a point, Harry." said Hermione. Her face was twisted into an almost adorable expression of nervous apprehension. "There are going to be consequences for what you said today."

"I don't care!" I shouted, standing up so fast that my chair fell over backwards. "Don't you get it? I... don't... care!"

With a broad sweep of my arm, I brushed the jigsaw of parchment pieces off the table. "I've had enough! Enough of being used. Of being lied to. Did you know that I asked Dumbledore four years ago why Voldemort wanted me dead? He wouldn't tell me. Refused to. Then, he had another chance to tell me three years ago. Again, he kept quiet. He has sat on this secret for no other reason than to keep it a secret. And do you know what happened because he kept it from me? Sirius died! You were almost killed! My best friend got attacked by a cross between a giant squid and the remains of a lobotomy!"

It felt good to scream, but I didn't push again. I really don't think I had the energy to do so in any event. Though it was still mid-morning, to me it felt like around ten at night after a strenuous day.

I looked around from Hermione's shocked face to my relative's fearful expressions. I guess they were expecting everything to shatter again. I bet they wished if anything was to burst that it would be a vein in my head. At the rate I was going, I wouldn't be at all surprised.

"Do you know when he decided to tell me?" I ranted, not giving anyone a chance to interrupt. "Right after my stupidity put all my friends in the hospital, and my godfather in the grave."

Fucking perfect timing, wouldn't you say?" I snarled.

Hermione's shining eyes were wide, though I couldn't tell from what. Fright maybe, I can't imagine she ever expected to see me like this.

"What did he tell you?" she said so softly I almost missed it.

I shook my head. "I can't... I won't tell you. I don't want to put you in more danger than you are already."

"Exactly how much danger are we in?" snapped Aunt Petunia.

I rounded on her, my anger flaring again. "You're fine. Don't you remember the note that Dumbledore pinned to me when he left me on the doorstep?" I snapped back. "Remember? The one that told you I was a wizard? That one? The information you kept from me until my letter came? To refresh your memory, as long as you took me in, willing or unwilling, you are safe in this house from any dark wizards. Voldemort himself could walk down the street, staring in each window, and he wouldn't be able to see us."

This time, she didn't back away. "Then how did Dudley get attacked last summer?"

I snorted. "Like I said, you are safe from dark wizards. Just not from the fucking government."

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It took Hermione almost an hour to get me calmed down enough to actually listen to what had happened in the days since the end of term. Funny how I had spent several hours each day fantasizing about what I'd like to do to Umbridge and Fudge, generally involving some sort of heavy blunt instrument, only to discover that they were in the process of what Hermione called 'damage control'.

To me it seemed a bit like putting a coat of paint on a sinking ship.

"Mr. Weasley has been given an extended leave of absence too. According to his department, he has only taken a holiday of more than a few days once in the last decade, and that was the summer before our third year. Not that anyone took any notice before, but now Fudge has an opportunity to get someone, whose presence could turn into a major press disaster, out of the Ministry offices for a while."

I rubbed my forehead, feeling a headache coming on. "Oh, Christ. Does that mean they are in trouble? Financially?"

"Oh no. I have to give Fudge credit here. He is still paying him his full wage, but personally asked him to continue to work for the Order while on leave."

I frowned. "Why the hell would Fudge do that?"

"Don't you see? If anyone asks Mr. Weasley what happened or what is happening, he can't say anything without jeopardizing the work the Order is doing. Fudge gets him out of the public eye, puts him to work doing all he can against Voldemort, and starts to make overtures to everyone he hindered."

"So Fudge has a new political adviser now?" I guessed.

"Yes, but how did you know?" Hermione asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

"Because everything he did last year was so shallow as to be laughable. Assigning a subordinate to a teaching post with no thought to her qualifications. Edict after edict, all written and enacted so quickly the ink was still wet. For Merlin's sake, they banned having a copy of a newspaper! The very definition of censorship. Everything that Fudge, then Umbridge did was childish, giving no thought whatsoever to the long term consequences. All built on top of each other, removing rights and freedoms one by one. One of the edicts passed named Umbridge headmistress! How did that one pass, considering it is the governors who assign and remove the headmaster post? Whoever would have willingly let the Ministry assume the power to intercept and read a student's letters to their family? What kind of person would freely agree to a group of students given the powers of a teacher and called the Inquisitorial Squad? And when you go back over it, it was all built on the basis of one thing; that I was trying to get publicity by lying. Bloody hell, Cedric and I had just won the Triwizard Tournament! I had all the publicity they said I ever wanted!"

You know, proving that I can think for myself really shocks her for some reason. I swear her eyes widened so much during my little rant that they were in danger of popping out. She looks so adorable when she is surprised.

Where the hell did that thought come from?

I shook my head to clear it, focusing on what she was saying.

"-impressed. Did you come up with that yourself?"

I nodded, still a little uncomfortable with what my mind was doing. I took a second to clear my thoughts and check my mental defenses. Yep, still intact.

"I have done a lot of thinking, not much else to do around here really. It just seems so stupid! I mean, what politician would stake the safety of their constituents, not to mention their entire career, on the hope that someone was lying?"

"An idiot." replied Hermione flatly.

"No, it is more than that." I disagreed. "He didn't just try and make me look to be a liar, he actively tried to ruin my life. He tried to get me expelled, and it was only Dumbledore pointing out that he had no grounds to do so that I was able to come back to school last year."

"What do you mean?" she asked, confused.

I sighed. I'd not told her what happened in the hearing. "Fudge called together a full Wizengamot for a simple underage use of magic hearing, which apparently is unheard of. A few of the more thoughtful members suspected something was up when Dumbledore pointed that out to them."

"So he tried to intimidate you?"

"That and more. It started with all the cock and bull you'd expect from a court proceeding, all the names and titles of those present, that sort of thing. Fudge looked really pleased with himself until Dumbledore walked in. Fudge had been banking on the fact that by changing the time and place of the hearing, Dumbledore wouldn't be able to interfere."

"But he sent a notification to the Headmaster, didn't he?" Hermione asked.

"I doubt it. Dumbledore didn't get one in any event. He just happened to get there at the right time. I think Mr. Weasley must have contacted him by fire and he apparated there." I scratched my chin, thinking deeply. "Anyway, They started asking me questions about the time I got a warning when Dobby was here, and the time I blew up my Uncle's sister, but Dumbledore told them that I was brought there on a specific charge, and I wasn't there to defend every bit of magic I ever did."

"Wait a minute! Fudge was actually there? As an interrogator?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Harry, he is the Minister! He makes the laws, it is a conflict of interest for him to participate in the judicial process too!"

"Someone seems to have forgotten to tell him that then." I said wryly.

"I wonder why Professor Dumbledore didn't object?" pondered Hermione.

I grunted. "Probably because he didn't want to risk being thrown out. Let's face it, in a matter of weeks after our fourth year he was thrown off both the Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards."

Hermione actually smirked. "Oh yes, that particular fiasco is getting pretty extensive scrutiny too. Everyone now knows that Professor Dumbledore told Fudge after the Tournament that Voldemort was back, no matter how many times Fudge denies it, and that Fudge had him removed from those positions just afterwards. Even the most rabid Ministry supporter has to admit it looks suspicious." She stopped speaking abruptly, as though realising exactly what she was saying. I tried not to laugh as she cleared her throat and continued in a much less vindictive tone of voice. "Anyway, you were saying that Dumbledore told them that you weren't being tried for every bit of magic you've done?"

"Yeah. Then when I said there were dementors, he got all smug and said that he knew I was going to bring up something like that. He was banking on the fact that there were no witnesses, before Dumbledore introduced Mrs. Figg."

"Fudge can't have expected that!"

I snorted at the memory. "He didn't. It seriously looked like he just deflated on the spot. He was most upset that there was a squib living near me. Once he recovered, he tried to sow doubt by suggesting that squibs couldn't see dementors, then when Mrs. Figg described the effects of a dementor he tried to say she wasn't a very convincing witness."

Hermione just shook her head. "That is just wrong. Someone so biased has no business being anywhere near a judiciary hearing!"

"Anyway, Madam Bones stood up for Mrs. Figg. Dumbledore and Fudge argued about clause seven or something, that's when Fudge started blathering about wanting to get the hearing over and done with that day. When Dumbledore said that Dobby was available to testify to the fact that it was him who was responsible for the hover charm that I got the warning for, Fudge got absolutely livid, refusing to listen to any other testimony."

"Then that's probably what sealed it. Regardless of your experience, he has never fully controlled the Wizengamot. He had influence, but Dumbledore had-, has more."

"Wonderful. Sort of makes you wonder if there are any other people out there who didn't have Dumbledore at their hearings, eh?"

"Well it doesn't matter now. Dumbledore is back in charge of-"

"It does matter Hermione!" I shouted. "We live in a world where we have to abide by the rules set down by others who will stop at nothing to do what is necessary to stay in power. Since when was it treason to question the government?"

Hermione swallowed. "Harry, stop. Please stop. Don't get worked up again." she pleaded.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Sorry. It's just that, I get so angry!"

"I noticed." she said, with a self depreciating smile. "The hearing finished and you were allowed to return. That is all you could hope for at the time."

"That still didn't stop him and Umbridge from trying to ruin my life. I know I sound like an over exaggerating prick when I say that, but I have had two main talents in the wizarding world. Quidditch and Defense. She banned me playing one for life for something Malfoy gets away with every second week, then during the career interviews we had she stated flat out that while Fudge was Minister, I would never be an auror."

Hermione gasped in shock. "She actually said that?"

"Yep. Right after saying that they don't accept people with criminal records. McGonagall pointed out that I'd been cleared of all charges, and as such don't have a record, but that just made Umbridge even more barmy."

"What do you mean, more barmy?"

I smirked at the memory. "She accused McGonagall of wanting her position as Under-whatever."

We laughed together for a while. It felt good, in its own way, to forget about the world. The fact that we had no homework for the summer meant that for once, Hermione didn't have to badger me to get it done. She told me about the holidays her parents took her on, the places in Europe she had visited over the years. We spoke about our friends, of what plans we had for the rest of the holidays, and of what subjects we hoped to be able to take in the coming year. For the first time in many months, I felt that life may be worth living after all.

I didn't notice that I had dozed off, still knackered from earlier, but I did remember the concerned look Hermione gave me when she placed a blanket over my body before kissing me on the cheek and wishing me pleasant dreams.

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I'm not quite sure what kept me from telling my relatives that Privet Drive would be receiving a rather unique visitor on the 14th, but whatever it was, I was immensely grateful.

By the grace of whatever gods were watching, (or more probably, given my lot in life, *interferring*) Uncle Vernon had Friday off work. We were just sitting down to lunch when the doorbell rang.

I know it doesn't sound like much, but the particular bell purchased by my Uncle rings for as long as the button at the door is depressed. After just three seconds of a single constant high pitched buzz, Vernon bellowed like a bull whose nuts had just been electrocuted and demanded that since I was closest, I should answer the door. Paraphrasing, of course.

I was not at all surprised to discover that the person leaning on the doorbell had red hair. I sighed to myself, nodded in welcome, then gently but firmly removed the offending digit from the button. "You don't need to hold it down, Mr. Weasley."

"Astonishing, simply astonishing! What wonderful ideas these muggles have, eh Harry?" he said, almost bobbing up and down in excitement at again having the opportunity to visit a totally muggle home. Actually, he is so excited I decided I'd better make sure we had a fresh supply of tissues.

"You're early." I stated calmly, not exhibiting the least amount of emotion.

My tone of voice seemed to penetrate his fervour. "Ah, yes. Well given the fiasco last year, I decided that it would not be out of order to give ourselves plenty of time to get to our destination."

I grunted, not at all willing to let anyone from the wizarding world have the satisfaction of me acknowledging that they were right. "Fine. Come in, I'll just get my wand." I said, turning my back on him.

It was only through morbid curiosity that I left him to his own devices without informing my



relatives of his presence. I really wanted to see just how much trouble he could get himself into, given only a limited time. I really should buy a watch with some sort of timer for this sort of experiment. It would be much more scientific.

I collected my wand and shoes from upstairs, studiously ignoring the yells, screams, crashes and other assorted noises emanating from downstairs. I toyed with the idea of taking my invisibility cloak, but decided to leave it behind. As useful as it would be to get past the inevitable throng of press, I certainly didn't want to risk having it confiscated.

I steeled myself, straightened my shoulders and bravely walked down the stairs to inspect the damage. Merlin's balls, in less than a minute he has introduced himself, tried in vain to calm my relative's fears, and was doing his level best to pull the microwave apart to see how it worked. I covered my eyes with my hand and groaned softly. Not even my family deserved this.

"Mr. Weasley, I'll buy you one for Christmas. We really should be leaving." As much as I want to be angry with him, it's too much like being angry at an excited kitten for knocking over a vase after trying to play with the flowers.

"Oh, right you are Harry. It was lovely to meet you again, Mr. Dursley." he said to the large figure bravely quivering in the corner of the kitchen.

My Uncle rounded on me and found his voice. "What do you think you're doing, inviting him in to my house?"

I narrowed my eyes and glared at him with contempt. His rage was rather quickly overtaken by another emotion; I could almost pinpoint the instant that realisation tapped him on the shoulder and handed him a note saying, 'You really shouldn't have said that!' before bolting to a safer place.

Without saying anything, I turned and walked out of the house, a chattering Mr. Weasley on my heels. The sight in front of the house caused me to stop so quickly that he ran into my back, almost knocking me over.

"Sorry Harry! Ah, I see you noticed our mode of transportation!" he bubbled cheerfully.

I almost wished that the Dursleys came to see me out. A long, white, gleaming limousine sat proudly on the road precisely aligned in the center of the property line. A tall, graceful woman with an extremely short skirt stood at attention next to an open door, waiting patiently for us to enter.

"What the hell is this?" I said, resignation in my voice.

"Compliments of the Minister himself." replied Mr. Weasley, sounding rather satisfied with the whole thing.

"Can't we floo or something?"

Mr. Weasley sounded shocked. "Why? Don't you want to travel like this? It was certainly fun

getting here."

"I'm sure it was. But if I turn up in this, people are going to think that I'm a pretentious git. If they know it was sent by the Ministry, they may even think that I approve of the way they have handled things."

Mr. Weasley sobered quickly. "I know that the opinion of others matter to you. But extra security has been added, in an effort to-"

"So I have no choice?" I snapped.

Mr. Weasley blinked and swallowed to clear his throat. "I suppose not. At least, not in the way you mean. I will not allow you to take a less secure method of transportation, Harry. I'm sorry."

The woman standing next to the car spoke up, with a depressingly familiar voice. "If you prefer, we can 'tone down' the vehicle, Harry. Make it less conspicuous."

I sneered at her. "Well thanks, Tonks. I didn't recognise you. Actually standing still really threw me out, you haven't knocked over a single thing in almost a full minute."

It was gratifying to see her flush, and I started to seriously wonder exactly how far I could push both of them. I jumped ungraciously into the limo and pulled the door closed myself. I didn't miss the look Tonks gave Mr. Weasley either. He just shrugged and shook his head slightly.

The limo didn't change until after we'd left Privet Drive, which I suppose I was grateful for. Dudley's fat face staring out the front window at me was so green with envy I'd say that if he stepped outside, he'd start undergoing photosynthesis.

"Oh, I almost forgot! Here you go." said Mr. Weasley, handing me a rather official looking piece of parchment.

"What is it?" I asked, making no move to accept it.

"Your OWL results. Albus told me they were quite impressive really."

I reached out and took the parchment, and broke the seal. Well, what do you know, an E in potions, I'm glad there was those questions about Polyjuice Potion, but I guess I won't be an auror then. An O in Defense, yeah, I expected that. What the hell?

"How the hell did I get an E in Divination?" I exclaimed.

Mr. Weasley chuckled. "Apparently after finishing her testing schedule, Professor Marchbanks was leaving the castle when she was knocked over by a plump second year student who had just been the focus of a flurry of water balloons thrown by Peeves. Apparently you told her she would soon be meeting-"

"A soggy stranger, yes I know. Bloody hell, that was just for something to say. I couldn't make out

anything in the tea leaves. I even read her palm and said that she should have died the previous Tuesday."

Mr. Weasley smirked. "Yes, Ron told me about your predictions. However, she was supposed to be in France, testing the students from Beauxbatons at that time, but pulled out because her mother was ill. Word got back later that there had been an accident, the train to Beauxbatons crashed that Tuesday. When she found out about it she had a bit of a turn, let me tell you."

I looked back down at my results, still reeling from the news that I'd received an OWL in Divination of all things. E for Charms, Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures *and* Transfiguration. A for Astronomy and a T for History of Magic. Yeah well, having an interrupted examination will do that to you.

Well, eight OWLs. Not bad, not bad at all.

From the reflection in the house windows we sped by, Tonks had obviously changed the outside of the vehicle into an old beat up mini. If she was trying to get an unfavourable reaction out of me, she was shit out of luck. It suited me just fine. Both in its unpretentiousness, and with the fact that when I turned up in a Ministry vehicle as crap as this, Fudge might just get a justifiable lambasting in the media for his attitude towards me.

I stared out of the window, running through my thoughts, arguments and insults I was going to use today. Especially the insults. Last year, I was terrified of what they could do with me, of the power they had over me and my future. This time, I just didn't care.

A most liberating feeling.

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Our arrival at the Ministry was rather amusing to say the least. A large crowd of parasitic vermin who had the word 'PRESS' written all over themselves were waiting for our arrival. As the car arrived, it was waved away from the carpeted entrance by a pair of dour faced bureaucrats so full of their own importance they made Percy look like his father. The car was directed to park at the far end of the lot, out of main view.

The looks on the bureaucrats' faces were absolutely priceless when I stepped out of the car, and made my way to the Ministry entrance. Someone in the gaggle of press noticed me, then shouted my name. When these bastards realised that they had effectively snubbed the very person they were waiting for, well, it was certainly satisfying. The feeling of satisfaction lasted right up until it became apparent that there was absolutely no way I was going to be able to force my way past the mass of bodies suddenly put in my way.

I did my best ignoring the questions being fired at me from all sides. Tonks and another auror I didn't recognise tried vainly to push a path through the nosey pricks, but this was the first time their 'prize' had been available, and the press certainly weren't going to let me get away that easily.

Finally, after remaining stubbornly silent throughout the ordeal, I employed my elbows and knees to very satisfying effect, and managed to force my way through the throng of babbling press and ditzy photographers to the guarded doors. I turned and briefly looked over my shoulder to find that Mr. Weasley had actually managed to stay on my heels.

"You know Harry, I always thought being famous would be fun." he said with a smile, his voice barely carrying over the noise of questions still being fired at us, despite not receiving any answer to any previous ones. Ron's father was still trying to act like everything was normal.

"Yeah, just peachy." I snapped back.

I watched him give a small sigh, probably of frustration. I guess this is a fellow who has raised seven children, including two monsters who have, against all odds, made themselves more successful peddling chaos in three months than Percy has pushing order in three years. One more uncooperative and combative teenager in his life certainly wasn't going to faze him too much. For the first time, I wondered where he gets his patience from. Given he managed to raise Fred and George, he must have it delivered to The Burrow at wholesale rates. In bulk.

We walked through the doors together and past the two aurors stationed in the corridor behind. The sound of the intrusive bastards outside was blissfully cut off as the doors slammed shut behind us. The guards sighed in relief, and nodded to us. Mr. Weasley gave them a smile, I graced them a snarl.

"Come along, Harry. We are running late." he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. Irritated, I rolled my shoulder to dislodge the unwanted contact.

What the hell is wrong with people? Can't they just leave me alone?

After performing the required 'wand weighing', we briskly made our way into the bowels of the building. Several people stopped and stared at us as we passed. Bastards. Are they trying to make me feel like a rat in a cage?

It is after two by their time we made it to the same place I was interrogated last year. Walking through the horrifyingly familiar doors, my heart began thumping painfully loudly in my chest. This time, I actually have enough presence of mind to take in my surroundings.

Looking around, I got chills from the familiar setting of a similar room in which Dumbledore managed to convince a corrupt Wizengamot that I was not guilty last year. Mind you, I doubt Dumbledore would call them corrupt. He'd call them something rather sanitized, like 'misguided', or perhaps 'ill-informed'. Maybe even 'inept', if he was feeling particularly and brutally honest. But as far as I'm concerned, any group of people who are charged with enforcing wizarding law that also bow quickly to pressure from those who make those very same laws are morally corrupt in the first place.

The sanctimonious pricks are all there again, staring down at me. I swallow, and do my best to ignore their stares, and casually look round the auditorium.

Oh, that was a mistake. If I thought the throng of press outside was intimidating, the row upon row of spectators with hungry expressions in here filled me with dread. Easily three times the number of reporters are scattered throughout the room than there were outside.

I sensed rather than saw Mr. Weasley stiffen behind me, and overheard his sharp intake of breath. Fingering the comforting weight of my wand hidden in my sleeve, I turned to see what was wrong. A short, thin wizard in a shimmering robe was quickly approaching us. The newcomer's hair was dark and slick with oil, while his pale skin glistened with an unhealthy sheen. Ugh, if I ever needed something to remind me of Snape, I'll just have to bring this guy to mind.

"Ah! Finally! Arthur, you really should be more punctual."

The expression on Mr. Weasley's face was certainly memorable. The only time I have ever seen him looking anything like it was when he faced down Lucius Malfoy in Diagon Alley. Ron's father was glaring at this slimy weasel like a basilisk. You know, for a guy who is normally unfailingly polite, his reaction was almost chilling.

"Mr. Potter!" the slick wizard said, holding out a limp hand. I tentatively reached out and took it, and gave it a quick shake.

It took every shred of discipline I had to keep my revulsion from registering on my face and to repress the shudder that swept through me. It felt almost exactly like I was shaking a cold, dead fish.

"Malachi, Julius Malachi, at your service. Please, do sit down, we have a lot to get through." he said in one continuous stream, not letting me inject anything into the conversation. Mr. Weasley simply gave Malachi a contemptuous glare before nodding to me and leaving my side. As he made his way over to the gallery, I surreptitiously wiped my hand on my jeans.

It still felt like I needed to wash my hands.

Malachi motioned me over to a chair, one that looked far more comfortable than the chair I sat in last year. I gently lowered myself into the soft leather, feeling it quickly and smoothly mold to my shape. My shirt had become damp with nervous perspiration, and as my back settled into the chair, the leather emitted a sound not unlike someone loudly breaking wind. I wondered if that was a sign of things to come; sitting in a chair that sounds like it has a muggle whoopie cushion built in.

I bet Dudley wishes he was here. He would have been in stitches.

As it was, every person in the room was looking at me exclusively, and I felt the hairs on the back of my neck start to rise. Something was amiss.

No, something was wrong. Very wrong.

Being the focus of attention for over five hundred people made it most difficult to empty my mind, but I closed my eyes and forced myself to concentrate. Slowly, I raised my mental shields,

and a comforting sensation of being separated from the world washed over me.

I felt nothing. No intrusions, and definitely no probing, subtle or otherwise.

I opened my eyes again, and looked up at the assembled Wizengamot, all dressed in the same plum coloured robes indicating their status. Self-righteous pricks.

Susan's aunt, Amelia Bones was there. She adjusted her glasses and started looking over some notes, probably preparing to begin the 'interrogation'. As I looked around the other members of Wizengamot, I saw Dumbledore, sitting there with a fur lined sash over his robes. Probably an indication of his status as Chief Warlock. He gave me a wink and a smile of encouragement. I ignored him, not in the mood for his kindly grandfather act.

Yep, I was right. Bones started the proceedings. On behalf of law-abiding wizarding folk, blah blah blah, fair and just to all, blah blah blah. God these bloody people can waffle on.

And that's the least of their incompetencies. This is a group of people who put Sirius in Azkaban for twelve years without giving him the benefit, no, the courtesy of a trial. A group of people who have used the public's misconception that werewolves, as dark creatures, are likely to support evil. Therefore they should enforce laws designed to make a lycanthrope's life so difficult that they often have no choice but to support evil.

It appears that the wizarding world has never heard of a self-fulfilling prophecy. For such a civilized society, many of them are yet to emerge from their fucking medieval notions. I mean, muggle English people have had certain legal rights since the 1600s, rights that wizards still don't have.

Bastards, all of them. The more I thought about the way things are, the more I was convinced that the wizarding government amounts to little more than a dictatorship. It has become quite obvious to me that Fudge has used his influence to pass laws, then removed anyone from a position of power who may have had the gall to challenge those laws. He controlled, or at least was able to heavily influence the media, and overstepped his boundaries to stamp out any and all dissent his paranoid little mind invented.

What respect I had for the assembled witches and wizards faded quickly. I was not going to make this easy. For any of them.

Bloody hell, how long does it take to start a proper Wizengamot hearing? All she really had to say was, "Right, settle down, and let's get started". Oh wait, she's done. Finally.

I leaned to one side, and swung my right leg over the right arm of the chair. The looks of disbelief from some of the members of the Wizengamot struck me as incredibly funny. I covered my mouth and gave a theatrical yawn to cover my amusement.

"I trust we are not inconveniencing you, Mr. Potter?" snapped an old witch waspishly.

"Of course you are." I replied evenly.

With a huff she stood, ignoring Dumbledore's gentle hand on her arm. "You should us show some respect, young man!" she announced.

I shrugged. "Why?"

That seemed to stump her. "Because we are your elders and betters." she replied, rather lamely.

"You know, for some reason, being told that you are deserving of respect impairs your critical thinking." I stated in the same even tone. "Exactly why should you be deserving of more respect simply because you have avoided dying?"

"I don't believe this! I won't put up with this from a spoilt brat!" she spat, sitting down.

"Ah, yes." I said. "When you can't debate the question at hand, insult your opponent. What a wonderful role model you are. I can see exactly why you think everyone should respect you."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Please! Morag, Harry, we are on the same side here."

"Really?" I exclaimed. "Since when?"

A chubby-faced wizard spoke up. "Surely you are not suggesting that you are supporting You-Know-Who?" he said with a chuckle in his voice.

Perfect. "No, but Fudge does." Silence descended on the hall. "What else was I supposed to think?" I asked, directing my voice towards the stunned crowd. "I told him over a year ago that the bastard that killed my parents was back. Since that time, the Minister has done absolutely everything in his power to make sure that the Dark Lord had a swift and seamless return to power."

Oh that felt good! I should remember to bring along some ear plugs next time I make such an announcement. I smirked to myself as I finally picked out Fudge in the crowd, surrounded by his Ministry lackeys. It was surprisingly easy to pick him out, considering the fact that he was jumping up and down, screaming incoherently at me.

Not so nice to be slandered yourself, is it you asshole?

A sudden wave of silence swept the room, and I turned to see Dumbledore standing tall with his wand out. I don't think I've ever seen him with such a disappointed look on his face.

Well, he better get used to it.

"Mr. Potter, you will refrain from making absurd statements like that. The Minister had done much in the last few weeks to ensure the wizarding world's safety."

I felt a tickling at my consciousness. Dumbledore was trying to tell me something else, trying to push a thought into my mind. Something else he didn't want others to hear.

Bugger that.

With all my might, I pushed up my mental shields, refusing to allow him access, even for a second. The old man blinked in surprise at the strength of my mind. I've had every reason to get as good at Occlumency as possible in the last few weeks.

"Surely you didn't mean what you said, Mr. Potter." he continued, a tiny pleading note in his usually confident voice.

"Of course not. I didn't mean that at all." I said placatingly. I waited until he sighed with relief and sat down before qualifying my statement. "Fudge is waaaaaaay too incompetent to be one of the Dark Wanker's Death Eaters."

Oh yes, earplugs would have been a really good idea.

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It took several minutes before both the crowd and the Wizengamot brought themselves under control again. Through it all, I lounged there, casually playing with a rubber band I found in my pocket. As uncomfortable as it was being the center of attention, I still did my best to remain as unfazed as possible. I did manage to pick out several familiar faces in the packed gallery.

Rita Skeeter was there, her quick-notes quill scribbling away furiously beside her as she whispered to it. It was disconcerting to note that during the whole time, she never removed her eyes from me.

McGonagall and Flitwick sat together in one of the stands. I was surprised at the lack of trepidation I felt when we locked gazes. I broke the stare casually after only a few seconds, keeping my face expressionless. I wondered what she was more furious about; how I treated her at Privet Drive or how easily I dismissed her presence.

I again turned to see how Fudge reacted to my little insinuation, only to find that he was no longer where he was sitting last. Damn, his presence was going to be necessary for what I had in mind.

I decided that I'd better be wary. Fudge was a cockroach, but cockroaches have very good survival skills.

"Order!" shouted Madam Bones, finally bringing the arguments to a close. She focused her gaze onto me. "Mr. Potter. You are here to answer our questions, not to make unfounded accusations against Ministry personnel!" she said in her booming voice.

I sneered at her. "You know, as far as I can remember, so far I've only answered the questions that have been put to me. Shall we ask the court scribe?"

"Mr. Potter, please! We have much to discuss and very little time to do it." She glanced down at her papers. "Mr. Malachi, if you would please begin." she said, before leaning back in her chair.



I turned from her to look at the slimy git who 'welcomed' me to the room. He cast a quick spell on his throat, presumably a *Sonorus* charm. "Thank you, Madam Bones. Welcome, Mr. Potter." he drawled and a shiver ran down my spine as his entire demeanor changed. All trace of his friendly nature had disappeared. "Nice of you to finally join us."

"I'm sorry." I replied, making no effort to add an honourarium. "I had a little bit of difficulty getting through the press outside."

Malachi raised an eyebrow. "You didn't think to allow time to get here?" he asked me, his voice twisted into a fake surprised tone.

There was a glint in the bastard's eye that I didn't like. "I had no idea what to expect. The last time I was here it didn't take me anywhere near as long to make my way to my destination, since I didn't have to force my way through a crowd of babbling idiots." I sneered. I was not going to be intimidated.

The crowd shifted restlessly at my comments, many reporters looking offended. A smirk appeared slowly over Malachi's face, making him look even more like Snape.

"Ah, yes. You have in the past been charged with a crime which required you to appear before a full Wizengamot, haven't you?" Malachi swept his gaze over the audience as he spoke, and the resulting murmur of disapproval from the audience was directed straight at me.

My throat constricted in anger, as these self-absorbed, easily influenced intellectual cripples immediately thought the worst of me. These complete morons are so easily led, they condemn without proof. Sheep, they are all sheep. Or perhaps sheeple.

"I was cleared!" I spat at Malachi.

Malachi tilted his head to one side. "Not by a great margin, I understand."

Oh, you arsehole. "So now there is another finding besides guilty and not guilty?" I screamed. "'Almost guilty'? Or perhaps 'sort of guilty'?"

"Mr. Malachi, how is that relevant to why Mr. Potter is here today?" one of the Wizengamot asked.

"You didn't answer my question." said the lawyer, ignoring the man.

"Fine!" I growled. "Yes, I didn't allow enough time to get here. I'm so bloody sorry. Yes, I've appeared before a full Wizengamot before. Sorry for that too." I continued, sarcasm dripping from my voice.

Malachi sighed theatrically. "It would appear that Mr. Potter has no respect for wizarding law." he announced to the gallery. "Or those who practice it."

"Mr. Malachi!" interrupted Madam Bones, standing up from her chair. "Mr. Potter has given his

reason for being late and he was indeed cleared of any wrongdoing in front of a full gathering of Wizengamot. You will refrain from impugning his character. This line of questioning has no relevance to this investigation."

Malachi gave her a deep, but mocking bow. "But I must protest, Madam, it has much to do with it." The wizard's slicked back hair stayed completely in place throughout his movements. He turned to the crowd and continued, though his words were directed at Madam Bones. "Mr. Potter assaulted the legally appointed headmistress, leading her into a trap where she was kidnapped by a group of monsters and subjected to such a horrific experience that she is still unable to relate it. Mr. Potter then illegally broke into the Ministry, indeed, into the very Department in which the deepest and most dangerous secrets of the wizarding world are stored.

"From his report of the incident, we are expected to believe that just six students, who, by the way, have not completed their education, managed to escape from twelve so-called 'Death Eaters'; Death Eaters who supposedly exposed themselves to public scrutiny just to obtain the record of a prophecy. A prophecy made by Sybill Trelawney, whose teaching methods were so suspect that she was rightfully sacked by the legally appointed High Inquisitor."

Malachi turned back to Madam Bones. "I put it to the court that Mr. Potter's actions can and should be interpreted by considering the fact that he has in the past come to the attention of and brought in front of-

I sprang to my feet, almost quivering with anger. "So the fact I was framed should be held against me?" I screamed.

Malachi closed his eyes and smiled as if I had just done him a service. "Framed, Mr. Potter? You mean to say that the full Wizengamot, in all their wisdom, were unable to see through a clumsy frame?"

"In their wisdom?" I gasped. "What sort of wisdom did they have bringing me before them in the first place, since I was only charged with-

"The proof!" shouted Malachi gleefully, interrupting me with his magically amplified voice. "Mr. Potter here believes that he is too important to follow the law! That he is too important to be brought in front of the very wizarding body that has shielded him from harm since he was a baby."

The crowd in the gallery immediately started shouting, arguing with one another, ignoring Madam Bones' demand for order.

"Silence!" Madam Bones roared, her voice rivaling Molly Weasley's, though still not enough to be easily made out over the ruckus. With an expression of utter fury, Madam Bones drew her wand and deftly silenced the entire gallery. "When order is demanded, you will comply or the gallery will be cleared! Do I make myself clear?" she demanded of the audience.

I looked around and saw that though silenced, several individuals in the audience were shaking their fists at her. These mental midgets allow themselves to believe the worst of people, then

refuse to listen when told they might be wrong.

Madam Bones removed the silencing charm and stood herself. "That will be enough! Mr. Potter was indeed brought before a full Wizengamot for a simple charge of using underage magic. He was cleared because he was in a life threatening situation, and he simply used magic to defend himself and his cousin. The fact that he was brought before an entire gathering of Wizengamot was a decision made by Minister Fudge, not a requirement due to the severity of Mr. Potter's actions."

I took a deep breath and looked around the gallery, noting that the reaction of the crowd to this information was quite unexpected. In an instant it became apparent that the details of my 'crime' had definitely been either suppressed or misreported.

"Releasing details of a case that was declared secret, Madam?" Malachi leered, though he looked a little ill now that he couldn't use the hearing last year to defame me any longer. "I was under the impression that Minister Fudge had prohibited others from discussing the case."

As Madam Bones sputtered to herself, Dumbledore calmly stood. "The Wizengamot feel that as the judicial arm of the wizarding government, they should not be bound by the will of the executive or legislative arms. As such, any order demanding the suppression of a court case for anything reason less than protecting state secrets is again no longer binding."

"No longer binding?" I spluttered, shocked to the core. "Again? So it was in the past, but only recently? Merlin's balls, how cowardly are you people?"

A small frown flickered over the slimy git's face, and many of the Wizengamot shifted uncomfortably in their seats. I guess they weren't expecting that. Malachi cleared his throat and he spoke up, ignoring Dumbledore. "Madam, you are aware that several charms experts have mapped the spell usage in the halls of the Department of Mysteries that night. Indeed, several people were caught, found to be supporters of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and sentenced to Azkaban.

"Each wand present that night has been tested and the spells cast documented, with only three exceptions. The wand that cast several spells, including the unforgivable Cruciatus curse in the Death Chamber is missing. The one that cast five unforgivable killing curses in the Atrium of the Ministry. And one whose signature cast several spells throughout several rooms." Malachi ticked off his fingers.

"Mr. Potter, I understand your wand has not yet been examined by Ministry personnel. Which of the unexamined wands do you possess?"

I frowned as several objections flood the floor, wondering exactly what this prick had up his sleeve. Obviously, my wand is the third one he referred to, with Bellatrix's being the first, and Voldemort's the second. Why would he need to ask?

Dumbledore was shouting something in the midst of the din, I couldn't make it out. Malachi hadn't even turned to acknowledge the outraged members of Wizengamot, and just stood there waiting

for my answer.

"Bellatrix Lestrange owns the first wand you refer to, she cast the Cruciatus on my friend, Neville Longbottom. The second wand belongs to Voldemort." I said, snarling at my questioner. If I wasn't so angry with him, I probably would have laughed at the reaction to my revelation, or at least to my mentioning Tom Riddle's pseudonym.

Several witches all through the chamber have clutched their hearts and fallen back into their seats. The instant I said 'Voldemort', a visible shudder swept through the entire crowd, with only a handful of people resisting the urge to react. Cowards, the lot of them.

Malachi ignored everyone. "So your wand is the third I mentioned?"

"Obviously!" I exploded. "Just how thick are you?"

A look of dismay washed over Dumbledore's face, and my stomach dropped as I wondered exactly to what I have just admitted. I felt blood rush to my cheeks at the expression of pure delight on Malachi's face.

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## Apprentice Potter Whoops

### Whoops

I never really understood exactly how quickly a human mind could formulate thoughts and conclusions when under extreme pressure. I mean, at each of the times I've faced down Tom I have been hectic, panicked and so scared my arse refused to cooperate with me for a week afterwards. But the horrifyingly unpleasant sensation of my stomach dropping so quickly focused my mind more than anything in recent memory. I swear that if my stomach fell any further I'd need surgery to get it replaced.

A faint voice in the back of my mind noted dispassionately that I would probably need to change my shorts rather sooner than originally expected.

"You possess a wand that cast an unforgivable Cruciatus curse?" demanded Malachi gleefully.

Oh.

*Shit .*

Well that's it then. Off to sunny old Azkaban for me. I don't suppose it will be quite as bad as it was for Sirius, since the dementors are everywhere but on the actual island. I wonder if all this would have turned out differently if Hermione hadn't managed to recover my wan-

"Was it cast before or after I was disarmed?" I blurted, saying the only thing possible that could buy me some time.

As much as I tried to focus, to mentally build a coherent defence, I simply couldn't force my mind to do anything other than rejoice at the change of expression on Malachi's face.

Though the bastard's expression remained fixed, there was a certain change behind his eyes that was most interesting to my panicking soul. I'd imagine that very same change had been visible in my eyes only seconds before. Next, though it remained on his thin-lipped face, the self-satisfied smirk lost its honest joy, becoming just an over-wide, sickly, put on smile.

But the best bit was when pure horror appeared in a manner he couldn't hide. The colour drained from his face like one of Ginny's blushes in reverse. His mouth opened as if to say something, allowing his chin to quiver slightly.

Oh, by all that is holy, that felt *good* .

The eruption of noise that followed from the crowd gave me a few more seconds in which to gather my wits. Not that I was able to see any way out of this one. I may have cast the curse after my wand had been taken from me, but it was also after Hermione had given it back.

Malachi was quick on his feet, I had to give him that. He quickly realised the difference between what I intimated had happened and what had actually occurred that night. I'm quite sure that given the chance, he'd have been able to crucify me.

But the very crowd to which he was playing came to my rescue. Presenting evidence showing The-Boy-Who-Lived cast an illegal spell would have been a story to knock Voldemort's return off the front page. But my off-hand comment about being disarmed had the rather beneficial effect of directing the crowd's ire onto my accuser.

Even with his magically magnified voice, he had no chance of overcoming the gallery.

Right up until a third wave of silence again swept over the audience members. Malachi gave me a superior look and tried to make the most of this break; but on discovering he too was silenced, an expression of resignation appeared.

"Order! You have been warned!" boomed Madam Bones, tiny flecks of spittle emerging at high speed from her furious mouth. "Security, clear the gallery!"

The animation of the crowd was rather amusing, as uniformed wizards drew their wands and began a rather complex series of wand movements. A shudder appeared to run through the gallery, and the assembled crowd began to flow backwards towards the various entrances. It took me a minute to realise the floor they were standing on was moving backwards just like a muggle escalator.

It took a surprisingly short time to clear the room, leaving only the Wizengamot, a panel of Ministry personnel, uniformed guards, Malachi and myself in the room. Malachi just glared at me, utter fury almost oozing from his blocked pores. Madam Bones had remained standing, her face still showing her displeasure.

"Mr. Malachi! Front and Center!" she shouted.

Looking rather like a first-year student heading off to a detention with Snape, the slimy git trudged over to the Wizengamot. In a low, hissing voices, several members began berating the lawyer. They spoke softly enough that only the odd word made it to me.

"You know, being around you is never dull."

I sighed at the familiar voice and turned to see Tonks back in her usual 'unusual' hairstyle. It clashed rather horribly with her uniform, though I suppose that was the effect she was after. "What are you doing here?" I snapped. "Weren't you relegated to driving duty?"

I'm sure Tonks would have liked to raise only one eyebrow, but she didn't have the muscle control to do it. "I've been charged with ensuring Arthur's security, and your's by extension." She tilted her head to one side and gave me a rather intense look. "What's up, Pup? What's the matter?"

"Nothing." I said shortly, turning back to watch Malachi get reamed. I certainly didn't want to miss a single second of that.

"Yeah, right. You're just acting like a complete little shit for fun and profit." she said easily. "You sure you didn't put your wand in your back pocket and blow off a buttock or something?"

"No. It's nothing you can fix or make better. Now piss off."

"Two quick words of advice, Harry." Tonks sounded disappointed, just like everyone else in the world. "It's OK to be angry, just don't dig yourself into a hole too deep to get out."

I yawned theatrically.

"Second, don't underestimate Malachi." she finished, turning to return to her post. "He was the Malfoy family's lawyer."

Wonderful. No wonder Mr. Weasley acted like that when the greasy fart introduced himself. I focused on Malachi, noting with regret that the Wizengamot had finished chastising him and had, in their *wisdom*, neglected to tear him a new one. Ah well, you can't get everything you want in life.

"Mr. Potter, I apologise for that rather unethical display by Julius." said Madam Bones, gracing the lawyer with one last withering glare. We are here this afternoon to discuss the events leading up to your little soiree into the Ministry, but we would like to focus on what happened at Hogwarts prior to you and your friends leaving the grounds. Specifically, the actions of Dolores Umbridge."

I nodded, with not a little relief.

"Good. If you will just state for the record that you didn't in fact cast the Cruciatus curse in question, we can move on."

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I sat alone in a rather unique office. It was large, as befitted a Department Head, but was so full of files, papers and boxes there was barely room for Madam Bones' high backed chair, her large oak desk, and two guest chairs. The guest chairs were nowhere near as comfortable as the one behind the desk looked.

I removed my glasses and ran a hand across my eyes, feeling far more alone now than any time in recent memory. Just three hours ago I had begged the world in the recesses of my mind to be left alone. Now my wish has come true, and I really didn't want it.

I managed to stay still as the door behind me opened. Madam Bones strode past me to sit in her

chair, while Dumbledore sat next to me in the remaining free chair. I looked up at her and tilted my head to one side. Mr. Weasley moved over to one wall with less paper than the others and leaned against it. Kingsley Shacklebot and Mad-Eye Moody closed the door behind them and focused on me.

"Harry, this is extremely serious." Madam Bones started, using my given name for the first time. "The Headmaster assures me that you didn't learn to cast the Cruciatus curse at Hogwarts, that no professor would consent to teaching you. I have personally ensured there are no library texts which contain the information, not even in the restricted section. Therefore I do need to ask you this and I need you to answer truthfully. Who taught you to cast that curse?"

I shrugged. "No one. I mean, when Barty Crouch was masquerading as Alastor Moody he told us that what the incantation was. He even demonstrated it on a spider in class once. I've been threatened with it on occasion and even been on the receiving end a couple of times. But that was the first and only time I've tried to cast the spell."

It was gratifying to see the look of complete shock on her face, but what really made my day was the look of horror on Dumbledore's. I'd have given everything in my vault for a camera right now. Bugger, where is Colin when you need him?

"I'm sorry Harry, are you saying that you managed to cast one of the unforgivable curses on your *first attempt*?" Madam Bones squeaked, her normally booming voice a pale shadow of what it was during the interrogation.

I nodded. Shit, the colour in her face drained quicker than Malachi's. What is going on?

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Harry, your professors have quite often spoken with me on the rather perplexing paradox that is your magical ability. As Amelia is aware, you were capable of casting a fully corporeal patronus at the age of just thirteen. Yet you had a rather stunning amount of difficulty in learning some other basic spells. The levitation charm for instance. Another example is the summoning spell, though you did use that one to rather spectacular effect during the-

"Do you have a point?" I growled, not the least interested in his rambling.

Dumbledore took a deep breath. "Harry, it normally takes several weeks of practice for you to master a spell. This is quite normal and healthy. Remus informed me that it took months of intense practice and dedication before your patronus was strong enough to hold off a dementor. Casting a spell of the power the Cruciatus on your first attempt is unheard of, and does cast your other testimony into a rather unfavourable light."

I sneered at him. "That's OK, I'm more than used to that."

"What do you mean?" asked Madam Bones.

"Harry is referring to not being believed by many during the past year after-

Again I interrupted him. "Since you know exactly what I mean, why don't you testify for me in future?"

He actually had the grace to look abashed. "I apologise, Harry."

I looked back at Kingsley and Moody, whose magical eye was fixed directly on me. I turned back to Madam Bones. "So, will I be able to go and at least get my toothbrush before being shipped off to Azkaban?"

Madam Bones blinked in surprise, looking more shocked now than before. "Why would you think you were going to Azkaban, Mr. Potter?"

Despite my sarcasm, I felt a huge weight lift from my heart. "Only because I figured that was standard procedure."

"Mr. Potter, *if* we determine that you have a charge to answer, you would only be sentenced to Azkaban should you be found guilty."

"Crap." I said flatly. "I know of two people you pricks sent to Azkaban without a trial. Both were innocent."

All four wizards in the room cleared their voice in unison, causing them all to blush to varying degrees. Madam Bones frowned at their reactions. Not being stupid, she knew they were trying to subtly stop me from telling her something. She continued to direct her questions to me though, ignoring the others. "To whom are you referring?"

"How about Hagrid?" I asked in a deceptively mild voice. "Sent to Azkaban because, and I quote, 'Got to be seen to be doing something.' Isn't that what Fudge said as he was having Hagrid carted away?" I rhetorically asked Dumbledore, still in the mild tone.

The old wizard closed his eyes. "Yes Harry, those were indeed Cornelius' words. I believe you've made your point."

"Oh you think so?" I challenged him.

"Yes." He replied all softness in his voice gone. "It appears that you may have failed to learn the lesson you have just undergone, Harry. When to speak, and when to *keep quiet* ."

Madam Bones leaned back in her chair; looking at Dumbledore over steepled fingers. Her eyes flickered over each of the other men in the room before coming to land on me. "I take it the others in the room would be happier if you didn't talk about the other person you mentioned." she said dangerously. "While you are certainly entitled to retain that information, I would encourage you to tell me if there has been an injustice performed by the Ministry."

I shrugged. "Oh, I intend to tell you."

"Harry!" said Mr. Weasley in a strangled voice.

Madam Bones leant forward suddenly. "Mr. Potter, I have a vested responsibility to ensure the safety of the wizarding world. Despite what these gentlemen think, if someone has been incarcerated for a crime they did not commit, I want to know about it."

I stared back at her defiantly. "I think they are worried my 'testimony' will be put into an even more unfavourable light." I said, mimicking Dumbledore's voice.

Madam Bones leant back in her chair, her piercing eyes not leaving my own. After several uncomfortable minutes, she finally spoke, in a very slow and careful voice. "It has been, in the recent past, common practice for someone accused of a serious crime to be detained at Azkaban while their trial was arranged and performed. In almost all cases, the accused was found guilty. Rubeus Hagrid was an exception." She paused, thinking deeply. "I understand that it was through your own actions that he was exonerated. However, of the few people who have been detained at Azkaban and were subsequently found to be innocent, Mr. Hagrid is the only person with whom you should have had contact. All other inmates have been found guilty at trial. Except for-"

The expression on her face contorted into one of fear and disbelief. "No. Please no. Please tell me you have not had contact with Sirius Black?"

"My godfather?" I asked sweetly. "What is wrong with that?"

"Mr. Potter! Sirius Black is a mass-murderer! He betrayed your parents!"

I rolled my eyes. "Have anybody in a position of power actually listened to what I said happened when Voldemort returned?"

Madam Bones was breathing hard, still on the verge of panic. "Of course I have. What do you mean?"

I gave her a sour look. "Who murdered Cedric Diggory?"

She blinked. "Well, You-Know-Who, of course."

I shook my head and looked down at my hands. "No, he *ordered* Cedric's death. Peter Pettigrew killed him."

"Peter? But I thought-"

"Thought what?" I roared, suddenly leaping to my feet. I sensed Moody draw his wand behind me. "That I was making it up? That I was dreaming? What?"

She shrunk backwards from the neck, briefly resembling a tortoise, before remembering that she was the one in power. "Mr. Potter! I will not be spoken to in such a manner!"

"What does it take for you people to think?" I demanded, slamming my hand down on the desk. "What does it mean that Peter Pettigrew is alive and well *and* a Death Eater?"

Madam Bones blinked, then frowned. "That Black and Pettigrew were both supporters of the Dark Lord." she offered hopefully.

I groaned at the apparent stupidity these people had. Hermione was right, very few wizards in the world have the ability to think logically. "No, It means that Sirius convinced my father to change who would be their Secret Keeper at the last minute."

"Mr. Potter, Albus has already testified that Black was your parent's Secret Keeper."

I ran a hand across my eyes. Why the hell is this so hard to understand? "Yes, indeed he did. He knew Sirius was going to be my parent's Secret Keeper. Everyone knew that Sirius was going to be the Secret Keeper. Who better to trust than your best friend." I looked directly into Madam Bones' eyes. "Did it ever cross your tiny little mind that perhaps it was *too obvious* , that they decided to let everyone *think* that Sirius was the Secret Keeper?"

Madam Bones' eyes flickered over to Dumbledore, who gave her a grave nod. "So it was Pettigrew who betrayed your parents?" she asked in a small voice.

I nodded, not wanting to let her off that easily. "My godfather spent twelve years of his life in hell because you bastards didn't give him a trial. You just swept him under the carpet, because it was too difficult to deal with at the time. Hell, it just didn't fit in with your comfortable idea that everything worked out all right in the end. So you'll have to forgive me if I have so little fucking faith in the wizarding world's record when it comes to justice!"

"Mr.Potter, I-"

I cut her off, just getting into my stride. "An innocent man has been through hell and back, while those who have a fucking tattoo burned into their arm are allowed to go around as free as a bird, just as long as they have the galleons to buy their way out of trouble. Fudge put Hagrid straight into Azkaban without any evidence at all, but let Lucius Malfoy whisper sweet nothings into his ear for a year after being told he was a fucking Death Eater, just because he gives a shit load of money to charity. My godfather died trying to protect me, killed by his own cousin, while some arseholes who work for the Ministry have done everything they could to make sure I needed to be protected in the first place!" I let my voice slowly build up.

"That is enough, Mr. Potter. I know you have been under a great deal of stress lately, but I will not tolerate this continuing verbal assault!"

I ignored Mr. Weasley and Dumbledore as they tried to get us to settle down. "It appears to be the only way to get anyone in the wizarding world to actually *think* !" I shouted even louder into her face. "You all just sit there, eyes shut to the outside world, hoping against hope that nothing untoward will interrupt your decade long nap! For fuck's sake, it took the bloody Dark Lord himself to make an appearance in front of Fudge, *in the fucking Ministry building* , before he actually *did* anything productive. Umbridge even went one step further, setting me up to look like a liar by setting a pair of dementors onto me!"

Silence descended. Madam Bones and I were all but nose-to-nose, breathing heavily and staring straight into each other's eyes. When she finally spoke, it was in a normal voice.

"I assume you can back up your claim that it was in fact Dolores Umbridge who sent the dementors after you?" she asked calmly.

"I have several witnesses to the fact." I replied just as calmly, slowly returning to my seat. It took a fair bit of effort to not smile at Mr. Weasley's sigh of relief. "Or do you accept memories in a pensieve as testimony?" I noticed my voice was a little raw. Not surprising really.

Wordlessly, Madam Bones stood and opened a cupboard behind her. She gently withdrew a large wooden box with an ornate keyhole on the front. Carefully, she sat it down on her desk, before producing the key from a chain around her neck.

The lock was obviously magical as well, since she mumbled something as she turned the key one way, then changed direction. Rather like opening a combination safe. The box opened, revealing a set of empty, unadorned bowls.

"We do not usually admit pensieve evidence as testimony, since memories have a tendency to be changed by the owner, making themselves look better, or at least making them look less bad. These are pensieves designed to hold memories of people on trial or witnesses until a verdict is handed down." she explained as she withdrew one of the ceramic bowls. She placed it in front of me gently. "While they cannot be admitted, it aids both the defence and prosecution to be able to re-examine the eye-witness memory of an event at different stages in a trial. Draw your wand, Mr. Potter. Place it against your temple." I nodded, drawing my wand from my sleeve. "Focus on the memory you wish us to see. Visualize the tip of your wand attaching itself to the scene."

I nodded again and followed her instructions. I closed my eyes and the scene flooded my mind. With a smile, I decided to put a little extra in. I would bet Madam Bones would be quite interested in discovering that I had been threatened with the Cruciatus curse from a Ministry official.

"Gently draw your wand away from your temple. That's it. You will feel the memory stretch as it is drawn out. Don't worry; you will retain it once the strand is removed."

The not entirely pleasant sensation was a bit like running your fingers down a strand of hair. I could feel the slight tugging at my scalp at the same time as allowing the thought to be pulled away.

The last second, feeling the silver memory strand break at the base was momentarily quite uncomfortable. I opened my mouth in a silent gasp as my train of thought returned with a rush. I looked at my wand, seeing a silvery strand clinging to the tip.

"Place it in here, quickly, before it dissipates." continued Madam Bones, gently pushing the small pensieve closer towards me. I nodded one last time, and lowered the strand into the bowl. It pooled quickly at the base, running together and forming a tiny puddle.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter. Let us see what you remember."

She prodded the tiny pool with her own wand, and the silvery forms of several people rose. The scene was horribly familiar to me, being as it was just before Snape left Umbridge's office.

With another prod, the figures began moving, Snape quickly closing the door behind him.

"I assume that was when Severus was asked to supply Dolores with Veritaserum?" queried Dumbledore. Madam Bones quickly tapped the side of the bowl, pausing the memory.

"She asked Professor Snape for Veritaserum?" queried Madam Bones. "She didn't submit a request to the Ministry?"

I shook my head with a sneer. "Of course not. She already tried to use it on me earlier in the year, but I sure as hell wasn't about to drink anything she gave me."

I heard a snort from behind me, and a soft growl of, "Good lad."

I looked back at Moody, and nodded to him. Of all the adults in my life at the moment, I guess Mad-Eye is the only one I don't feel angry towards. I almost chuckled at the thought. Being angry towards the man would no doubt decrease my life expectancy dramatically.

"I see." said Madam Bones. "I shall bring that up with her later. Shall we continue?"

I nodded along with the others, all just watching my own memory play out before me.

Madam Bones watched in disbelief as the Ministry appointed High Inquisitor talked herself into believing she could use the Cruciatus curse on a student to extract information. A silvery Hermione begged her not to, claiming that it was illegal. When the tiny silver Umbridge admitted to sending the dementors, Madam Bones gave a hiss of anger. When Umbridge claimed that it was done just to discredit me, there were at least three audible gasps in the room. The memory faded.

"That slimy- I don't believe- How could she?" she demanded of the world, slamming her palm down onto the desk.

"Let me guess." I said, not liking her reaction. "No one believe me before?"

"It's not like that." said Madam Bones absently. "Dolores hasn't testified yet. She claims that she doesn't remember the events that happened prior to being led into the forest. She claims that she was probably under the influence of the Imperius curse."

I raised an eyebrow. "I take it you no longer believe her?"

"No." said Madam Bones emphatically. "Someone under the Imperius does not stop to justify their actions, least of all to themselves. She was acting fully of her own accord."

She stood quickly, and began pacing back and forth behind her desk. The effect was ruined by the

fact that with all the paper and files, she had to turn around after only three strides.

"Shacklebot!" she snapped, coming to a halt. "I want her detained at Azkaban until her trial, not in one of the holding wards at St. Mungo's. She needs to be in a far more secure facility. See to it, please."

Kingsley must have nodded and left, since I felt a tiny gust of cool air hit my back as I stared at her. She resumed her pacing, mumbling to herself. I could make out the odd comment; 'Can't believe-', '-bring down the entire Ministry', '-was she thinking?' all reached my ears.

Dumbledore spoke up. "While this is very damaging to both Dolores and the Ministry, we are here to deal with Harry."

"Ah, yes." said Madam Bones, shaking her head slightly.

"We are left in a rather unenviable position." Dumbledore continued. "Harry's use of the curse was illegal, though there are recent precedents where it has been allowed to be performed against Dark Wizards."

I gave an amused snort. "I don't suppose you could request that the alledged victim come down to the Ministry in person to register an official complaint? Maybe fill out some forms in triplicate? A few hundred perhaps?"

Madam Bones just glared at me and ignored my question. She sat down, and answered Dumbledore. "True, but that authority was given to trained aurors only. As much as Mr. Potter here can claim to have been in danger, and even given his remarkable OWL score in Defence, he is not by any means an auror. Not to mention the fact that the executive order allowing the use of the unforgivables was rescinded over a decade ago."

"That has not stopped those unfortunate enough to encounter any of Lord Voldemort's minions over the last few weeks from using them to defend themselves." Dumbledore said pointedly. "Since Minister Fudge's announcement of Voldemort's return, the Ministry has been quite reticent to prosecute any who were forced to use one of the unforgivables in self defence."

"Again, those were fully trained wizards, something Mr. Potter here is not." replied Madam Bones, frustration leaking into her voice. "If he is not charged, then use of such a curse spells the end of his formal education. Without a trial to determine whether or not casting the curse was justified, the governors will have no choice but to expel him."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "You mean that if I did stand trial-"

Madam Bones nodded. "And were found not guilty of casting the curse, or found to have cast it in self defence, you would be entitled to return to Hogwarts. If you were found guilty, you would more than likely be spending a few years in Azkaban." She shook her head. "However, if you don't appear at trial, the governors will be required to use only the information at their disposal, which at present is that you did in fact cast the spell. They will not have any information regarding the

mitigating circumstances."

"Wonderful. I have to gamble with my freedom, if I want to go back to school?"

"Essentially." nodded Dumbledore, clearly unhappy.

I looked down at my hands, not quite sure how I felt. Relief at not being incarcerated featured prominently, mixed with my ever-present anger and combined with not a little dread. The fantasy of not going back to Hogwarts had been quite satisfying while I had taken for granted that I would actually be returning. But with the knowledge that I would not actually be going back, I felt... empty.

No more Quidditch. No more DA. No more chess games with Ron in front of the fire. No more sneaking into the kitchen at night for a midnight snack. No more Hogsmeade weekends.

No more Snape. Well, I suppose every cloud has a silver lining and all that. I just wish I wasn't struck by lightning every time I went looking for it.

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Apprentice Potter Evasion

Evasion

I left Madam Bones' office immediately after the interview had concluded. I certainly didn't want to spend any more time in Dumbledore's company than I absolutely had to. Mr. Weasley had been sympathetic to my request to visit Gringotts; though Tonks had been more vocal in her disagreement, but finally had consented to escort me. It was either that or watch me walk out without her.

It probably wouldn't look too good on her next appraisal if I was attacked on her watch.

Diagon Alley was just as busy as I remembered, though I hadn't been there in years. A great press of colourfully robed bodies were all busily scurrying around doing whatever they felt they needed to do. I've never really looked at it from any other point of view, but it does remind me remarkably of an ant nest. Hundreds of mindless zombies hurrying around performing what is to them some massively important task, yet individually has very little effect on society as a whole. While a part of me was glad that these people are still living their lives and not letting Voldemort dictate their actions, another part was silently screaming at them to wake up. To take notice of what is going on in the world.

I watched a pair of young brothers standing outside Quality Quidditch Supplies argue over which broomstick to get, as if it was a decision of such importance that the fate of all mankind depended upon the outcome. I shook my head, silently wagering that they would probably come to blows within a few minutes.

Tonks casually leaned away from me, pulling on my arm, silently telling me to keep moving. We were walking down Diagon Alley arm in arm, as if we were two lovers out for a casual stroll. Given the fact that she had dressed me in a robe that widened my shoulders, a wide brimmed pointed hat that rivaled McGonagall's and a pair of sunglasses so large they went out of fashion in Italy in the sixties, I had actually managed to walk half the length of the Alley without being recognised. I had received plenty of odd looks though.

I guess everyone thinks that Harry Potter goes around with his famous scar on display for all, basking in his fame. Or infamy of course, depending on whether or not you allowed the media to do all your tedious and tiring jobs for you. Like thinking.

Still, I had assumed that there were people in the wizarding world who were actually more observant than this. Not that I was complaining. Not for the first time, I really envied Tonks' ability to change her appearance at will. I had thought for a while last year that I may have been able to do so too, that I may have had the same latent ability, but the only thing about myself I've ever managed to change was the length of my hair. And that was only when I didn't know I was a wizard.

"Keep going, Pup. Stopping to gawk at something just draws attention to yourself."

I ground my teeth at the irritating nickname. "Like wearing a pair of sunglasses large enough to use as plates to feed that fat cow Umbridge twice over wasn't enough in the first place?"

Tonks gave a small hiss of frustration. "Listen, you are the one who wanted to come here. You are also the one who prefers to remain anonymous. Believe me, this is not an assignment I'm enjoying. Acting like a spoilt brat in public is the quickest way I can think of to ruin your day." she said softly.

"And here I was thinking that nothing could top being expelled."

Tonks dug her nails into my arm and drew me across to Madam Malkin's where she could pretend to examine the clothes on display. "Enough. Grow up. You can act like a child when you are not exposed, but right now, you need to pretend you do this every day." she hissed out of the corner of her mouth.

She was right, but I sure as hell wasn't going to let her know that. "Moody would be so proud. You've finally managed to reach the required level of waspishness to be a truly great auror. No more jokes? Did you get promoted from bumbling sidekick to dour goon?"

She closed her eyes, lowered and shook her head. Taking a deep breath, she looked up and turned towards me, studying my expression intently. "Is getting the last word in worth being discovered? Then mobbed at best, attacked at worst?"

I snarled, and took a breath to berate her, but she jabbed her fingers into my solar plexus, forcing the air painfully from my lungs.

"Shut up, someone is coming over."

I stiffened, unconsciously fingering the tip of my wand in my sleeve. With the ugliest pair of sunglasses in existence on my face, I couldn't wear my normal glasses. I turned to see a tall, hauntingly familiar figure approach us uncertainly. I felt my will slowly fade, and even though I couldn't quite make her out, I just knew exactly who approached.

"Arry? Is that you?" she said uncertainly.

I took a deep breath, forcing some air into my aching lungs. I blinked behind the glasses, trying to focus. "Hello Fleur. How are you?"

Fleur's expression softened, and became a lot more relaxed. "'Arry, I almost didn't, ah, *recognise* you." she said, enunciating the unfamiliar words clearly. She took my free arm to turn me around, before kissing me on both cheeks. "These glasses, they do not suit you." she said, her voice tinged with laughter.

Tonks' fingernails were on the verge of drawing blood. Clenching my jaw against the pain, I turned back to her. "I know. Fleur, this is-"

"Rachel. Rachel Airey." said Tonks, not letting go of my arm. My eyes were beginning to water. "Harry has told me all about you." she simpered.

Oh please no. You absolute bitch.

"'Arry? You 'ave a girlfriend?" asked Fleur, a pleased smile on her face.

Tonks nodded, while I shook my head. Whoa, that was a mistake. Tonks ground her nails into my forearm, and it took everything I had not to cry out. Even so, my head swam and I felt a warm liquid trickle down the sensitive flesh on the underside of my arm. I prayed to any god that happened to be listening that it was perspiration.

Between the pain in my arm and Fleur's veela charms, I was feeling decidedly woozy. Fleur looked from Tonks to me, a faint frown marring her perfect features. I closed my eyes behind the dark glasses and erected my mental shields, just trying to block out the pain of having Tonks' ever lengthening fingernails gouge their way through my arm and out the other side. The pain slowly faded to a faint sensation, while my libido calmed down to merely raging adolescent levels.

I opened my eyes to discover something rather remarkable. Fleur, though pretty, wasn't anywhere near as beautiful as she was before I closed my eyes. I remembered seeing the veelas at the World Cup look ugly when they forgot to exhibit their glamour. But Fleur was part human. Her part-veela heritage enhanced her beauty to those looking, but she was probably no prettier than Cho. She was dressed in what appeared to be the latest fashion, with her hair done up in a rather elaborate knot on the top of her head.

"T- Rachel is a friend, who happens to be a girl." I said, my voice clear and strong, but low. "How is Gabrielle?"

Fleur blinked and smiled, a faint blush on her cheeks. "She is 'ere, in London, visiting. William is showing 'er the carts down to the vaults. She does so love to ride quickly. She'd also love to see you again, 'Arry."

I nodded and smiled. "It would be nice to see her too. Though I'm not sure I'd recognise her without seaweed in her hair."

Fleur giggled, daintily covering her mouth with her hand. "Oh, 'Arry. You are so funny."

I just kept smiling. "Thanks. We were heading to Gringotts anyway. Do you want to come with us

or were you on an errand?"

"Sorry, a what?" asked Fleur.

"An errand. A, uh, job, a task, um-"

"Oh! Oui, I was getting a gift for my parents. It is their um, ann-, anniver-, anniversary. I shall meet you at Gringotts soon, yes?"

I nodded. "I'll see you there. Um, would you mind not telling anyone you saw me?"

"Oui. I never saw you." winked Fleur before taking her leave, giving us one last wave. I turned back to Tonks, only to notice her smile looked a little too forced.

"Harry, that wasn't Fleur Delacour." she hissed.

Huh? "What do you mean?"

"Harry, I think it was someone who had taken polyjuice. you know that Fleur is part-veela. Men lose control of their drool reflex around them and need to wear a bib to avoid ruining expensive robes. You didn't even skip a beat."

Nice to see you have a healthy respect for the males of our species. "I know. She started to affect me like that, but because of your efforts to put me in the hospital wing,-" I wiggled my arm in her grasp. "I put up my Occlumency shields. After that, she was just another pretty girl."

Tonks' mouth opened and she blinked, shock evident on her unfamiliar features. "You're an Occlumens?"

I nodded. "Trying to be one anyway. What was up with the jealous girlfriend act?" I asked nonchalantly, dreading the answer.

She shrugged. "Who'd think a woman acting jealous around a half-veela was in any way out of the ordinary?"

I grunted in acknowledgement and breathed a quiet sigh of relief, silently thankful it wasn't anything more than that. While I'm pretty sure that having a metamorphmagus as a girlfriend would be rather interesting, at least from the point of view that you'd never get bored in bed, I'd sure as hell not feel comfortable letting any particularly sensitive parts of my anatomy anywhere near someone as clumsy as Tonks. Not while she had fingernails like that at any rate.

Tonks seemed to read my mind. "Don't worry, Pup. I'm not one of your groupies. You're nice and all," she gave a little snort. "usually at any rate, but I prefer my men blond and well built. Not to mention out of their teens."

I gently extracted my arm from her grip, and rubbed it surreptitiously. "And how do your men like you?"

She gave me a superior expression. "Wouldn't you like to know." Her face turned wistful. "You know, there was this one guy who I went out with for a while who cheated on me." Her face twisted into a perfectly self-satisfied grin. "After I found out, I lured him into bed and morphed into his mother just before he-" Tonks coughed delicately. "-*finished* ." she smirked.

I smiled despite myself. "Is that a warning for me to stop pissing you off? Or a threat?"

Tonks tilted her head to one side. "Oh, I never threaten, Pup. It lets people know when you've reached your limit. If you just keep making jokes, then extract your revenge, the subject of your ire can never be sure exactly what it was that caused you to retaliate. Afterwards, they are always much better behaved."

"I bet." I nodded, since I wasn't stupid. At least, I hadn't thought I was stupid, but that was before I managed to talk myself into a situation where I need to risk going to prison just to continue my education.

Tonks went to take hold of my arm again, but I judiciously maneuvered her so she grabbed my unperforated arm. Humming quietly to herself, she led me in vague direction of Gringotts.

"So, why are you so insistent that we visit the bank?" Tonks asked.

"I need to know exactly how much is left in my vault. If I'm going to hire someone to defend me, I probably shouldn't agree to spend more than I have."

"Fair enough, but Bones hasn't even brought charges against you. The Ministry are not charging anyone for using an unforgivable in self defense. You probably won't even have to shop around for a landshark."

I blinked. "A what?"

Tonks smiled at me, a large genuine smile. "Something one of my ex-boyfriends called lawyers. He picked it up from growing up in the muggle world. I thought it was quite apt."

I chuckled to myself. "I suppose. Anyway, Dumbledore said that the governors can only take into consideration what is recorded. Since I rather stupidly admitted to casting the spell, unless I'm exonerated they have to expel me."

"If the Ministry don't charge you, you're stuck?"

I nodded glumly. "Pretty much."

"Man, sucks to be you." she said happily.

"I'm underwhelmed with the sympathy you're showing." I replied sourly.

Tonks snorted. "Maybe you can get the media on your side?"

"What do you mean?"

Tonks suddenly swung me around and planted a kiss firmly on my lips. It happened so quickly that I was shocked into stillness. She released my arm and put her own arms around my neck, her cheek against mine. "Sorry Pup, but there are two people following us. We need to get somewhere safe until they leave." she whispered in my ear.

I nodded, my mind still telling me that kissing someone who didn't have tears running down her face was really very pleasant. I rolled my eyes around, taking in our surroundings, and noticed a new shop that hadn't been there the last time I was in Diagon Alley.

"I know just the place." I said with a smile, looking at number ninety-three.

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Killing your customers has never really been a successful business strategy, though making your clients feel appreciated can truly enable you to make a killing.

The twins' store seemed to have both qualities in abundance. In just the time it took us to make our way from the front door to the main counter, Tonks managed to knock over enough merchandise to have two near-death experiences, ending the trip with feathers, three arms and (rather amusingly) her legs on backwards. The last did nothing at all to assist her lack of dexterity, or her moving around the room. By the time we made it to a relatively safe place, she wore a furious expression on her face. The only consolation was that she was not alone, there were at least a dozen potential shoppers in the store, all of whom were suffering from some form of magical malady or another.

I casually picked up a piece of merchandise or two, as though deciding on what I wanted to purchase. Tonks had apparently forgotten her own advice on what not to do when you want to blend in.

"Wait till I get my hands on them." she steamed, absently clutching at my shoulder with her third arm to maintain her balance.

I smirked to myself. "They'd probably appreciate a visit from their mother..."

Tonks shook her head. "I can't morph in this state." she moaned.

My reply was interrupted by a rather boisterous red-head. "Welcome to the greatest prank shop in the known universe! Here you can fulfil- Harry?"

I shook my head while giving him our Quidditch hand gesture for a feint. "Where is your back room?" I whispered.

Fred smiled. "George is back there, going over some figures. Just step over there and give the password to the statue to your left. I'll join you when I get rid of these guys." Fred said, waving towards the other shoppers. Another tinkle announced the arrival of another pair of shoppers.

From the way Tonks began giving me matching wounds on my other forearm, I guessed they were our unwelcome shadows.

"Password?" hissed Tonks, eyeing Fred with obvious dislike.

I nodded. "They owled me about it this summer. They told me that if I ever stopped by in Diagon Alley, I could escape from any unwanted attention in their back room." I turned to the statue of what could only be described as the most unfortunate object in the universe. Less than half the maladies afflicting the statue were on show around the room as various shoppers ate the wrong thing. Even Tonks gave it a sympathetic look. "Voldemort's a wanker." I whispered.

The statue ground to one side allowing us access into the inner sanctum of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes.

A surprisingly sparse, moderately lit room greeted us. A pair of old, but comfortable looking couches were lined against one wall, facing an old oak desk. The desk was rather peculiarly shaped as a triangle with rounded corners, with identical chairs (presumably for the twins) along two of the sides, and a pair of armchairs along the third side with their backs facing the entrance.

George sat at one of the chairs, pouring over some paperwork. He looked up as we entered, a brief curious expression on his face, but that quickly turned into a smile. "Harry! Tonks! Come in, please sit down." he said, gesturing to the armchairs. He looked Tonks up and down, a satisfied look on his face. He probably noticed her expression though, because he opened a drawer and drew out a single wrapped sweet, which he tossed to her. "Swallow that." he finished simply.

Tonks juggled the sweet, surprisingly managing to keep from dropping it. "What is it?" she demanded.

George chuckled. "A Universal Reversal." he said. "It will negate all of our pranks."

Tonks eagerly tore off the wrapping and swallowed the thing, wincing as her hips reversed themselves, putting her legs back on the correct way. Her third arm dropped off and evaporated, while the feathers molted. "Thanks. Why don't you sell them?"

"Are you kidding? They are just for making business deals. Lets our potential partners know we are professional."

I plonked down, tugging off the hat and sunglasses with relief. I pulled out my own glasses and put them on, watching the world finally swim into focus. "You're seriously taking on partners?"

George nodded. "The quickest and easiest way of spreading a brand is to sell franchises. People sign up with us and agree to follow the procedures we set down. They put their own money into their store and run it, selling our products. We get a large, up front deposit, a cut of the new store's profits and the brand gets spread far and wide."

"Have you had many people show an interest yet?" I asked.

George nodded. "After our escape from Hogwarts last year, the tale grew a little beyond what we expected. Dozens of kids went home at the end of the year insisting on visiting us as soon as possible. Quite a few parents came to the conclusion that there was some money to be made from that sort of advertising. We've had no end of offers. Some are just looking for a quick galleon, but two in particular are serious and professional enough to convince Fred and I to agree to bring them on board."

Tonks butted in. "George, we need two owls. We were being followed, and I want to inform Kingsley."

"You didn't just stop in for a chat? I'm crushed."

"Shut up and get me those owls OK, or I will crush you."

George grinned at her. "Ok. Keep your hair on." he said, but didn't move.

Tonks frowned at him. "Well?"

I looked over at her and burst out laughing. Her hair had fallen out.

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"What is the second owl for?" I asked Tonks as she sent off the first to Kingsley.

"For you." she said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. She turned to George, who had finally managed to get over his shock after Tonks morphed into Mrs. Weasley and yelled at him for a good fifteen minutes. "Are they still in the shop?" she snapped.

George made his way along the back wall, opening and glancing through several different peepholes, before stopping and nodding. "I'll go and swap with Fred." he said, eyeing the fuming auror with not a little nervousness.

The other twin appeared moments after George left the back room, and came over to greet us. It only took Tonks half a minute to brief him on being followed and what we were doing there.

"Well, those two are not looking at anything." Fred confirmed. "They haven't moved around the shop much, staying in one corner. Come to think of it, that corner has line of sight both to the front door and to Butt."

"Butt?" asked Tonks, a puzzled frown on her face.

"Our statue." replied Fred with a grin. "The butt of our jokes."

Tonks and I both let out a groan.

Fred clutched at his heart. "How could you be so cruel? Not laughing at Butt?"

I rolled my eyes. For someone who was quite willing to join the Order last year, who was also ready to risk their life by having me in their store, Fred could still be remarkably childish. I felt a rush of gratitude to him. Hell, to the whole Weasley family. I felt a genuine smile form at the edges of my mouth before I noticed Tonks looking at me.

I coughed and walked over to the wall where the peepholes lay in wait. I stared through them for a few seconds, committing my two stalkers to memory. "How are we going to get past them without them seeing?" Tonks came over to look through another spy hole herself.

Fred's ever-present smile grew wider. "I have a few suggestions."

"How many of them don't involve the use of your inventory?"

"*Our* inventory." Fred corrected, giving me a serious stare. "You are our partner, Harry."

I rolled my eyes. "And I told you not to be ridiculous."

Fred's irrepressible smile returned. "Too late."

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

"Exactly that." came the cheeky response.

Tonks must have noticed my rapidly darkening face, because she drew herself away from the spy hole to surreptitiously wave at Fred and make warning faces from behind my shoulder. I could make out her jerky movements in my peripheral vision, even though I was glaring at Fred.

"You can keep out of this, Tonks." I snapped, not taking my eyes from Fred. "Exactly what do you mean, 'too late'?"

Fred's eyes flickered from Tonks to me. "George and I decided to make you an equal partner. You own a third of the company, and once you are out of Hogwarts, there will be a job waiting for you."

For some reason, the thought of working with the twins filled me with equal parts dread and longing. Dread at the thought of long periods of being in close proximity to a pair of compulsive practical jokers and the largest collection of magical prank items in the country. Longing at the realisation that even though being near me decreases your life expectancy by about an order of magnitude, these people actually valued my company enough to offer me such a role.

"Thanks." I said finally, my voice a little rough.

Fred gave me an understanding smile. "You're welcome. Now, how are we going to get you past these rather unwelcome annoyances?"

Tonks snorted. "And once he's past you and your brother, how is he going to get past the shadows?"

Fred clutched his heart again. "Oh, Nymphodora, how could you?"

Growling deeply, Tonks whipped out her wand and sent a quick hex at Fred. I was rather gratified to see him deflect it easily and send his own harmless laughing jinx back at her.

Tonks collapsed with laughter, but managed to get out the counter-jinx to the spell through her chuckles. "How the hell did you get so fast?" she asked, surprised at the speed in which Fred had reacted.

Fred grinned at me. "I always thought that aurors were taught to not underestimate opponents."

Maybe." I replied cheekily. "But our experience with aurors is limited to a freakishly paranoid octogenarian, a guy who was given the task of capturing my godfather, but ended up working with him, and a clumsy good-for-nothing-"

Tonks had her wand pointed rather accurately at my groin. "It is so important for the existence of your future children, that you do not finish that sentence."

Fred just laughed at her. "One of his students took you down quickly. What makes you think you'd be any more successful against him?"

Tonks frowned at him, but finally stood. "What do you mean?"

Fred looked surprised. "Didn't Dumbledore tell you about the DA?"

"Just that it was a study group."

As Fred launched into a slightly embellished version of how the DA started, I turned and looked out the spy hole again. The pair of wizards following me were obviously quite annoyed at the continued attention George was lavishing on them. Mind you, a saint would be driven into a homicidal rage at what the annoyance consisted of. George was obviously enjoying himself immensely.

After a few moments, at the edge of my attention, I heard Fred describe my teaching several dozen people to produce a corporeal patronus. I figured he was about to tell Tonks about the events after we were ratted out.

"Maybe I should try to become an animagus." I said vaguely, more in the hope of shutting Fred up than any real determination.

Tonks snapped her head around at me. "I wouldn't."

I looked over my shoulder at her. "Why not?" I asked, a hint of anger in my voice. "It would be far easier to evade these bastards if I could turn into an animal."

"Because someone told Fudge that Sirius was an animagus, we think it was probably Malfoy senior. Fudge changed the laws governing them so that now, anyone who wants to become an

animagus needs to obtain specific permission from the Ministry *before* attempting it. Previously, they just needed to register on completion of the training. Any unregistered animagus will be charged if they are discovered."

I gave a small scowl before a thought hit me. My change in attitude must have shown in my eyes, because both Tonks and Fred looked at me curiously.

"No amnesty period?" I asked carefully.

Tonks shook her head."

I graced her with a feral grin. "You know Tonks, I think I will be needing that owl after all. I think it is time I had a chat with a certain journalist."

Tonks tilted her head to one side. "You have one in particular in mind?"

I just nodded.

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It was probably no more than fifteen minutes later when Butt moved aside again, allowing entrance to the twins inner sanctum. I turned, expecting to see either Fred or George, then froze. Bile rose in my throat as I focused on the particularly unwelcome figure of Albus Dumbledore serenely enter the back room.

The old man ignored me to start with, joking easily with Fred, bantering with George.

That suited me just fine. The last thing I wanted to do was talk to him at that point.

I studiously looked everywhere but in his direction, an expression of belligerent nonchalance on my face. At least I hoped it was nonchalance, though the old man was probably stupid enough to confuse it for constipation.

After a few minutes, a gentle hand gripped my shoulder lightly. "Harry? I think we need to talk."

I swung my arm around, knocking his hand away from my shoulder. "There is nothing I want to say to you."

Dumbledore didn't take the hint. That distant voice in my mind wondered exactly how much more explicit I needed to be before he actually left me alone. I really needed to get myself a firearm of some sort.

"There are, however, some things I need to tell you."

I sprang to my feet and spun around to face him in one quick movement. Leaning forward, I screamed straight into his face. "I don't want to hear it. I've had enough of your platitudes. Of your sanctimonious crap. I've had enough of you trying to control my life. If you don't understand that,

then try this." I took a deep breath. "Fuck off!" I shouted into his face. "Can you understand that?"

Before he could respond, I turned and almost ran to the washroom, slamming the door behind me.

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I leaned against the back wall of the tiled room, wincing as I felt the bile in my stomach climb into my throat. My rage had not yet run its course, and I looked down at my hands, noting wryly that they were trembling.

After a few seconds, I pushed off the wall and moved over to a hand basin. I wrenched the tap, turning the cold water on unnecessarily hard. Cupping my hands beneath the too powerful stream, I splashed water everywhere to get about half a cup in my hands. I sipped the water, rolling it around in my mouth.

The cool sensation on my tongue calmed my stomach, and rolling anger settled. I tilted my head back and gargled, desperate to get the filthy taste from my mouth. I gripped the sides of the basin and lowered my head to spit in the basin. With a sigh I looked up at myself in the mirror.

My hair was just as messy as ever, though my fringe was stuck to my damp forehead, easily covering my bloody scar. My pale skin looked almost sallow, giving my eyes a haunted look.

I had to go out there and face Dumbledore sooner or later. As much as I'd kept my anger at him from overflowing while we were in Bones' office, the sight of his condescending smile just filled me with rage.

I wanted nothing to do with him. He had done enough messing around in my life already. I was not going to let him have another chance.

Maybe it would be better for me not to go back to Hogwarts. I'd need to work out things like safety. Keeping my location secret from both Voldemort and Dumbledore would be difficult, but possible. After all, Sirius managed to stay on the run from the Ministry, the dementors and the Order for almost a full year.

I could feel the pain of guilt flood through my veins, thrumming in my arms. I clenched the sides of the basin while squeezing my eyes shut. Unbidden, I felt my magical strength leak out. Through the haze of tears, a loud crack and a flash of hot pain broke me out of my trance. I looked down to find that I'd gripped the edge of the basin so hard that a piece had broken off in my left hand. I slowly released the porcelain shard, letting it fall unheeded to the ground, and felt the blood rush back into my hand.

And out of it too, through at least two separate cuts.

I just stared with a curious detachment as the blood dripping from my injured palm splashed gently into the ruined basin. Tiny red tears fell, landing on the pristine white porcelain, shattering on impact from one drop into several tiny red liquid shards. The beads of blood then slowly ran

together, forming streaks of crimson on the previously unspoilt white background. More blood drops landed, adding to the colour that simply mesmerised me.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there, staring at my blood slowly drip into the basin. I was in no danger, only one drop of blood fell every few seconds, but all I could think about was how Sirius would never spill his blood again. That he would never get another chance to do good. To clear his name.

I finally clenched my fist to put pressure on the cuts, stopping the slow bleeding completely. The remaining blood in the basin trickled away, leaving only a red smear.

I tore off a strip of cloth from the base of Dudley's old tee-shirt, binding my hand quickly. I fumbled a bit, it's not easy to tie a knot with only one hand, then gripped one end of the cloth in my teeth and the other with my right fingers. I pulled the knot tight, wincing slightly as the fresh cuts protested.

The washroom door looked quite intimidating, though that was probably because I knew what was on the other side. I had to face Dumbledore at least once more, if only to get a promise from him to leave me alone for the rest of my life.

I could make out a soft murmuring of voices, though no actual words. With a soft snort, I wondered what I'd give to be a fly on the wall in the conversation that was going on.

I leaned back against the wall and thrust my hands in my pockets, more to stop them shaking than to keep them warm. My undamaged hand wrapped itself around one of the items I picked up on my way in. A slow smile lazily spread over my face, as I pulled my prize out of my pocket.

An Extendable Ear.

--

A/N

Apprentice Potter It's Fun to Argue

It was the work of a second to put the Extendable Ear to use. Instantly, the soft murmuring behind the door sharpened into specific words, easily identifying the speakers.

"-cannot afford to have him so angry, Albus."

Tonks. Concerned? Nah, probably just worried that she'd get a bad review if she messed up her assignment.

"I'm afraid that is at least partially my fault, Nymphodora. I have been keeping a certain amount of information from Harry for some time now. "

Well there's the understatement of the year, old man. Just because you have accepted part of the responsibility freely doesn't mean that I'll forgive you any time soon.

*"Will you **please** stop calling me that!"*

"Ha! You plead with Dumbledore, but you attacked me for doing the same thing."

"Shut up, Weasley."

Maybe this conversation wasn't going to be as interesting as I'd expected.

"Can we argue about nicknames another time? Harry's two shadows are still out there in our shop."

"I believe I can put your minds to rest there, George. Kingsley was concerned enough for Harry's safety that he sent a pair of subordinates to assist our erstwhile pair as they made their way to Gringotts. The fact you spotted them will be a definite point in your favour, young N- Tonks. I'm sure Alastor will be delighted."

Bloody wonderful. Not only do I have to look over my shoulder for Voldemort and his boot-lickers, I have to keep an eye out for suspicious types who feel the need to protect me. Sent by the very organisation that gave me the option of being tried for use of underage magic or losing my soul.

Fuck that. I will never trust the Ministry as long as I live.

"I'm sure Mad-Eye will be happy. He may even reduce the number of complaints he has about your work, Tonks."

*"Shut **up** , Weasley!"*

Well, it looks like Tonks is getting pissed off. Isn't that a good omen for the rest of the day.

"Just what information did you keep from the boy, Albus?"

My blood froze. The silky tones of Severus Snape drifted through my mind, causing my heart to pound.

What the hell is he doing here? When did he get here? He must have come in after Dumbledore, though I probably wouldn't have noticed his silent entry if he had walked in behind the old fart. I was too busy ignoring him.

"I'm afraid I cannot reveal that, Severus. Not just yet, at any rate."

"So you are just going to let him put more of us in danger? Let the consequences his childish tantrums go unheeded? The boy's ego is large enough as it is, if he isn't taken down a peg or two, he will become a bigger liability than that idiot, Fudge."

"Harry's actions are more than simple adolescent rebellion, Severus."

"Bah! He's a little prima donna, whose luck at escaping unscathed has not extended to his friends. For that alone he should have his movements restricted."

Instantly, my blood went from frozen to boiling. How dare he? He was ready to have a dementor kiss Sirius before he had a chance to tell his story.

I clenched my eyes and fists, in an effort to control my anger. Losing control now would just give Snape what he desired, proof that he was right.

The image of Snape's superior smirk as he was proved that I was a danger to everyone cooled my ire quickly, leaving me in a terrifyingly calm state. I opened my eyes and looked down at my hands. Not a single tremor. The door to the washroom opened, and I didn't even start.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the little rule-breaker himself. Eavesdropping too."

I raised my head to look directly into the glittering black eyes of Severus Snape. My normal gut reaction to his presence was a slight stomach clenching nervousness, but my anger and hatred of him had quashed that quickly. "Piss off, Snape." I said calmly, removing the Extendable Ear from my own ear.

"Oh, I have no intention of going anywhere, Potter. Not until I've impressed upon your rather feeble mind the consequences of what you have done."

I gave the smirking bastard a sneer. "Well, I certainly hope you have better luck than your efforts to impress Occlumency upon my *feeble* mind. You were a fucking failure at that, and you had all year to do that."

I really do need to get a stopwatch. One that measures in thousandths of a second. If I'm going to see just whose face I can get to go beetroot red the quickest, I'll need some sort of timer.

"That was your failure, not mine!" spat Snape. Wow. Even his neck was red. I could see it in the mirror behind him.

"You think? It had nothing to do with your idiotic teaching methods at all?"

"I have taught Occlumency to several students, Potter. They all had no difficulty at all in developing up even rudimentary skill. Every one of them had far less incentive than you."

"Yeah, I'm just positive your methods were identical with them too. Insult, assign impossible exercises, heap abuse instead of encouragement, lather, rinse and repeat."

Well, for once the tables were turned. Many times during my time at Hogwarts, Snape has pushed me into a fuming frenzy while staying coolly unflustered himself. Not this time. I was beginning to understand just how satisfying it was to have your hated opponent off their rocker.

"My teaching methods are none of your concern, Potter! You have no-"

"You don't teach. You've never taught. You simply intimidate and frighten people into learning the material themselves. Dumbledore could put a talking textbook at the front of the class and the average OWL score would improve."

Snape's eyes narrowed as his hatred morphed into loathing. "You are pathetic, Potter. I have taught students for over a decade, and very few of them have failed."

I shrugged. "Goyle could stand in front of your students, telling them they'd have to answer to him if they failed and he'd get the same pass rate as you. You even think Neville is bad, you didn't see him in his Practical OWL. He was as calm as I've ever seen him. All his problems with potions are caused by *you* ."

"Longbottom is an idiot, someone who couldn't brew a potion to save himself unless someone was holding his hand. Just like his father, he is a failure. Just like you, Potter. You however, blame all of your failures on others. You are never to blame for anything. Not even your pitiful Potion OWL result."

I raised my eyebrows at this. "Do you even know what I got for my Potions OWL?"

He sneered at me. "Judging from your coursework, the best you could hope for would be a 'P'."

I leaned forward, letting a slow grin form. "I got an 'E', you ignoramus. Yet another fact that points to your complete and utter failure at accurately marking those you have a bias against."

Snape's sneer slid off his face quite satisfyingly. "There is no way in hell you could have scored an 'E', Potter."

I reached into my pocket and withdrew the letter Mr. Weasley had given me in the car. "Read 'em and weep." I said, handing it to him with a flourish.

The only movement on his face as he read my scores was a slight twitching of his left eye. A pity, I had hoped he would explode with fury at being proved wrong.

With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the letter onto the floor in front of me. "Well, that just goes to show that your fame can blind even impartial testers." he said dismissively.

I clenched my teeth in anger at his tone, but I refused to succumb this time. "Or, it highlights just what a pathetic little man you are; a little man with a little bit of power, lording it over those in his care. Without Dumbledore, you are nothing, a nobody."

Snape almost exploded on the spot. "I HAVE DONE MORE TO KEEP YOU ALIVE THAN ANYONE, POTTER! YOU WILL SHOW ME THE RESPECT I DESERVE!"

I growled deep in my throat, my anger threatening to escape from my control. "You have done nothing that warrants my respect, Snape. What you are quick to claim as your altruistic actions are nothing more than your duty to the students placed in your care. Everything you claim about me, that my fame blinds me, that I take advantage of my name to avoid punishment, all these things are simply what *you* would do if you were in my position. If you had my fame. You wander around demanding that you be shown respect when all you have done is what you are *supposed* to do."

"I HAVE SAVED YOUR MISERABLE LIFE MORE TIMES THAN I CARE TO REMEMBER, YOU UNGRATEFUL WRETCH!"

"Bullshit. You have done everything in your power to make my life a misery, just because I bear a superficial resemblance to my father. Yes, he was a prick at fifteen. Yes, he tormented you, embarrassed you at every turn. But for all his faults, he was ten times the man that you are. He is, and always will be remembered fondly. Just who do you think will remember you? Fondly, if at all?"

"Your father was an arrogant, self-centered reprobate. You saw *that* when you violated my privacy." he snarled.

I stared straight into his eyes for a long moment, wondering just why he brought that up. Surely he knows that I have told no one what I saw.

Suddenly, I had an epiphany. "I violated nothing."

Snape's features twisted into a gross caricature of a smile. "Nothing?" he demanded. "You deliberately invaded my memories, the very things I wanted no one to see."

I gave him a short, sharp laugh and waved my hand dismissively in his face. "The term 'violated'

implies non-consent on your part. You wanted me to see that memory."

"WHAT?" he demanded, his eyes bulging quite interestingly.

"Oh, please, don't act so surprised. You are an experienced spy. Despite what I personally think of you, you are an intelligent man. You leave your pensieve in plain sight, leave me alone in the room with it, it contains a memory that denigrates my father, and you want an excuse not to teach me anymore." I pointed my finger at him. "You expect me to believe you fucked up that badly?"

Snape looked ready to pop. "YOU BLAME ME FOR YOUR OWN ACTIONS?"

I shook my head. "I accept that I did the wrong thing, but don't claim you didn't want me to see that memory."

Snape appeared to calm slightly. Not that it made much difference. "So not only are you a failure, you admit to not accepting responsibility for your actions?" Snape seethed, looking as though he was about to murder me.

The hell with that. "As opposed to your failure to teach me anything?"

Snape grabbed the front of my shirt and dragged me close, so we were nose-to-nose. "Like your father, you have been a failure all your life. You managed to kill your godfather with your idiocy. Had you actually heeded my attempts to teach you Occlumency, he would still be alive!"

His words stirred something deep within me. Flickering images of the Dursleys calling me a failure over and over again ran through my mind. My own self-recriminations echoed painfully as the guilt I'd carried round since that night in the Department of Mysteries resurfaced.

Something was different though. The memories were too specific.

Oh, you complete bastard.

With a grunt, I erected my Occlumency shields, easily forcing Snape's presence from my mind. His eyes betrayed his surprise for an instant, before I closed my own eyes and launched my own attack.

I refused to let go of the anger Snape had stirred within me.

Snape's screams echoed faintly in my ears, already filled with the roar of my pounding blood. I *pushed* him away, and I felt a similar sensation to when I unconsciously cast a hex at Snape during our lessons last year.

It felt good. Refreshing.

I'm not sure how long I stood there, *pushing* at him, but a frantic "Harry! No!" intruded on my solace.

I opened my eyes and drew in a ragged lungful of air. My lungs felt like I hadn't drawn a breath for a few minutes. My eyes swam for a moment, several pinpoints of light tracing across my vision. I blinked and the world focused again. Dumbledore was desperately shaking my shoulder. I slapped his hand away.

Lying crumpled against the far wall was Snape, his back against the mirror. Cracks in the glass shot out from where he had hit the wall, looking like lightning shooting from his body. Blood trickled from his nose and ears, his eyes open but unfocused.

A feeling of victory surged through me. I felt an almost uncontrollable urge to jump and punch my fist into the air.

Dumbledore again put his hand on my shoulder, instantly dispelling my euphoria. "Harry, in your current condition, you present a danger to those around you."

I rounded on him, sharply slapping his hand away a second time, my face as red as Snape's had been. "That's rich coming from you! You do nothing but make things dangerous for everyone!"

Dumbledore blinked in surprise, and frowned. "I'm not sure I follow your reasoning."

"How about we start with the night I got my fucking scar? Of all the blunders you've made in my lifetime, that has to be in the top three. You unilaterally decided that I be put with people that hated me for what I am."

Dumbledore seemed to relax at that. "Harry, I'm aware at how difficult your childhood was-"

"You have no fucking idea, you bastard! Sirius turned up that very night to see Hagrid carry me out of the house. As my guardian, he had the right to take me in, but you wouldn't let him. Instead, you left him with nothing. His entire world had been ripped from him in one night."

"I did what I thought was best." Dumbledore said softly.

The meekness in his voice just enraged me further. "Taking away the one thing that Sirius had to live for was for the best? That one moronic decision left nothing for him but revenge, an action that put him in hell for twelve years. It left me trapped in a fucking shoe cupboard for a decade! I never even knew what day my birthday was until I went to primary school, I had to learn it from the teacher. And you have the utter gall to stand there and claim it was for the best?" I screamed unbelievably.

Dumbledore lowered his eyes. "As I told you last month, I had to make the decision quickly."

I just stared at him. "Who the fuck gave you the right to make it in the first place?"

Dumbledore looked up at me. "What do you mean?"

"Who were you to make a life changing decision for me? You were not my guardian. You are not related to me. Why did you just assume responsibility for me and my welfare?"

Dumbledore heaved a great sigh. "They were turbulent times, Harry. The Ministry was in disarray, several high ranking people were under suspicion of supporting Voldemort. Someone had betrayed your parents, we all assumed it had been Sirius. Putting you with your blood relatives under the protection of the blood charm was the best decision at the time."

I snarled at him, growling deep in my throat. "You coward. You fucking coward! **YOU** made the decision to put me there, yet you absolve yourself of the responsibility for the abuse I suffered. Despite my OWL result, I've learned enough in History of Magic to know that Voldemort's supporters all but disintegrated after he killed my parents. You put me with the Dursleys for my protection, yet once it wasn't needed, you left me there! You even knew how they treated me! My first Hogwarts letter was addressed to The Cupboard Under the Stairs!"

Dumbledore flushed with anger at my rebuke, something I have only seen him do only occasionally, but he kept his voice steady. "While I freely admit that your situation was far less than ideal, it has worked out in the long term. Had I not placed you in the care of your Aunt, or had I removed you once it was clear you were in no immediate danger, you would not have the protection now that it is necessary."

"If you hadn't made the decision in the first place, the protection wouldn't be necessary! Wormtail would have been captured! Sirius would have been free! Voldemort wouldn't have been able to return, you fucking idiot!" I shouted, spittle flying from my mouth. My face felt so hot it was probably glowing. One thing that dispassionate part of my mind noted was the trembling magical potential in the air.

"Enough, Harry!" Dumbledore almost shouted. "Getting worked up will not solve anything."

I glared at him, and I'm quite sure that had an insect flew between us it would have been incinerated. "Just stay away from me, old man." I said with deadly seriousness. "As far as I'm concerned, the governors can kick me out. I don't care anymore. Hell, I'll even write to them and tell them not to bother expelling me, that I just quit. I'll be safe just as long as I'm away from you."

"Harry, there are several people at Hogwarts working to ensure it is and will continue to be a safe environment, conducive to learning for all students. You will be safest behind the walls of the castle."

I laughed sarcastically at that. "How? In the last five years, three of the Defense teachers have tried to kill me, the last one found it gratifying to torture me all year." I waved my hand vaguely towards the still insensate Snape. "You defend this bastard who just tried to violate my mind, and who has such a hatred for me that he cannot conceive the possibility that my work may be even acceptable. He terrorizes all the non-Slytherin students, blatantly favouring his own house, and you have the utter gall to claim that you have created an environment conducive to learning?"

"Professor Snape does have issues he needs to overcome, just as you do. His skills as a master potion brewer are second to none in Europe. Despite all his negative attitudes towards you and your house, he has protected you to the best of his ability. Admirably even."

I gaped at him. "Bah! Flitwick is a master charms expert, yet he doesn't give me detention when I get insulted by a Ravenclaw. Sprout makes Neville's knowledge of plants seem pitiful, yet she doesn't mark my work as zero if a Hufflepuff destroyed my assignment. McGonagall didn't take points away from me during my first lesson for not knowing anything, claiming that it proved that fame wasn't everything. Having great skill sure as hell doesn't automatically make you a good teacher."

Dumbledore's expression turned stern. "It is not easy to teach when the student does not follow instructions, Harry. Even the greatest teacher would have difficulty in imparting knowledge and skills onto an unwilling recipient."

I turned and looked down on the floor for my discarded results. Scooping them up, I slapped the sheet of parchment on Dumbledore's chest, though his long beard cushioned the blow somewhat. "Unwilling? Except for the exam Voldemort intruded upon, this proves that I have been anything but unwilling to learn, you bastard. I may not have been as dedicated to practicing Occlumency during the year as I have been over the holidays, but I must have missed that safe, conducive to learning environment you've created at Hogwarts last year, since I spent most evenings getting tortured."

Dumbledore sighed. "I realise that the number of detentions you had with Dolores was exorbitant, and she did not go out of her way to make it easy on you, but calling writing lines 'torture' is an exaggeration I had not thought you capable of."

I bared my teeth without smiling. "Cutting the words 'I will not tell lies' into the back of my hand a thousand times a night isn't torture?" I snarled through clenched teeth.

Oh, I guess ignorance really is bliss. The old man looked rather taken aback. "Cutting?"

"Yes, 'cutting' you idiot. With that damned quill of hers that cuts the words you write into the back of your hand."

Dumbledore paled quickly. A gruff voice intruded on our argument. "Did it write in your own blood?" snapped Moody.

The grizzled ex-auror stepped out from the shadows in the doorway. So much for constant vigilance, the man could have taken me by surprise in an instant. "Yes." I replied simply.

Moody wheeled around to face Dumbledore. "You let her into Hogwarts with a Blood Quill?" he almost screamed.

Dumbledore actually had the grace to look ashamed, and not a little flustered. "I fear I must apologize. Harry, I had no idea. Alastor, I, er-"

"You what?" Moody demanded, stepping right up to Dumbledore, forcing the headmaster to take a few steps backwards. "The boy is right, you've all failed him. You let that monster into a school full of children with an device that had been deemed a torture implement and didn't even know."

Albus, it is your damned job to know!" Moody punctuated his point by jabbing a gnarled finger into Dumbledore's chest with each shouted syllable. "Who knows how many other people she used it on?"

"She made Lee Jordan use it once that I know of." I inserted calmly.

Moody didn't even break his stride. "That is some school you've got going there, Albus. When the kids are tortured, they don't come forward for help. Are you so aloof that you are unapproachable to them?"

Dumbledore just looked blankly from Moody to me, a look of abject shame on his face. "I- I don't know what to say."

Moody growled at him. "Albus, you've been a shining example of what a wizard should be in the past, but you've messed up royally this time. You are too close; your objectivity has been compromised."

"Um, should I even ask?"

Two heads and one blue eye turned to the door, to see Tonks looking around the room, Fred and George behind her on either side. I glanced around at the room myself, and noted that she had the right to be confused.

A stunned and bleeding Snape still lay slumped against a shattered wall mirror, a clearly defensive Dumbledore was all but backed up against the opposite wall, with a furious Moody jabbing a finger down to the second joint into Dumbledore's chest. Not exactly a Kodak moment.

"What do you want?" I asked shortly.

"I think Moody was right, you have blown off a buttock." she grinned at me.

I sighed and shook my head at her irrepressible humour, and gave Dumbledore one last glare before walking over to her and out of the partially destroyed washroom. Fred and George had just noticed Snape as I exited. I had to duck as two cameras zoomed towards them in response to their summons. Tonks gently took my hand and walked me away from the rather full washroom where two elderly wizards were engaged in a quiet but heated argument and two young wizards were gleefully taking photo after photo at different angles of the unconscious Snape.

"I bet those pictures will be worth a fortune at Hogwarts come September." Tonks said, the grin on her face looking like it was going to stay there for a while.

A bubble of laughter burst from my stomach, catching me unaware. "In Gryffindor Tower at least." I replied, a smile on my face at the thought. Seeing Dumbledore chastised was a real spirit lifter. Getting all that off my chest by yelling at both Snape and Dumbledore was uniquely satisfying. Having a female hand in mine was rather pleasant. Soothing in fact. If it wasn't for the fact that my mental shields were still up, I'd have believed I was being manipulated into calming

down.

Tonks sat down on one of the couches along the wall, and pulled me down into the soft leather next to her. "We, ah, heard what you said to Severus."

I raised an eyebrow. "Fred and George had enough Extendable Ears for everyone then?" I asked rhetorically.

Tonks rolled her eyes and gave a giggle. "Moody said you'd figure it out. Snape didn't believe him."

"When did he arrive?"

"Moody or Snape? Well, Snape came in first, he followed Dumbledore in. Moody got here with them, but he stayed outside and checked out the pair Kingsley sent after us. Then he came in just in time to see you slam the door. Snape wanted to go after you straight away, but Dumbledore stopped him."

I nodded. "I missed seeing Snape when he came in. Moody will be pissed."

"Don't worry about it, Pup. Mad-Eye knows you are under a fair bit of stress at the moment, and even with the leg, he can sneak up on almost anyone if he wants to."

"Why do you call me that?"

Tonks gave me a sad smile. "Sirius used to call you that, you know. In the Order meetings. He was so very proud of you and just wouldn't stop talking about you. I actually thought I knew all about you before we even met, just from what he told me in the weeks before we took you to HQ. I must admit, a lot of what he said was exaggerated though, some of it was even made up completely."

"Like what?"

"He told me you fought off a basilisk by yourself, and got bitten in the process."

I felt a heat flood my face. "My second year. But it wasn't by myself." I said softly.

Tonks tilted her head towards me. "Excuse me?"

I nodded. "Fawkes helped. He blinded the basilisk first, so it couldn't petrify me."

As much as I hate talking about those terrifying times of my life, I must admit that it is gratifying when someone gives you an expression that indicates they have just heard something they originally thought was fiction.

"I'm sorry. You- You mean it's true? You actually killed a basilisk?"

I nodded again, a small smile on my face. Her expression was just indescribable. "I jabbed a sword

into its brain through the roof of its mouth. That's when it bit me." Her expression turned from incredulous to disbelief. "Fawkes healed me with his tears less than a minute after I got bitten, that's why I'm still alive." I clarified.

"Harry!"

Both Tonks and I looked up. One of the twins was rushing towards us, his grin so wide I could almost see his wisdom teeth. "You beat up Snape! You beat him up! Wow! Thank you! These photos will be worth a fortune."

"Be sure to put one on a Christmas card and send it to Snape." I said, getting to my feet. That grin was contagious though, both Tonks and I started chuckling ourselves."

The washroom door slammed, and all three of us jumped slightly at the unexpected noise. Moody stomped over to us, his leg making threatening crashes with each step. When this guy stamps his feet, the world would do well to take notice.

"Potter, go about your business, but be at your relative's place by nightfall. That gives you less than two hours. Go!"

"Why?" I retorted.

"Because I said so, that's why." he snapped. "Unlike Dumbledore or Tonks here, I won't hesitate to stun you and drag your sorry arse where ever it needs to be if you even try to act like you have been."

I swallowed nervously. "You would, wouldn't you." As much as I've improved over the years, I think I'd rather face Bellatrix wandless than this man if he was angry.

The grizzled wizard cracked a rather evil grin at me. "I've done it before, Laddie, to better wizards than you. Now get your arse in gear. I'll meet you there in two hours. And have your gear packed and ready to go."

I blinked several times in confusion. "Why?"

His expression made me quickly clarify my question. "I mean, why are you meeting me at Privet Drive?"

The magical blue eye peered straight at me. "Because there is someone I'd like you to meet." he said with finality.

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Apprentice Potter An Interesting Meeting

An Interesting Meeting

Tonks and I finally managed to leave Fred and George's shop, still with our two anonymous shadows. Moody had indeed been pleased with Tonks, even going to the extraordinary lengths of *not* criticising her decision to take refuge, nor offering another suggested course of action. From Tonks' beaming face, I'd hazard a guess that any non-critical review from Moody was the equivalent of sheer praise from anyone else.

The two faceless aurors who Tonks spotted didn't get away anywhere near as easily. I was seriously on the verge of getting Fred to make us some popcorn, but after Moody reamed Dumbledore, his caustic remarks towards someone I didn't know didn't leave me with the same sense of satisfaction.

My disposition was much improved after our little detour, so much so that Tonks even started to relax into her usual unconcerned, bantering mode. The stroll down to Gringotts was punctuated by bouts of chuckling from both of us at her jokes and observations. By the time we reached the bank, I actually felt better than I had ever since that night.

Given how late in the afternoon it was, it appeared that Gringotts was on the verge of closing for the day. For all the bad press the goblins get for all the rebellions they participate (read initiate) in, they do put in a full days work. I made my way to the shortest queue and stood patiently as a fat old witch argued with the goblin behind the desk that she definitely had more galleons in her vault yesterday than was there today.

"This could take a while." grunted Tonks unhappily, staring daggers into the old fart's back.
"Perhaps we should get into another line."

I gave her a grin. "Perhaps you are right. There must be a reason this is the shortest queue. Perhaps everyone else got the idea that she was going to be a while." I said, making no particular effort to keep my voice down.

The old witch turned on her heel and glared at me, no doubt overhearing my offhand comment. I gave her a cheeky grin.

"Young man, you had better watch your manners." she said with not a little hostility.

"Or?"

She gave me her own smile, revealing all three of her teeth. "I may be old, but I can still curse you so badly that you'd wish you were never born."

I snorted, leaned forward and whispered clearly point blank into her face. "Voldemort."

The old woman's face blanched quickly and she gave a short, startled yelp at my blasé use of Tom Riddle's pseudonym. She grabbed her bag and bolted from the bank. Tonks punched me in the arm.

"There was no need for that." she said, looking all the world as though she couldn't decide whether she should be angry or amused.

I shrugged and gestured towards the goblin behind the desk. Though I'm not an expert, he definitely had a relieved expression on his face.

"Welcome to Gringotts, my name is Halanishyurteth, but you may call me Halish. Can I help you?" he asked, rather sincerely.

I nodded. "I'd like to see my vault please, Halish." pleased at the decidedly less syllable intensive nickname.

"See?"

Huh? "Yes, I need to find out how much is left."

Halish gave me a small smile. "Do you intend to make a deposit or withdrawal?"

I frowned. "I hadn't. Why?"

The small smile turned superior. "There is no need for you to visit your vault in order to determine the balance. If you have your key, I shall determine the current balance immediately."

Ah, of course. "Thank you." I said, handing over the small key Hagrid gave to me on my eleventh birthday.

The goblin accepted the key graciously. "Thank you. Please bear with me a moment."

I watched curiously as he drew out a small, dark slate board. It was a little bigger than the palm of my hand, and it had a tiny dollop of what looked like mercury clinging to the bottom half of the face. Deftly, Halish pressed the key into the silvery material sideways, obviously imprinting the key's teeth onto the malleable substance. A few moments later, chalk numbers swirled into view on the slate.

"Hm, most curious. Mr. Potter, I presume?" he said quietly enough that it was highly unlikely that he would be overheard.

I nodded, not expecting a goblin to be so accommodating. "What is curious?"

"Your vault includes a recent inheritance, one which has not been signed for."

My anger again flashed irrationally, but Tonks gave my hand a squeeze, calming it almost instantly. "My godfather passed recently."

Halish nodded absently. "I see. This is most irregular. Normally, funds allocated from a deceased's estate are cleared for use immediately. For some reason, there has been a hold placed on your access and use of these funds."

Tonks spoke up. "We can sort that out later. My friend would like to know exactly how much he has available."

He nodded sagely, wiping the slate clean with his sleeve and handing back my key. I noted with interest that the impression my key left on the silvery substance quickly faded. "All totalled, you have close to thirty thousand galleons available, though that figure will be adjusted once the hold on your inheritance has been removed. For a small fee, I can provide you with an exact breakdown of the specific number of coins in your vault if you desire, both available and held."

I shook my head. "No thank you. That is all I needed to know."

"Excellent. Thank you for your custom."

I put the key back in my pocket. "Oh, one last thing. Do you know where Bill Weasley is working?"

The goblin's expression immediately turned sour. "You are a friend of that... *person* ?"

I couldn't stop the expression of surprise registering on my face. I had thought that Bill was pretty much universally liked. "Um, not exactly. I'm friends with his brother and an acquaintance of his girlfriend. I was just wondering if they were here, I thought I'd say hello."

Halish grunted, but raised a warty hand and pointed towards a corridor. "He and his veela are down that corridor. Sixth and eighteenth door on your right, respectively."

"Thank you." I mumbled, not a little troubled. Tonks asked the question that was on my own tongue.

"Why don't you like him?"

Halish gave her a sour look. "He is a little too lucky at cards." he said shortly, before pointedly calling out to the person behind us in the queue.

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Bill laughed at my story as we left his office to go and visit Fleur and Gabrielle. "Halish is just

upset that I won about two weeks pay from him a couple of days ago." he said easily.

"Won?" I asked.

Bill shrugged. "Chess. For some reason, the goblins are obsessed with the game."

I laughed loudly. "Ron would have a field day."

Bill smirked. "Who do you think taught him?"

That stopped me. Mr. Weasley, as much as I love the man, is not the most strategic thinker in the world. Mrs. Weasley is ruled by her emotions and couldn't build a strategy to save her life. I don't know much about Charlie really, and what I know of Percy would indicate that he wouldn't have had the time for Ron in the first place. Fred and George playing something that didn't explode doesn't bear thinking about. Ginny may have taught him, but she would have had to be taught in turn.

"I suppose I never really thought about it. Are you any good?"

Bill nodded. "I was pretty good before I taught Ron, but he picked it up so quickly that I soon had to improve my own game just to stay competitive. But I haven't won a game against him in years." finished Bill, stopping in front of another door. Reaching out, he gave the wooded door a quick rap.

"Oui?" came a voice, muffled by the heavy door.

Bill smirked. "You are here to work on your English, remember."

The door swung open quickly. "William!" said Fleur, throwing her arms around his neck. She released him enough to look in our direction. "Oh, 'Arry, take off those glasses." she laughed.

I nodded, removing the massive things with relief. I slipped on my own glasses, grateful to see the world in focus again. Blame Rachel." I said sourly.

Tonks hit me again. "Introduce me properly."

I rolled my eyes. "Tonks, this is Fleur Delacour. Fleur, this is, um, Tonks. Just Tonks. She doesn't have a first name. None whatsoever. Don't even ask." Under Tonks' gaze I continued. "She's an auror, and has been given the task of keeping me un-mobbed today."

Fleur covered her mouth again and giggled. An angelic young girl appeared behind Fleur, obviously unsure about the new arrivals. Fleur looked down and smiled. "Gabrielle, this is *Tonks* ." she said, gesturing towards my bodyguard with a grin. "And I think you know this young man."

Gabrielle looked up at me, and her eyes widened. "Je vous remercie de m'avoir sauver la vie." she said softly.

Fleur smiled at her. "Do you want to say that in English?"

Gabrielle shook her head, her expression almost one of terror.

"Gabrielle's English is not, um, *proficient*. She is unsure of herself. She said 'Thank you for saving me.'"

I smiled at the young girl. "My pleasure. You look much prettier without dirty water in your hair."

She blushed ferociously, and stepped a little further behind Fleur. "Merci." she whispered.

"You know, Potter, you seem to have this effect on prepubescent girls." grinned Bill. "Can you teach me?"

I rolled my eyes, remembering how Ginny reacted when I appeared at the Burrow that morning with Ron and the twins. "Shut up, Bill." I said, feeling my face heat up.

Bill, Tonks and Fleur laughed, while Gabrielle and I blushed.

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We spent a rather pleasant hour with Bill, Fleur and Gabrielle before giving our goodbyes. Though Gabrielle looked uncomfortable with me there, she did seem to be a little upset that I had to leave. Gringotts had closed before we left, so Bill escorted us to the entrance.

The trip home was uneventful, even though Tonks baited the muggle police at every chance. She'd speed past one at what felt like mach two, daring to be chased. Once the police were on her tail, she'd nip round a corner and change the outside of the car.

I honestly don't think I'd laughed as hard in a long time. By the time we'd reached Little Winging, my sides hurt just breathing. I waved goodbye to Tonks, not even letting her leave the car. As much as she has the ability to blend into whatever situation she is in, whenever grace and poise are not necessary at any rate, I wouldn't wish on her my family's bigotry.

As I walked down the short path, a faint premonition gathered in my mind. Even before I opened the front door to my relative's house, I knew I would not enjoy the reception that awaited me. An unwelcome sensation hit me as soon as I'd entered the house, that of thick tension in the air. Well, this looked like it was going to be more than moderately unpleasant.

Still, ten seconds after I closed the front door behind me I wondered why my eardrums were still intact. In the past, when something abnormal happened around me, my fault or not, I got about the amount of time it takes a fat, forty-year-old to draw a deep breath before getting a blistering sample of my Uncle's halitosis delivered at one hundred and twenty decibels. Oh, that *and* his projectile spittle. Ugh, that's a horrible thought. You know, since he shoves his ugly mug a few centimetres from mine whenever he shouts at me, I do believe that four of my five senses are being assaulted. Thank the gods that I don't have to lick him too.

The place was eerily silent. I fingered the end of my wand in my sleeve, noting that it was starting to become a nervous habit. Something was wrong here.

A slight clink came from the lounge. Like a cup on a saucer.

I rolled my eyes and groaned to myself. The sun was still up, though it was quite red and sinking quickly to the south-western horizon. Moody had given me until sundown, and I got here before that. Why was he here, terrorizing my relatives, already?

Feeling a little better, since I seriously doubt my Uncle would raise his voice at anything in the vicinity of a madman with a very threatening gaze, I walked into the lounge to announce my return.

Moody wasn't there.

My Aunt and Uncle were sitting with such stiff backs that I'm sure they'll be searching the phone book for local chiropractors within the hour. The coffee table had three cups of tea and a half empty pot arrayed on its glass surface. Dudley was nowhere to be seen.

Remus was sitting on the couch opposite my Aunt, staring straight at her.

"Hello Harry." he said coolly, without looking in my direction.

"Remus." I replied as I looked him over, realising that I was probably going to get into another spat with someone from the magical world. His eyes looked tired, with dark rings deepening the shadows around them. He looked haggard and drawn, even more than usual, an impression emphasized by the patched and well worn robes he wore.

I made a few mental calculations, and sighed in sympathy. The full moon was the day before yesterday. "Rough couple of nights?" I asked lightly, then winced when I realised just how that sounded.

"Rough couple of weeks." the werewolf retorted. He stood slowly, and I raised my eyebrows at how painfully thin the man was. He looked half starved.

"I think we are overdue for a chat, Harry."

I closed my eyes and took a long breath. My good mood was disappearing quickly. "Fine, but let's go up to my room." I turned to my Uncle, who looked about to burst from the strain of appearing welcoming to someone who had not three weeks ago not-so-transparently threatened him.

I turned to face my Uncle. "I'm sorry about this, but within about half an hour, Alastor Moody will be arriving here. I couldn't do anything to dissuade him, but I'll make sure he won't stay too long."

"Who?" Uncle Vernon asked, his confusion almost masking his anger.

"The grumpy fellow with the blue eye." Remus supplied, curiosity evident in his voice. The

werewolf missed the sudden loss of colour my Uncle's face experienced, but I certainly didn't. "Why is he coming here, Harry?"

I shrugged. "Not too sure, he just told me that I was to meet someone." I quickly turned and left the room to forestall any questions about this mysterious someone. I was particularly interested myself.

With a few bounds, I ascended the stairs quickly, three at a time. That put me out of Remus' line of vision, so I could enter my room and have a quick look around for anything I didn't want him to see. Given my Aunt's vocal histrionics when I don't keep my room tidy, as usual the room was spotless, except for the two texts I had been studying this morning. I scooped them up and deposited them in my trunk. Nothing was out that would have embarrassed me if Remus saw it.

I pulled out the single chair from behind the table I use as a desk, and placed it so it faced my bed. Remus entered my room solemnly, and I gestured to the chair. He sat down, shifting his meagre weight in a misguided effort to get comfortable. Fat chance, the Dursleys wouldn't have given me that chair if it was comfortable.

I kicked off my shoes and sat down, cross-legged on my bed with my back against the wall. "Does Dumbledore know you're here?" I asked.

Remus shook his head. "Albus has been keeping me busy in an effort to keep my mind off recent events. I had meant to visit as soon as I had the chance, to have a talk with you about Sirius."

I tilted my head back so my scalp lightly thumped against the wall. "Must you?"

"Judging from your recent behaviour, I'd say it was overdue."

"My recent behaviour?" I asked sweetly.

"The way you treated Minerva and Kingsley."

"I do believe I'm not at school at present. Dumbledore has been quite insistent that I live in the muggle world during the holidays. Exactly how is my behaviour any business of the wizarding world?" I asked levelly.

He ignored my taunt. "It's not your fault."

"Huh?" I frowned.

"Sirius' death. It's not your fault." he clarified patiently.

I sighed. "Everyone keeps telling me that, yet for some reason, it doesn't stop the nightmares." I said sourly.

Remus scratched behind one ear. "No, I don't expect it does. From what I remember as your teacher, you always accepted more responsibility for events than warranted."

The familiar sensation of a heavy lump of guilt settling in my stomach returned. "Perhaps you could enlighten me as to whose responsibility it was?" I snapped, trying to keep from crying.

"Voldemort's?"

I shook my head. "If I'd used the bloody mirror Sirius had given me, I'd have found out that he was safe. We wouldn't have gone."

"Bellatrix's?"

"You don't get it! If I wasn't there, Sirius would be alive!"

"How can you be sure of that?" he asked me in a whisper.

I could feel my anger bubble dangerously close to the surface. "Did you get hit in the head recently? If I hadn't been there, there was no reason for Sirius to go there."

It was Remus' turn to sigh. "Harry, why did Voldemort want you to go to the Department?"

All of a sudden, I had a flashback to the interrogation this afternoon, and I was determined not to fall for another trap like that, even if there was no 'punishment' to look forward to. "To get the prophecy."

Remus nodded. "Albus finally told us what he was after, but not the words of the prophecy itself. I assume he has told you?"

I nodded guardedly.

"Good. Don't tell anyone, not even Ron or Hermione. Not even me. From what Albus said, the longer the contents remain a secret, the longer we have an advantage."

Again, I nodded.

"Good. Now, assume you'd managed to contact Sirius and discovered that he was safe. What would you have done?"

I blinked a few times. "Well, I wouldn't have gone charging off to the Ministry in the first place." I said sarcastically.

Remus appeared not to notice my tone. "Exactly. Now, what would Voldemort have done?"

I looked up at the ceiling with a frown. "Well, I don't know. I suppose he'd have tried another way to get me to go there."

Remus sighed. "Harry, if you'd managed to contact Sirius, he would have known what Voldemort was trying to get you to do. Once you'd been told too, you would never have gone in the first place, no matter what incentive Voldemort gave you."

"What is your point?"

"Who could have retrieved the prophecy?"

"Well, me. And Voldemort." I said.

Remus smiled. "Exactly. Once he determined that there was no way you were going to go there, he would have had to go himself. And we would have known."

My head snapped down to stare straight into his eyes. "That's what those Order members were doing there! Setting wards or something!"

"Not quite, but you have the idea. Suffice to say that we would have known if Voldemort went to the Ministry, and we would all have struck when he arrived. Including Sirius. There is nothing to say that he would have survived anyway, Harry. He may have been destined to die by his cousin's hand."

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Remus' presence instilled a strange dual emotion in me. With his announcement that Sirius' death may have been fate, we settled into a rather uncomfortable silence. As comforting as it was to have one of my father's friends nearby, the fact that I had contributed to his best friend's death still made my intestines feel like they were twisting around on themselves. In an effort to take my mind off the uncomfortable sensation in my belly, I finally spoke up.

"What did Dumbledore have you doing?"

"I can't really tell you that. But I just got back to Grimwauld place a few days ago to learn how you treated Professor McGonagall." he said evenly, judging my reaction.

I fought the urge to smile. "If she thinks I treated her badly, have her talk to Snape, then ask her again."

"Harry, I haven't spoken to Minerva, I learned what happened from Kingsley."

I gave up resisting and let a self-satisfied grin spread over my face. "Then go and talk to Dumbledore about today's events, and then decide if I treated her badly. Well, *relatively* badly."

Remus frowned. "What happened?"

"Snape." I said simply, losing my smile. "He happened."

Remus sighed. "Severus has been under an intense amount of pressure over the last few weeks. People are bringing up old accusations of his support of Voldemort. He doesn't need any more stress at the moment."

I shrugged. "Too late."



He raised his eyebrows expectantly and leaned back in the chair, crossing his arms over his thin chest. "Do I want to know?"

"I daresay you'll find out sooner rather than later. Especially if the twins get the photos developed quickly."

Remus closed his eyes and rubbed his temples with his fingertips. "What did you do?"

I stood up off the bed. "Nevermind. You'll see the pictures at some point soon. Right now, I have to pack."

"Pack?" Remus blinked, confused.

"Putting clothes and things into a trunk or bag. It is what people do when they want to travel."

He ignored my sarcastic reply. "Why?"

"Because Dumbledore has completely stuffed everything up. I'm leaving."

"Don't be absurd. You are safe here." scoffed Remus.

I stared at him. "From who?" I asked, truly surprised.

Remus frowned and opened his mouth, but I waved my hand through the air between us and cut him off.

"Two dementors were sent by the Ministry last year, so I'm not safe from anyone there who are trying to save their own idiotic skins." I spat with a snarl, opening up my trunk at the foot of my bed. "Since given the appalling security there, everyone at the Ministry knows where I live; therefore, I have to assume that Voldemort knows too, since Malfoy's dad was on such chummy terms with our dear, incompetent Minister. The Order knows where I live, so it isn't exactly a secret now, is it?"

"Voldemort took my blood to give himself both a new body and to neutralise the protection my mother gave me. So living here isn't safe at all, given my location is known and the magic protecting me is weakened." I finished, throwing an armful of clothes from my wardrobe into my trunk.

Remus pursed his lips together tightly. "Albus knows what he is doing, Harry. You need to stay here."

I threw my hands up in despair and scoffed. "Why the hell do people keep saying that? He has no idea!" My underwear and socks disappeared into the wooden trunk.

"Harry, listen to me." he said sternly.

"No, you listen!" I snapped, losing patience. "With no one's permission, he took me from my legal

guardian as a baby and put me in a place he knew I would be unwelcome. I spent my childhood unloved, unwelcome and unhappy. Once I turned eleven, I loved spending my time at Hogwarts, but every summer, no matter what I wanted, he kept sending me back here." I took a deep breath.

"There was another student a few years ago at Hogwarts. His mother died and his father disowned him as a child. He spent his childhood growing up unloved, unwelcome and unhappy. Once he turned eleven, he loved his time at Hogwarts, but no matter what he wanted, Dumbledore kept sending him back to the orphanage during the summer." I slammed the lid of my trunk shut and spun to face my old professor.

"So perhaps you can ask your infallible Dumbledore exactly what he was thinking when he decided to interfere and make my life a mirror of Voldemort's." Remus' eyes were wide, but I kept pressing. "Perhaps it was some sort of twisted experiment, designed to discover for himself just how badly he fucked up all those years ago." A thought struck me. "Or to justify to himself his actions and decisions back then; maybe he wanted to prove to himself that Tom Riddle made his own choices." I finished softly.

Remus stood, and took a few steps over to me. He gently reached out and placed his hands on my shoulders. "Harry, as angry as you are, you are not thinking clearly. The hearing in front of the Wizengamot proved that." He gently turned me to face him. "Sirius gave his life for your safety. I would give mine to keep you safe. So would Albus, and many others. Is it too much to ask that you at least listen to us?"

I covered his hands with my own, and stared straight into his haunted eyes. "You just don't understand, Remus. The last thing I want people to do is to die for me. As for listening to you all, I have been manipulated, lied to and used far too often by Dumbledore for me to ever be comfortable listening to him ever again. I'll always wonder what his intentions are, what he hopes to accomplish, what he is keeping from me."

"He only has your best interests at heart."

Instead of a flash of anger, I simply felt an empty chill. "No, Remus, he doesn't. A year ago, I witnessed someone being murdered in front of me, and I felt keenly responsible for his death. Dumbledore sent me here and promptly forbade my friends from writing to me. Can you honestly look me in the eye and say that was the course of action of someone who had my best interests at heart?"

"There were safety concerns--"

"Oh, bollocks. There is such a thing as a telephone, and I'm almost positive Hermione has at least a passing familiarity with one. Pig is small enough to go by unnoticed at night, and a simple disillusionment charm would have made it all but impossible to intercept him. All I needed at the time was to talk and write to my friends about my feelings, to let out my sense of responsibility. Nothing incriminating need ever have been passed, but a total communication blackout was imposed on someone who was quickly falling into depression. However great he is as a wizard, he is a complete failure as a guardian."

Remus tilted his head to one side, and I got the impression that I'd at least partially convinced him. "You are determined to do this? Have you thought your way through it completely?"

I shook my head. "I'm meeting someone."

"Who?" Remus pressed.

A gruff voice interrupted us. "You don't need to know, Lupin."

Remus almost jumped out of his skin. "Alastor? What are you doing here?"

"I've come to organise an introduction for young Potter here, and hopefully have an arrangement in place tonight."

I blinked at that announcement, wondering what sort of arrangement he could mean. I opened my mouth to ask but Remus got his question in first.

"What is going on?"

Moody stomped up to the werewolf. "Potter is a target. Right now, every man and his kneazle knows where he lives, even though it is supposed to be a secret. If he wants to turn sixteen, he needs to hide."

My indignation at this was again cut off by Remus. "He is safe here!"

Moody gave a snort that was reminiscent of the broken washing machine my Aunt kept in the garage. "That's some definition of the word 'safe' you've got there, Lupin. I don't recall the last time someone being guarded with this much effort had to fight off a pair of dementors alone."

Remus growled with frustration. "You know what I mean! With us watching him..."

"We put his safety into the hands of a group of untested and untried people." Moody finished flatly. "Enthusiasm, courage and good intentions do not a professional make. Putting someone the Weasley twins look up to as a guard was asking for trouble. Albus has always had these little failings, wanting everything to look like nothing is wrong, believing the best of people. Well, Potter here no longer has that luxury."

Remus shook his head in denial. "Has Albus approved this?"

Again, Moody snorted. "Albus is still trying to get Snape to wake up. He will not find out until it is too late for him to mess up any further."

"I can't let you just take him!"

"I don't think you have a choice." dismissed Moody. "I've had a chat with his relatives, and they were more than happy to have him out of the house. Sirius' estate hasn't been executed yet, so your claim of guardianship is not yet valid. Regardless of how you feel responsible for the lad, you

don't have a say."

"Damnit! The blood protections-

"Are useless." spat Moody. "If Albus was as confident of the protection as he claims, he would not have had twenty-four hour surveillance on the boy. The more I see, the more I think that Albus isn't as sure of the blood magic as he claims. He had people apparating in and out for weeks, but wouldn't let an owl near the place. Given how much danger Potter has been in over the last few years, I'm inclined to believe that the plan of bringing him back to Hogwarts at all costs is fatally flawed."

Remus seemed to deflate. "So what do you suggest?"

Moody looked over to me. His scarred visage twisted into an expression of indecision. "I'd prefer you didn't know, since the whole idea of this move is so no one knows where he will be. I've even organised to be obliviated afterwards, to further obscure his location."

"What about Hogwarts? How is he going to continue his education from a cave?"

"I'm arranging an apprenticeship for him."

If I was surprised, Remus was shocked. "An apprenticeship? There hasn't been an apprenticeship in over half a century!"

Moody nodded. "Exactly. No one will expect it. Not the least, Riddle. If Potter ever faces him again, he'll expect the lad to have the equivalent education of a fifth-year drop out."

Remus sat back down, his face slowly returning to its normal colour. "Maybe, but I'm not sure. Has this person ever taught before?"

Moody nodded. "He's taken an apprentice or two before."

"When?"

I laughed. "Over fifty years ago, I'd guess."

Both wizards turned to face me, Remus with a slightly put out expression, Moody with a small smile that looked way out of place.

"Thank you Harry, but I was after a rather more specific answer." the werewolf growled.

"Too bad." said Moody with finality. "That is all you need to know. Potter, have you got everything?"

I shook my head, and grabbed a few things from under the loose floorboard; my photo album, some owl treats and a quill. "I think that's it." I said, looking around.

"Good. Come on." the ex-auror said.

I hoisted my trunk over my shoulder with a grunt, giving my room a quick going over in my mind for anything I'd forgotten. Remus stood in front of me.

"Harry, are you sure about this?"

"What else do you suggest? I can't go back to Hogwarts, because the governors will expel me. I can't stay here because everyone knows where I live. This seems like the best alternative."

Remus swallowed, and put a hand on my shoulder. "Promise me one thing."

I raised my eyebrows, waiting to hear what he had to say.

"Keep in touch, and be safe."

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The trip from Privet Drive was interesting in its randomness. First of all, Moody began chewing me out for just leaving with him, and not confirming his identity. I pointed out that he had known that the twins were part of the Order, that he know that I had been protected twenty-four hours a day last holidays and that he suggested the same course of action both at the twins' store and at my relative's house.

That seemed to calm him down, but we spent about half an hour flooing from one place to another, starting from Mrs. Figgs. I honestly couldn't begin to retrace our trip, given that at one stop the sun was streaming through a rather grimy window, and it was all but snowing at another two.

Finally, we arrived at a quiet pub. It was quite obviously a muggle establishment, but I could feel the charms on the fireplace, encouraging the muggles to ignore the comings and goings through the fire.

A tall, distinguished gentleman stood at one end of the bar, wearing well-made, but old style robes. He focused on us at our arrival, and casually strolled over to a booth along one wall of the room. Moody looked at me and tilted his head towards the man. We entered the booth ourselves, Moody without hesitation, myself with a little trepidation.

With a flick of his wrist that belied his age, the old man had his wand out and pointing at Moody quicker than I'd ever believed possible.

"Hello, Zab." the old auror said, not the least perturbed at the situation.

The tall wizard didn't waver, his wand pointed straight at Moody's unmagical eye. "When did you capture Alphonse Rodrigo?" he demanded.

Moody didn't blink. "Twentieth of March, nineteen twenty-eight."

"Who was your favourite instructor at the auror academy?"

Moody grinned. "Alphonse Rodrigo."

"When was the last time we spoke?"

Moody pulled out a pocket watch. "Two hours, fourteen minutes ago."

"I meant before that."

"Why didn't you say? Eight years, four months."

The wizard didn't seem convinced, but his next question startled me.

"Tea or coffee?"

"What are you, a Yank? When did you start drinking coffee?"

The tall wizard let a slow smile appear on his features. "Mad-Eye, it is good to see you again."

"And you, Zab." replied Moody, grabbing his old friend in a brief hug.

"Is this the problem you had?" the new wizard asked, indicating me with a nod of his head.

"Not exactly, but it does involve him."

"And what is it you want from me?" the old wizard asked curiously.

"I want you to take him on as an apprentice."

The wizard called Zab just looked at Moody expressionlessly. For almost a full minute Moody withstood the gaze in silence. To say I was impressed at his nerves would have been an understatement.

"Terms?"

"Pretty standard. Teach over the school year, focus on the requirements for being accepted as an auror. Give him some time to himself during the breaks, allow him to visit his friends occasionally. Only thing I'd insist upon would be that his instruction and location be kept secret, though I doubt you'd have a problem with that."

Still no expression so much as flickered over this man's face. Was he made of stone? I blinked and shook my head slightly. I'd never want to play poker with this guy.

"I'm not sure, Alastor. You know I value my privacy. Secrets I can easily keep, but allowing him unfettered access to come and go as he pleases during school breaks is a security risk I'm not willing to take."

I raised my eyebrows at this. What was he afraid of? I turned what I had seen of this man over in my mind. From the way he greeted Moody, I'd say he was just as paranoid as the old auror. "I know how to keep a secret." I said.

For the first time, the wizard looked over to me. "You will speak when spoken to, boy. If you are to be my apprentice, you would do well to keep quiet until asked a question." he said flatly.

Moody held out a hand, silently telling me to stay quiet. "He's muggle raised, so some of our traditions and expectations are lost on him."

"So you're dumping an orphan who is in danger on me? Some friend you are." he said, though a slight emphasis on certain words gave me the certain impression that he was actually amused at the concept.

"Exactly." Moody turned to me. "Zab here hasn't been in contact with anyone else from the wizarding world for decades. He has no idea who you are, or what you have done."

Something didn't click. I turned to face Zab myself. "May I ask a question?"

He actually smiled. "Yes."

"How did you know I am an orphan, if you haven't heard of me?"

For the first time, Zab actually looked interested in the conversation. "Muggle *raised* ? Interesting choice of words, don't you agree?" he asked me.

Ah, right. "I see. Since I wasn't muggle *born* , you guessed my magical parents had died. What if they had just abandoned me?"

"It was certainly an intriguing time, during the Dark Lord's last reign. Many families lost loved ones, some proud families were all but wiped out. Adoptions at the time were common, a way of keeping grieving minds occupied with the living."

I smiled at the way this man's mind worked. "If I had been abandoned, another wizarding family would have adopted me. But since I was muggle raised, I was likely sent to live with relatives in the muggle world."

A smile was the only answer I got.

"And you know I'm in danger, because the one thing Mr. Moody insisted upon was something you do anyway." I finished.

Zab turned back to Moody. "Alastor, this young lad has a quick mind. I do believe I will enjoy this."

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Apprentice Potter Verbal Sparing

Verbal Sparing

Moody and Zab chatted for a while, discussing some of the recent events of the wizarding world. The topics discussed amused me no end, since there didn't seem to be anything of earth-shattering importance brought up. Voldemort wasn't mentioned. Fudge's prospects at another term in office weren't discussed. It just seemed a little pointless to me.

Except that after a while, one thing struck me as... odd. The same words kept coming up, even when another would have been more precise, or more descriptive.

I'm not sure exactly what tipped me off that they were speaking in code, but a while before we left the pub I knew they were discussing things that had nothing to do with what it appeared they were talking about.

I spent some time examining this wizard who was going to be my teacher. Master? Instructor? I didn't even know what his title would be once I started; what I would be calling him.

Why had I agreed to this in the first place? I mean, I hadn't exactly spent a great deal of time thinking about the consequences of my actions, I had just jumped at the chance to get out from under Dumbledore's thumb.

Now, I was stuck with this fellow, who I didn't know from a hippogriff. For all I knew, he was a clone of Snape.

No, thinking about it logically, Moody knew him. He acted like Moody too, not exactly as paranoid, but just as cautious.

Judging from the questions he asked of my blue-eyed escort when we first arrived, I'd have to assume that he had spent time in the auror academy too. Maybe as a teacher as well as a student. He appeared younger than Moody, but then again, Moody appeared older than Dumbledore's grandmother with his collection of scars and missing body parts.

So, he was probably an ex-auror too, but had left the wizarding world. Fair enough, I could certainly understand *that* particular desire.

Zab's robes were an old style, that much I could make out. But once I looked closer, I noticed that

the material was quite fine and the cut was obviously designed for comfort. Though no expert, I'd guess they were probably very expensive when actually purchased. The colour had faded over the decades, but this man was obviously either well off, or had been in the past.

His eyes were hazel, and often expressed his mirth at one of Moody's reminiscences. The wrinkles around them gave him a distinguished air, though you'd never call this man venerable. He exuded far too much energy for that.

He was clean shaven, except for a small, well trimmed moustache and silver goatee. His accent was difficult to place, but he spoke quite clearly and very precisely. Not even McGonagall spoke so eloquently.

He lounged easily in his leather-backed chair, seemingly comfortable with his surrounds. That struck me as being a little off, given how paranoid he acted on our arrival. Looking closer revealed that Zab certainly wasn't as relaxed as he appeared. One of his hands was kept near his wand at all times, though he pulled off being casual about it remarkably well. He managed to hide his glances around the room within his bursts of laughter, and I was quite sure he could have described each and every person who entered the little pub.

Finally, after almost half an hour, the pair of old wizards rose to their feet. Moody withdrew a pendant from a pocket, one which I recognised as one which all Order members wore. He passed it to Zab. "That will transport the boy to a place where he is safe should anything happen. The command word is the previous owner's pet's name. He knows where I mean. The destination is unplotable, and under the protection of the *Fidelius* charm, so you won't be able to go there with him.

"I have a portkey on me that will take me there in-" Moody continued, pulling out a pocket watch. "-eight minutes." He placed the watch back within his robes. "I've left myself a message to explain the gap in my memory. Go ahead and *Obliviate* me."

Zab nodded. "Are you certain you do not want to delay that a few more minutes? It is disorienting enough having your memory adjusted without having to try and determine your surroundings."

Moody tilted his head to one side, then nodded. "Fine. Time for one last drink." he said, pulling out his ever-present hip flask and taking a nip.

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In fact, Zab left it quite late, obliterating Moody only seconds before his portkey kicked in. I grinned wryly at the thought of how Mad-Eye Moody would react in his current situation. Stunned, with no memory of where he was and what he was doing, and being tugged to a new destination.

I hoped that no one was in the same room, or there would have been a rather interesting meeting. Lots of flashing lights and explosions. Pity it wasn't Guy Fawkes night.

Zab passed me a pinch of powder from a velvet pouch which he kept inside his robes. Though it was very much like floo powder, it just seemed to *feel* a little different.

"Toss it in that fire, lad." He said, indicating another, smaller fireplace. "That is a single-destination floo point. It will take you to your new home."

"Do I need to say a destination?" I asked.

"One thing you will learn about me, is that when I give instructions, they will be clear, concise, and *complete* ." he said evenly.

I swallowed and nodded. I moved over to the smaller fireplace and tossed the powder in. Unlike normal floo, it didn't leave a trace on my palm, even though my hands were damp with nervous perspiration.

The flames flashed green, and I stepped through into what promised to be a rather unique adventure.

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I twisted and turned in the floo system for a long time, much longer than any of my previous floo trips. I spun rapidly for what felt like hours before being launched through the exit. I fell to my knees, unable to maintain my balance. I did manage to retain the presence of mind to move away quickly from the fireplace so that when Zab arrived, he simply stepped out onto the carpet easily, rather than tripping over a uncoordinated git.

Zab extracted my shrunken trunk from a pocket and placed it in one corner of the room before returning it to its usual size. I took the time to look around the room.

Despite the obviously gothic influence, the sitting room was quite comfortably furnished. The centre of the room was dominated by a large, ancient dining table. My eyes flickered over the chairs, counting twenty-two 'normal' chairs, and a pair of high-backed, ornate seats that could easily be called thrones.

The two large chairs sat at either end of the long table, which could have been straight out of one of those old movies with two diners sitting at opposite ends and unable to talk to each other. Though no places were set, the grandeur was obvious to all.

The rest of the room was no less grand, but far less imposing. Three fireplaces dominated three of the four walls, the fourth contained a pair of massive double doors. Three full lounge sets were arranged around the fireplaces, ready for anyone to curl up in one of the large armchairs in front of a roaring fire.

Other items of furniture were arrayed around the room, including several bookshelves, two well stocked stores of potion ingredients, a liquor cabinet and a set of mahogany desks obviously set up for work.

Zab pulled out a chair at one end of the long table, and indicated that I should be seated in a chair next to him. "I imagine you are quite confused at the moment. You are in all probability wondering what fate has in store for you." He smiled. "Or at least what I have in store for you."

I nodded, pulling out the indicated chair. Oh boy, it was comfortable. Thoughts flew through my mind as I tried to determine exactly what to ask first. One thing popped into my mind, and it would probably answer a lot of other questions too.

"Why did you accept me? You obviously want nothing to do with the wizarding world."

Zab gently tapped his chin. "I have not completely severed my ties with the wizarding world, regardless of what you were told. Alastor is a good friend, and we do see each other occasionally." He snorted softly. "Very occasionally. My descendants are still well entrenched and visible within your world, my great-granddaughter even goes to Hogwarts." Zab's eyes turned distant and he smiled, a decade dropped instantly from his face making him appear quite youthful. "Actually, you will get to meet her tomorrow. She generally spends some time with me before heading back for the school year."

I froze. "Are you sure that's a good idea? Professor Moody wanted me to stay out of sight."

A set of perfect white teeth smiled at me. "*Professor* Moody, eh?"

I felt some heat flooding my cheeks. "Well, technically. But he never got to teach us."

"So he told me. I understand that you were the one who exposed his usurper."

I shook my head. I realised he had rather easily deflected my earlier question, but I was willing to humour him for now. "Crouch, that's the guy who took his place, decided to reveal himself to me at the end of my fourth year. He meant to kill me. Dumbledore and some of the other teachers saved me. That was when we found Professor Moody locked in his chest."

Zab nodded. "This Crouch. Was he any relation to Bartimous Crouch?"

I nodded. "That was his name, he was named for his father. Barty Crouch Snr. was a real nut when it came to catching Death Eaters. He had his son convicted and sentenced to Azkaban."

Zab frowned. "I recall Alastor ranting about it to me a few years ago. But didn't his son die there?"

I should my head. "Crouch Snr.'s wife convinced him to swap her for her son. She was dying anyway, so the dementors apparently didn't notice a difference. They each took polyjuice, taking on the other's appearance, and he was kept under house arrest from then on by his father. But he managed to escape with the help of another Death Eater who was free, and they helped completely revive Voldemort."

Zab raised his eyebrows. "My goodness, someone who can say the bastard's name without shivering. How curious."

"Now, can we get back to why I have to meet your great-granddaughter?"

Zab actually laughed. "You don't let anything distract you, do you?"

I wondered if this was a test. "Enough to realise that you still haven't answered my question."

"Is that so?"

I could feel my anger starting to bubble. "You haven't answered any of my questions at all."

Zab closed his eyes and rolled his neck from side to side, the vertebrae creaking. "I know. I'm rather pleased you noticed. As my apprentice, you are expected to learn. I don't have time to teach you."

"Does not one follow the other?"

Zab chuckled softly, but still didn't answer my question. "My great-granddaughter has complained bitterly about the standard of some of the teachers at Hogwarts over the years."

Still no answer. I decided to play along. It seemed to be the quickest way to get the answer to my questions. "I can imagine. Our Potions Professor is one of the worst teachers I have ever come across."

"*One* of the worst?" Zab questioned pointedly.

"Yeah. You never met my second year Defense Professor."

Zab tapped his chin. "Hm, you have just completed your fifth year, yes?" Zab waited for my nod. "Then you would be wrong."

I leaned back in my chair. "You have met Lockhart then." I said, deliberately phrasing it as a statement rather than a question.

"Gilderoy is a buffoon, though he has a real talent for memory charms."

"Had." I clarified.

"He died?" said Zab, clearly surprised. "The man is a coward through and through, what on earth possessed him to go into a dangerous situation?"

"He didn't. Didn't die, that is. He tried casting a memory charm on my best friend Ron and I, but used a broken wand to do it. It backfired on him, and now he is in St. Mungos, with no memory whatsoever."

"Fitting, considering what he did in the past."

I kept quiet, wondering if he was answer my question if I left it unspoken.

Zab winked at me. "You are learning. Good. Gilderoy used to be an obli-vi-ator, and a damn good one. At least, that's what Alastor told me. He was an arrogant little pest as a child though."

This revelation didn't surprise me.

"Apparently, some Death Eaters caught up with a pair of aurors, and tortured them to insanity in front of their young son. Gilderoy was the first on the scene, and he obli-vi-ated the boy without thinking." Zab shook his head in disgust.

"He was thrown out of the corps that day. Using memory charms on toddlers can cause serious side effects on their magical growth."

I swallowed nervously. "Neville." I said softly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Neville Longbottom. One of my friends. One I'd trust with my life. If what you said was true, then it was Lockhart that almost destroyed his magical ability. For a long time, his family thought he was a squib."

Zab snorted. "A Longbottom? They thought a Longbottom was a squib? Bah, idiots." he spat. "I'll tell you this now, and I'm as sure of this as I am of the sun rising tomorrow. That boy will be a great wizard one day, just like the rest of his family."

I nodded, thinking back to that night. "The Sorting Hat put him in Gryffindor, and for a long time, people wondered why. But after our exams, I was tricked into going to the Department of Mysteries. He came with me, he wouldn't even think of letting me go off without him."

Zab looked interested. "Why did you go there? What on earth gave you the justification?"

I looked down at my hands. "I thought my godfather was being kept there."

"You didn't answer my question."

"You never answer mine." I snapped back, trying to push the flood of guilt back.

Zab didn't look like he would respond; he just stared straight at me. Finally he spoke. "I'm not the apprentice."

I coughed to clear my throat. "There was something at the Department that only myself or Voldemort could get. If he went himself, the Ministry would have had to admit he was back. So he tricked me into going there."

"There is a prophecy about the two of you?" Zab blurted, clearly astonished.

I bit the inside of my cheek and let my mind roll over this new information. "You were an Unspeakable." I said finally. "Or at least a high-level auror who knew about what went on at the

Department."

Zab nodded, looking sheepish. "I'm impressed. A lot of people would have accused me of being in league with Voldemort after that outburst. I must admit that you surprised me, young man. That does not happen often.

I felt my face heat up. "The record of the prophecy was smashed in the fight we had. Twelve of Voldemort's Death Eaters came after six of us. We did our best to escape, but we got beaten up pretty bad. It was a miracle that we all survived until the cavalry arrived."

Zab stood and walked over to the locked cabinet. With a quick flick of his wand, the doors sprung open to reveal several dozen bottles of alcohol. He selected a bottle with a muddy coloured liquid and poured a couple of small glasses.

"Here." he said, passing one to me. "A liqueur a muggle friend of mine makes." He took in my obviously reluctant expression. "From chocolate." he finished.

I took a sip. The sweet, syrupy liquid sat easily on my tongue and slid down my throat without leaving a bitter aftertaste. Once it hit my stomach, a wonderfully warm sensation seeped through my body.

"That's nice." I said appreciatively. I took another sip.

"Do you want to talk about this 'cavalry'?"

I sighed deeply and shook my head. "I still feel guilty about it."

"Would you prefer to talk about your godfather? I assume he was in trouble if you felt the need to rescue him."

An almost familiar flash of anger tinged my words. "He was always in trouble, and it wasn't his fault!" I snapped hotly.

"Ah. Alastor mentioned that you were dealing with a great deal of anger. Shall we duel?" he asked, almost eagerly.

That brought me up cold. "What?"

"I do believe I was quite clear."

I shook my head to clear it. "What does duelling have to do with this?" I asked, not a little nervous at the prospect. From what I'd observed, guessed and confirmed, I would be no match for this guy.

Typically, he didn't answer directly. "A wonderfully invigorating way to pass the time, duelling." Zab said casually. "All sorts of emotions can spill forth, leaving one feeling drained afterwards. Being completely emotionless after a period of having emotions rule you is the best therapy there is."

I swallowed my retort and the rest of my drink. "There remains the problem of staying alive long enough to enjoy that feeling." I said, hoping the nervousness I felt would be covered by the alcohol.

"Duelling, my boy, not fighting. Duelling implies acting within rules of engagement, following traditions and form. Tossing spells against another human with the intent to kill or injure is not duelling."

"I can't agree." I said. "The few times I've done what you call duelling, I've had to defend myself from real harm. The rather more numerous times I've done what you call fighting, I've had to defend myself from real harm."

Zab smiled. "Didn't Gilderoy start up a duelling club?"

I groaned at the memory. "Yes. Well, that was what it was called." I said sourly.

Zab actually chuckled. "That wizard couldn't throw a curse or a jinx to save himself."

I smiled. "He didn't. The one and only time he took the floor he was handed his butt by Snape."

Zab nodded, his smile still in place. "Severus doesn't suffer fools gladly."

"He doesn't suffer anyone not from Slytherin gladly, fool or not." I clarified.

Zab nodded, almost sadly. "A real pity that what was the greatest college of magical learning in the world has been in decline since Dumbledore took over."

For some reason, something stirred within me, demanding that I defend Dumbledore. I squashed it, putting it down to the memory of my trusting him enough to call Fawkes to me. "I couldn't say. I don't have any experience of other schools to compare it to."

Zab's eyes flickered with surprise. I guess he had been expecting me to defend the school.

"Don't be so shocked." I said sardonically. "So far, I've been taught by two Death eaters, a werewolf, an incompetent idiot, and a sadistic, even-more-incompetent, Ministry lackey. And that's just in one subject. I shudder to think of how many scratches Dumbledore is going to have to make in the bottom of the proverbial barrel to get this year's *Defense* Professor."

Zab raised his eyebrows. "And yet you achieved an Outstanding on your Defense OWL. They can't have been that bad."

I shook my head. "Two were exceptional professors, the werewolf and one of the Death Eaters. That was Barty Crouch Jr. One was satisfactory, that was the other Death Eater. The other two were so bad that it was a miracle that anyone passed their exams at all."

Zab leaned back in his chair. "Are you aware that in Defense this year, the largest number of Outstanding OWLs were awarded in that subject in a century? That would indicate woman who

taught you this past year was apparently competent enough."

I sneered at him. "It also had the largest number of failures in any subject, ever. Not so competent." I snapped, not sure if that was true or not. I wouldn't bet against it though.

Zab smiled widely and nodded. "True, though if you know that as a fact and not just guessing, you are significantly more informed than the majority of the people out there. The Ministry is going to extraordinary lengths to cover up that fact." Zab chuckled to himself. "They beside themselves trying to work out a way to reconcile those two facts."

I took a deep breath to calm down. "I did guess."

Zab smiled faintly. "I know. There was no way you could have known."

I frowned and squinted at him. "How did you know?"

Zab just smiled broadly at me.

I sighed and thought deeply. "You were talking to Professor Moody in code, so if he knew, he may have told you. He claimed that you had been out of the wizarding world for a long time, yet you knew about Neville's parents, Lockhart's duelling club and that people still shiver when they hear the name Voldemort." I shifted in my seat, still thinking hard. "You see your great-granddaughter on a regular, if infrequent, basis, so she could tell you about things that happen at Hogwarts. You spoke to Mad-Eye eight years ago, so he could have told you about Neville."

I looked away, trying to remember what I could about our discussion. "Moody doesn't shiver when he says 'Voldemort', and I can't imagine that your great-granddaughter mentions the name on any regular basis, so you must have another method of finding out things that are happening in the world."

"Very good, Harry."

I started. "You do know my name!" I stammered.

Zab just nodded.

I frowned deeply again. "You know, the more I think about this, the more things don't make sense. Moody said that you didn't know who I was, but you do know my name, even though you insisted on not formally introducing ourselves until we were here.

"Judging from how you greeted him, and the lengths to which we went to disguise our destination, you are just as security conscious as he is, if not more so. He trusts you, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you trust him. Especially if you figure he doesn't need to know about you." I paused to collect my thoughts.

"You know what I think?" I finally asked.

Zab tilted his head to one side. "I am quite sure you are about to enlighten me."

"You haven't severed your ties with the wizarding world at all. That is a fiction that you encourage, even perpetuate. You have an ear or two at the Ministry, and ear at Hogwarts."

Zab's eyes lit up with delight. "My goodness, exactly how many ears was I born with, I wonder."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "That wasn't a question, so you can't dodge it." I said with amusement.

Zab chuckled softly. "You are not correct, young Potter." My face fell. "But you are not entirely wrong either. You are closer than I expected you to be, and far closer than I'm entirely comfortable in you being."

I swallowed to shift a sudden lump in my throat. "Are you going to oblivate me like you did to Moody?"

Zab shook his head. "Don't be ridiculous. I'd no sooner start messing with your mind than I'd set fire to my library. Alastor requested to be obliviated, in order to protect the secret of your location."

I smiled. "Then exactly why am I going to be meeting your great-granddaughter?"

Zab stood and refilled our glasses with the sweet liqueur. "Well, you managed to direct the conversation back around to your original question. Quite well in fact."

I waited.

Zab hummed with amusement. "Over the years, I have taken on seven apprentices. Since Hogwarts takes all the magical students in the country, there leaves very few options for companionship, at least that of a similar age to yourself."

I framed the thought in my mind so as to not present it as a question. "I hadn't expected companionship to be relevant to an apprenticeship."

I received a nod of approval. "Given your rather unique circumstances, I would have thought that having some people your own age around would be high on your list of priorities."

"Since when does-, er, I mean, I hadn't expected an apprentice to have any say in the priorities of his education."

Zab tilted his head back and laughed. "Well done." he said with a smile. "I suppose we should discuss your priorities, obligations and responsibilities."

I nodded, pleased that I'd finally find out what I had let myself in for.

Zab started. "Right, Alastor asked me to focus on the subjects required for entrance into the auror academy. Is that a desire of yours? You wish to be an auror?"

I frowned for a second. I'm not sure what prompted me to tell McGonagall that I wanted to be an auror. I guess I just felt I had to say something at the time.

No, that's not exactly the truth. After meeting Tonks and Kingsley, I had actually thought that being an auror would be cool. With my good grades in Defense, I just supposed that doing something I was good at would have been the best thing. Now, I'm absolutely sure I don't want to be an auror. At least, I sure as hell don't want to work for the Ministry.

I shook my head. "I thought I did, but recent events have, shall we say, soured me on working for the Ministry." I said, my voice expressing just how sour I found the idea. "No offence." I added, not quite sincerely.

"None taken." Zab replied. "The Ministry you are familiar with has grown introverted, and very conservative."

"Not to mention dictatorial and tyrannical." I said with a grimace.

Zab sighed. "Yes, the signs are there that the current group of leaders are taking the wizarding world in that direction. I could not begin to defend them on some of the decisions they made this past year, with regards to all the education decrees."

"Yeah. The one where they appointed Umbridge Headmistress was a cracker. How did they get that one past the governors?"

Zab's eyes twinkled. "Ah, you spotted that too. Well, between you and me, I'd say the governors are going to have a great deal less influence over the affairs of Hogwarts for the foreseeable future."

I grinned. "Why on earth would that be? Because a convicted Death Eater sat on the board? Or could it be because they delegated their responsibility to appoint a Headmaster to the Ministry, who promptly appointed a sadistic, tyrannical idiot?"

Zab mirrored my grin, and I felt a flash of kinship with him. "Indeed. As satisfying as it is to see their pompous egos pricked, it does leave Hogwarts in the less than capable hands of Albus Dumbledore."

"Perhaps." I said. "I trust Dumbledore will learn his lesson and vet the new Defense professor a little better."

Zab nodded absently. "Yes, for the sake of my great-granddaughter, I hope so too. However, I do need to know why Alastor asked that I focus on auror subjects."

"Probably because Voldemort is coming after me with a vengeance."

"Ah, yes. A rather abrupt summation, but I do believe you are correct. It is good to know what you face, it tends to give one a rather more powerful drive to succeed."

"So, what subjects will I be-, I mean, I believe we should discuss what subjects I will be covering."

Zab nodded and stood, moving over to a locked sideboard. With a wave of his wand, the lock clicked, and the wooden covering rolled itself up. Zab extracted a sheaf of parchment and brought it over to the table.

"These are the syllabus I taught by at the auror academy. I want you to read through them tonight, so that in the morning you can explain to me the levels of your ignorance."

I chuckled at his chosen words. "That's a bit harsh."

"Yes, but true. I shall retire now. You have full use of this room, and your own, which is down that corridor, the third door on the right. The house elves will see to any of your needs." He placed a tiny bell down on the table. "Simply ring that to summon them. Since you have some reading to do tonight, there is no need to rise early. I shall leave you to your own devices until midday. We shall continue our discussion on your education then."

I nodded and stood. "Um, just one thing. I know this is a question, but I would appreciate a straight answer. What do you want me to call you?"

Zab looked me up and down expressionlessly. "Answer a straight question? Me? Goodness gracious me, Alastor would be beside himself with jealousy."

I swallowed. "Well, you haven't formally introduced yourself."

"Names are overrated."

I blinked. "Well, may I-, um, Can-, damn, um-" I shut my mouth until my brain had caught up. "I shall call you Master." I said with far more certainty than I felt.

Zab nodded. "Good choice." He turned and left the room, but I distinctly heard a snicker as he left.

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Only Hermione would love the parchments Zab left me. While many of the items on the list I understood on a broad level, the specifics eluded me. Many of the charms listed I had never come across. Most of the wizarding law details just flew over my head.

I did feel some vague sense of satisfaction in that I could name all but a handful of counter curses and jinxes, even to the point where in one specific example, I jotted down an error in the pronunciation of the spell listed.

As deep as I was into my task, my heart nearly leapt into my mouth when the fireplace flashed green.

I shot to my feet so fast my chair fell over backwards. I whipped around just as a figure emerged

from the flames.

Short, petite and covered in a large, soot-covered cloak. *With a wand in hand !*

With a mental curse, I snatched my wand out. "*Stupify !*" I shouted.

The newcomer had obviously come ready for battle, since he leapt to one side with the reactions of someone expecting resistance. The figure waved its wand in a quick series of movements which were completely unfamiliar to me and said in a feminine voice, "*Imago !*"

Instantly, there were three figures, all mimicking the movements of each other. Cursing to myself, I quickly decided to use the opposite strategy, and promptly cast a dissolution charm on myself.

As the vaguely unsettling sensation of cracked egg tracked down my hair and face, the three images of the intruder all cast the same curse at me.

Instinct kicked in, and I allowed myself to fall over backwards, hissing the counter-curse in a successful effort to send all three curses to the ceiling. Three beams of light hit the ceiling, though only one left a mark. I banished my overturned chair, sending it straight at one of the images.

The chair passed through it as though it was smoke, though I'd guess that smoke would be more substantial than the illusion.

The trio of female images cast "*Finite Incantetum !*" at me, in an effort to dispel my concealment spell, but I rolled into the path of the spell cast by the known illusion. I traced my eyes over the other two, trying to get a clue as to which one was real.

Only one had soot on the cloak.

Our curses were both cast at the same time, and intersected with a flash of light and sparks. I grunted as the flash temporarily blinded me, and it was only my opponent's girlish yelp that alerted me to the fact that she was blind too.

And had given me her position with that shout. As had I.

She cast another *Finite Incantetum* at me as I leapt at her, my eyes closed and watering. I felt her spell hit my shoulder, dispelling my camouflage, and I barked my shin on the leg of the table, but in my adrenaline infused haze, I felt no pain. My forearms stretched in front of me collided with something soft and warm, and I managed to wrap my left arm around my opponent's waist. Even though I hadn't gone through any sort of growth spurt, I still managed to pull her to the floor.

Air was forced from my lungs with a grunt as an elbow struck me sharply in the stomach.

Somehow, she managed to fire off a jinx, and my legs locked together. With a growl, I snapped a silencing charm, but quite obviously missed. In desperation, I let go with my left hand and groped for her wand.

That was how Zab found us a few seconds later, wrestling on the floor. I had the wrist of her wand hand gripped in my left, and she had mine likewise. The only thing going for me was that I was on top, sitting across her waist, with my legs locked together.

"What is the meaning of this?" shouted Zab from the door.

My relief seemed to be contagious, because for some reason, my captive relaxed too.

I blinked rapidly to clear my vision, only to start in shock as I recognised just who it was I had grabbed.

She blurted a question I really had no easy answer for.

"Potter? What in Salazar Slytherin's name are you doing here?"

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## **Apprentice Potter Girls are Crazy**

### **Girls are crazy**

"Potter? What in Salazar Slytherin's name are you doing here?"

I stared down at the surprised features of Blaise Zabini, too stunned to say anything. Fortunately, Zab came to my rescue.

"Potter? Exactly what are you doing on top of my great-granddaughter?" He asked, amusement and innuendo evident in his voice.

That immediately got my hackles up. "I didn't mean to! She attacked me!"

"Bollocks!" Blaise snapped, as she started to struggle again. "You attacked me first!"

"You had your wand out!" I retorted.

Blaise finally wrenched her hands away from mine. "That's because I was turning up here early!" she said hotly.

"You're ready to duel when you show up through the floo?" I gapped, probably looking as confused as a first-year on first entering Hogwarts.

"She should be." said Zab sternly. "I'll attack anyone who comes through that floo point unexpectedly." With a flick of his wand, my legs felt free once more.

"Oh." was all I could think to say. I stood up and held out a hand to Blaise in a silent offer to help her to her feet. "Sorry." I offered.

Blaise ignored my hand and rose gracefully to her feet herself, breathing in and out deeply, staying silent but watching me closely. After a few moments she nodded. "Fine. Just don't do it again."

"Not likely." I said with a wry grin, and rubbed various sore places of my anatomy.

"Blaise?" said Zab, an edge in his voice. "You came here expecting resistance, and yet you were overpowered?"

"I was not!" she said with not a little indignation. "I almost had him where I wanted him."

Zab's lips twitched. "Really?" he said, leaving absolutely no doubt what was on his mind.

Blaise blinked and instantly reddened. "That's not what I meant." she said softly.

My mind finally caught up with events. "Zabini?" I turned to face Zab. "Zab is short for Zabini?"

My new master gave me a sour look and rolled his eyes. "Here I was thinking you were over your habit of asking questions. You were doing so well."

Blaise snorted. "You're subjecting him to that too?"

Zab gave her a superior expression. "I do not subject anyone to anything. I merely feel that questions do not assist learning. In discovering things for yourself, both facts and reasons are-

"-far more firmly entrenched in memory." Blaise parroted. "Yes, Great-grandfather, I know."

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That wasn't to be the last time I got assaulted that night.

Zab and Blaise had left the room to catch up, and it was obvious to all the fondness they had for each other.

Blaise was certainly an enigma, I thought an hour or so later, as I entered my designated room. While in no way as pretty as Cho or the Patil twins, she certainly wasn't unattractive. She was obviously skilled in what Zab called duelling; she knew spells I'd never seen before.

With no false modesty, I did believe I was one of the better duellers in our year. After all, I had had both the incentive and the opportunity to develop my skills. But earlier this evening, Blaise had come close to incapacitating me quickly. I shook my head to clear my thoughts. The room contained a table, two chairs and a bed. A well-stocked woodbin sat next to the fireplace, itself alight with a cheery glow. The only thing out of place was the bedraggled snowy owl furiously hammering on the outside of the window with her beak.

"Oh, bollocks!" I said as I ran over and let Hedwig in. "I'm sorry girl, I just- OW!"

Hedwig expressed her displeasure by sinking her talons into my arm, then leaning over and biting my wrist. I gritted my teeth and let her vent, I certainly couldn't blame her for her anger. Looking out the window, I could understand just why she was so pissed at me.

We were on the second or third floor, and there wasn't a tree within half a mile. Poor Hedwig had been sitting on the window ledge in the pouring rain waiting for me to let her in.

"Look." I said through clenched teeth. "I know you're bloody angry, but drinking my blood isn't going to make you better." I paused. "Actually, I suppose it may make you feel better."

Hedwig let go and looked up at me, her amber eyes expressing her displeasure really quite eloquently.

"I said I'm sorry girl. Here, let me get you something to eat."

Hedwig gave me a hoot of anger and sank her sharp beak into the base of my thumb.

"Ow! Ok, you're not hungry, I get it. Sorry. Um, let's get you warm and dry."

Hedwig shook her head irritably. I groped around in my trunk with one hand for a dry towel. I was apparently taking too long, given Hedwig's sudden growl.

"You have a real way with the ladies, Potter."

I looked up at my visitor. Blaise was standing in the doorway, nonchalantly leaning against the doorframe. "Why on earth don't you cast a drying charm on her, instead of fumbling around for a towel?"

"We are out of school." I pointed out, only to wince for two reasons. Firstly, we'd just exchanged almost a dozen spells between us without a peep from the Ministry, and secondly, not to mention more importantly, Hedwig had clenched her talons again.

Blaise rolled her eyes. "You are such a muggle sometimes." she said, and deftly cast a drying charm at Hedwig. "The Ministry hasn't got a clue what is happening here. Underage magic can't be tracked at an unplottable location."

I frowned. "Bastards." I hissed, expression quite a bit of feeling.

Blaise raised her eyebrows. "Potter? Don't you know noble heroes aren't supposed to use language like that."

I snorted with laughter at her tone. "Good thing I'm not a hero then. No, I was thinking about last summer. I spent quite some time cleaning an unplottable house from top to bottom without magic. The adults there neglected to tell us that we wouldn't have been caught if we'd used magic."

Blaise frowned herself. "I thought you stayed in the muggle world during the holidays. What were you doing at an unplottable house?"

I nodded glumly. "I do. But after I was attacked, Dumbledore decided to-"

"What?" Blaise asked, curious.

"Um, I'm not sure if I should tell you."

Blaise's expression darkened. "Fine. See you 'round." she snapped, turning to leave.

"Wait!" I said, not sure why.

"What?"

I stood there blankly. "Um, I, sorry. It's just that, I just don't trust anyone anymore. And I mean anyone."

"Not even Dumbledore?" she asked in a rather sarcastically sweet tone.

"Especially not *him* ." I snarled in response.

To say she looked surprised would be an understatement. "Huh? I thought that you Gryffindors thought Dumbledore walked on water."

"I wouldn't trust him to walk on wet pavement. He's a great wizard, no one who's seen him in action could say otherwise. But he's a crap guardian."

Blaise walked over and sat on my bed cross-legged. Hedwig floated over to her on silent wings and nuzzled her hand.

"Traitor." I said fondly, sitting on the foot of the bed.

"What did Dumbledore do?" Blaise asked, gently running her fingers down the back of Hedwig's now-dry feathered head.

I shook my head. "All this time, all these years, I trusted him. With everything. Only to find out that he has been lying to me ever since I met him." I looked directly into her eyes. Rather pretty pale blue eyes. "It turns out that my entire shit life is due to him."

Blaise tilted her head to one side. "What about You-Know-Who?"

I waved away her question. "Do you remember Sirius Black?"

Blaise blinked in surprise at the apparent non sequitur. "Of course. But he hasn't been seen in years."

I sighed and took a deep breath. "He is my godfather. I spent a few weeks with him last summer. He and my father were best friends."

The shocked look on her face was quite satisfying. Blaise finally nodded. "That last bit I knew." she said, her voice softly stunned. "My mother had a crush on Black for a while at school, but she was two years older than him."

"Well, the night that my parents died, Sirius arrived at their house, to find Hagrid carrying me out of the ruins, with this bloody cut on my head."

"I always wondered how you got your scar. Every book that you've been in mention it, but none of them say how you got it. Most float the theory that the Dark Lord gave it to you."

I shrugged, not really interested in talking about it. "Sirius asked Hagrid to give me to him, since he was my godfather."

Blaise's expression turned indignant. "Good thing he didn't!"

I shook my head. "I wish he had."

"What? Why?"

"Because Sirius didn't betray my parent's location to Voldemort."

"Yes he did. He was their Secret Keeper. Everyone knows that."

I gave her a sad smile. "How did everyone know that?"

The young Slytherin looked uncomfortable. "Well, who else would your father have chosen?"

I snapped my fingers. "Exactly! Who else. Everyone knew that Sirius was their Secret Keeper." I raised my eyebrows questioningly. "As a Slytherin, you don't see anything wrong with that scenario?"

Blaise grimaced. "Too obvious."

I nodded. "Sirius convinced my father to make Peter Pettigrew their Secret Keeper."

Blaise frowned, deep in thought. "Then what happened when Pettigrew cornered Black?"

"What do you think?" I asked her.

She gave me a sour look. "I get enough of that from Great-grandfather, I don't need more from you."

I smiled. "Sorry. Pettigrew set a trap for Sirius. He killed all those people, cut off his finger and turned into a rat to escape down a sewer."

"A rat?"

"Yeah. He was an animagus."

Blaise nodded. "So Black was arrested and imprisoned, and you got sent to live in the muggle world."

I nodded with a growl. "If Dumbledore had just kept his big fat nose out of it, I'd have grown up with Sirius. Pettigrew would have been captured or on the run, and Voldemort wouldn't have been able to return."

Blaise shivered. "Don't say his name!" she said.

"Why not? It's just a name."

Blaise ignored my challenge. "So what has soured you on Dumbledore now? All that happened years ago."

"Sirius and I exchanged letters ever since he escaped from Hogwarts at the end of our third year. He was at Hogwarts after I brought Cedric back from..." I swallowed, trying to shift the lump in my throat.

Blaise leaned forward and placed a small hand on my own. "For what its worth, I never believed that you had anything to do with his death."

I nodded, not trusting my voice. "Thanks." I said thickly. "It just hurts to talk about. I've not done many things more difficult than tell Skeeter what happened that night."

"I can imagine."

"Anyway, that summer, the Ministry sent two dementors after me."

Blaise leaned back surprise and disbelief mixed in her face. "Dementors?"

"That was the reaction Fudge was after." I said sourly. Quickly, I recounted the rather terrifying events that happened last year. "I drove them off, but got a letter saying that they were going to snap my wand and expel me from Hogwarts."

"But?" Blaise asked.

I gave her a vicious grin. "Fudge didn't reckon on there being a squib nearby who saw the whole thing."

Blaise burst out laughing. "Oh, that would have been hilarious, seeing his expression."

I nodded. "It was funny when I thought back on it afterwards. Anyway, during the past year, I kept in contact with Sirius. Voldemort found out how much I meant to him." I closed my eyes in an effort to keep tears from forming. "I was tricked into thinking that Voldemort had Sirius at the Department of Mysteries."

Blaise looked shocked. "You believed him?"

I felt a flash of anger. "Hey, it felt real at the time!"

She rolled her eyes. "Potter, why would the bloody Dark Lord keep a captive in the middle of the Ministry, the very institution that was denying his existence?"

I coughed. "I didn't think of that."

Blaise grinned at me. "You are such a *Gryffindor* . So let me guess, you went off charging to the

rescue?"

I nodded forlornly. "Turns out it was us that needed saving. Sirius and the others came to our rescue."

"Us? Others?"

I hesitated. What was I saying? I was talking to a *Slytherin* , for Merlin's sake. I closed my eyes and examined my mind, only to find that there were no external influences on me. I opened my eyes and looked at Blaise.

"Sorry. I was just wondering why I was telling you all this."

She shrugged her shoulders slightly. "Because I asked?" she offered with an impish grin.

I didn't answer her, I just looked down at my hands.

"It's because I'm in Slytherin, isn't it?" she said with a hard edge to her voice, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed.

I shook my head emphatically. "No. It's just that there are things I haven't even told Ron and Hermione."

She relaxed back onto the bed. "You know, from the way the three of you go around school, I thought that you told them everything. Especially *Granger* ."

Blaise's emphasis on Hermione's name caused me to pause. I just knew I shouldn't, violating someone's thoughts was an awful thing to do, but I gently pressed my consciousness into Blaise's mind and got a sense of...

"You're jealous?" I blurted.

Blaise tensed and her eyes darted around the room for a second, but she quickly relaxed. "Of course. Have you got any idea just how difficult it is to make really close friends in Slytherin? We are all ambitious, but we are also *aware* of that ambition in others."

I see. "I never really thought about it."

"Yeah, well, if you come from a family like the Malfoys or the Parkinsons, then everyone wants to be close to you, as though respectability can be achieved from association."

I smirked. "The Malfoys aren't exactly respectable now."

Blaise actually sighed with relief. "I know, and you have no idea just how pleased I am. That blond idiot was doing everything in his power to ensure everyone hated Slytherin house." She shook her head. "He actually thought that Slytherin won the bloody House Cup this year."

My surprise must have shown on my face.

"What? You're surprised that even us Slytherin's think Malfoy is a git? Don't be."

"A lot of Slytherin house seems to agree with him and his politics."

Blaise snorted. "Again, we are just back to the idiots who think that by associating with someone perceived as respectable, they are somehow respectable themselves." She looked me straight in the eye. "Do you know how difficult it is as a half-blood in Slytherin?"

"One of your parents was muggle-born?"

She nodded. "My mother is like your friend Granger. She had no idea magic existed until she got her letter. Anyway, you didn't answer my question. How difficult do you think it is as a half-blood in Slytherin?"

"Half as hard as for a muggle-born?"

Blaise blinked at my answer but nodded with a sad smile. "Yeah, but there aren't many of those."

"What about those who were brought up as muggles?"

"They're treated like muggle-borns." she said, matter-of-factly.

"Then I wonder how I would have fared if the Sorting Hat got its way?"

Blaise coughed. "What?"

"That bloody hat. It wanted to put me in Slytherin."

"You're kidding."

I shook my head. "Nope. I asked it not to. I told it anywhere but Slytherin."

Blaise looked at me in wonder. "You actually *argued* with the Sorting Hat?"

"I'm not sure 'argued' is the right word. It told me that I'd do well in Slytherin, but I'd been introduced to Malfoy's obnoxious side by then, and he'd already been put there. It was the last place on earth I wanted to be."

Blaise looked at me coyly. "I wonder who would have been your friends then? Who would have been your Slytherin version of Weasley and Granger?"

Before I could answer, Zab knocked on the door-frame of the open door. "Sorry to interrupt, but you really need to be getting your rest, both of you." He smirked at us. "Besides, I'm far too young to be a great-great-grandfather."

My face heated quite quickly, just as quickly as Blaise's turned red. "GoodnightPotter." she blurted, and hurriedly left the room.

"Good night, Blaise." I said to her back as she dashed from the room. I looked up at the amused expression on my new Master's face. "Good night, Master."

Zab bowed slightly. "To you too, Harry."

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A small elf came to inform me in a high squeaky voice that lunch was served. I gathered the sheafs of parchment Zab had given me the night before. There had been several times after Blaise left that I found myself concentrating on the memory of her sitting on my bed rather than on the task Zab had assigned me.

As such, the sun had started peaking over the horizon by the time I finally rolled into bed. Now, lunch was being served, and it would be my breakfast.

I made my way down the short corridor to the room where we had arrived last night. The doors opened to reveal three place settings at one end of the main table.

Zab was sitting at the head, Blaise to his right. He stood as I arrived. "Good Morning, Harry. I trust you slept well?"

I nodded, forcing back a yawn. "I just got to sleep late."

Blaise gave me a smirk, and I had a flash of intuition that she was thinking something rather inappropriate. I gave her a sour look. She poked her tongue out at me.

"That's enough, children." Zab said, a smile on his face at our antics. "Harry, sit."

I obeyed quickly, just in time for the elves to begin serving us.

Lunch passed easily, and I found myself rather enjoying the banter with Blaise, and the question/non-answer method of imparting information with my new Master.

Finally, two elves cleared the table away, and Zab gestured towards the pile of papers. "How did you fare looking over the material I gave you?"

"It was interesting, at least most of it was. The stuff on wizarding law was, shall we say, an excellent insomnia cure."

Zab nodded. "Not to mention, probably out of date. I shudder to think of the changes Fudge has made to the lawbooks since I last checked the code."

"I'd guess that was a few years ago." I said, quite proud that I didn't actually ask a question.

"You'd be wrong." said Zab. "I last checked it a few days ago."

Blaise laughed, easily and genuinely. The sound surprised me, I had not ever heard such a merry noise from a Slytherin. "Fudge is having to face an impeachment panel. During the hearing that is going on at the moment, someone gave evidence of the criminal activities one of his secretaries got up to last year."

I felt my face redden slightly. "That would be me."

Blaise blinked. "What do you mean?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "After what happened at the Ministry at the end of last year, Madam Bones wanted to know exactly what Umbridge got up to. She was the one who ordered the dementors after me. Anyway, the night I went charging off on an idiot's mission, she admitted sending them after me, and then threatened to use the Cruciatus curse on me."

Both Zab and Blaise gave small gasps on surprise. "Did she actually use it?" Blaise asked.

I shook my head. "From what I saw of her level of magic skill, I'm not sure she'd be able to cast it."

Zab cleared his throat. "Don't bet on that. That woman has a rather impressive talent for curses."

Blaise shrugged. "She'd have to, give the lack of talent she displayed in every other bloody area."

Zab chuckled. "Exactly how did you go in your OWLs, young lady? What areas did you display talent in, hm?"

"I got nine, thank you very much." Blaise said primly. "I got an O in Potions, Defense and Charms, an E in Herbology, Transfiguration and Arithmancy, and an A in Care of Magical creatures, Astronomy and History of Magic."

I blinked. "Well done, Blaise!" I congratulated her.

She blushed. "Thanks." She looked at Zab, pride obvious on her face. "I was the only Slytherin to get an O in Defense, so I should thank you for your help."

"You are most welcome, Blaise. How did your classmates go in Potions?"

Blaise growled softly. "Snape all but gave us the bloody exam beforehand. Any competent brewer could have got an O in they're in Slytherin."

I found this very interesting. "Snape gave you the exam beforehand?"

Blaise shook her head. "No, the exams are charmed for secrecy. But he's been teaching for what, fourteen years now? He knows what will be on the exam."

I grumbled to myself. "He probably does that to make sure that the Slytherins outnumber the other students in his Advanced Potions class."

"Of course," replied Blaise, as though it were obvious. "Though it also brings up the average score for his students. It makes it easier for him to claim that he is a good teacher."

Zab snarled. "A good teacher can impart lessons onto all students, not just those with a talent for that specific discipline."

I quipped, "No one ever claimed Snape was a good teacher."

Zab rounded on me. "Regardless of your personal feelings, *all* teachers should be shown respect."

I swallowed, a little unnerved at his tone, but I sure as hell wasn't about to back down on *this* subject. "Like I told him yesterday, he doesn't teach. Ergo, he's not a teacher." I stared back at Zab.

Blaise kicked me under the table. "You saw Snape yesterday?"

I nodded, surreptitiously reaching down and rubbing my leg. "We finally had it out." My grimace of pain turned quickly into a smile of remembrance. Though my eyes were open, I was looking at the memory of Snape lying slumped against a shattered mirror. "There was no hiding behind the student/teacher relationship, no pretending that there were any rules. It had been coming for a long time, and neither of us held back. It was a most satisfying feeling, blasting him across the room."

"What?" she exclaimed, shocked to the core.

"Last time I saw him, he was lying against a wall, bleeding from the nose and ears."

Zab spoke up, his voice even, though laced with disapproval. "I hardly think that possible, Harry. Severus is a fully trained wizard, more than a match even for you."

I snarled at my new Master. "I did! He invaded my thoughts, my memories!" I stopped there, feeling quite ashamed at how I had just spoken to Zab. "I just forced him out of my mind a fair bit harder than was necessary."

Zab leaned forward, an intensely interested expression on his features. "Forced him out? Are you referring to Occlumancy?"

I nodded. "Snake-face has been trying to get into my thoughts, so Dumbledore asked Snape to teach me to be an Occlumens. After what happened at the Ministry, I've been practising for hours every night. I won't let it happen ever again." I finished defiantly.

Zab leaned back in his chair, his poker-face back in place. I felt a tiny wisp of a mental touch before reacting violently, clenching my eyes and fists, slamming up my shields so fast I could almost hear my mind shut itself off.

Zab hissed, and I risked opening one eye. He was clutching at his temples, his own eyes closed.



"Let... me... go..." he croaked.

A lot slower, I lowered my defenses, noting that the tiny flicker of consciousness I felt was still caught in my mind. I let it go quickly.

Zab took a deep breath, and his face relaxed. "You weren't exaggerating." He opened his eyes and stared deep into my own. "You expended far too much effort and energy just then. There was no need to erect your defenses so violently." He traced a fingertip around the edge of his goatee. "Your technique is crude, but effective. Am I correct in assuming that the majority of your skill has come from practising on your own?"

I nodded, still getting my breath back.

"As I suspected. You have progressed far without direction. A remarkable feat, though a pity in some respects. You will need to unlearn some of what you have learned."

I swallowed. "Each time I've used it suddenly, I've been drained just afterwards."

Blaise was turning her head to face each of us as though we were playing a particularly long tennis match. "What's going on?" she whispered.

"Harry has been taught the rudimentary basics of a mental discipline called Occlumancy. In essence, it is defending the mind against external influences, attacks and stimuli."

"It also wards off the effects of creatures like Veela." I added, much to Zab's surprise.

"It does? Hm, I suppose it would, though I've never had the inclination nor occasion to test that theory. Would you care to explain the circumstances?"

I shrugged. "Fleur Delacour, one of the Triwizard Champions, is in London, supposedly to improve her English, though it probably has more to do with the fact that her boyfriend works for the London branch of Gringotts."

Blaise harrumphed.

I grinned at her. "Anyway, yesterday she approached me, and I felt my mind start dribbling out of my ears. I raised my shields, and she turned into just a pretty girl, rather than a perfect goddess."

Zab nodded, ignoring Blaise's reaction. "A fortuitous discovery."

I waited, mentally screaming the question on behalf of both Blaise and myself.

Zab smiled. "I understand that some magical European creatures have joined the Dark Lord. The latest reports indicate that at least two full clans of veelas have joined the Dark. The fact that Occlumancy protects somewhat from their influence is very good news. I should pass this intelligence along to Alastor."

Zab rose to his feet. "Blaise, I would be most appreciative if you would show our guest the rest of the manor. Mr. Potter, do behave yourself, don't use your fame to take advantage of my naive great-granddaughter."

I gave him a sour look, which must have corresponded quite nicely with my flaming face. Blaise graced him with her own scowl, voraciously objecting to him calling her naive.

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The rest of the day passed pleasantly enough. Blaise was a warm hostess, though occasionally her temper flared at odd things I said. Those episodes quickly passed, though they did put me on edge. I could not be sure what topics of conversation to which she would find worthy of exploding.

The Zabini family manor was quite grand and spacious, with incredibly high ceilings in the main entrance and reception rooms. The gothic style was very well done, not giving me the willies until the sun went down. The shadows lengthened quickly, making the airy rooms suddenly become dark and foreboding.

Blaise retreated to her own room after dinner, leaving me to my own devices. I helped myself to tiny glass of the chocolate liqueur, and moved over to one of the fireplaces.

I collapsed into one of the comfortable looking armchairs in front of the fire, discovering to my fatigued delight that it was as comfortable as it looked, if not more so. The leather had an odd texture, almost like furry satin. It felt absolutely delightful to trace my palm over the chair. I closed my eyes and traced my fingers over the armrest. The wonderfully soft material made suede feel like sandpaper.

"You're in my chair."

I snapped my eyes open and looked up to see Blaise standing in front of me, fists on her hips.

"Oh, sorry." I said, getting to my feet, not without a little disappointment.

Blaise rolled her eyes and put her hands on my chest, then gave me a sharp shove, pushing me back down onto the chair. "Bloody Gryffindors." she muttered.

"Wha-" I started to say, only to watch in fascinated horror as she sat herself down on my right, squirming slightly to both force me to my left and to get comfortable. I raised my right arm in an unthinking reaction, allowing her to wriggle under my guard.

She placed an arm around my rather tense waist, leaned her cheek against my chest and gave a happy sigh. "You're rather comfortable, Potter." She tilted her head up to look into my eyes. "At least you will be once you relax. I'm not going to bite."

"I, ah..." I said. My arm was still straight up in the air. I grabbed hold of my hair, just to have my arm doing something. I hoped against hope that I wouldn't have to grab my ear just to stay in this position.

Blaise sighed softly. "Eloquent as always. Now put your bloody arm around me, you look like an idiot holding it up like that."

"Um, are you sure?"

She placed her head back against my chest and gave me a mock growl. At least I hoped it was a mock growl. "No, you're taking advantage of me. You've cunningly manoeuvred me into hugging you. Well done."

I gently placed my arm around her shoulders, and I couldn't help but notice just how... warm she was. "Sorry. I'm just not used to this."

"Come on. Surely you've had some good snog sessions in Gryffindor Tower. What about Granger? Or that girl you took to the ball in our forth year, what was her name? Patil? Or the Weasley girl?"

I swallowed nervously, wondering where this was going. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I've never been in this situation. With any girl."

Blaise frowned. "Really?"

"Really."

For some reason, Blaise seemed more comfortable after that. "Well you won't be able to say that again." she said, and I could feel the smile on her cheeks against my chest. "For someone with your fame, I'd have thought you'd have been a hit with all the Gryffindor witches."

"Then I guess you don't know me all that well then." I replied.

Blaise snorted with laughter. "No kidding. Before yesterday we'd spoken all of ten words to each other since our sorting. All I know of you is what I've seen and heard from third parties." She gave a small sigh. "Now, are you going to relax, or am I going to have to hit you with a calming spell?"

I tried to relax, I really did. But each time I felt some tension leaving my body, I became painfully aware of more tensed muscles in other parts of my body.

"Bloody hell, Potter. I'm not going to hurt you. Relax!" She twisted slightly to bring her left arm into view, and looked at her muggle watch for a few moments. "Your heart rate is just under one hundred and thirty."

"Only that?" I stammered.

She actually giggled. "You really haven't been in this situation before, have you?"

"No." I answered honestly.

"Have you ever kissed a girl?" she asked slyly.

"Um, yes. Sort of." I replied, not sure why I even answered her. I felt my face heat up.

Though I couldn't see, I just knew she was rolling her eyes.

"Either you have or you haven't, Potter. Which is it?"

I sighed at the memory. "Cho kissed me. It shocked me at the time, so much that I didn't really kiss her back."

Blaise nodded, but stayed silent for a long while. Slowly, I relaxed all the muscles under my conscious control, but I still felt my heart beating wildly. After a short while, I also became rather embarrassingly aware of another part of my anatomy.

Fortunately, Blaise's breathing had evened out, and her warm breath gently ruffled my shirt, lightly tickling me. I closed my eyes, letting my mind focus on the sensation. For a long time, I sat there with a small smile on my face, simply enjoying the feeling of a soft, warm body pressed comfortably against my own.

I must have dozed off, because I briefly flickered awake as Zab gently covered us with a blanket. I mouthed my thanks, but that was the last thing I remembered that evening.

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Apprentice Potter Training Begins

Training begins

Though I'd hardly call them lessons, my apprenticeship began the next day with a rather more interesting session on Occlumancy. Since Snape had been my only teacher in that discipline so far, I literally had no idea there were other ways of teaching the skill, though I should have guessed there would be.

"You expend a great deal of energy when you raise your shields. Though resilient, a determined attacker could slip through." Zab lectured.

"Dumbledore couldn't slip past my defences at the hearing." I pointed out.

Zab nodded. "True, but I was referring to a more time-consuming method of attack. Remember, the majority of assaults which occlumancy defends against are discrete, and performed over a long time. Using the same amount of effort to defend against such an insidious attack would drain you beyond the point of exhaustion. We will discuss and practise that form of offensive magic another time. Right now, I'd like to refine your defensive-"

"What?" I blurted. "We're going to practise an attack?"

Zab raised his eyebrows. "I am not accustomed to being interrupted, young man." he said, his voice softer than the cover on last night's armchair, but carrying an unmistakable edge. "I will not tolerate the disrespect you seem to habitually show your instructors."

I blinked and swallowed, my face heating up. "I'm sorry. You just surprised me, that's all. I'll do my best to-"

"I am not interested in your apologies. Only your obedience."

Again, I swallowed, trying to move the lump of dread from my throat, and nodded.

"Good. As to the reason for your surprise, I do not expect anyone to be able to fend off an attack without at least a working knowledge of the intricacies involved in making that same attack on another. The current Ministry administration's ongoing disapproval of examining offensive magicks is misguided in the extreme."

I tilted my head to one side. "You are actually suggesting that I should learn the Dark Arts?"

Zab rolled his eyes. "Your exemplary score in your Defence OWL would seem to indicate that you already have more than just a passing familiarity with the Dark Arts."

"But I don't use them!"

"Really? Never?" Zab asked politely.

I ground my teeth together. "Well. Yes, I have used them." I admitted softly. "The Cruciatus curse." I clarified, more than a little apprehensive as to what his reaction would be.

Zab nodded, not the least perturbed. "To what effect?"

"Not much." I replied, thinking on just how quickly Bellatrix shrugged off my curse.

"Why do you think such a powerful curse had not much effect?"

I sighed, not wanting to remember the events at the Ministry. "I had only righteous anger, not hate, when I cast the spell."

"Ah. And what have you learned?"

I frowned, wondering what he was getting at. "That the curse needs hate to drive it properly." I offered.

Zab gave a little sigh of his own. "Specifically, yes, the Cruciatus is more potent when hate is used as an emotional amplifier, rather than righteous anger. But I was thinking of a more general lesson. On not just the Dark Arts either."

I shook my head slowly. "I'm sorry, I've missed it."

Zab nodded. "It will come to you. Of that I have no doubt. Now, explain to me what you understand to be the basics involved in defending the mind using Occlumancy."

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Zab and I spent many hours over the next few days reviewing my knowledge and skill level with the various disciplines that made up the art of Occlumancy. His methods of teaching were similar to Snape only in that he made me practise the techniques before attacking me, but that was it.

Zab was gentle where Snape was blunt. Where Snape was repetitive, Zab changed tactics. Where Snape forced himself into my mind with the brutality of a rapist, Zab was subtle, *insinuating* his consciousness into my own time and time again. One technique was interesting in that he made no attempt to breach the walls I could erect around my mind. He seemed to lay his mind against my defences, and then *remember* things.

It sounds odd, but this method flickered tantalising images at the edge of my mind, just beyond the limits of my conscious, not unlike a dream you just couldn't quite remember on waking. It called to my curiosity, the same weakness Voldemort himself exploited over the year. I tended to find myself reaching out to the images, in an unconscious effort to work out exactly what they were. After the fifth time Zab easily breached my defences, we worked on a method of creating stronger mental walls, and practised ignoring things.

But the most amazing difference was that Zab expected me to use the very same techniques he was teaching me to defeat. Time after time, he would allow me to attempt to do the very thing he was doing to me.

It was quite fascinating how quickly I progressed when the teacher worked with me, rather than against me. By actually using the very same techniques to attempt to break into Zab's mind, I gained quite a few insights into how better to defend against him.

One thing that I didn't enjoy was Zab's other tests. He had Blaise fire harmless curses and hexes at me, ones that most second-years could easily defend against; spells that I thought I could defend against in my sleep. While my attention was focused on Blaise, Zab would again subtly try and break through to my mind.

It was one of the most difficult mental challenges I have ever attempted. The only other thing that could compare was the time in the graveyard after Voldemort had risen, when our wands were linked. The mental effort of forcing the golden beads away from me and towards Voldemort was just as mentally draining.

Blaise seemed to enjoy herself a bit too much during these sessions. Though she never tried to hurt me at all, she did find it amusing to catch me in a body bind or hit me with the jelly-legs jinx. I suppose it wouldn't be unlike someone watching a student deliberately trip over a judo expert. My scowl always sent her into gales of laughter, which in turn put a smile on Zab's face.

After what felt like the hundredth time I failed to keep Zab from my mind, I collapsed with a grunt into a heap on the ground, and wiped the sweat from my eyes. "I don't think I'm ready for this level of distraction, Master."

Zab nodded in agreement. "Indeed."

That put a frown on my face. I looked up at Blaise, only to note that she also looked a little confused. "Then why are we doing this?" I closed my eyes with a sigh. "I mean, then this just seems fruitless."

Zab strolled over to the side of the room and took a glass of water from the sideboard. Passing it to me, he said, "On the contrary, I believe it is indeed bearing fruit."

Blaise snorted. "Apples?"

Zab gave her what could only be described as 'a look'. "Thank you for your excellent and well

thought-out input, young lady. Next time you have something of equal merit to add, do the world a favour and keep it to yourself."

Blaise just grinned back.

Zab turned back to me. "I think you've misunderstood the reason we are conducting these tests. Given that I had no expectation that you would even remotely get close to succeeding, why do you think I am allowing my Great-granddaughter to indulge her rather unladylike mischievous side?"

"Mischievous? Don't you mean malicious?" I retorted, directing my words with a grin at Blaise.

She gave me a pout.

"Possibly." Zab conceded, coming the closest he had ever done to answering one of my questions outright. "However, Blaise's psychological motivations aside, would you care to answer my question?"

I took a sip of the cool water while thinking deeply. After a few moments, I had still come up with nothing. "I suppose the obvious answer is to show me just how difficult Occlumancy is to use when you are focusing on something else." I looked up into Zab's eyes. "However, that is not the reason."

Zab nodded, a faint smile on his lips. "Interesting. You are correct. While identifying the reason something is not occurring is not generally helpful, it can assist to logically deduce the reason something *is* occurring."

I licked my lips and frowned. "Perhaps it would help if you told me exactly what fruit my efforts were bearing."

"Probably."

I sighed at Zab's response. What was he trying to teach me? I thought back to when I told him about my training under Snape. My eyes snapped open wide. "You're trying to teach me how to use Occlumancy with a minimum of effort!" I blurted.

Zab smiled and nodded. "I told you earlier that you were expending far too much effort and energy on your mental defences. By putting you in a situation where you needed to focus on other dangers, you have been forced by necessity to use far less effort on Occlumancy."

Zab took my half finished glass of water. "Not an ideal method of breaking bad habits, but very effective. You either learn to use less power, or get hurt."

In our next session, to Blaise's dismay, instead of dividing my attention equally, I focused on evading her attacks, putting only what effort I could safely spare on my mental defences. While this meant that Zab was easily able to break through to start with, by the end of the week I was able to hold him at bay almost indefinitely while duelling.



In that first week, I found myself far better able to defend my mind against attacks, using only a fraction of the effort it used to take me.

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Blaise and I grew more comfortable around each other over those first few days. Zab initially had me begin working early in the morning until mid-afternoon. Blaise and I would spend some time together as the summer sun silently drifted down to the horizon.

To my delight, Blaise turned out to be a better than average flier, and we spent many hours zooming around the quadrangle enclosed by the three wings of Zabini manor. Her cries of wonder at the capabilities of my Firebolt brought a smile to my face.

To Blaise's disgust, I had little to no interest in classic literary works. No matter how much she tried, I just couldn't *get* poetry. I couldn't write it, I couldn't understand it, I couldn't even make it enjoyable to her when I tried reading it.

That's not to say that we didn't get along. After the night spent in front of the fire, which (after we both woke up the next morning rather embarrassed) we didn't mention again, we spent quite a lot of time just talking. The tiny Slytherin witch was an amazingly complex character. The fact that she was still the only person in our year smaller than me was a bonus.

I had actually given some thought to her question; who would have been my Slytherin Ron and Hermione? Though we were not anywhere near as close, I could easily imagine cultivating a strong friendship with Blaise over time. If the Sorting Hat had overruled my objection during my sorting, I may have wondered who would have been my Gryffindor Zabini.

Thinking about Ron and Hermione made me slightly ashamed at myself. And, for some reason, thinking of Hermione made me not a little embarrassed. Each night after the night in front of the fire I dreamed of that very same scene. It was not unpleasant, but the sensations of a warm, soft body pressed against mine did make me think certain things that I really shouldn't. Not only that, but a few times in my dream, I lowered my head to kiss the top of Blaise's raven locks, only to find that the hair was rather bushy, not dark and straight.

Quite uncomfortable, having dreams like that about someone who you always thought of as a sister.

Made even more so by the fact that Zab had forbidden me from sending Hedwig with messages to my friends, saying that she was far too conspicuous. Not for the first time I wondered just who learned from the other, Moody or Zab.

For a while, I did wonder at the lack of messages *from* my friends, though when I mentioned it to Blaise, she gave me a look suggesting that I was in mortal danger of dying of low-IQ-pressure, and told me that no delivery owl could get through the wards around the unplottable manor unless specifically allowed. Only if an owl was particularly loyal, or very bright, would it be able to make its way to Zab's home.

I already knew about Hedwig's loyalty, and her intelligence. After all, she had arrived at the Leaky Cauldron before I got there after the incident with Aunt Marge before my third year. She also had far more personality than many of the owls I had met. I had told Blaise of the incident involving Hedwig, a partially digested meal and my Aunt's hair, only to have my new friend pay even more attention to my owl as a reward than before.

In an effort to be accommodating, Zab allowed me to take a couple of days off to visit my friends, giving both Blaise and I an emergency portkey which would immediately take us to the pub at which he met Moody and I, and a packet of his special floo each.

We floored to the unnamed pub, and from there on to the Burrow. I had no idea how *I* would be received, not to mention Blaise.

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I tumbled gracelessly out of the fireplace, though I did manage to catch my balance and prevent myself breaking my nose. The Burrow was curiously quiet, though a few moments after my arrival the silence was shattered as the ghoul upstairs let loose a shriek.

Oh, wait. It was a weekday. The twins would have been at work. That was why it was so quiet.

"Who's there?" asked a familiar voice.

Mrs. Weasley exited the kitchen, wiping one of her hands on her apron; the other held a wand. She took one look at me and instantly zoomed forward to engulf me in a bone-crushing hug. I swear if you put a family member she hadn't seen for a while at the end of a running track, the woman would give any muggle Olympic sprinter a very nasty shock.

"Harry, pet! We've been so worried! Where have you been? What happened?" she asked in a continuous stream.

I didn't get a chance to respond before Blaise tumbled out of the fireplace. Given that my face was currently pressed firmly into Mrs. Weasley's rather significant bosom, I missed seeing her arrival. I did here the thump though, as Blaise landed face first on the floor, as stiff as Neville had been after Hermione cast a full-body bind at him.

Mrs. Weasley gave a gasp, and thrust me behind her. "Harry! Run!"

I coughed. "It's OK, Mrs. Weasley. This is Blaise Zabini."

The look of consternation on her face gave me pause. "Harry, what on earth are you doing consorting with her?"

I caught my breath at that. I'd never heard such bigoted talk from her. "How dare you?" I steamed, my affection for Ron's mother quickly overtaken by my indignation. "I can't believe that you of all people would think like that! She's a Slytherin, not a Death Eater!"

She had the grace to look abashed. "I'm sorry, Harry. It's just a bit of a shock, that's all. Albus has been beside himself with worry, and now it turns out that you've been with a Slytherin all this time."

I pulled out my wand to release Blaise, but caught myself in time. "Um, could you please let her go?" I asked coldly.

Mrs. Weasley looked uncertain for a second, but nodded and cast the counter-charm. "I'm sorry, my dear. We've had to upgrade the security on our floo. Anyone we haven't specifically invited coming through the fireplace will be caught in a body-bind."

Blaise picked herself up, with not a small amount of surliness. "That's fine." she said insincerely. "I was always looking forward to enjoying a fabled Weasley welcoming party."

"Blaise!" I warned.

"What?" she retorted. "Why on earth would such a measure be needed?"

Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat. "Since my family has been targeted. We caught two Death Eaters in the fireplace the first night we returned to The Burrow."

Blaise blinked, and actually looked down at her feet in shame. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley."

The Weasley matriarch waved the apology away. "Don't be silly, my dear. I've had to calm quite a few ruffled feathers over the last few weeks. Minister Fudge was quite put out that I couldn't instantly remember the counter-charm."

Both Blaise and I laughed at that. "How long did it take you to remember it?" I asked.

"Oh, not long." She said vaguely, with a particularly self-satisfied smile. "Only a few minutes. Four or five at the most. Well, maybe ten."

"Mrs. Weasley? I thought you had no idea where the twins get their personality from." I laughed.

She blushed. "You should go and let Ron and Hermione know that you are safe. They have been beside themselves. I'll let Albus know."

"No!" I snapped.

"What?"

"I don't want Dumbledore knowing where I am, or what I've been doing. You can tell him afterwards that I was here if you like, but I never want to see him again." I growled.

Mrs. Weasley looked at me blankly. "But Harry, he needs to know."

"No, he doesn't." I said flatly. "I realise that my hope never to see him again might be optimistic,

but if I can avoid him for the next few years, I'll be more than satisfied."

She gave me a small frown of disapproval, but nodded shortly. "Go on outside. Ron, Ginny and Hermione are out there, de-gnoming the garden."

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley. Come on Blaise, this way."

Blaise quickly caught up and walked at my side. "Thanks for sticking up for me back there."

I nodded, still bemused that Mrs. Weasley would be so uninviting. "Just be prepared for an even more unfriendly welcome. Ron will probably go off his nut at you."

Blaise rolled her eyes. "Why did I even think about escorting you here?"

"Oh, you're my escort now?"

"Of course, Potter. We can't have someone as incompetent as you blundering around the floo network without help." she finished, a small smirk floating on her lips.

As blasé as she sounded, Blaise still took my hand for comfort as we exited The Burrow. I looked around the garden and saw my friends in one corner. Ron and Hermione appeared to be having another argument; Ginny was sitting on an old wooden bench enjoying the fireworks.

"Crookshanks shouldn't have been there!" Ron spluttered, waving his arms around.

"I'm sure you will be able to point out the sign that prohibits cats from sitting anywhere near you." Hermione retorted.

"Don't be silly, Hermione. I just wouldn't have trod on his tail if he wasn't under my feet!"

"You should watch were you're putting you great big feet!"

I grinned at Blaise, who smirked back and gave a low chuckle. "She's right, Ron. You really do have big feet." I offered from behind Hermione.

"See! Even Harry agrees wi-" Hermione started, before standing stock still and silent for all of one and half seconds. She then turned and leapt at me, throwing her arms around my neck and held on so tight that I could hardly breathe.

"Harry James Potter, you great prat! Where have you been? Have you any idea how worried I've been? Are you all right?" She pulled back so she could look at me in the eye. "Did it not occur to you to let me know what happened?"

I managed to extract myself enough to breathe with little difficulty, only to notice that my arrival hadn't been greeted with smiles all round. Blaise was giving Hermione a sour look, Ron was giving Blaise a sour look, and Ginny was giving *me* a sour look.

"What?" I croaked at the red-headed witch, hoping that at least, since I was the one apparently at fault, that I could sort out at least one problem.

"You made life unbearable around here by disappearing, then you just turn up, a smile on your face, and interrupt the best entertainment I've had all summer." she said in a faux annoyed voice.

Ron and Hermione flushed in tandem, while Ginny's expression cleared, and she gave me a wink and a smile. "I'm glad you're safe, but why didn't you tell us where you were?" she asked. Without waiting for me to reply, the youngest Weasley came over and kissed me on the cheek, earning her a glare from Blaise *and* Hermione.

Glare's I'm quite sure she noticed. Her eyes flickered quickly over both Blaise and Hermione's expressions, before she looked back to me and gave me a winsome smile.

Awkward was hardly a fair description of the situation. Oddly, it was Ron who came to my rescue, though not in the way I was expecting.

"Get off him, 'Mione. Let him breathe."

Hermione blinked, then blushed rather prettily, and let me go.

Ron stepped forward and landed a light punch in my stomach. Just hard enough to knock the wind out of me.

"Oof!" I grunted, doubling over. "Thought you... wanted me... to be able to... breathe."

"What sort of friend are you?" Ron snapped. "You leave your home without telling anyone where you are going, and don't answer owls! What the hell were you thinking?" He grabbed my shoulders and hauled me upright, then grabbed me in a rough hug. "Bloody hell, Harry! We were worried about you!"

Blaise scratched her head theatrically. "Potter, is this how your friends always greet you? Attempted strangulation, body blows, hugs and kisses? No wonder you have trouble opening up to new people."

I grunted with a scowl, still trying to get my breath back.

"What are you doing here, Zabini?" growled Ron with a sneer.

"I'm Potter's escort. I admit I'm doing a pretty poor job so far, since he's half dead after only ten seconds at the mercy of you, his friends." she replied easily, her tone light.

"Escort, Harry?" asked Hermione, confused.

I shook my head, and held Ron's shoulders at arms length. "Ron, it's good to see you." I smiled, then drove my knee rather satisfyingly into his thigh. "There. Now, we're even."

The red head yelped and let me go. "Hey! I only hit you because you didn't answer our letters!" he said, clutching at his thigh.

"You never wrote to me last summer." I reminded him.

"Really, Harry, that's hardly fair. Dumbledore forbade us to write to you." said Ginny easily, her eyes on her brother, her eyes betraying her obvious enjoyment at Ron's discomfort.

"Then did it occur to any of you that I was under the same restrictions?" I snapped, my patience nearing its end.

That brought them up short. Hermione especially looked quite embarrassed at not thinking of that scenario. Blaise gave them a superior smile. "I guess the Sorting Hat was right not to put any of you lot into Ravenclaw."

"Shut up, Zabini."

"Enough, Ron." I said, holding up a hand. "Blaise has helped me adjust to a difficult situation over the last few days. I'd appreciate it if you would treat her with respect, if not hospitality." I looked around at all my friends. "All of you."

Hermione grabbed a fistful of the front of my shirt. "Harry. Where. Have. You. Been?" asked Hermione, punctuating her words by shaking me in time, her tone leaving no room discussion.

I sighed and sat down on the rickety bench. Hermione let me go; it was either that or fall onto my lap. "I can't tell you, Hermione."

"Why not?"

I shrugged at Blaise, an identical smile playing on both our lips. "Well, I suppose a technical reason would be, because I don't exactly know."

Ginny and Hermione exchanged glances. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't know where the place I have been staying *is* . I couldn't find it on a map."

"Oh." said Hermione, temporarily speechless.

"Oh, that was *nice* " whispered Blaise.

"What was nice?" snapped Ginny. I recognised the early signs of a shortening Weasley temper. Not that any Weasley apart from their father had anything *but* a short temper.

Blaise answered for me. "The place is unplotable, so you can't find it on a map anyway, even if you knew where it was."

"Well, are you back now? Where are you going to stay?" Ron asked. "We could put another bed in

my room again."

I shook my head sadly. "Sorry guys, but I'm going back tonight. I suppose you'd say that Blaise and I are only on day release."

"You're staying together?" Hermione gasped, an odd tone in her voice.

"You sound worried at the prospect, Granger." noted Blaise with a smirk.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at my Slytherin friend. "Ron, take Harry and Ginny inside, would you?" she asked sweetly, not taking her eyes off Blaise.

Ron's eyes widened, but he recognised the steel in her voice. "Um, sure. Come on you two." he said. He hauled me to my feet and half propelled me towards The Burrow.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Dunno." replied Ron helpfully.

Ginny laced her arm though mine. "Come on. I'll tell you in a minute."

I glanced back at Blaise and shrugged, before being led away. "Tell me! What's going on?" I demanded of Ginny once we were out of earshot.

"You really don't have a sensitive bone in your body do you?" Ginny snapped. "What happened to your sense of responsibility?"

"Sorry." I snarled back, my tone indicating that I was anything but. "I must have lost it somewhere."

Ginny put her fists on her hips and turned to face me directly. "Don't take that tone with me. It may have escaped your notice, but there are some people in the world who care about what happens to you."

"You think I don't know that?" I blurted. "You almost got killed following me to the Ministry! You care about me enough that you risked everything to follow me on a fool's crusade!"

"Then why didn't you tell us where you were going?"

"Because I was told not to! You're all fond of *that* excuse!"

Both Ginny and Ron assumed identical hurt expressions. I closed my eyes and sagged. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I know you wanted to write to me last summer, but damn it, I wanted to write to you over the last few days!"

Ginny pressed her lips together into a straight line. "Fine, but how to spoke to Dumbledore is not excusable! He saved us, if you care to remember."

I frowned. "What? Who told you how I spoke to that idiot?"

Ron gasped at my response, Ginny just narrowed her eyes. "I peaked through the keyhole and listened in one night when the Headmaster visited our parents. He showed them his pensieve, with you ranting and raving at him."

"Did you actually hear what I said to him?"

Ginny shook her head. "The twins were in the room with me, babbling about some photos of Snape or something. I kept trying to get them to shut up, but you know how hard that is."

I nodded, the memory of the twins taking photos of Snape dispelling my anger. "Were they trying to show you the pictures?"

Ginny shrugged. "Maybe. I just ignored them."

I gave a low chuckle. "Next time, look at what they are trying to show you. I guarantee you'll have a good laugh."

Ron tilted his head to one side. "You mean those made up photos of Snape they have?"

I raised my eyebrows. "Snape unconscious and bleeding from the nose and ears?"

Ron nodded. "They're the ones."

"They're not made up."

Ron blinked. "They're not?"

"Nope."

"How do you know?"

I smirked. "Because I knocked him out and left him like that."

Ron blinked, and sat down. "You?"

I nodded.

Ginny looked at me with an expression bordering on awe. Ron leapt to his feet and grabbed my shoulders, hoisting me into the air easily. "Way to go, Harry!" he whooped.

"Put me down, you prat!" I laughed at Ron's antics. Ginny was smiling too, and I couldn't help but notice just how impishly cute she was when she smiled. I'd not seen her smile often enough.

Ron dropped me, and I almost overbalanced. I reached out and pointed at Ginny. "You were going to tell me what was going on between Hermione and Blaise." I said.



She shrugged. "I'm not sure you're intelligent enough to understand." she sniffed in an offhand manner.

I looked to Ron for support, but just got a blank shrug for my trouble. Huffing a little, I turned back to Ginny and said, "Try me."

Ginny's smile grew broader. "You're such a *boy* !" Can't you tell when two girls are interested in you?"

I blinked. "Hermione doesn't like me that way." I said blankly.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Potter, *I* had the biggest crush in existence on you for years, and you didn't even notice. Everyone made jokes about it, and you had no idea. I hardly think you've got the best track record of figuring out things like that."

I narrowed my own eyes at her, feeling the familiar bubbling rage grow. "It must be nice, being able to recognise when someone likes you. You'll have to forgive me, since I never received any affection at all until I went to Hogwarts."

Ginny blinked, and her face softened. "I'm sorry, Harry. But--"

"But what?" I snapped, interrupting her. "I've seen how your parents treat you! You're mother would have fought off a dozen dementors to get to you after Ron and I brought you out of the Chamber of Secrets! You've been totally loved all your life, I'm not surprised you can recognise it in an instant, Ginny! I sure as hell can't!"

Ron grabbed my shoulder, and it took all my willpower not to strike his hand away. "Easy, mate. She said she was sorry."

I blinked, realising that my breathing was deep and ragged, as though I'd just been through one of Oliver's insane training sessions. Ginny's eyes were wide with surprise, and perhaps a flicker of fear.

"What's happened to you?" she asked, her voice uncharacteristically soft.

I snarled back at her. "I'm sick and tired of the wizarding world, Gin. I'm sick and tired of people blaming me for not knowing something, or punishing me for telling the truth. I'm sick of being seen as a hero when it is convenient, and a scapegoat when it isn't. I can't handle it any more." I snapped, all the while, my mind screaming at me that I shouldn't be saying this to her.

Ron gently squeezed my shoulder as a warning, but it wasn't necessary. I raised my hands and sighed. "I'm sorry Ginny. To you too, Ron. I had no right to take this out on you. You guys have been there for me when I needed you."

Ron cleared his throat. "Not always, I haven't. But I'll be there from now on."

I frowned and turned to face him. "What brought that on?"

Ron sighed and rolled back his sleeves. Raised red and purple welts criss-crossed his forearms. "Every day, I have to use six different salves and potions to cope with the pain. I have nightmares each night, about the Ministry. What's unexpected is that I've seen the same events from different people's perspective."

"Perspective?"

Ron nodded. "I've felt the curse that hit Hermione, the Cruciatus on Neville, and the, well, what happened to you. I've seen the world tilt and turn from Moody's blue eye as he was knocked out, and even felt the power and control that Dumbledore has when he cast spell after spell at the Death Eaters." Ron took a deep breath, and looked to Ginny for support. "Sometimes, I've even dreamed that I was the Death Eaters, casting those curses that I felt at the other end. I've lived that night from everyone's point of view, even..."

Icy fingers clutched my heart, and I just knew what he was trying to say. "Sirius?"

Ron just nodded. "He was so frightened that something was going to happen to you. But he was excited at the same time. It was the first time he had been out of the house for months, and he was just too, I don't know, *eager* .

I lowered my eyes, feeling tears form in the corners.

"I've only woke once, absolutely terrified though." Ron continued. "It is when I possess you, and taunt Dumbledore, trying to get him to kill you."

I gasped in shock. "You- you've dreamed you're... Voldemort?"

Ron flinched, but nodded. "He's scared of you, Harry. There is something about you that absolutely terrifies him. He really needed to know what was in that prophecy, and now that it's gone, he's really uncertain." Ron coughed and cleared his throat. "Anyway, I've also dreamed I was you, Harry. I felt everything you did. And I sure as hell don't deserve the sort of friendship you feel for me."

"What?"

"Do you remember our forth year?"

I grimaced. "You mean the time you didn't believe me about not putting my name in that bloody goblet?"

"Yeah." said Ron, clearly embarrassed. "I was so sure that it was you who wasn't being a friend. Like you wouldn't tell me how you put your name in. But during the dream where I was you, I learned just how you feel about all of us. I'm telling you now, you will never have to stand alone. I'll be beside you every bloody step of the way."

"How touching."

All three of us turned to see Blaise in the doorway, a lightly mocking expression on her face.

"Piss off, Zabini. Like you'd ever know what loyalty was," snapped Ron.

Blaise shrugged, completely unperturbed. "Whatever. Just thought I'd give you a heads up, Potter."

"What is it?"

"Dumbledore's here."

"Shit!" I spat, jumping to my feet. "Where is he?"

Blaise gave a snort, but I got a sense she was trying to pretend she wasn't impressed. "Trying to get past Granger. I'll have to give that girl credit, she can distract people on a mission like I've never seen."

"Why's she doing that?" asked Ron, clearly surprised.

Blaise gave him the same look she gave me when I expressed surprise at something she considered blatantly obvious. "So we can get the hell out of here without him seeing us."

I sighed, and nodded. "Sorry, you guys, but we've got to go."

Ron nodded, but Ginny still looked uncertain. "Why don't you just talk to him now, Harry?" she asked.

"Because there is nothing he can say that will make me change my mind." I replied simply.

Blaise stood up straight and led the way back to the living room, only to discover that Dumbledore had beaten us there.

"Ah, Harry. It is good to see that you are safe. And Miss Zabini? This is a rather interesting development."

The old fart was casually standing in front of the fire, but his stance betrayed his determination. "Yeah, well, we were just leaving." I said evenly, not looking into his eyes. Instinctively, I just knew this was going to end badly. Deep in my gut, a volcano of anger and hatred opened.

"Miss Zabini is of course welcome to depart if she wishes, but I'm afraid that I must insist that you return to your relatives for the duration of the summer."

"Insist away. I've already told you that I don't give a crap what you think anymore."

The vague expression of kindly bemusement that he normally wore was nowhere to be seen. In its place was a steely determination that would quite frankly have scared me, had I not been keeping my rage in check.

"It is for your own protection that you will return there, Harry."

My protection? I felt a sharp pain in my stomach, and my hands started twitching. "You'll have to forgive me for not trusting your definition of the word 'protection'. You seem to use a different meaning than everyone else in the world."

Once more in his presence, I felt him try to push himself into my mind. Keeping my face expressionless, I gently pushed up my shields.

"Despite your anger and frustrations, you do know that I am right."

"You were only right about one thing, and one thing only." I spat back.

"And what might that be?" he asked, curiosity tinting his steel tones.

"That I wasn't anywhere near as angry at you as I should have been."

The explosion of force that struck my mind was almost blinding. I grunted in surprise, but managed to keep the bastard out of my mind. "Find what you were looking for?" I snarled.

Dumbledore blinked. "Your Occlumancy skills have improved greatly. Who has been teaching you?"

That was the last straw. "Someone who would makes both you and Snape look like incompetent idiots when it comes to teaching." I snapped, and stopped restraining my anger. From the gasps of surprise from those in the room, I'd say physical manifestations of my anger were quite apparent.

His normally twinkling eyes narrowed; his aura almost visible, and certainly palpable. "Do not think that you can pit your skills against mine, Harry. As powerful as you are, you are still no match for me."

The lesson Zab was trying to teach me clicked in my mind.

"Shall we see?"

## Apprentice Potter Head to Head

### Head to Head

"Shall we see?"

My words hovered there in the air between us, like a verbal gauntlet waiting to be picked up. Waiting for my challenge to be accepted. Of all the things I could have said or done, from the expression of disbelief on the old fart's face, I'd guess that saying that was pretty far down the list.

He just blinked at the challenge, and stared back at me, his eyes betraying nothing. Except for a tiny flick-

Magic exploded from him, rushing towards me too fast to react to. Too powerful to deflect. Too fast to think of a defense.

I didn't need to do any of that. I already knew what I was going to do.

I forced my rage to flood out through me, to focus on my magic, and I screamed, "*Legilimens!*"

I grunted in reflex as Dumbledore's wave of power crashed into me, but not before my own mental assault had sliced through it and struck him. I knew the old man was powerful, and that his occlumency defenses were probably the best on the planet. As my mind struck his own, I discovered that his mental shields were indeed as strong as a brick wall.

It didn't matter. Fuelled by my incandescent anger, my spell crashed through them like a tank.

Zab's lesson was right. The most effective attack is one your opponent does not know you can make. That was why my curse struck Bellatrix, when even Dumbledore had trouble hitting her.

The look of shocked surprise on his face etched itself into my memory, and I just knew that it would help keep me warm on cold nights for many years to come. His head rocked back from my blow, and I watched in slow motion as he fell to his knees. Though his mouth was open, I couldn't hear the scream.

A thing of great beauty it is, seeing an overwhelmingly powerful opponent being reduced to kneel before you.

Once inside his mind, I didn't hesitate. I wasn't there to take anything. I was there for only one thing.

I was there to make a deposit.

In the time it took for my body to crumble backwards and hit the floor, I dumped every feeling of helplessness, rage, betrayal and anger I currently felt into his mind.

The helplessness I felt when Sirius fell through the veil, knowing that no matter how powerful I was, or what magicks I mastered, I would never be able to reach back and rescue him.

The rage I felt at him for leaving me alone; alone once again, after only having him in my life for a few short years.

The betrayal I felt when no letters arrived from my friends in the last summer, and how much more intense that feeling was after discovering that it had been Dumbledore's order that prevented them from doing so.

The soul-scorching anger I felt towards Dumbledore, the night I destroyed his office, the night I discovered just how deep his treason had run.

But more memories flooded out of me.

Unbidden, the memory of being locked in the cupboard under the stairs for three days with a broken arm surfaced and jumped into his mind. I could almost feel the dull, throbbing ache. How the skin around my eyes was tight, from my dried tears. The way the oppressive darkness crowded in on me.

The memory faded, to be replaced by another.

Being punished for dropping Dudley's breakfast onto the floor after burning my four-year-old hand on the stove. How my protestations that I couldn't see the top of the stove meant nothing, and how I was soon in even more pain from the beatings.

The desperate need for someone who loved me, coming from a three year old. Seeing Dudley being coddled and pampered, feeling nothing by jealousy.

The feeling of loneliness as Dudley and the rest of my schoolmates departed for a school trip, leaving me to stay in class because the Dursleys wouldn't sign the release form for me. Wondering why the Dursleys wouldn't let me go with the rest of the class, since it didn't cost them anything.

Going hungry for a week, because I'd done some accidental magic. Feeling weak and lethargic from lack of food.

Even as my back struck the floor, leaving my lungs winded and me gasping, more memories surfaced. It was almost cathartic, pushing them all into Dumbledore's vulnerable mind.

Scene after scene from my life flashed forward and directly into Dumbledore's exposed mind. Something was directing the most profoundly disturbing moments from my life to rise and escape, diving deeply into Dumbledore's mind. Seeing it all happen again did nothing to quell my rage. Indeed, it kept me angry enough to keep a hole in his defenses.

Not angry enough though, apparently. After what felt like hours but was probably no more than a few seconds, at the edge of my hearing I heard him snap a couple of unfamiliar words, and my consciousness was abruptly and violently ejected from his mind. A sharp pain flared in the front of my brain as my thoughts rushed to compose themselves into some semblance of order.

I opened my eyes in an effort to seek out the old man, only to see two blurred images of him slowly stagger to his feet. "Impressive, Harry. But you-" he gasped.

As quickly as I could, I drew my wand and aimed its trembling point at him. "*Stupefy!*" I croaked, my own throat too dry to speak properly.

With a grunt of effort, Dumbledore swung his wand like a fly-swatter and batted my spell away. The obvious effort it took him alone told me he just how vulnerable he was at that instant. "Enough! You do not have a choi-" he began, before giving a little sigh and slumping forward to the ground unconscious. I blinked in an effort to focus my blurred vision. As quickly as I could, I raised one hand to straighten my glasses.

Dumbledore had landed face down on the irregular slate tiles, his glasses skewed on his face and cracked from the fall. Oddly, he was still on his knees, leaving his rather large backside sticking up in the air.

But it was who was behind him that truly captured my attention. Ron was standing behind the crumpled old man, the (now slightly bent) poker for the fire in a tightly clenched fist, with an expression of steely determination on his face. His chest was heaving, his nostrils white with anger.

That rather interesting tableau was maintained for all of three eternal seconds before Mrs. Weasley's explosion of indignation filled the air with recriminations. I flinched at the first shouted syllables, until I forced myself to remember that it probably wasn't directed at me.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley! How could you? How dare you?! I never thought I'd live to see the day when a child of mine attacked Albus Dumbledore!"

I struggled to my feet. "How dare he?" I asked incredulously, rounding on her. "You have the utter gall to invite a man into your house who attacked a guest, and you instantly blame Ron for defending me?"

Mrs. Weasley blinked, mentally changing gears. "Harry, pet, I'm sorry. I didn't know that Albus would-"

I didn't catch the rest of her apology, since I my trembling knees had given way, and I had

slumped to the floor myself, completely exhausted.

At least three pairs of hands encircled me, supporting my shoulders, arms and body.

With their help, I struggled to my feet again. "Why don't you invite some Death Eaters, Mrs. Weasley? At least then you won't have to sit through some boring repartee before the fireworks." I said sourly.

She looked absolutely mortified. "Oh Harry. I'm so sorry. I didn't invite him here, I just called him through the floo to tell him that you were safe."

I rolled my eyes. "You didn't think that he would immediately pop around to see for himself?"

Mrs. Weasley looked down at her hands, wringing them tightly. "You don't understand, we've all been so worried about you." She looked up at me. "I'm sure he has the best intentions."

I snorted at that. "Yeah, I bet you do. Remind me again exactly what it is the road to hell is paved with?" I asked rhetorically, and looked around at the people holding me up. Hermione was on my left, Blaise on my right. "Thanks." I offered, but frowned. I could have sworn that there were more hands on me a few instants before.

Hermione nodded, her face contorted into an expression of self-recrimination. "I'm sorry Harry. I *tried* to distract him, but he wouldn't listen to me. He demanded to know where you were."

I raised my eyebrows at this, and gently disentangled myself from her. "What did you tell him?"

Hermione looked embarrassed. "I told him you were outside playing Quidditch, but he just turned and went straight to the fireplace."

Even in my drained state, I chuckled. "You are an awful liar, Hermione." I said, putting one hand on her shoulder for support; both physical for me and emotional for her. "Don't worry about it. And don't you ever change."

Relief rose from her like steam.

"Potter, we need to get out of here." said Blaise urgently.

A chorus of disagreements met this announcement. Ron was disagreeing the loudest, looking down at Dumbledore. It was easy to figure out what was on his mind.

"Don't worry Ron, if no one says anything, he'll just think that I tricked him. He doesn't need to know who stunned him." I said, a tired smile on my lips. "Unless you want him to." I looked around at the others, noting an absence.

"Where's Ginny?"

"Here." she replied, appearing at the base of the stairs. "You didn't seem to need my help getting



up. I've got something for you."

She handed me a small box, which I almost dropped in fright as it trembled and bumped in my hands. "Open it when you get home."

Blaise frowned. "What is it?"

Ginny gave her a sly look. "Harry knows."

"I do?"

"You will."

"When?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "When you open it, Silly." she said with a smile. "Use it."

My brain hurt too much to try and figure out her circular logic, and Blaise tugged on my shirt. "Potter, we need to go *now*."

"OK," I yawned. "May we use some floo powder, Mrs. Weasley?"

Blaise shook her head. "Not by floo."

"Yes by floo." I said, taking a deep breath to steady myself. "He'll have some way of tracking portkeys." I said, gesturing towards the incumbent incompetent. "Once we are in a public place, we can use them."

"Go to my house, Harry." said Hermione. Both Blaise and I looked at her curiously. "I convinced my parents to have a floo system installed. It took a while, since it meant that they needed to build a fireplace, but when you look at all the benefits-

I coughed to interrupt her. "Hermione? We need to know your floo destination's name."

"Oh." she blushed. "It's just 'Granger residence'."

I smiled at her. "Thanks, 'Mione."

~~~

Hermione ended up flooing to her home first, to ensure her parents didn't freak as two unfamiliar people entered their home in a flash of flame. Though I knew that the Grangers were at least willing to let Hermione go to Hogwarts, I wasn't entirely sure they were *happy* with the fact.

After all, if my daughter was turned to stone at school, I'd seriously consider other, less-dangerous, education establishments, though given recent events, a school set up next to a fusion plant built by and staffed with people suffering from Parkinson's Disease would be a safer choice

than Hogwarts.

I must be getting better at floo travel, I thought to myself as I whizzed down the magical passage. After Moody made me take a very roundabout path to that pub, I was quite over my motion sickness.

I hardly had time to get dizzy when I was ejected out into a room. Quite a nice room too, at least from my point of view from the floor.

"You still haven't got used to floo travel, have you Harry?" said Hermione unhelpfully as she assisted me to my feet. I doubt I'd have managed it myself.

"You try it when you're about to collapse." I replied.

The fire flashed again, and Blaise stepped out. "Potter, we really need to get back. Once you get up off the floor that is."

I sighed, letting my head droop. "No. First we need to open Ginny's package."

Hermione frowned. "She said to open it when you got back home."

I exchanged glances with Blaise. "I'm not sure my host would be too pleased with me, bringing an unopened package into his home." I said carefully.

Blaise nodded. "He'd make Professor Snape look like Flitwick."

Hermione pursed her lips. "Are you staying with Professor Moody?"

Blaise and I chuckled. "Close." I said. I took out the small box and gingerly flipped the lid. I didn't really know if Ginny took after the twins or not.

An explosion of feathers and irritated twitting greeted the three of us. A tiny owl burst forth from the box where Ginny had rather unfairly contained it.

"Pig!" I snapped, waving my hands over my face. "Come here, you feathery git."

Blaise looked from me to Ron's pet. "What did you call that thing?"

"Pig. Short for Pigwidgeon. It's Ron's owl."

"Um, Potter, that thing doesn't look anything like a pig." She gave me a doubtful look. "It doesn't even really look like an owl. It looks like a mouse with feathers."

I watched as Pig fluttered around the room, still expressing his annoyance. "I know. It's more like an extremely energetic ball of dandruff." I said sourly, not having the energy to try and catch the pest.

It took Hermione and Blaise almost a minute to corner and grab Pig. By that time, a middle-aged gentleman had entered the room and was watching our antics with bemusement.

"I wasn't expecting you home today, sweetheart. Is this some magical ritual? Chasing after a bird and jumping on the furniture?"

"Daddy!" Hermione said, a warning tone to her voice. "Stop making fun of me."

The newcomer just smiled and let his shoulders shake a couple of times. "My apologies. Not a magical ritual. Got it. Um, may I ask why you are chasing a-, um, exactly what is it that you are chasing?"

"An owl. Ron's owl."

"Ah, this would be the famous 'Pig', would it?"

"Infamous, possibly." I offered.

Mr. Granger turned to me, looking up and down. "From Hermione's rather vivid descriptions, I'd guess that you are none other than Mr. Potter. John Granger, at your service." he said, offering his hand.

I took it with a sigh of relief. "Thank you. Do you mind if I sit down? I'm a little bit light headed at the moment."

"Be my guest, though you look a little more than light headed. Do you need a doctor?"

I shook my head. "Just rest."

"He's suffering from magical exhaustion, Daddy."

"I see. Not something covered in standard modern medical texts then." Mr. Granger replied, then turned to Blaise. "My dear, you don't have red hair, so I must assume that you are not a member of the rather extended Weasley clan. John Granger." he finished, offering his hand to Blaise.

"Blaise Zabini. I go to school with P-, I mean, Harry and Hermione."

They shook hands, Blaise looking decidedly unaccustomed to this sort of friendly welcome.

"I don't recall Hermione ever mentioning you. Not by name at any rate. Are you in any of her classes?"

Blaise nodded. "Potions, Care of Magical Creatures and Arithmancy."

Mr. Granger raised his eyebrows. "I suspect that means that you are in Slytherin then."

Blaise swallowed nervously, but nodded. "That's right."

Mr. Granger looked at her intently. "From Hermione's stories of school, I'd never have suspected that she would ever be friends from anyone from that particular house."

"We're not exactly friends," said Hermione darkly.

"She is *my* friend, however." I interrupted, not prepared to let anything happen here before we left. At my announcement, Mr. Granger relaxed, Blaise smiled and Hermione tensed. "I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Mr. Granger, but Blaise and I need to be going."

He looked surprised. "Are you sure? You may stay as long as you like."

Both Blaise and I nodded. "Thank you for your offer, and if you don't mind, I will take you up on it in the near future." I said politely. I turned to Hermione. "Could you send Pig back with an apology from me?"

Hermione nodded, but Blaise disagreed. "Hang on. We should take him with us."

I blinked. "Are you sure?"

Blaise nodded quickly. "If there was an owl that could slip anywhere unseen, it's this one. I'm sure the owner of where we are staying wouldn't mind at least us asking if we can use, um, Pig." Pig's name was almost snorted with repressed humour.

"I'm too tired to argue. I just need to go now."

Blaise nodded and took Pig from Hermione.

"Just remember what I said." Hermione said to Blaise, her voice thick with implied threat.

The tugging behind my navel stopped me from thinking about what she meant.

To tell the truth, after that, I had very little recollection of getting back to Zabini Manor, or being assisted to my room.

--

Apprentice Potter What the Hell Happened?

What the Hell Happened?

I tried to open my eyes the next morning, only to mentally swear almost as inventively as my Uncle. Someone must have crept into my room last night and somehow transfigured the inner surface of my eyelids into sandpaper. As I groaned in a generic sort of way; anyone listening would easily determine just how enthused I felt at the arrival of the sun. I heard Hedwig hoot softly, sounding very amused.

That owl's sense of humour is as refined as a bloody sledgehammer.

I groaned again, just in case the world didn't get the message the first time. It didn't make a difference though; nothing had changed just to suit a pathetic lump of flesh like myself.

Without opening my eyes, I groped around with my left hand, blindly knocking all sorts of objects off the bedside table while searching for my glasses. A sort of wet tinkle indicated that someone had placed a glass of water close to the edge of the bedside table last night.

Somehow, I just knew that it was going to be one of those days.

I tried to raise my gritty eyelids, only to shut them tightly again quickly. The light entering my bedroom window, though probably dim to someone whose eyes were used to normal daylight, felt like it was soldering my retinas to the back of my skull. Keeping my eyes shut, I got up and stumbled towards my ensuite, my joints creaking like an old wooden ship.

My brain was telling me, *I can do this! I've walked this way before! No need to open our eyes .*

My toes told me, *Open your eyes; we're not going through this again .*

I missed the door by almost a metre, and smashed the toes on my left foot into the wall.

I clenched my teeth tightly together while the toes on my left foot said, *Argh!* and the toes on my right said, *Told you so .*

~~~

Having a warm bath in complete silence and darkness is, rather peculiarly, a great way to wake up.

I honestly thought that I'd probably fall asleep within a few minutes, if not seconds, of relaxing in the comfortably molded tub, but it didn't take long at all for me to blink my eyes open, even though there was nothing to see.

Though the tub was comfortable, it wasn't long enough for me to lie down completely. In order to lay my head in the water, I had to lift my feet out and rest my calves on the lip of the bath. Without anything distracting me, I took stock of how I felt.

My back was sore, probably from the rough landing on hard slate tiles after Dumbledore blew me off my feet, but under the wonderfully warm water, that pain was fading. The toes on my left foot still smarted, so I raised my knee to allow them to dip into the water.

I'm not sure how long I just lay there in the self-heating bath before my brain started functioning. Actually, more than that really.

Images, sounds, old dreams; they all flashed by in my consciousness. It amused me to begin with, and stunned me when I heard an almost familiar female laugh of joy. The only time I'd heard that voice before was when it was accompanied by a flash of green. It was with a sort of reverence that I listened to my mother laugh.

Unfortunately, since thinking about my mother brought on other, more painful feelings, it didn't take long for the memories that I had deliberately buried to come bubbling to the surface. Curiously, it was the ones I'd dumped into Dumbledore's unwitting mind that came to the fore, forcing me to relive some of the worst moments of my life so far.

I rose to my feet, more in an effort to distract myself from the memories than a desire to get out of such a deliciously comfortable bath. It worked, however, and the sudden rush of cool air across my skin quickly focused my mind.

It was not without trepidation that I opened the bathroom door, dreading the sharp stab of light. But the dim light of my bedroom, though initially requiring me to squint, wasn't as painful as I'd expected. Hedwig gave me a soft hoot of greeting, before tucking her head back beneath her wing.

"Good morning to you too, girl," I said with a smile, and began to dress.

A look at my watch told me that it was a little over an hour before my accustomed rising time, or at least the time that Blaise would normally bang her fist on my door and yell insulting things about lazy Gryffindors.

The thought of getting some payback sent a smile flirting across my face.

~~~

My mischievous mood didn't last long.

There is something dreadfully depressing about an empty room.

I had spent some small amount of time in Blaise's room, so I had been accustomed to picking my way around the discarded robes and texts piled haphazardly on the floor. I'd never been permitted to leave anything out in my bedroom at Privet Drive, so the mess just seemed to exude a sort of comfort with your surroundings that I just found warming. It did apparently drive Zab crazy though.

Standing in the middle of a perfectly tidy and empty room was the opposite. The bed, perfectly made, had obviously not been slept in the night before. I took a couple of steps towards the bed and placed my fingertips down on the soft blankets. Dry and cold.

Despite the empty room, Blaise's scent still hung in the air, making me miss her all the more. She had teased me mercilessly in my time here, and ragged me for my Gryffindor tendencies, but beneath all that, she had accepted me. She had even enjoyed herself while spending time with me. She made me feel welcome.

Being welcome is a rare enough feeling for me in the best of circumstances, but the fact that she had no reason at all to be even cordial towards me in the first place, given how we met that first night, made my sense of acceptance all the more real.

I glanced over at her desk, the desk where we had sat together reading, or at least in my case, trying to read, poetry. Now, it sat bare. Not even dust touched the surface. The house elves had done their work well. So very well.

Not knowing what else to do, I wandered back to my own room, to find a note from my Master on my own, not so clean desk.

Harry,

See me.

~~~

I cautiously entered Zab's study. You'd have expected that since the door was as imposing as any portal Hollywood has ever exhibited on the big screen, it would have had some sort of god-awful creaking hinges. The sort that make your entire spine shiver.

Nothing. The door swung open as silently as it had remained closed. Zab didn't miss my entrance though.

"Sit." he said, not looking up from his work.

I swallowed. His one word order had no threat behind it; no intonation indicating his disappointment with me. Nothing.

That made me even more nervous than I had been.

I gently sat down in one of the unoccupied chairs in front of his desk. The scratching of the

peacock feather quill on parchment simply felt like scraping my nerves along chilli powder.

Finally, Zab put the quill down. "My apologies for ignoring you. With Blaise gone, I needed to get that done this morning," he said, placing the parchment into one of the many trays on his desk, where it glowed briefly and disappeared.

I blinked. *Why is Blaise gone?* flashed through my head, but it was only the fact that I already suspected the reason that I stopped the words from leaping to my tongue. Instead, I said, "I hope it is not because of anything I've done."

"A vain hope, under the circumstances, don't you agree?"

With a sigh, I nodded. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Zab asked pointedly.

Something told me to formulate my answer *very* carefully. I certainly wasn't sorry for attacking Dumbledore, even though it made my life even more complicated. But I did have something that I was sorry for. "For causing Blaise to leave early."

Zab nodded, apparently satisfied. "I do enjoy Blaise's visits, and I'm sorry this one was cut short. However, she told me what happened yesterday, and to maintain my privacy, she understood that she needed to go back into the world." He stood up and walked over to the high window, his hands clasped behind his back. "Albus will be rather annoyed I'd imagine. Since Blaise was with you when you disappeared, she will undoubtedly be questioned as to your whereabouts."

"Dumbledore will probably use Legilimancy to get his answers." I said glumly, calming somewhat after it appeared that Zab wasn't going to explode. "While he won't be able to read her mind, he will be able to tell if she is lying to him."

Zab nodded, still looking out the window. "Blaise suggested that too. Do not worry overly much. Her father is quite capable and will see to it that Albus does not overstep his bounds when speaking to her." Zab turned back to me. "All that now needs to be discussed is your behaviour yesterday."

Immediately, my heart rate doubled. "If you are referring to how I acted towards Dumbledore, I don't think I had a choice." I said, trying to at least sound confident, but my voice let me down.

"You always have a choice, Harry. Life is about making choices. Tell me, would have been wrong with agreeing to go with Albus, then using the portkey I gave you once you were back home?"

"Well, for starters, the wards on my relative's house would probably be set up to track portkey usage. Dumbledore would have been able to find his way to the pub."

The look on Zab's face instantly told me that my answer had not been a good one.

"Perhaps you are unaware of the concept of *walking* . You place one foot in front of the other, and



then allow your centre of gravity to sway forward. Before you fall over, you then place your other foot-

"I know what walking is!" I growled.

"Curious. Given that I'm sure you know that wards only cover a specified area, I was forced to assume you had no idea that you could walk outside them."

I closed my eyes and mentally berated myself, feeling my face flush hot. "I didn't think it through, that's all. All I knew is that I didn't want to go with him, and I didn't want to betray your location."

Zab shook his head. "By refusing to sacrifice a pawn, you've put a bishop in danger. It's obvious you are not a good chess player."

There was nothing I could say to *that*. Ron had repeatedly ground my dignity into the dirt by beating me at chess each and every game we played. He'd even managed it without losing a single piece, on occasion.

Zab continued. "The security mechanisms placed around this manor are extensive, but also layered. The first, as you've seen, is a level of obfuscation. By hiding the entrance, it is difficult to find unless you know where it is."

I nodded. "Professor Moody knows where the pub is, but you can only get to the Manor if you have the special floo powder that allows travel between the pub and here."

Zab snapped his fingers. "Exactly. That is both the second and third level of defense I've established around this property. Now, in chess, you can sacrifice anything but the king to give you an advantage or take away a disadvantage, as long as the benefit outweighs the loss of the piece. Giving up this obfuscation level of security, since it has other, more robust levels behind it, has less impact than sacrificing a pawn."

"Less impact? I doubt that."

"Can you add pawns to a chessboard after they have been removed?"

It took me a few seconds to get what he was driving at. "You can stop using the pub at any time! You could set up another entrance anywhere."

Zab lowered his head, but kept looking straight at me from under his eyebrows.

It took me another few seconds to realise what I'd got wrong. "Oh, I'm an idiot. You *already* have other entrances ready to be used."

Zab smiled. "Though it does take you a while, you don't disappoint, Harry. Once you get into the habit of thinking through your ideas to their logical conclusion, you won't make the same sort of errors of judgement. I'm beginning to think that you may well become a very dangerous young man one day."

I blushed at his compliment. "Thank you."

"But I do need you to give me your perspective on yesterday's events. Blaise was rather explicit about things that had to do with you, but was more than a little vague about things that had to do with her."

Ah . "You'll have to forgive me. I'm not sure I can help a great deal there. She and Hermione had words with each other, but I wasn't there to listen in."

"Had words?"

I shrugged, more than a little uncomfortable. "Ginny told me that I had no idea when two girls had feelings for me. I guess Hermione was telling Blaise to stay away from me."

Zab gave me a knowing smile and ran the tips of thumb and forefinger around the edge of his goatee. "That would make sense, given Blaise's reticence to explain what occurred between her and your muggle-born friend. What about when you met Albus?"

I felt a flash of anger at the memory, but I drew a deep lungful of air and let both the breath and anger go. "Hermione tried to distract him, so that Blaise and I could leave, but he saw through her lie and met us in front of the fireplace."

"Are you sure that this Hermione didn't tell Albus where you were?"

I shook my head emphatically. "She can't lie to save her life." I said with a wry grin.

Zab acknowledged my response with a nod. "Continue."

I struggled briefly to put what happened into words. "Dumbledore stood in front of the fire, blocking our way out. We danced around each other for a bit, then let loose."

Zab suddenly appeared to be irritated. "Yes, thank you Harry. Now would you tell me what happened, since I already got that level of detail from my Great-granddaughter."

I bit my lip to stop myself from snapping back. "Do you remember the lesson you were trying to teach me?"

"Naturally."

"Well, as I was staring Dumbledore down, it came to me. I was feeling so angry that he was going to take me back to where I didn't want to go, so I just channelled my anger into my magic. It was just what I'd been doing all summer, but deliberately, not accidentally."

Zab leaned back in his chair. "Ah, now this is where it gets interesting. Blaise said that you cast *legilimens* at Albus, and that both of you fell to the ground. I thought she was exaggerating, since I doubt you have the skill or power under normal circumstances to break through the defenses of such an accomplished wizard as Albus Dumbledore. But channelling rage into a mental discipline

such as Legilimancy..." Zab shook his head as his voice trailed off for a moment, before he cleared his throat and again focused his attention on me. "Well, it certainly appeared to be effective."

I shook my head. "It worked, sort of, to start with. But he did manage to chuck me out of his mind."

Zab nodded. "That would be when you tried to stun him?"

"Yeah. It was almost a reflex action on my part, it was the only thing I could think of at the time and I didn't really expect it to succeed. It came close though, even though it didn't. It took him a massive effort to deflect it. I realised then just how much I'd drained him."

Zab eyed me carefully, evaluating my words. "Well, I must say that I'm quite impressed with the way you conducted the duel, not with how you failed to avoid the duel in the first place. No matter how much rage you had, there was no way you could have bested Albus, so don't feel bad that you didn't manage to defeat him."

"Yeah, I suppose. I just wonder how Ron feels now."

Zab actually chuckled. "Your friend with the damaged poker? I imagine his actions would be weighing rather heavily on his mind this morning. You'd best write to him and help him work through his fears. Which brings us rather neatly to the other reason I needed to talk with you." Zab picked up his wand from his desk and cast a summoning spell.

A birdcage flew towards him, and he caught it deftly. Inside, a furious Pig flapped his wings and hooted his indignation.

"A curious bird, this one. I don't believe I've ever seen such a pathetically tiny delivery owl."

"Ginny gave me him in a package-"

"I am aware of how you received it. I was merely commenting on the creature itself." Zab peered even closer at the indignant Pig. "Oh, yes, such a creature definitely deserves comment."

"Blaise said that you might allow him to deliver mail here," I said, and I could hardly keep the hope out of my voice.

"She suggested such to me also. I have no objection, but I do have a few conditions."

I nodded, feeling a welcome sensation of, well, *actually being able to contact my friends*. I'm not sure there's a word for it. "I assume the conditions are things like how often we use him."

"Frequency, yes. But destination, content and security feature in my conditions as well."

Destination? "Do you mean-, damn, um..."

Zab sighed, an amused play on his lips. "Do not bother contorting your meaning into a statement

rather than a question, Harry. Though I do enjoy your verbal gymnastics on occasion, I will spell out how this... *Pig* ," he said, enunciating the name just like Edmund Blackadder would, "is to be used."

"Thank you."

Zab waved his hand, dismissing my gratitude. "There is no need to thank me, I knew that I had to develop a method of communication for you at some point. Not many people prefer to have the miniscule amount of contact I maintain with the world.

"Now, the owl will not make more than one round trip a week, and it must use different days. You will floo to a different point in the country before sending any message with this owl. That will change the direction and distance it needs to fly to reach its destination. While I would prefer to review any correspondence, I understand that you have some expectation of privacy. I will therefore ask that apart from simply writing, 'I cannot comment', you do not supply any information regarding our location to any question your friends have."

"Of course. I've already told them I can't tell them that."

"Good. I shall also provide you with a spell designed to nullify any tracking charms for a short duration, which I expect you to use on the owl before sending him on his way. I wish there were some way to ensure the spell was cast before the owl was sent to you."

I tilted my head to one side. "We could get my friends to send Pig to Blaise first. She could then cast the spell herself, or get her parents to cast it, before she sends him onto me."

The blank expression on Zab's face was one I knew I'd learn to cherish. The look that meant, *Why didn't I think of that* .

~~~

Dear Blaise,

I'm really sorry you had to leave early. I did enjoy spending time with you, and I wanted to thank you for making me feel welcome. I intend to visit Hogsmeade on occasion during the year, more than likely on certain weekends. Make sure you don't get a detention from Dumbledore.

Zab agreed to let me use Pig, so long as I agree to certain things. One thing I did want to ask you. Can Ron and Hermione send their letters to you, for you to forward onto me? Your parents will need to cast the nullify charm they use on their own mail owls beforehand though.

I've attached a letter for them to Pig. Could you please send him on for me?

Thanks again, Blaise. For everything.

Harry.

~~~

Dear Ron, Hermione and Ginny,

Pig has been a rather rude houseguest, hooting and generally being a pest, but he will be able to make weekly trips to visit me. If you send him to Blaise, I'll get your letters.

It's good to know that we can write to each other again. Don't take this the wrong way Ron, but my host couldn't believe how pathetically tiny Pig is, and that's the reason he's letting me use Pig to deliver our letters. No Death Muncher would think about stopping a feathery mouse.

I'm sorry I didn't get to spend more time with you guys the other day. Recently, it seems that every time something in my life goes right, someone out there decides to do something about it.

Anyway, I won't be returning to Hogwarts.

Stop panicking, Hermione. I will get an education. If you think about it, you'll figure out how. If you can't, ask Remus.

I'm not under arrest or anything like that, so I will be able to visit. Make sure you don't get detentions on Hogsmeade weekends and that you come home during the holidays.

You know, now that I think about it, Dumbledore would probably make sure you **don't** have detentions on Hogsmeade weekends, just so he can have you followed to see if you meet me. Ron, you may be able to use that to your advantage. I expect to see Malfoy with a couple of black eyes on the first weekend.

With any luck, I'll be able to see you again soon, but it will be after my birthday. I'll send you the date of my next visit in advance, so there are no more surprises.

Take care guys,

Harry.

~~~

The next week passed surprisingly quickly. Zab refused to start training me on anything else other than Occlumancy, stating that since it was the holidays, I should be using the time to relax and enjoy my time.

I spent most of it either reading in his main library or flying around the quadrangle on my Firebolt. I still had flashes of anger as my thoughts dwelled occasionally on Dumbledore or Voldemort, but with my ever-developing Occlumancy skills, I was able to keep a lid on my temper.

My scar prickled occasionally as well, but curiously, my newly developed mental defenses also blocked that wonderful little connection. So rather than giving me pain and visions, my scar was

occasionally just a little itchy.

A much more pleasant state of affairs.

One item Zab introduced me to was his family pensieve. That's not what he called it, but that is in effect what it is. Zabinis throughout the centuries have placed memories in it, making the bath-sized container an incredible resource.

Imagine being able to watch Mozart perform his first symphony at six years of age.

Or sitting in the best seats of the house at the premier of A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Or a lecture on the properties of alchemical substances, given by Leonardo Da Vinci.

Zab insisted on being present when I used the pensieve, since it contained some pretty disturbing memories too, including a front row seat at an address given by the Marquis de Sade and some rather graphic burnings of muggles accused of witchcraft. But for the most part, the contents were benign, but notable historic events that simply fascinated me.

We were watching the opening ceremony of the 1896 Olympics when Pig made his return appearance, holding a bundle of parchments larger than he was.

As I struggled to undo the package, Zab covered the pool of memories. "Unless there is something addressed to me from Blaise, I shall leave you to your correspondence."

I glanced at the writing on the first parchment. "I don't think so, the first one is from Blaise, and she says that they're all addressed to me."

Zab nodded. "Make sure you check for a magical signature on the parchment, to ensure there are no portkeys there before you read them." he said on his way out.

I drew my wand and muttered a detection spell, designed to make any enchanted object glow. Nothing in my hand lit up, though the majority of the room's contents cast some sort of light.

I sat back into my armchair and placed the bundle on the side table. I grabbed Blaise's cover letter and started to read.

Potter,

I have no idea how someone as antisocial as you manage to get so much correspondence, but this huge stack is all yours.

And I am sorry I had to leave too. I wish I could have been there when you woke up, if only to complain about just how awkward you are to carry around. Great-grandfather told me that you were just magically exhausted, but you really scared me.

The headmaster came around the day after Weasley brained him with the poker. I'll tell you this,

that boy has risen in my estimation. Believe it or not, Dumbledore actually thinks you did something to him!

The interview itself wasn't exactly pleasant. For a while there I didn't think he would leave. Suffice to say that while I'm pretty sure he knew I was lying when I said I didn't know where you were, he didn't find out anything. I'm a little worried though, to tell you the truth. For all his grandfatherly airs, Dumbledore can be pretty frightening.

I'll close with an observation and a question that you may or may not want to answer. From the way Dumbledore was acting, you'd think it was the end of the world if you weren't found and returned to your relatives. Exactly why are you so important?

Your (Slytherin) friend,

Blaise.

I put down Blaise's letter and thought deeply. I had told her things that I'd kept from everyone, even Hermione and Ron. It was odd, but I felt that having someone else I felt comfortable around made it easier to talk to, and easier to examine my feelings.

It was good to know that Dumbledore had not hurt her, but I was annoyed that he had gone to all the trouble of trying to intimidate her just to find out where I was.

I reached for the next letter in the pile, which turned out to be from Ginny.

Dear Harry,

I have got so many things to say to you, I don't know where to start. First of all, I thought for a while there that you weren't going to send Pig back to us. Ron threw a major tantrum when he found out that I'd sent his owl away with you, and only calmed down when Pig arrived the next day. Only to have him just about explode again once he read your letter.

Why do we have to send mail to you via Blaise Zabini of all people? Are you still staying with her? Not that I mind that, it's quite nice to know that you are safe and hidden so well that not even Dumbledore can find you, but are you sure you can trust her?

About Dumbledore. Well, my first reaction was to mimic my mother and yell at you for what you did, but I thought about it for a bit and realised that Dumbledore himself came looking for a fight. I think he knew that you wouldn't go back home to your relatives with him. Not that I blame you or anything.

But Harry, he did come and save us all at the Ministry. You know this, and after you came out of his office that night you were... different. What did he say to you? What did he tell you that could make you so angry? With the whole world?

I'll understand if you don't want to tell me, but at least tell Ron or Hermione. Actually, PLEASE tell Ron, it will do something to take his mind off the fact that he brained the most powerful wizard

in the world with a poker. Or, judging from your anger, at least make him feel like Dumbledore deserved it.

There are so many more things I want to say to you, but if I write too much more, Pig will never be able to carry it all. I'll only say, please stay safe, even if only so my stupid brother doesn't have a heart attack and Hermione doesn't die of worry.

Love,

Ginny

I put Ginny's letter down on top of Blaise's. She was right about Dumbledore looking for a fight, he was ready to take me back by force. It wouldn't surprise me if he actually burns whatever good will he still has at the Ministry and gets them on his side. I decided that I'd best be careful whenever I was to be away from here.

The sight of the handwriting of the next letter on the pile caused me to pause, and draw my wand again. As a precaution, I again cast the detection spell, to ensure that Dumbledore's letter wasn't a portkey or anything.

Please Harry, for the sake of the trust you once had in me, I beg you to read this letter.

Well, it would appear that I have made even more mistakes over the last few weeks than I believed. I have, unfortunately, succumbed to the same sin that Voldemort has in abundance, underestimating you.

I cannot say that I am angry with your decisions, not after you supplied me with your rather unenjoyable memories, but I am disappointed that you feel that self-imposed exile is your best choice. However, as much as I wish things were different, I must accept that you not only have made your own choices, but you also have the power to stand fast to them.

Where and when you developed these skills, I do not know. I do have some large concerns about the fact that they appear to be more than somewhat dark in nature. I understand that advice from myself is particularly unwelcome to you at present, so I ask that you consider what I am about to suggest as coming from all your professors at Hogwarts as a whole, rather than just from myself.

Please do not be tempted to delve too deeply into the Dark Arts. There have been too many good witches and wizards who did so in the past, only to find themselves changed for the worse by the experience. I would not be the only person who cares for you who would be upset to see such a wonderful young man corrupted.

You are a wonderful young man, Harry. I feel privileged to have known you and to have had a hand in your upbringing, even though we both know that I have made some terrible mistakes. I pray to any being listening that you will be able to let go of your anger, even if it means that I am never permitted into your life again.

Oh, whatever spell you used to incapacitate me at the Burrow worked remarkably well, to the point that I had a splitting headache until I managed to reach Poppy's tender care. I am still trying to figure it out.

I will close with something I hope will give you some peace of mind.

The governors of Hogwarts have been rather defensive in their decisions ever since it was demonstrated that Lucius Malfoy was in fact a Death Eater. As many of them received substantial donations before voting with Mr. Malfoy in the past, their autonomy has been brought into question. As such, I have been given full authority over school matters until an investigation is carried out into their affairs.

You will always have a place here at Hogwarts, Harry. Your bed will not be removed from Gryffindor Tower.

Take care,

Albus Dumbledore.

I slapped Dumbledore's letter down firmly on top of Ginny's. I was not going to fall for the fatherly forgiven act. After all, if only a week ago he was ready to knock me out to force me back to my relatives, he's unlikely to have given up on that goal just because he got whacked on the bald patch with a sodding blunt instrument.

I picked up the next letter.

Dear Harry,

I am sending this to the Weasleys, hoping against hope that you will contact them and allow them to contact you. I will keep this brief, though I want to write more.

*I am sorry for how things have moved in your life. You seem to get far larger servings of every problem than usual adolescents get. For not being there when I should have been, I'm sorry. For not being there for you when I **could** have been, I'll not forgive myself.*

I have told no one about your apprenticeship. Albus had been almost raging at Alastor after your disappearance, but he has now settled into a sort of resigned calm. I think Albus finally realises that he cannot manipulate you and your life any longer without being called to account. Do not think that he will not try in the future however, he will just be more subtle.

He did admit that he was perplexed at how you managed to render him unconscious during your little showdown, a mystery that puzzled me too, I must admit, until a certain Weasley male came to me with something that weighed on his mind. Whatever else you have done in this life, the loyalty you command in others is your finest achievement.

I wish we had more time to talk, Harry. There are certain things we do need to discuss, not the least being Sirius's will. There are a few trinkets here that he wanted you to have. But that can

wait until you are both emotionally and physically ready. Not to mention, safe.

Please drop me a note if and when you can, if only to let an old werewolf worry less about you.

You are by far old enough to make decisions for yourself regarding your future. I will stand by you as long as I am able. I owe you, Lily and James that much.

Love,

Remus.

I whipped my glasses off and savagely wiped the hot tears forming in my eyes away with the back of my hand. While I had managed to think about Sirius from time to time over the last few weeks without the usual bubbling anger bursting, it still hurt. It hurt so much.

Now, the pain came rushing back, like it had never left. The idea that I would profit from his death sickened me, my guilt at being the cause of his death redoubling.

I dropped Remus's letter on the table and stood up, moving over to the fireplace. I put my hands on the mantle, and leaned forward, wanting nothing more than to have Sirius back with me.

I stood there for a while, chanting under my breath, "Stop it, stop it, stop it." Finally, the stinging pain in my gut weakened.

The next letter was a little more upbeat, and managed to make me smile.

Dear Harry,

Oh, you are the most irritating, wonderful, painful, magnificent, heartless git, you know that? I was worried to death about you for days, then you show up, with a Slytherin girlfriend no less, turn our lives upside down, and cause Ron to technically attempt to commit suicide. That is what attacking the most powerful wizard in the world is defined as, you know.

*To think that Ron was worried that being confined to the Burrow meant that the holidays would be **dull**.*

Please, please, please, tell me what is going on! I need to know, Harry. Remus knows something, but he isn't letting on. Merlin, Harry, I'm dying here, not knowing where you are, if you are safe.

My father was pleased to finally meet you, even though he knows that you weren't exactly at your best. He told me to extend an invitation to come to our house for dinner one night. Please come, Harry! Just pick a night that is good for you and let me know. It will be nice to finally get to talk to you by myself for a time.

Hermione's letter continued for some time, delving into her own self study routine she had adopted during the holidays in lieu of assigned schoolwork. I'm sure Ron would consider her completely bonkers. Oh, and she was quite proud of getting an O for all her OWLs, since she

mentioned it three times. Like I'd ever expected her to do any different.

I hope I haven't bored you, but we do need to keep ahead in our studies. Mr. Weasley told us that he had given you your results. How did you go? Will you be able to become an auror?

Please write back soon, Harry. I miss you terribly.

All my love,

Hermione.

I sighed as I lowered her letter. After Ginny pointed out that both Blaise and Hermione liked me, perhaps a little differently than just friends, I was a little better at picking up some of these subtle clues.

I guessed that Hermione referring to Blaise as a Slytherin girlfriend wasn't a term of endearment.

I sighed again and put the letter on the read pile. It was obvious that Blaise didn't tell her exactly what had gone on between us. I'd have to clarify that Blaise and I were just friends.

The words *for now* popped into my mind.

I shook my head to clear it, and grabbed the next letter.

Dear Harry,

Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry for what happened after I flooed Albus. I never expected that he would act as he did. It was inexcusable on both our parts, putting you in that situation.

But please, think about coming home. I know that you are not legally my son, but I've thought of you as one of my own ever since you turned up at our breakfast table that first morning. I don't think you understand just how horrifying it is not to know where someone you love deeply is, or if they are safe.

I will leave telling you the news to the children. They miss you so much, even more than Arthur and I.

Be safe, and know that you always have a home at the Burrow.

Molly (& Arthur) Weasley.

I picked up the last, surprisingly short letter.

Hey Harry!

What the hell have I done? I attacked Dumbledore! Why the hell did I do that? Oh, man, I haven't been able to sleep properly for days.

Look, I know that you've got some things you need to work through, so I'll just say that I'm here for you. I couldn't write a coherent letter right now to save my life, so I'll wait until the next time I see you.

You are coming here for your birthday, aren't you?

Ron.

I blinked. My birthday. I had no idea what I was going to do.

I drew my wand and summoned a quill and parchment, and began to write my replies.

--

Apprentice Potter Happy Birthday to me

Happy Birthday to me

Dear Hermione,

I must admit, I'm confused. I'm not sure whether I should be blushing from praise or preparing to commit hari-kari. From your letter, it's difficult to tell. Thank you for the compliments, and sorry for the other things.

I do need to clear up a couple of points though.

Blaise is not my girlfriend. The potential may be there, but we have not crossed that boundary yet, and probably won't any time soon. I have been thrust into a rather unique situation here, and Blaise has been patient enough with me (most of the time) to help me come to terms with it.

In case you haven't figured it out yet, I have been given an apprenticeship. I cannot tell you where I am, or who my Master is, so please do not ask. I will be completing my magical education, and will probably be taking my NEWTs with you at Hogwarts next year, so please don't fret about my education.

*Now that we have got that out of the way, congratulations on your OWL results! I cannot say that I am surprised though; you've been the top student in every class we've ever taken. I am very, **very** proud of you.*

*I didn't do nearly as well. I did get one O, (in Defense, naturally) but I was very happy to get six E's (Potions, Charms, Herbology Care of Magical Creatures, Transfiguration and **Divination** of all things. I still haven't worked that one out.) and an A for Astronomy. I failed History of Magic (a T, ugh) but given the Dark Wanker interrupted my exam, I can sort of feel OK about that. So, I got eight OWLs, which isn't too bad. As for becoming an auror, my apprenticeship is going to cover what I need to know, even though I didn't get the marks I needed. At any rate, I'm pretty sure that I won't be applying to work for the Ministry, in any capacity. I'll live in the muggle world before I let myself to that.*

You probably know that Dumbledore wrote to me. Suffice to say that in the letter he said that he had no idea what spell I used to incapacitate him, so you can tell Ron not to worry. In the unlikely event that he is actually telling the truth, Dumbledore blames me for him waking up with a

headache. In the far more likely event that he **does** know what happened, then he just wrote that to make me think I can pull one over him, and Ron can still not worry anyway, because the old fart needs to pretend that it was me who tricked him to carry it off.

Did that make sense?

I'm really not used to thinking my way through these sort of things. I may be becoming as paranoid as Professor Moody, but forcing myself to get into the habit of thinking through to different levels will keep me safer than just blindly trusting information given to me. It's hard, but necessary, and I'll be better for it. People have been manipulating me for a long time, and I refuse to allow them to do so any longer.

I just wish I learned that lesson before I killed Sirius.

It still hurts, and it doesn't seem to be getting any better. About the only good thing is that I'm coming to terms with my anger affecting the world around me. I'm actually able to channel it, and make my magic stronger. That's the only reason I was able to stun Dumbledore in the first place.

Oh, I've been practising my Occlumency, and I've got to the point where my scar no longer bothers me. I've felt the warning signs, but by using Occlumency, I'm not getting visions any more. Apart from seeing Sirius die, I haven't had any nightmares for the last few weeks.

Well, in an effort to get off that depressing subject, I have a favour to ask of you.

My birthday is in a couple of days, and I was hoping that you could organise a birthday party for me. I don't know who else to ask, I can't organise much given the communication restrictions I'm under and I've got no idea what you need to do in any case, since I've only ever had one in my life. (And given I was only one year old, I probably had more fun with the wrapping paper than the presents themselves.)

If you can, I'd like to invite the DA, if only so that I can explain why I'm not going back to Hogwarts in person. And Blaise too, if you don't mind too much. Thank you, Hermione, it really means a lot to me.

Take care, and I'll floo to your house on the 31st.

See you then,

Love, Harry.

Hey Ron!

Relax mate! Dumbledore wrote me a letter saying that he was still trying to figure out exactly how I managed to 'incapacitate' him. So I think you are off the hook.

That is, as long as your mother doesn't yell at you too much.

I've asked Hermione to organise my party, so it should be sorted down to the last miniscule detail. I don't know where it will be, but I'm flooing to her house on my birthday, so I'll see you then.

How did you go on your OWLs? I don't know if your dad told you, but I managed an E in Divination. At least now that I won't be going back to Hogwarts I won't have to bother with that useless subject anymore, but I will miss the creativity we regularly showed for our homework.

Anyway, like I've told Hermione, I've been given an apprenticeship. I can't tell you who or where, but I will be making an appearance or two during the year at Hogsmeade, and I'll be taking my NEWTs with you at Hogwarts.

Don't let yourself be depressed about what happened. Believe me, the old fart deserved it.

Say hello to Fred and George for me.

Harry.

Dear Blaise,

Anti-social? Moi?

I'm sorry you had to go through all that with the old man. I guess that was going to happen at some stage the moment he saw you at the Burrow, but I'm still not happy. If I get a chance, I'll follow Ron's example and brain him again.

Do you think he'd pass it off as an accident if I used an axe?

As for why he thinks I'm important, let's just say that he's a little off the deep end. Hogwarts' unesteemed Divination professor made a prediction after my birth in his presence that the Dark Lord got wind of. The Dark Wanker didn't get the full script though, and went hunting for me as a baby.

*Mind you, given her track record, I'd have to assume that Voldemort didn't find out who actually **made** the prediction in the first place either.*

Anyway, you know the rest.

Dumbledore puts more faith into prophecies than most, so he's been trying to keep me safe all these years. Though if you knew how I was treated growing up, you'd wonder what his definition of the word 'safe' is. The second I got out from under his control, he went bananas.

Again, I'm sorry you were caught in the crossfire.

On to lighter news. My sixteenth birthday is coming up. I've asked Hermione to organise a party

for me, so I'd like to invite you to floo to her house on the 31st. I hope to see you there.

Take care, and I'll write soon,

Harry.

Dear Ginny,

Thank you for your concern. The more I think about the way you stood by me at the Ministry, the more I wish we'd included you in our misadventures over the years. But don't fret about me, I'm safe and secure, not to mention free for the first time in my life.

The odd thing about freedom is that I have to accept the responsibility that comes from my actions. I accept that I will not be able to return to Hogwarts. I accept responsibility for my own education.

I also accept responsibility for my choice of friends.

Blaise is a friend, and only a friend. That may change, the same way the relationship between all of us may change over time. But for now, she is a small, but welcome, part of my life. As for trusting her, I do not entirely trust her yet. But that is because I do not know everyone she trusts.

As for what Dumbledore told me at the end of term, Remus has made it quite clear that the longer it remains a secret, the longer we have an advantage over Voldemort. If I do tell anyone, it will be you, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna all at once. You all deserve that much.

Please tell your mother that I do not blame her for Dumbledore's actions. She may think of me as sort of a son, but she'll always be the closest thing to a mother I have.

You'll have to wait to tell me all the other things yourself. I'll see you at my birthday party, but you'll have to ask Hermione for details.

See you there,

Harry.

Dear Remus,

I'm sorry that this has all been a bit sudden. From the date on your letter, you wrote it about a fortnight before I received it.

The Weasleys will be able to send me a message once a week, so just forward your letter onto them, and they'll in turn forward my letters to you. I'm sorry it has to be this way, but if Dumbledore and yourself can't find me, Voldemort has no hope whatsoever.

Thanks for being there for Ron. His letter to me was a little scattered, and I hope my reply will calm him down a little. Though if what happened is weighing heavily on Ron's mind, imagine how heavily it must have weighed on Dumbledore's?

Don't let Dumbledore fool you though, he knows exactly what happened. By pretending to think that it was me who knocked him cold, Dumbledore is playing on Ron's sympathies. I have no doubt that he will use that to subtly manipulate Ron over the next two years, to either get information or trick him into doing something.

I'm not sure whether or not to tell Ron though.

Hermione is organising my birthday party, so you'll get a chance to see me in a couple of days. Ask her for details. Can I ask a favour? Could you help her with any security arrangements? Having a fair number of students who have helped me in the past at one place could make a tempting target.

I don't know how I'll feel about Sirius' will until I see it, so if you want to bring it along on my birthday, be my guest. I might just have to take a few breaks if it gets too difficult.

I do want you to know that I'm safe, sound and learning. And happy.

I hope that sets your mind to rest.

Love,

Harry.

I put my quill down and rubbed my aching wrist. No matter how often I use a quill, it still causes my hand to cramp after a while. I'm surprised Hermione's right hand hasn't fallen off.

I looked at the stack of letters I'd written, debating whether or not to write one more.

What the hell, I don't have to send it.

Dumbledore,

Apparently, you still haven't got the point.

Don't contact me again.

H.P.

"You spotted that, did you?" Zab mentioned once I gave him the letters for a once over before

sending them on.

"I assume you mean about Dumbledore knowing that it was Ron that hit him."

"Indeed. I am glad you made the connection. More than one person has noted in the past that Albus always appears to know what is going on, and when he doesn't, he simply wants you to think he doesn't."

I nodded, though I could feel a headache coming on. "So I know that he knows, but does he know that I know?" I mused.

Zab actually barked a laugh. "Do you think he does?"

I frowned for a second, putting myself in Dumbledore's position for a second. I nodded slowly. "If he truly believed that it was me that knocked him out, he would be far more interested in determining the weakness in his defenses I exposed. The letter he wrote to me was subtly trying to steer me towards trusting him again, but he knows that anything he writes will be viewed in the worst possible light, perhaps even actively disbelieving anything he says." I paused, gathering my thoughts. "One letter is not going to change the betrayal I feel; that he knows I feel. So he has to assume that I know that he knows about who hit him. So I know that he knows that I know that he knows who hit him."

I shook my head while listening to Zab's soft laughter. "This is beginning to sound like a Monty Python sketch."

Zab looked at me quizzically. "Monty who?"

"Python. A muggle group of writers, actors and comedians. One of their many techniques is to follow an idea through to a ridiculous length."

Zab tapped his bearded chin. "Example?"

I smiled at the thought of a wizard being interested in an aging band of funny men. "To poke fun at the Government, at how bloated it was getting at the time, they created a skit with a man walking in a very funny manner along a street, crouching down while walking, sometimes swinging his leg so high it was over his head. The punch line is when he passes a building which a sign says is the Ministry of Silly Walks."

Zab blinked, but smiled. "Interesting. I shall have to investigate them. Now, back to our musings. You assume that Albus knows that you know that he knows who hit hi-"

I couldn't help it. I just started laughing all the more. The deadpan delivery of that line pushed me over the edge. Zab's expression just made me laugh harder.

I decided to floo to Hogsmeade to release Pig, who appeared very confused that he was being transported somewhere before being released.

The tiny owl struggled for height, carrying a roll of parchments larger than himself. I felt a twinge of guilt, thinking that perhaps I should have picked somewhere closer, but the little pest has far too much energy to refuse to accept such a delivery.

I stepped back through the floo before I was spotted, and made my way back to Zabini Manor.

Only to find that it was pissing down.

Bloody English weather.

Zab found me moping around in the lounge, Firebolt in hand, staring glumly out the window.

"Holidays are not fun when your movements are restricted," he offered.

I grunted. "At least I'm not locked in my room."

Zab's eyebrows shot up, but he changed the subject. "I recently acquired a tome of some age. While incomplete, it does document the recipe for a potion that claims to enhance one's mental discipline. I had hoped to experiment with the recipe and test the results against another Occlumens." Zab tilted his head to one side. "Would you be interested in assisting me today?"

"Of course, isn't that what I'm supposed to be doing as your apprentice?"

Zab tilted his head to one side, and looked at me expectantly.

I closed my eyes. "Bugger. Sorry. Um, I guess that is what I'm supposed to be doing as your apprentice. I assume you asked because it is still the holidays."

"See. You don't need to ask questions when you can work out the answers yourself."

I smiled and gave a small chuckle. "Fair enough. Yes, I'd be happy to help, though I warn you, I'm not crash hot with potions."

"Your OWL score would indicate otherwise."

I grinned. "Maybe, but I think that was because there were questions on polyjuice potion in the written exam."

Zab looked intrigued. "Polyjuice is an extremely difficult potion to make, it takes several weeks to brew. Why would questions on such a complicated potion be good for you?"

I chuckled at the memory. "My friends and I brewed it in our second year."

"Truly?"

I nodded. "We used it to get into the Slytherin common room."

Zab threw his head back and laughed. "With ambition like that, it's a wonder you weren't all sorted into Slytherin in the first place!"

We spent the days leading up to my birthday pouring over the old tome. I copied out the relevant pages onto new parchment to make notes and scribbles on, only to become rather downcast as it became terribly apparent that a great deal of the recipe was illegible.

Zab did not seem concerned though. All through my potion-making career, I had not considered exactly how new potions were discovered. Despite the seemingly random ingredients and tools, there was a somewhat scientific basis for the skill.

Five items on the ingredients list had been smudged out of existence, with only the odd letter of their names legible. At that point I was ready to admit defeat, but Zab simply summoned a pair of ledgers from his library, which contained information on how various compounds reacted with each other when brewed.

He was able to identify the first missing item within fifteen minutes.

"See here, Harry," he began, his finger pointing to a specific entry in the old text. "The first item only has two letters that are legible, a combination of 'i' and 'a'.

I looked to where he was pointing. I could make out ***** *ia*** *****.

I nodded. "But that could be anything."

Zab shook his head. "Look down at what is left of the recipe. The only time the letters 'i' and 'a' appear together is for the word 'giant'."

I read down the page. "So it does. I can make out 'add the giant...' before the ink fades." I looked up at Zab. "So the middle word is 'giant' or 'giant's', the first word is probably an amount, and the third is the item we need."

Zab smiled. "Excellent. Now, look at the ingredients that are already listed. Cross reference the effect we are after in these volumes, and you can see that giant's blood is used to counter the debilitating effects of wormwood." Zab looked up at me and adopted a lecturing tone. "As a matter of fact, giant's blood is also used to increase constitution, ward off poisons and diseases, and cure disorders like anaemia and haemophilia." Zab pointed to the list of ingredients again. "Wormwood is listed here in a quantity that is considered dangerous. The addition of giant's blood would make the potion safe."

I blinked in amazement as Zab's deductive reasoning quickly picked out the first ingredient. "Well, that was easy. Now we go onto the rest of them."

Zab's lips twitched. "Almost correct."

I rolled my eyes as he dumped the tomes into my arms. "Now you go onto the rest of them," he said.

The bad patch of weather stayed around for another day before breaking, but by that time, I was well entrenched in my task. I often found myself reading off into tangent subjects, finding the information contained within Zab's books to be very interesting.

I did manage to identify two more missing ingredients, and misidentified a third. Luckily, Zab was able to quickly recognise that the potion would become useless if that ingredient had been used.

My birthday dawned cloudy and humid, for once I hadn't been waiting up until midnight for letters and gifts from my friends. It felt good to lie in, just dozing the morning away.

I wondered what Hermione had organised for me.

I gracelessly stepped out of the floo and directly into a flaming argument.

I have no idea why this sort of thing appears to happen to me more often than most, but when you've decided not to care about the world any more, it can be somewhat amusing.

"-not welcome here, even if Harry did invite you!"

"Pity you didn't tell Potter that then! He might have asked someone who isn't paranoid to organise his party!"

"Zabini, I don't care what you think of Harry, you stay away from him. He already has friends! Friends who would die for him!"

"You're an idiot, Granger. And it's obvious you don't know Potter at all. The last thing he wants is for someone else to die for him!"

"Don't call me an idiot, you... you..."

I rolled my eyes at the conversation I'd inadvertently stumbled upon. Hermione was flushed red and tongue-tied with indignation, while Blaise was pale and shaking with fury. A most interesting contrast, and one I'd have happily examined at length with amusement in other circumstances. Circumstances that did not include the disturbingly high probability of murder being committed.

"Hiya, Harry. Happy Birthday," came a voice from my right.

I turned to see Neville standing there, pretty much oblivious to the raging debate that was occurring in front of him.

"Thanks, Neville. Happy Birthday to you too. How are you feeling?"

Neville shrugged. "Not too bad. I'm still having a few bad dreams, but other than that..." He shrugged again.

I nodded with sympathy. "Um, how long has that been going on?" I asked, tilting my head towards the feuding femmes.

Neville glanced in their direction.

"-wonderfully snappy comebacks, Granger. You sure you weren't dropped on your head as a baby?"

"Are you sure you're not the result of cousins marrying?"

Neville raised one hand and twisted it back and forth. "I'm not really sure. Not much longer than an hour."

I blinked. "An hour?" I blurted.

Neville sighed deeply. "Yeah. I've only been here for twenty minutes or so, but Ron told me that it had been going on since Blaise arrived." He pointed to the other side of the room where a group of DA members were watching the proceedings with great interest. "They'd be a bit upset if you take away their entertainment." He tilted his head and gave me an intent look. "Blaise said you invited her."

I nodded. "Yeah. That's true."

"I didn't know you knew her all that well."

"I didn't before the holidays."

Neville seemed to be content with that. "Do you want a butterbeer?"

My face twisted into a mask on indecision. "I do, but I'd better stop Hermione and Blaise from killing each other first. I may need an ambulance instead though."

Neville frowned faintly. "A what?"

I waved his question away. "Never mind. Just grab a pinch of floo powder and be prepared to call Madam Pomfrey, would you?"

Neville's smile lit up the room. It had been far too long since I'd seen such a merry sight.

"I was under the impression that this was Potter's party, not Little Miss Prefect's!"

"Harry asked me to organise it, so I'll do as I see fit to make sure he has a good day!"

This had gone far enough. Hermione knew me better than just about anyone, and I'd do anything for her, but Blaise had become important to me as well. I cleared my throat in an effort to get their attention.

"Insulting his guests is your way of making sure he has a good day?"

"Since you are not welcome here, you can hardly be called a guest!"

I shook my head gently. They both had to come to terms with the fact that I wanted both of them in my life. I cleared my throat again, a little louder this time.

"Well since you can hardly be called a hostess-"

"Don't you dare try and say I haven't-"

Well, they'd gone past the stage of responding to each other's insults to not listening to them in the first place. I glanced over at their audience, many of whom raised glasses half full of various liquids in greeting before turning back to their entertainment.

Well, there was at least one way to stop them. Embarrassment.

"Hem, hem!" I said, imitating Umbridge.

Both ladies jumped about a foot in the air and spun round to face me, almost identical expressions of fright on their faces.

"As much as I'd like to join your fan club," I started, gesturing towards the group groaning in disappointment, "I'd prefer my eardrums intact." I turned to the assembled DA members. "Or would you prefer we take this outside in the sun, transfigure them half a ton of mud and get them to put on bikinis before the fight turns physical?"

The roar of approval from the male members of the DA was amusingly enthusiastic. I turned back to the pair of combatants to see they'd both assumed identical shades of crimson.

"Harry, you prat!" said Hermione, before throwing her arms around my neck. "What did you go and say that for?" she whispered fiercely in my ear.

I put my arms around her and gently squeezed. I noted that she was very warm. "It was the only way to shut you up. You didn't even notice me arriving, and I tried to get your attention a couple of times."

She leant back, still looking annoyed. "You could have tried harder."

I gave her a lopsided grin. "Not without the Ministry coming round to investigate."

She let go and smoothed down the front of her blouse. "Um, well, Happy Birthday," she said finally.

Blaise sauntered up to us, and with a subtle nudge of her hip, edged Hermione out of the way. "Yes indeed. Happy Birthday, Potter."

I almost got the first syllable of a 'Thank you' out before Blaise grabbed the sides of my head and kissed me hard on the lips.

It took more than a little effort to calm Hermione down after that. That is, she assumed a expression of absolutely nothing, and was coolly polite to everyone from that point on. It took a great deal of effort to get her to even briefly show some emotion; to bring her down from the alpine mountaintops of icy wrath.

I spent some time catching up with the DA members, finding out how their holidays were going. Blaise stayed close by for the most part, though occasionally left the group to get a drink to to chat with some of the other people at the party. I found myself enjoying the party in spite of Hermione's mood.

The Creeveys were present, sans cameras. Angelina, Alicia and Katie were there too, and they gave me a wave and a smile from across the room. From the floating conversation, I gathered Oliver Wood had a training session today for a game tomorrow, so wasn't able to come. Fred or George was holding court at one end of the room, doing a brisk trade. The other was probably holding down the fort in Diagon alley. Given how loud the results were, I spend some time working out why the neighbours weren't complaining.

It was the sight of a sparrow scratching the lawn for seeds through the window that convinced me there were fairly extensive silencing charms surrounding the house. A muffled boom made almost everyone in the room jump, but the bird outside didn't even flinch.

That meant that there were some adult wizards or witches around.

I shifted my gaze from the local wildlife to the faces of the guests. I could recognise all of them easily, except for one woman, though given her appearance, she would have to be Hermione's mother.

As I went over to introduce myself, she stumbled and almost tripped over the edge of a rug. I stopped dead and examined her closely, noting that while she was wearing rather close fitting clothes, the sleeves on her top were rather loose.

Long sleeves? In July?

She gave the offending rug a glare and noticed me looking at her. "Ah, you must be Harry. Pleased to finally meet you," she said, holding out her hand.

A tiny smile flickered over my lips. "Wotcher," I said, mimicking Tonks' usual greeting.

The woman stiffened, but quickly relaxed. "A little informal, aren't we Harry?" she said. Her voice was slightly strained, but you'd have missed it if you weren't listening for it.

I glanced around the room, noting that a couple of people were watching. "It's nice to meet you,

Mrs. Granger. Or should that be Doctor? I'm sorry if I offended you, Hermione has told me so much about you, I feel as though I already know you." I shook her hand.

'Mrs. Granger's' shoulders slumped slightly. "Would you mind helping me in the kitchen for a moment, Harry? I'd like to have a little private chat with Hermione's best friend."

I nodded. "Of course. Lead the way."

There were a couple of more familiar faces in the kitchen. Not surprisingly, Hermione's father was there, along with a woman who, though wearing different clothes, looked identical to the woman I'd just introduced myself to.

Remus sat at the kitchen table too, a cup of steaming tea in front of him. His eyes flickered between me and the first Mrs. Granger, his eyebrows raised in silent question.

"Don't ask me how, but he picked me out straight away," grumbled Tonks as she morphed back from mimicking Hermione's mother.

I gave her a grin. "Unless Dr. Granger here is in the habit of concealing a wand up her sleeve..."

All the adults minus Tonks chuckled. Remus gave Tonks a look of amusement, and held out his hand.

"All right, Remus. You were right. He spotted me. Happy?" she grumbled, extracting a galleon from a pocket and dumping it into Remus' hand, obviously disgruntled.

Remus stood and faced me. "It's good to see you, Harry."

I took a deep breath, suddenly feeling alone. I grabbed the werewolf in a hug and held on tightly. "You too," I whispered.

I was led into a room that could only be described as a library. Books lined every wall, and were stacked in neat piles on various pieces of furniture.

I sat down on one of the couches Dr. Granger indicated and squirmed a little to get comfortable. He sat down on a three-seater couch to my right while Remus sat on a chair directly opposite. Tonks plonked herself gracelessly down next to me. Each of us put our drinks on the coffee table in the middle of the chairs, though I managed to catch Tonk's before it was spilled all over the carpet.

"Harry, I've asked John to sit in with us, since he has had some experience with the execution of wills in the muggle world."

I glanced over at Hermione's father, who nodded with a mildly sad expression. "All four of Hermione's grandparents passed away before she began school at Hogwarts, over a period of a few

years. I was named as executor in each of their wills. It makes it a little easier for someone who has experienced loss to have someone they trust to take care of the legalities. It also makes it easier to have someone with experience from whom to ask advice."

I nodded thankfully. "I-, that is, who was Sirius' executor?"

Remus' lips pursed tightly. "As a fugitive, he did not get a chance to legally change his final wishes. The will he wrote during the war was simple and direct. At the time he had no assets to speak of, though he did have a reasonable amount of money from an inheritance himself."

I frowned at Remus' evasion of my question. "You didn't answer," I said, wondering if Zab's conversation method was contagious. A sudden prickling ran down my spine as realisation dawned painfully. "My father." I whispered. Tonks reached out and silently took my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Remus nodded again, with an expression of approval. "Yes Harry. James was named as Sirius' executor." Remus made a face. "Peter was named executor in the event of James' death."

My heart skipped a beat. "Wormtail? Why?"

Remus sighed. "Sirius didn't entirely trust me at the time. Remember, we had reason to believe that someone was passing secrets to the Death Eaters; Sirius assumed that it would have been me."

"So we have to wait for Wormtail to make an appearance in order to carry out Sirius' wishes?" I growled.

Dr. Granger shook his head. "No. For all intents and purposes, Mr. Pettigrew is dead. If he did surface, he would be charged and certainly found guilty, his duty as executor would be rescinded because of that. In that situation, a government employee is put in charge of executing the will. Usually some low level civil servant."

Remus nodded in agreement. "Sirius' case also has some extra difficulties. First, there is no proof of his death. There is no body, and even though there were witnesses to his death, all three of us are beneficiaries in his will, so our testimony may be seen as suspect. Not to mention that having to explain why the country's most wanted criminal was working with several Ministry personnel would be difficult enough at the best of times. Now, any hint of collusion by Ministry personnel with dark forces is cause for a full investigation." Remus sighed and shook his head. "With so little resources, the Ministry is stretched to the limit trying to cover everything that is happening. By forcing the issue, all we would accomplish is weakening the forces fighting against Voldemort for a significant length of time."

I pushed my glasses onto the top of my head and rubbed my eyes. "So what does all this mean? I assume the inheritance deposited in my vault will continue to be unavailable. That doesn't bother me. What about clearing Sirius' name?"

Remus sighed and sat back. "Harry, is that the most important thing to you?"

"Damn straight!"

"Why?"

I blinked in surprise. "What?"

"Why is clearing Sirius' name so important? He's dead. It doesn't matter to him anymore."

I honestly didn't know I could go from upset to insane with rage in less than a second. All four of our glasses shattered in unison. Dr. Granger yelped and leapt to his feet while Remus just gasped at the sudden physical manifestation of my anger. Tonks cursed as I tore my hand from her own.

"It does matter!" I shouted. "Haven't you learned anything?"

I tried to stand, only to discover that I was already on my feet.

Remus swallowed nervously, but had his wand out and pointed at me in an instant. "Harry, please calm down. I don't want to have to use magic against you," he said, his voice soft, but determined.

I snarled at him. "Dumbledore tried that a week ago. What makes you think you'd fare any better than him?" Without looking, I swung my right hand in a circle to my side on a hunch, and was gratified to feel Tonks' wand knocked out of her hand.

"Because you love me," he offered simply, not glancing at Tonks, who I was sure had an expression of extreme surprise.

"But we can be angry at those we love," I retorted, but his words had affected me. There was no way I'd attack him, no matter how angry I was.

Remus nodded, but didn't lower his wand. "Yes, yes we can. And I know you are angry with him Harry. But why is it so important to you that we clear his name? It will take a great deal of time and effort, and we just don't have the resources to spare."

I collapsed back into my chair and pinched the bridge of my nose, seething with anger. Remus took the opportunity to summon Tonks' wand and handed it back to her. "You just said that anyone who is suspected of dark ties are investigated," I said.

"Yes. Yes I did."

"Let me guess. These investigations are not being conducted completely," I spat, sarcasm dripping from my words.

Remus frowned. "True. In quite a few circumstances, they have returned a questionable judgement. Some investigators are making a name for themselves by being, shall we say, enthusiastic. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess." I said flatly.

Tonks snorted softly, but Remus gave a small sigh of frustration. "Cynicism does not become you, Harry."

"To an optimist, a realist is a cynic." I shook my head. "Look, can you name exactly one thing the Ministry has done correctly that affected me?"

Tonks butted in as Remus raised an eyebrow. "Minister Fudge didn't bring charges against you when you blew up your Aunt Marge."

"That bitch is not my Aunt!" I snapped at her.

"I stand corrected. But the point is valid," she replied, looking a little miffed.

"Really? Tell me this. If he had ordered an investigation, would anything have come of it? It was an uncontrolled release of magic in anger." I snorted. "It's not like I haven't been doing that all bloody summer. No, Fudge was blinded by my fame and decided not to pursue it for the wrong reasons. You'll have to do better than that."

Tonks appeared momentarily flustered. Dr. Granger used the opportunity to enter the conversation.

"Um, Harry, what happened? Did you blow someone up?"

I shook my head. "It's not what you think. The woman is my Uncle's sister. She came around for a visit in the summer before my third year. The last time she stayed for a visit, her dog chased me up a tree while the rest of my relatives laughed at me."

Dr. Granger's eyes flashed fire. "Go on."

I shrugged. "She kept saying that my parents were a failure. That my father was worthless, and that there was no hope for me. She called my mother a bitch," I related, getting angrier as the memories resurfaced.

For some reason, Dr. Granger appeared even angrier than me. "What happened then?"

I frowned. "To tell you the truth, I'm not exactly sure. She started expanding, like you were blowing up a balloon. She floated out the open door and into the streets. The Ministry caught her, undid the magic and then wiped her memory."

"I see," Dr. Granger said quietly, before leaning back on the couch and interlacing his fingers into a double fist in front of his face, thinking deeply.

Remus cleared his throat. "Harry, I know that you had a difficult childhood. And now that I think about it, the Ministry hasn't exactly been a model of-

"So you can't think of a time they were right when dealing with me," I snapped.

"I guess not," he said.

"Then why do you think I was being cynical when I said the Ministry hadn't done their job correctly?"

Remus sighed deeply. "It just pains me to see someone as young as you so jaded, Harry."

"It doesn't pain you that the Ministry may be bugging up people's lives just to appear to be competent?"

"Yes, and there are loud voices at the Ministry who are being hysterical about punishing those found to have links to dark wizards, but that doesn't explain why you are so adamant about clearing Sirius' name."

"It has everything to do with it Remus! If people heard just how badly someone who was innocent was treated, then how that person fought against Voldemort even though his own government had condemned him, then they may start thinking about standing up themselves. Not just relying on a group of useless bureaucrats more interested in padding their pockets and covering their arses. Voldemort wouldn't stand a chance if everyone in the wizarding world stood side by side against him."

Remus nodded. "It would be of great benefit if we could do that, but neither the Order or the Ministry have the ability at present."

I took a deep breath to calm myself. "Well then, maybe I do."

Remus and Dr. Granger shared a glance. "Um, what do you mean?"

I shook my head. "Never mind. I haven't thought my way through it yet. Can we just get on with why we are here?"

The adults looked at me intently for a second or two, before Remus finally nodded. "Of course. I have a copy of Sirius' will here. Would you like to read it?"

I stared at the will in his hand, and it felt as though the world had stopped on its axis. That single roll of parchment bound with a black ribbon that held Sirius' last wishes, or at least his last wishes as they were before his world was torn apart in one night.

No, whatever was written there, it wasn't what he would have wanted to happen the evening before he tried to save us at the Ministry.

I shook my head. "No. That was written by a man who didn't know what was truly happening."

Remus nodded. "I agree. However, it is the version the law will recognise."

I nodded glumly. "What does it say."

Remus slipped the ribbon off and unfurled the parchment. "I, Sirius Black, disinherited scion of the ignoble house of Black, do make and declare my last will and test-"

I groaned. "Broadly, Remus. Broadly, what does it say?"

"Very well, Harry. Besides some incidental items he no longer owns, like his motorcycle, he essentially splits his estate into six equal parts. One to James, one to Lily, one to Peter, one to Tonks, one to myself and one to you."

I looked up. "Why would he not name you executor because he thinks you were dark, but give you a share of his assets?"

Remus sighed. "My share depends upon my declaring under the influence of Veritaserum that I do not support the Dark Lord."

My first reaction to be angry at Sirius was tempered at the fact that he was nineteen when he wrote his will. I looked over to Dr. Granger. "What happens when some recipients are not alive? I mean-

Dr. Granger held up a hand. "I know what you mean, Harry. Depending on the terms of the will, it can either split the deceased's shares equally among the remaining living parties, or their portions are added to their own estates, and distributed as per their own wishes."

Remus interrupted. "Sirius made no provision for that situation. During the last two years, he knew that he could not make any legal amendments to his will, but he asked me that Tonks, you and I, Harry, as the last legal beneficiaries, come to an agreement ourselves."

I frowned. "What part of his estate has already been distributed? I mean, when I went to Gringotts, there was a fairly significant deposit. I can't imagine he had an enormous inheritance before he was jailed."

Remus nodded, seemingly pleased with me. "Remember, the will was written before he was made an orphan, with the exception of his cousins. Sirius inherited the entire Black family fortune and assets before his death."

I mulled this over for a bit. "Won't his inheritance of those be contested?"

"By who?"

"Draco's mother? She hasn't been implicated in anything, as far as I'm aware."

Remus smiled almost evilly. "Oh, yes. She went and saw Malachi about securing what she could. But when Sirius wrote this, he almost nothing compared to what he owned at his death. The will is simple and direct. There is no room for legal manoeuvring at all, he gave no reasons for his decisions. She would have to claim that it was in the best interests of the family, but I can't see the Wizengamot agreeing with her."

Tonks laughed. "They'd have to face the public and say that they think it is better to take from someone the media is portraying as a hero and give the estate to a family who has been proved to be dark."

I snarled, feeling my accustomed hatred towards the press. "This week."

Dr. Granger tilted his head to one side. "This week, Harry?"

"Yeah, they're making me out to be a hero this week. They may get bored with that, and decide to portray me as a reckless danger to other children. I suppose it depends on whether or not they meet their sales quota," I grumbled.

Tentatively, Tonks slipped an arm around my shoulders. "It's OK, Pup."

Remus gave me a minute to compose myself. "In any event, given that in the eyes of the law, Peter is dead, there are three portions to be allotted, including ownership of various pieces of property, including Grimwald Place."

I glanced at Tonks, whose hair was, for once, a normal shade of dusty blonde. "What do you think?"

She shrugged. "When the Order was making moves without the Ministry's approval, Grimwald Place was a necessity. Now, though the charms are still in place, that level of secrecy isn't needed. To tell you the truth, it is no longer necessary, though we can't exactly get rid of it."

I gave a low chuckle, feeling the tension of the last few minutes fade. "Yeah. I suppose having one particular portrait permanently attached to the wall would lower the value of the property more than a little."

With my answer, the whole room appeared to relax slightly.

Remus extracted a small, wrapped box from his robes and placed it on the table before removing the shrinking charm. "We can discuss how we are going to divide Sirius' estate later, Harry. That is not important right now. I do have here a few things Sirius wanted you to have though."

I swallowed nervously, wondering why I was so scared of what was in the box.

The three adults stood. "We'll leave you to it, Harry. Just remember that if you need us, we are right here."

"Thanks, Remus, Tonks. And thank you, Dr. Granger."

Hermione's father nodded. "My pleasure, Harry. May I ask a small favour?"

"Of course."

"Hermione stormed off earlier today, and refused to say what was wrong. In the interests of being

good hosts, we didn't want to push in case we made a scene. But would you go and talk to her? Please?"

I nodded quickly. "Of course."

I tentatively rapped on the door with one knuckle. Silence greeted me.

"Hermione?"

"Go away," came her muffled response.

"No," I responded. "I need to talk to you."

"Why don't you go and talk to your girlfriend?"

I debated saying 'I'm trying to', but that would probably make things worse. "Because, like I wrote to you, I don't have a girlfriend."

"You could have fooled me!"

I raised my eyebrows. "I could? That's amazing. I've never been able to fool you before."

There was a pause before, "Just go away, Harry."

"No. I need to talk to you."

"Well, I don't want to talk to you."

I sighed. "Fine, I'll do the talking."

"I don't want to listen to you either."

I leaned my head back and thudded it against the wall. "'Mione, please!"

"No! Go away!"

I looked down at the slim mirror in my hand, and evaluated the gap at the bottom of Hermione's door. The carpet was thick, but worn, which meant that I could probably slide the mirror under the door.

What the hell. "I have something for you."

"Don't want it."

With a grimace, I knelt down and pushed the mirror face down under the door, giving the handle one last shove to propel it into the room. "It's yours now. You'll have to open up to give it back."

"I'll just send it to your girlfriend with Pig next time."

I closed my eyes. "It belonged to Sirius, Hermione. I want you to have it."

The pause was longer this time. "You should keep it."

"That would be silly, Hermione."

"Why?"

"Because then all I could do would be talk to myself."

Slowly, the door opened slightly, allowing a rumpled and red-eyed Hermione to stick her head through. "Is this...?"

I nodded. "The twin to the mirror I should have used to call Sirius after our History OWL."

"Why are you giving it to me?" she asked in a soft voice, with an odd twinge of both hope and dread.

I reached out and, for the first time, cupped her cheek in my palm, and gently ran my thumb along the moist skin beneath her eye, wiping away the tears. "Because there is no one else on this world I'd rather talk to."

Before she could say, 'What about Blaise?', I held up my other hand. "No matter what happens between Blaise and I, you will always be my friend. Maybe in the future, we will be something more, but for now, I need you as a friend."

"But what if I want something more now?" she whispered, her eyes downcast.

"I can't give it to you Hermione. I can't give it to you, to Blaise, to anyone. I'm not going to be living in the next room to you for the next two years. We are only going to be seeing each other a handful of times until our NEWTs. I can't give you anything more than friendship during that time because of that."

Hermione looked up into my eyes for a few long moments, before opening the door to allow me in.

Apprentice Potter Party Time

Party time

Hermione's room was almost exactly as I imagined. Two out of four walls were lined with tightly packed shelves of books. A massive desk sat along another wall, placed below a rather large window looking over the back garden.

I looked around, taking in the various photos containing Hermione's family members. At least two photos adorned every shelf. Everyone was smiling in them.

This was the most loving room I'd ever been in.

Hermione silently sat down on her desk chair, which was obviously of orthopaedic design. It bounced down for a second, until it settled so that the arm rests were just below the level of the desk top. With Hermione sitting on the chair, it would slide under the desk quite neatly. That alone told me that it was my friend who had adjusted it.

"Well? Talk," she snapped almost aggressively.

I swallowed and cleared my throat. Now that I was in here, I had no idea what to say.

"Um, that mirror will let you talk to me. Just say my name and I'll be able to see and hear you," I said, more to delay talking about the wall between us than believing that she couldn't work out how to use the mirror herself.

She looked down at the mirror in her hands. "I know. I've read about them."

Of course you have. "I should have guessed," I said with a small smile.

"Can I call you after you've gone home today?"

"Ye-, no! No. Not just yet."

Her eyes hardened instantly. Oh-oh. Note to self; Never piss this girl off. My life expectancy is short enough as it is.

I held up my hand in a vague attempt to stop her exploding. "It's just that, I sort of have to fix my

one."

She frowned faintly, but was obviously still angry at my answer. "Your... one... what?"

"My mirror. I tried to call Sirius after he, well, you know," I said, my voice failing.

Hermione's shoulders slumped. "Oh, Harry!" she said, sounding exasperated. "You broke it, didn't you."

I nodded glumly. "I hoped that I could talk to him. I hoped that if he had the mirror on him as he fell through the veil then..."

Hermione's eyes filled with sympathy. "Oh, Harry. These mirrors don't work that way."

"Yeah, I figured that out for myself. To tell you the truth, I forgot about it until Remus gave me Sirius' mirror."

"You talked with Remus? He said he wanted to."

I nodded. "Yeah. He wanted to go over Sirius' will." I looked up at her. "Did you ask Remus or Dumbledore to organise the security for my party?"

Hermione blinked. "Um, neither. I asked Remus and Tonks to come, and they arrived early to set some wards. I should have thought of that myself, since I invited the twins."

"Only one of them showed up."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, and he won't tell anyone which twin he is."

I took a shuddering breath, and let it out slowly. Finally, I took the plunge.

"What brought all this on? Downstairs, I mean," I asked her.

Hermione shifted uncomfortably in her chair, staring down at her clasped hands. "Well, you know. You kissed Blaise."

"No." I shook my head. "Blaise kissed me."

Hermione shifted again, but didn't look up. "Same thing."

"No, it's not."

Hermione looked up at me, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "Did you enjoy it?"

I looked intently at her for a moment or two. Honesty is by far the best way to go here. I refuse to make the same mistakes that Dumbledore made. If it makes it more difficult in the short term, so be it. "Yes, I guess I did. You know I haven't been kissed by so many people that I can tell if it was

good or bad."

"It hurt me to see it, Harry."

"Hurt? Hermione, I kissed Cho a few months ago and you didn't react like this. You even comforted me when Ron teased me about being a bad kisser."

"But in your letter, you said the potential was there for her to be something more."

I nodded. "And I haven't seen or spoken to her in the meantime. Nothing has changed since I wrote that."

Hermione was quiet for a few moments. "Do you think your feelings for someone can change?"

I frowned at her question. "Of course. It happens all the time. You're hardly in love with someone you just met, even if you end up marrying them."

"What about if you've been friends with someone for a long time. What then?"

"Yes. Of course."

She gave a little sigh of frustration. "What about changing so suddenly that it surprises yourself?"

This surprised me itself. "What do you mean?"

"Harry, I've been your friend ever since you saved me from being eaten by that troll. I've watched you go through so much. I've seen you hurt, happy, sad and angry." Hermione took a deep breath. "But I've never loved you like anything other than a brother."

I stayed silent. One of the things that Zab's habit of not answering questions encouraged was an almost intuitive understanding of when saying anything would be a bad idea.

She continued. "I love the way you think of others before yourself. I love the way you care for me. I love your determination and will. But I was always exasperated with the way you didn't take your studies seriously. The way you never applied yourself to what you were doing."

I raised an eyebrow. "You were impressed with the amount of effort I put into learning spells before the third task. You even convinced me to lead the DA because of it."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, but you learned all those spells and curses because you had to, not because you wanted to. Harry, I have never seen us together in my mind's eye, just because I didn't think... I didn't think that..."

"Yes?" I asked softly.

"I didn't think that I could ever be with someone who didn't use his mind to its full potential," she blurted.

I blinked at that. "Oh," I pouted.

She reached out and took one of my hands. "Oh Harry, please don't be offended. It sounds worse when I say it like that."

I gave her a self-depreciating grin. "I'm not offended. I know I didn't usually use my mind. To its full potential or otherwise."

Relief flooded across her face. "Thank you."

"And now?"

"What?"

I chuckled softly. "And now? You just said that you didn't think you could ever see yourself with someone who didn't use his mind. Now can you?"

Hermione bit her lip, then shook her head.

I opened my mouth, but she covered my lips with her fingertips. "Harry, the day you received that letter from the Ministry, I was very angry with you. At least, I was angry after I found out that you were safe. But the way you spoke once you woke..."

I tilted my head back slightly, so her fingers couldn't reach my lips. "You can't mean the way I yelled at McGonagall!"

"No!" she said, blushing at the memory. "No, not that."

"Then you mean... when I was talking about what was wrong with the Ministry?"

Hermione nodded. "You thought your way through everything. You challenged what was written and accepted in the media; you made me think about my own perceptions. You debated and argued, and I realised that you were thinking so much more clearly that I'd ever seen you do. You were so passionate, so persuasive, so... so..."

"So?" I asked, not sure where she was going with this.

Hermione looked directly into my eyes. "So sexy."

My heartbeat jumped. "Um, OK. I've never been called that before," I offered, a little dazed.

Hermione smiled at me. "I know, but when you think like that, you *are* ! It was weird the way you just changed my perception of you. And the letter you wrote to me since then was amazing. I honestly thought that Professor Dumbledore thought that it was you who incapacitated him at the Burrow, but you convinced me that I was wrong; that he was attempting to manipulate you into trusting him again!"

Hermione's tears had just about dried up, and her voice was getting more and more enthusiastic.

"Don't you see?" she asked, waving her hands around, threatening to accidentally break the other mirror too. "Have you got any idea what it is like to have your notions challenged absolutely by someone you didn't think capable of it? Harry, I've been so impatient to talk to you again, I've almost been driving my parents crazy."

She was almost bouncing in her chair. I reached out and put my hands on her shoulders, gently holding her steady. She smiled, and took the opportunity to put the mirror down safely on her desk.

"And then, the next time we saw each other, Blaise kissed me."

She stiffened momentarily, but relaxed and nodded. "Even though you'd said in your letter that she wasn't your girlfriend..."

"I know. I'm sorry she did that, but you didn't make it easy to explain you know."

Hermione covered her face with her hands. "I know. I'm so embarrassed. I just didn't know how to handle it."

With a small sigh, I took my hands off her shoulders and gently took hold of her own hands. "Hermione, listen to me. You are one of the two most important people in my universe. You alone have stood by me every single step I've taken. I have not doubt that I would have been dead several times over if it wasn't for you and your help."

I took a deep breath. "Do you know what memory I used to create the patronus that drove away the dementors from Sirius in our third year?"

She nodded her head. "The memory of Sirius asking if you wanted to live with him."

I smiled. "But I didn't use that memory to fight off the dementors last summer."

"What memory did you use?"

"You and Ron." I said simply.

She blushed lightly, but looked at me with a slightly worried expression. "What about now? What would you use to make a patronus?"

I gave a little snort. "Probably the memory of Umbridge getting the sack. That's what I used during my OWL."

Hermione's silvery laugh made my spine tingle. "Oh, Harry. That is just so, so... so *you* !"

Though I was still sitting, I gave her a mock bow. "Thank you. Now, are you going to come out and join my party?"

She hesitated, but gave me a quick nod and stood up. "Are you going to tell Blaise what we spoke about today?"

"Nope, no need."

"Why not?" she asked, sounding pleased, but clearly surprised.

I shrugged and tilted my head nonchalantly towards the door. "Because she is listening at the door right now."

I was rewarded with a confused expression on Hermione's face and a muffled gasp from behind the bedroom door. Rapid steps on the polished wooden hallway floor indicated the retreat of my Slytherin friend. I couldn't stop a satisfied grin from forming.

Hermione's expression turned hard as she realised that I had been correct. "Did you tell her to listen in on us?" she demanded.

I shook my head. "Of course not!"

Her eyes narrowed again. This was getting to be a habit. "Did you tell her to wait outside the door?"

I shook my head.

"Then how did you know she was there?"

I let a slow grin slide over my face. "Because she's a Slytherin."

Hermione blinked, obviously trying to decide whether or not to be angry or amused. Finally, she appeared unable to stop a smile forming. "I can't decide whether or not this is a good thing."

"What is?"

"You being able to figure out what people will or will not do. I'm vaguely alarmed that you might do it to me."

I just couldn't help myself. "You've made the decision to come down to my party haven't you?"

Hermione blinked, and looked uncertain for a second or two. Her eyes flittered around as though she was looking for something, before she settled for glaring at me. "If you've lied to me to get me to come down..."

I shook my head again, as serious as I've ever been in my life. "No Hermione. I will never lie to you. I've been lied to for too long to believe that it can ever be justified. What I wrote to you in my letter was the truth, what I said to you today was the truth. Even if it hurts now, it won't tear our friendship apart later."

She frowned and tilted her head to one side. "Is that what this is all about? Is that why you are so angry?"

I nodded slowly. "Dumbledore has been lying to me ever since I got to Hogwarts."

She reached out and touched my arm. "He's worried about you, Harry."

I shrugged. "Yes, he is, but not in the way you think."

"Oh? And just how do I think?"

I narrowed my eyes and looked at her appraisingly. "That he's worried about me like he worries about all the students. Or that he is worried about me like the son he never had," I said sourly.

Hermione shook her head. "No. I *thought* that. Not any longer."

"Oh. Why?"

"Because of what you said that day you yelled at Professor McGonagall. That he was worried about losing his secret weapon."

I closed my eyes. I knew she'd pick up on that. "What do you think now?"

"That Professor Dumbledore knows what the prophecy said, even though it was destroyed. And that he told you. And that it has to do with both you and Voldemort."

I opened my eyes and nodded very slowly. "Yes," I said simply.

"Can you tell me how the prophecy ends?"

I shook my head. "It's not that sort of prophecy. Anyway, I shouldn't tell you here."

"It is safe here."

"Not safe enough."

"Then where?"

I frowned slightly in thought. "Go to the Room of Requirement. Make sure you think about the most secure room you can. Take your mirror with you. I'll tell you then."

Hermione took a little while to agree, but she finally nodded her acceptance. "Ok."

I held out an arm. "But for now, let's go and join my party."

With a smile, she slipped her arm through mine. "Sounds like fun."

Blaise's innocent expression turned sickly when she spotted Hermione and I coming down the

stairs arm in arm. Either Fred or George must have noticed too, since a burst of whistles and cat-calls greeted our arrival back to the party proper.

Hermione turned a familiar shade of red and gently disengaged herself from my arm. "Sod off, you prat," she said to the vocal Weasley twin.

"Ooooooh!" came the typically juvenile response. "Little Hermione swore!" I think it was Fred, since he was all over Angelina earlier.

"Drop it, Fred," I said.

Fred blinked. "You can tell us apart!" he said, surprise evident in his voice. "Mum would be so jealous!"

Hermione was still glowering at him as I led her away from Fred, despite his attempts to provoke her. I glanced around and located Blaise. It didn't take much; all I really needed to do was work out where the icy silence that was making the hairs on the back of my neck rise up was coming from. I crooked a finger at her and slipped my hand back into Hermione's.

I led the pair into the library, to more than a few cheers from the rest of the group.

Once they were both in the room, I firmly closed the door behind me and turned to face them.

Not that either of them was paying me any attention whatsoever. Once more, they had locked glares and appeared to be attempting to set the other on fire using nothing but their emotions.

Fair odds, I'd say.

"Enough, both of you."

This didn't seem to have any obvious affect.

After a second's thought, I said, "Perhaps I should go out there and kiss Neville."

Both witches gave a startled squawk and turned to face me with very similar expressions of both horror and dismay. I rolled my eyes. "Why me?" I asked the ceiling. They both started with the same words.

"Harry, tell her that-"

"Potter, tell her that-"

I snorted as they looked at each other in horror. "Yes," I said, "you are both more similar than you would care to admit."

Both girls blurted in tandem, "I'm nothing like *her* !"

"Riiiiiiight, you're channelling the Weasley twins for fun. Both of you, sit down."

They sat.

I remained standing, but I leant forward and shifted my gaze over both of them. "Look. I don't have so many friends that I can afford to lose one. Blaise, I've been close friends with Hermione since first year, and I love her dearly. You will have to deal with that fact yourself. Hermione, Blaise has made my life a hell of a lot easier recently. You know how angry I've been; she has helped me cope with it. So much so that I've found myself missing her terribly ever since Ron tried to get a tune out of the old man's skull by using it as a drum set. Both of you are very important to me. You don't have to like it, but both of you do have to accept it."

I stood up straight and crossed my arms. "So what do we do from here? Which of you is going to offer the olive branch first?"

Blaise looked confused. "Olive branch?"

Hermione gave her a superior expression. "It means to-"

"Mione!" I snapped before she could finish. "Have you been listening? I don't want you to fight. I don't want you to insult each other. I don't want you to continue this ridiculous spat. I need you both, and I sure as hell can't keep apologising to one of you for the actions of the other."

"Now, I'm going out there to enjoy my party, and I don't want to see either of you out there until you are at least at the point where you can stand to be in each other's presence without picking a fight."

They gave each other wary, distrustful looks. This wasn't going well.

I walked over to the door. "Well, if you keep this up, it seems like I won't be seeing you again today. If not, thanks for the party, Hermione. Blaise, it was good to see you again. Bye."

And I walked out the door, and shut it firmly behind me.

The rest of my party was fun, if not exciting, until my early exit a few hours later. I spent a great deal of time telling everyone repeatedly that I didn't have a girlfriend, that both Hermione and Blaise were friends (with me only, obviously not with each other) and that I was not returning to Hogwarts.

Oddly, Fred was the only person that seemed to take that announcement in his stride. Though I suppose he thought for a second that I may be coming to work for him sooner rather than later.

It was Ron who came to my rescue more often than not, telling various people badgering me to either change the topic or bugger off. The pair of us sat together, laughing at the results of Fred's pranks on the other party goers.

The conversation flowing around me suddenly reduced in both volume and intensity. More than

one person in the room was now staring at someone behind me. The sudden sobriety that my friends showed indicated the new arrival was more than likely a teacher.

"Well, well, well. Mr. Potter. Fancy meeting you here."

Well, someone who holds a professorship at Hogwarts anyway, even if he cannot be classified as a teacher. "Snivellus," I said, not turning around, but gently erecting my shields. Almost instantly, I felt a tiny flicker of a presence. Nothing like Snape's touch, more like...

"I don't believe you were invited. Oh, tell the old man to keep out of my mind," I said as both Ron and I stood up and turned around.

Surprise barely registered in Snape's eyes, and only briefly. His wand was in his hand already; he was not even pretending that he was only facing a student. I suppose even a Slytherin could figure out eventually not to underestimate someone. I felt rather than saw Ron draw his own wand.

Pity for me. It did not escape my notice that nearly everyone in the room was backing away, leaving Snape, Ron and myself in the middle of a ring of onlookers. I took note of the people behind the slimy git. Ah, yes. I reached out and placed my hand on Ron's arm, gently pushing it down, lowering his wand. "Thanks, but that won't be necessary, Ron."

I casually rolled my head around and stretched my arms out in front of me, making a few subtle gestures. "Your wand isn't aimed at me. That's a mistake, Snape. You should have it pointed straight at my heart if you want to use it. I can take you down right now so fast it may as well be a stick." I rolled my wrist, then theatrically pointed my hand towards Snape, two fingers extended. "You should probably know that if I don't stun you, Weasley will do it."

This time, uncertainty did show on Snape's oily face. He looked from Ron to me, then snapped his wand up and began to mouth a spell.

Before slumping down, eyes rolling in his head.

"*Stupefy*," I said, belatedly, as I watched Snape's face bounce gently off the thick carpet.

I looked up from Snape's incumbent form and winked at Fred, who grinned back at me as he put his wand away. Ron let out an explosion of breath and swallowed loudly. Almost as soon as he'd let it out, the rest of the room followed suit, everyone to a man running forward to congratulate me.

As satisfying as it was to trick Snape, I knew that Dumbledore was in the next room. I turned to Ron, who was being soundly kissed on the cheek by Susan Bones. It seemed that it wasn't only Snape who was tricked. "Ron, thanks for the back up. I have to go." The majority of the people there vocally disagreed. I ignored them. "Tell Hermione and Blaise that I said bye, and thank Fred for me. I'm glad he still recognises our Quidditch hand signals."

"Do you have to go?" he asked while blushing a typical Weasley red, his attention obviously

somewhere else. Probably on a well endowed Hufflepuff.

I nodded sadly. "Ask Hermione about talking to me. I should be in touch in a couple of days."

I pushed my way through the crowd to the fireplace before I heard the unwelcome tones of the headmaster. "Harry! No, please wait!"

The next second, I was spinning through the floo, on the first of several legs of my journey back to Zabini Manor.

I leaned back in my chair and stretched, feeling my vertebrae creak satisfyingly. I cupped the back of my neck and massaged it, feeling the tension ease slightly.

The day after my birthday dawned cloudy and wet again. The unseasonable weather confined me to my studies, and I made considerable progress at deciphering the ancient text's recipe ingredients. Zab had agreed to help me repair my mirror, but since it would take a few days for the materials to be gathered by his contacts in the wizarding world, he had me work even harder on the obscure potion. He sat opposite me at the large desk as I worked, his own notes and calculations forming a pile to his right.

"I think I've figured out the last ingredient," I said, catching my Master's attention.

Zab looked up from his own studies. "Excellent. May I?" he asked, holding out a hand.

I nodded, picking up my notes and passing them to him. He ran his eye over my work. "I think it's Shrivelfig. There was only a short note on it in your reference guides, since it isn't really a modern ingredient. Most of its effects can be mimicked or improved in nearly all potions by using other, more common ingredients."

Zab nodded absently, still reading. "Yes, that would make sense. And since it was commonly used when this text was written, yes, I believe you are correct. Good work, Harry," he said, his nose buried deep in my notes.

"Thank you, Master. We still don't know the correct amounts of some of the ingredients, so we'll probably have to recreate the original potion first before we try and improve it with modern replacement ingredients."

Zab gave me a smile. "Yes. That had been my intention. Come, let us examine the contents of my storeroom."

We rose, myself with more than a little excitement. So far, Zab's potion storeroom had been out of bounds.

The storeroom was located in Zab's study, cunningly hidden within the grain of the wood in one wall. Zab opened the door with a short, muttered incantation. A faint, sickly green glow emanated from a roughly door-shaped area of the wall, before a loud click signalled the release of the magical lock. Silently, the door swung inwards and I felt the cool dry air from the room within on

my face.

As Zab stepped in, the room slowly lit up, several crystal globes positioned at various places glowing softly. Shelves lined all four walls, filled with containers, books and artefacts. A large, utilitarian workbench occupied the center of the room. Zab placed our shopping list down on the table and began reading out the ingredients, pointing to various shelves.

With a silent shrug, I followed his directions, collecting the various ingredients. The majority were selected from two walls, seemingly filled with benign, common or inexpensive reagents. It was only when Zab directed me to collect the giant's blood from the far wall that things went wrong.

As my fingers grasped the large glass container filled with the surprisingly viscous liquid, a magical trap sent a shock up my arms so quickly that I didn't recognise that I'd been zapped until after I woke up.

I really should be used to the universe crapping in the box labelled 'Harry Potter's karma' by now. I had subconsciously assumed that after I took control of my life I would have, in some minor way, stopped every bad thing from happening to me. Or at least reduced in number the incidents that require me to have medical attention.

Colour me surprised.

The light above me was blinding as I tugged my eyelids open. Blinking rapidly, I took stock of my situation.

At least two house elves were busy, quietly buzzing around the bed. I tried to sit up, only to find that I had absolutely no control of my body.

"Ah, welcome back, Harry. I must apologise, I had no idea the shelves at the back of my store were warded in such a way. I have since discovered that they are trapped against those not of Zabini blood."

"Oops," I managed, trying for withering sarcasm, but getting only uncontrolled dribbling. I tried to sit up, but found it impossible.

"Don't strain yourself unduly. Sensation and motor control will return in due course. I'd estimate that within the hour you will have full control back."

"Goo' 'rap."

Zab frowned momentarily, before nodded. "Yes, I believe my paternal grandmother placed the original wards. She was a powerful, though particularly paranoid, witch."

I tried my hardest to give him an incredulous stare, but I'm not sure I managed anything like it.

Zab patted my shoulder. "Again, I'm sorry. I've collected the rest of the reagents required, sparing

you further inconvenience. I must apologise again."

He actually seemed quite upset. Not surprising really. "'k," I offered.

He nodded, looking abashed, and left me in peace.

It didn't take an hour for me to get most of my bodily control back, but I was still a little twitchy a few hours later. Because of that, Zab wordlessly manipulated the assembled ingredients on the potion workbench himself.

"While the majority of the reagents are still potent and usable, we are missing a few. One of which is, unfortunately, giant's blood."

I frowned. "Um, no. I quite clearly remember selecting giant's blood from the shelf at the back. It was rather embedded in my memory. Shockingly so, as a matter of fact."

Zab sighed softly. "Again, I'm sorry, Harry. There is little more I can do or say. I hope you can put this behind you, letting an accident-"

I held up my hand. "No, I'm sorry for my tone." He really was sorry. I needed to grow up. "I will not bring it up again. I just seem to have been behind the door when the universe was handing out good luck."

Zab nodded, a small smile on his lips. "Quite. In all honesty, I cannot quite gauge the hardships you have had to endure in your life. I have always been privileged, born to both wealth and power. However, I refuse to apologise for that which was outside of my control."

I tilted my head to one side. "You apologised to me, yet you said that you didn't know the shelf was warded."

Zab nodded. "But I should have. I placed you in a situation where I had not taken all possible steps to ensure your safety. It is for that that I apologise."

I nodded. "Accepted, and thank you. Now, about this supposedly non-existent giant's blood."

Zab chuckled softly. "I'm afraid there is no dispute as to the current whereabouts of the blood. The entire container is now currently residing, in pieces, mind, in the rubbish. The contents of said container were cleaned off both the storeroom floor and your clothes."

"Ah."

"Indeed."

A pause. "And? Why would that be unfortunate?"

Zab rolled his eyes. "Think, Harry. I can't imagine that the trap scrambled your brains. Not unless the old bat was far more vindictive than I remember."

I ran a hand down my face. "Ok. Since I was out I imagine you were busy getting the ingredients you don't have."

Zab nodded encouragingly.

I frowned. "Right, so since you said it was unfortunate that there was no giant's blood, I'm assuming you mean *usable* giant's blood, unless it can be wrung out of a mop."

"Go on," Zab said with a trace of laughter in his voice.

I paused, before figuring it out. "There isn't any giant's blood available right now. All the apothecaries are sold out."

Zab tilted his head to one side. "And?"

I blinked. What? Was there a problem? A supply issue?

Realisation dawned. Oh, bugger.

"The giants have joined Voldemort," I blurted. "There won't be any available in the near future."

Zab nodded. "Yes. Giant's blood is particularly difficult to collect at the best of times. Most giants are notoriously unwilling to part with any, you understand. My supplier estimates a three month delay on being able to fulfil my order."

"Three months?"

"Unfortunately."

"Why can't you harvest some yourself?"

Zab lowered his head, looking at me from under his eyebrows. "Surely you have noticed that I don't have a giant farm listed under my assets."

I nodded. "I know."

Zab didn't let up. "You are also aware that there are no living giants in the British Isles. They were routed and expelled during Grindewald's reign."

I winced. "That's not entirely correct."

Zab breathed in and out twice before speaking. "You had better have intimate knowledge of a giant's location somewhere in the British Isles."

I nodded slowly. "I do."

Again, Zab took his time in responding. "If we collect the necessary tools, we can floo to

Hogsmeade within the hour. That will allow us to enter the Forbidden Forest under the cover of darkness."

My mouth dropped open, but I snapped it shut after a second. Thinking through an idea was becoming a habit. "The forest is the only place I've been, or at least know of, that a giant could live undetected."

Zab smiled and nodded. "You know Harry, logic and reasoning are rare traits in a wizard. It is good to see them in such a talented individual. Even better is to see you cultivate them. Right now, however, you will explain to me in minutly intimate detail exactly *how* you know that a giant is living in the Forbidden Forest."

Apprentice Potter A Giant Problem

A Giant Problem

It was fairly late in the evening when Zab and I stepped out of the fire at the Hog's Head. This was a calculated risk on Zab's part. While the disreputable tavern did attract those who paid attention to the comings and goings of others, in Zab's experience, it tended to be specific, targeted spying. Sitting in the dim tavern hoping someone important would come through the floo assumed that the hypothetical spy would have someone to sell the information to, and that he wouldn't be targeted himself. As such, regulars here tended to keep their eyes to themselves and ignored the comings and goings of others. At least those who could fight back. More as a survival trait than anything else though.

Wordlessly we left the pub, not even getting a glance from the bartender. I did make sure that none of the three patrons even looked up at us though. Just to double check. I didn't want to make the same mistake again as I made with the DA.

Zab tilted his cowed head, indicating that we should head down one of the many lanes nearby. I followed him, having one last look up and down the dimly lit street. Only a single tipsy couple were in the middle of the road, and they were walking unsteadily away from us.

"We need to wait for a few more hours, until the night gets dark enough for us to slip into the Forbidden Forest unseen," he whispered.

I looked around surprised. "I can hardly see the other side of the street. Isn't that dark enough for our needs?"

Zab looked down at me. "We just stepped out of a brightly lit building."

I blinked. "Oh. So we did. Our eyes are not adjusted to the low light yet. Although, many people would disagree with you on your description of the Hog's Head as *brightly lit*."

Zab smiled easily. "True. But at this moment, you need to step out of the line of sight of someone walking down the street."

Obediently, I moved over to Zab's side and leaned against the wall. He nodded at me; I assumed he was pleased that I didn't argue or take my time.

"If there was a building nearby we could hide in until moonset, that would make our task easier, you know."

"I trust you know of such a place, and are not just making conversation."

I nodded. "The Shrieking Shack is on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. If you apparate there, I can use my invisibility cloak to make sure no one sees me."

Zab frowned momentarily. "I think not. The shack you refer to does not give us a clear path to the forest that we can take and guarantee our remaining undetected. Not to mention that it is haunted."

"It doesn't need to, and no, it isn't."

A flicker of annoyance crossed Zab's face. "Explain. Quickly."

I took a deep breath. "There is an underground passageway from the shack to the base of a tree near the edge of the Forbidden Forest. And the rumours that it was haunted were started by Dumbledore about twenty-five years ago when he allowed Remus Lupin to stay there when he had his monthly changes."

Zab slowly looked away, then back to me again. "Lycanthropic transformations?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I guess you'd call them that."

Zab ran his fingertips around the edge of his goatee. "Very well. I shall apparate there directly. Meet me there in ten minutes." With a soft implosion, he disappeared.

I pulled my cloak out of my backpack and tossed it over me, then made my way to the Shrieking Shack.

Without a slaverling animagus and a howling werewolf, the inside of the Shrieking Shack was really not too intimidating. Though derelict and thoroughly uninhabitable, the structure itself was well built and solid. Intentionally that way, I suppose, since it was designed to house an adolescent werewolf.

Zab was crouching down in one corner as I entered, examining the scratches and bite marks on the few sticks of furniture that remained. He ran a thumb over one deep gouge in a shattered chair leg, obviously deep in thought.

"Albus allowed a werewolf to attend Hogwarts and to transform here?"

I nodded, though Zab's back was to me. "Remus was a friend of my father. And my godfather."

Zab stood, still holding the chair leg. "I cannot believe that man."

Was Zab a bigot? "You don't think a werewolf deserves an education?"

Zab waved away my question. "Don't be absurd. You're reading something into my words that I certainly never put there. Everyone deserves an education. But putting a werewolf into a house from which escape is trivial is truly idiotic. To house a dangerous creature so close to both a school and a town is simply diabolical."

I stared intently at him, realising that as cold as he sounded, he was thinking of the rights of the community at large, rather than the rights of a single unfortunate individual. I guess this was the major fundamental difference between him and the old man.

"I guess you would have done something different. Perhaps given Remus a timed portkey to a safe location for his transformations."

Zab nodded. "That's exactly what I have done."

Huh? "You've done that?" I blurted. His words clicked in my mind. "You used to have a werewolf as an apprentice!"

Zab nodded sagely. "Yes. Like your Remus Lupin, she was both a fairly powerful witch while also considered an outcast. Dippet wouldn't allow such a danger anywhere near Hogwarts, rightly enough, so it fell to the Ministry to decide. Typically, they chose to wash their hands of the whole thing, and voted to banish the poor girl. I took her on as an apprentice over seventy years ago." Zab sighed. "She was seduced by Grindlewald during his reign. He used her as a distraction during the full moon. During the course of five months, she savaged over a dozen people, infecting the three survivors." Zab looked over at me with his penetrating eyes to gauge my reaction.

I nodded my acceptance. "The Ministry passes laws designed to make dark creatures' lives hell. Falling in with Voldemort now or Grindlewald then may have been their only choice."

Zab shook his head. "There is always a choice. She chose poorly. I will grant that the pressures she was under were far greater than I have ever experienced. Perhaps I am being too harsh in my judgement, but I truly believe that she made the wrong decision, that she could have chosen to stay out of the fight altogether. While her life would undoubtedly have been more difficult, it would have been longer."

Something in his voice made me make a connection in my mind. "You caught her."

Zab slowly slumped his shoulders. "No. She refused to allow herself to be captured. I killed her. In the line of duty."

I swallowed. "I'm sorry."

"For what? You didn't know her."

"No. I'm sorry that you had to make that decision."

Zab nodded, then squared his shoulders, subtly indicating that the conversation was over. "Where is this passage?"

I moved over to the entrance, casting *lumos* as I entered. The passageway didn't seem to be as oppressive as it had been the first time I travelled down it. I had actually expected to feel claustrophobic, or at least thought that the passageway would seem smaller, but it appears that though I've grown a little since third year, I haven't yet hit my growth spurt.

A muffled creaking combined with a few earth shaking thuds indicated that we were coming close to the well guarded Hogwarts entrance. I scrabbled through the hole at the base of the Whomping Willow, and reached up to press the knot of wood that calmed the violent tree.

You know, I reckon I could make a great deal of money selling seeds for this species of willow to those self-styled eco-warriors who tie themselves to trees to protest them being felled. They could plant a heap of them in the middle of a logging plantation before the loggers come. Let the trees get revenge, in some small way.

Zab climbed out after me, and brushed off the dirt and dust that covered his cloak. "Interesting. A way past the wards surrounding Hogwarts, with no security other than secrecy. I'm amazed that Alastor didn't kill Albus out of frustration even during the few days he was here."

I smiled at the image of Moody barking his displeasure at Dumbledore in the twins' shop. "The fact Dumbledore is still alive probably means that Professor Moody didn't know about this."

"Indeed. Come, your giant awaits. Lead the way."

It took a while to find the mound where Grawp made his home, only to discover that he wasn't there. Signs of a struggle were hard to miss, considering that they included shattered tree trunks that were so thick that Hagrid wouldn't have been able to put his enormous arms around most of them.

Sticky blood trails littered the clearing, along with literally hundreds of wooden shards. Here and there, a snapped spear or bow lay forlorn and lonely. Even in the rather dim light of the crescent moon, it was obvious that the centaurs had forcibly evicted Hagrid's brother.

"Sorry Master. It looks like this has been a wild goose chase."

"Not necessarily," Zab replied, examining the far edge of the clearing by lighting it with his wand. "There are distinct footsteps over here, made by a humanoid with almost metre long feet. They do not indicate flight; this Grawp of yours appears to have left of his own accord."

I'm not exactly sure why, but I felt relief at that. "OK, but I'm not sure tracking down a giant at night in the Forbidden Forest would be less hassle than waiting for three months for the Diagon Alley apothecary to have giant's blood in stock."

Zab grimaced. "That was merely the minimum time that their own supplier could have that for delivery. Given that your friend's mission to woo the all the giants in Europe to Albus' banner failed, it will in all likelihood mean that giant's blood will become rare to non-existent to potion brewers all over the world." He pressed his lips together. "At least to the non-Dark brewers."

I frowned and bit my lip in thought. "Well, since we probably won't have regular access to Grawp anymore, we will need to take more blood than we had expected tonight. We don't have the right containers for that amount."

Zab disagreed. "I can cast some charms to expand the internal dimensions of our container. That is not difficult or time consuming. The problem will be to convince Grawp to willingly give up that amount of blood in the first place."

I glanced down at the ground, still sticky with dried blood and gore. "That may not be a problem. Unless it needs to be collected directly from the body, and not from the surrounding landscape."

Zab growled deep in his throat. "You are fully aware that all potion reagents need to be extracted from their natural state before being sealed."

I sighed but didn't respond. For someone who was quite cynical and had a dry humour, he seemed unwilling or unable to see that sort of humour in others. We continued following the path of Grawp's escape route. Not that it was difficult. Indeed, it would have taken a rather spectacular lapse of concentration on our part to lose the trail, since it included the occasional uprooted tree.

Subtlety was not a giant's strong point.

I jumped slightly as a distant roar of pain shook the trees. Zab and I shared a glance before we started running along the trail.

The sounds of combat grew louder, until we arrived at the scene and skidded to a halt. A moderately large clearing was lit by a score of discarded torches, their flames illuminating the area and projecting disturbing shadows against the tree line. Almost a dozen centaurs were harrying Grawp with spears while others were shooting arrows into his thick hide.

Grawp didn't appear to be too encumbered by the dozens of shafts already sticking out of his skin. He snatched down and grabbed the arm of one of the spear-wielding centaurs, and hoisted him into the air. Four equine legs waved pathetically in the air for a moment before Grawp grabbed the centaur around the belly with his other hand, and hurled the creature into a trio of archers.

All four centaurs were removed from the fight, and probably from the realm of the living too, given how hard Grawp threw the first one. The dispassionate voice in the back of my mind noted that even as large as Grawp was, using a centaur as a bowling ball and scoring a strike would require a vast amount of adrenaline. Hagrid's brother was caked with dried blood, but was in no way slowed.

With a swipe of his enormous hands, Grawp uprooted a tree that was probably older than Zab to use as a makeshift club. As effective as it was crude, it drove back the remaining spear-wielding centaurs out of the effective range of their spears.

"GO WAY!" shouted Grawp, still swinging the tree trunk from side to side. "LEAVE GRAWP 'LONE!"

One centaur who I recognised as Bane struggled to his hooves on one side of the battlefield, one arm hanging limply, dislocated at the shoulder. "Aim for his eyes! Blind him!" he ordered.

The volley of arrows shot at Grawp's face mostly missed, since the giant was swaying from side to side as he swept the massive club in front of him. Even so, more than a few struck his face, one lodging in his eyebrow.

"NOT KILL GRAWP!" the giant howled with frustration.

Zab ran his eye over the scene. "Perhaps we should have made an appointment?"

I hardly registered what he said, since I was staring at the ground.

I've seen paintings of battles before. Not the originals of course, but reprints in books. There always seemed to be something missing. Now I know what it was.

The smell.

Blood. Bile. Faeces. Digestive fluids. Nothing can describe the stench of them all on a battlefield.

A centaur has the same physiology of a horse, including what looked like half a kilometre of slippery tubes. One victim of Grawp's wild swings lay just in front of us, his legs waving pathetically in the air as his heart gently stopped beating. I could tell the exact moment, since the poor creature's ribcage was torn open, revealing the overlarge organ as it ceased its life giving role.

My eyes swam and I found myself on my knees, vomiting my dinner. Zab's hands encircled my chest, and he half lifted-half dragged me away from the fight. He propped me against a tree about twenty metres from the small clearing.

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

I nodded, not trusting my voice. Somehow, I just knew that nightmares involving Sirius would be replaced by a vision of something a lot more gruesome. "Thanks," I mouthed.

He simply nodded, and passed me a handkerchief with a permanent cleaning charm. I wiped away the bile on my chin, and spat in an effort to clear my mouth.

"Stay here, Harry. Compose yourself. I'll be back in a moment."

I looked up at him in disbelief. "You're going back!" I croaked.

Zab nodded. "We need that blood, and I can't harvest it from a corpse. I'll stun all the centaurs if I have to."

I pushed myself away from the tree. "I'm coming with you."

Zab took a deep breath, and looked me up and down. I had expected him to object, to order me to stay behind, but again he surprised me. "Fine. Stay behind me, obey any order I give you immediately and without argument, and if you feel faint, get out of there. Understand?"

"Yes, Master," I said, fingering my wand.

Zab nodded at my determined expression, and moved back towards the fight.

He moved differently. Before, he walked with the assured tread of the confident aristocrat. Now, he moved with the silent grace of a predator.

Zab's first spell spread a thin layer of ice over the ground at the hooves of the remaining archers, causing them to slip and slid around almost comically before succumbing to gravity.

He cast a shrinking charm on the spears held by two more centaur warriors before our presence was noticed. Bane quickly ordered a pair of centaurs to focus on the second threat.

Zab wasted no time in restraining the pair, conjuring a stream of smoke that acted like rope, binding the legs of the attackers quickly, forcing them to the ground.

One had the presence of mind to hurl his spear at my Master, but I summoned it towards me instead and stepped to the side to allow it to pass harmlessly. A group of at least six centaurs appeared on the opposite edge of the clearing, throwing Zab's odds calculations off. The situation was threatening to get out of hand.

I noticed movement behind Grawp and quickly cast "*Expeliaramus !*", disarming a centaur who was about to drive his spear into the giant's unprotected back. Unsurprisingly, that attracted the centaur's attention to my presence. Gritting my teeth against what I was about to do, I cast a banishing charm on the corpse in front of me, mimicking Grawp's bowling effort on the newcomers. With far less effect though.

"Shield charm!" Zab spat, before turning his wand back to the fray.

Two arrows embedded themselves into my shield less than a second after I finished mouthing the incantation. Three more centaurs appeared through the trees on the right hand side of the clearing.

I swallowed, let my shield drop, pointed my wand at my throat and cast, "*Sonorus !*" I then lifted my head and shouted, "STOP! NO MORE!"

Everyone, man, centaur, giant, all stopped at the sound of my voice. The fact that the trees surrounding the clearing shook with the volume made it all the more intimidating.

"ENOUGH! LET THIS END! THERE HAS BEEN TOO MUCH BLOOD SPILT ALREADY!"

Bane and several other centaurs were shaking their heads in an effort to think clearly. Grawp was staring at me with something approaching awe on his arrow-studded face. Almost absently, he began raising his tree trunk club to deal a blow to a stunned centaur in front of him.

"GRAWP! NO! DROP THAT NOW!"

The giant blinked, but continued to lift the weapon into the air.

"*REDUCTO* !" I shouted, anger blossoming in my stomach.

Again, the rage I felt enhanced my magic and blew the enormous tree trunk into kindling. At the detonation, every centaur dropped to their knees and covered their heads. Grawp simply stood there, blinking stupidly at the remains in his hand.

"I SAID, ENOUGH!"

Bane struggled to stand. "This is none of your concern. Leave, or we shall send your spirit to the stars tonight as well."

I snapped my head around to face him, rage contorting my features. "WHAT GIVES YOU THE RIGHT TO DECIDE WHO DIES TONIGHT?"

Bane managed to stand, though he was swaying slightly. "This is our forest, manling."

"NO. IT DOES NOT BELONG TO YOU. IT BELONGS TO EVERY CREATURE WHO LIVES WITHIN. THAT GIANT IS ONE OF THEM."

Bane blinked in the dim light, focusing on me. "I remember you. You are the boy-wizard Hagrid calls Harry. I warned you against coming back to the forest." He grabbed a spear from a fallen comrade and hefted it in his good arm.

I gestured to the carnage around us. "YOUR ORDERS HAVE LED TO THIS. YOUR DECISIONS HAVE KILLED THESE CENTAURS. IN YOUR MISGUIDED ATTEMPT TO CLEAR THE FOREST OF THOSE YOU CONSIDER A THREAT, YOU HAVE CAUSED MORE DEATHS THAN ANY OTHER CENTAUR LEADER. YOU ARE A FAILURE."

Bane appeared taken aback at that. Some of the centaurs were looking from him to me and back again, confusion on their faces.

"LOOK AROUND YOU!" I shouted. "IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED? IS THE DEATH OF SO MANY OF YOUR HERD WORTH THE REWARD? HOW MANY FOALS NO LONGER HAVE A FATHER? HOW MANY MARES NO LONGER HAVE A HUSBAND? IS BANE'S PRIDE WORTH THE PRICE THEY PAID?"

Bane drew back the spear, aiming at me. "Go back to the world of men. We want nothing to do with you. Go now, and never return."

"THE WORLD OF MEN IS ALREADY IMPOSING ON YOU, BANE. YOU CANNOT HIDE FROM IT. YOU CANNOT RUN FROM IT. WAR IS COMING, EVEN YOU CAN SEE THAT IN THE STARS." In the midst of my anger, I shouted my frustration at the world.

Bane simply threw the spear. I prepared to step aside and dodge it, but Zab intervened. With his *incendio*, the spear erupted into a short-lived comet, reaching me as a brittle stick of charcoal, snapping into tiny pieces against my chest.

I casually brushed the marks from my robes. Several centaurs snapped at Bane in an unfamiliar language at his action.

"No! We need to kill this giant to ensure our safety!" Bane shouted at the dissenting centaurs.

Again I gestured towards the ground, still littered with corpses. "YOU DARE CLAIM THAT YOU ARE CONCERNED FOR THEIR SAFETY?"

Bane rounded on me. "The giant killed them!"

"HE WAS DEFENDING HIMSELF FROM YOU!"

"He is a threat to us!"

I snarled at him. "IT IS A POOR LEADER WHO TURNS A POSSIBLE THREAT INTO REAL DEATHS."

Many centaurs were muttering among themselves, though some took the opportunity to assist the wounded.

Bane glanced around his rapidly eroding support. "If I had done nothing, more of us may have been murdered."

I gaped at this. "THERE IS A FAMILY OF ACUMANTULAS LIVING IN THIS FOREST TOO. HAVE YOU EXTERMINATED THEM, SINCE THEY POSE A THREAT TOO?"

Grawp opened his fist, and dropped the remains of his weapon. "You no kill Grawp, Grawp no kill you."

Bane stared at him in disbelief, before turning back to me. "I cannot allow the giant to live."

"Bane! Too many of us have died in conflict with the giant," said the centaur I saved from Grawp's blow, blood streaming down his muscled torso from a gash in his shoulder. Two other centaurs assisted him to his hooves. Once standing, he looked Grawp up and down. "The giant is dangerous, but we can avoid him, especially if he truly wishes to avoid killing."

Bane whirled to face the speaker. "Manis, Firenze said that many centaurs would die by the giant's hand!"

The centaur named Manis nodded sadly. "Many have. Many honourable centaurs have been killed to salve your pride, Bane. That they died by the giant's hand does not change that fact."

"No! I shall not permit him to live, Manis!" Bane shrieked.

Manis sighed and nodded. "Then you shall have to take the life yourself. The wizardling is correct. It is not for the safety of the herd that you pursue the death of this giant."

Grawp cleared his throat, sounding like a gravel mixer as he looked between Manis and Bane. "You no kill Grawp now?" he asked, obviously confused over the proceedings.

Bane glared at him, absolutely livid. "This is not over, giant. I shall hunt you down."

Grawp nodded, seemingly oddly satisfied. "Little horse-man hunt Grawp later. No kill today."

Bane snorted, reared onto his hind legs and galloped out of the clearing. Manis watched him leave before turning to face Zab and I. "Thank you for your assistance. I fear many of us would have joined our ancestors, had you not arrived."

I pointed my wand at my throat and cast, *quietus* . "You're welcome."

Manis glanced at the dark sky. Though obscured by the smoke from the dying torches in the clearing, many of the brighter stars were still visible. "Mars is bright, Jupiter gains in form while Venus wanes. War is coming, and there is nothing we can do. We must fight, or die." He looked back to me, his old eyes narrowing. "But you, manling, you move outside the stars. Perhaps you can stop this war, perhaps not. But decisions you make may well change the world."

With that, Manis busied himself in aiding the wounded. Grawp loomed over the proceedings, looking uncertain. Zab came over and grabbed my arm above the elbow.

"Harry, I swear, if you ever spring a surprise on me again that doesn't work, I'll make you wish you were in detention with Snape for the rest of your life," he said, giving my arm a shake.

I gave a little chuckle. "Sorry, it just seems that killing everyone was just stupid."

Zab let me go and shook his head with a low chuckle. "Don't apologise, my boy. Only those leaders who are insecure in their fallibility demand an apology after unorthodox tactics result in a successful mission. Just warn me in future if you are going to stand on your soapbox."

Grawp stepped gently around the fallen centaurs. Well, gently being a relative term. It still felt like a minor earthquake.

"Grawp no want kill. Grawp want Hagger. Where Hagger?" he asked, looking at me with awe, bordering on fear.

"Hagger?" Zab whispered out of the side of his mouth.

"Hagrid," I whispered back. To Grawp, I said, "Hagrid is working. I don't know where. Can you come with us?"

Grawp started picking arrows out of his skin, looking for all the world like he was picking stray hairs from a woollen sweater. "Grawp follow little Haree with big noise."

Zab glanced at me and shrugged, before turning back to the path leading to Grawp's mound. Grawp and I followed, walking back into the dark wood.

"Grawp, your English is getting much better," I offered.

An almost amusing expression of confusion blossomed on Grawp's face, still sporting a few rogue arrows. "'Glish?"

I smiled. "The way you speak."

Grawp grunted. "Hagger help."

I nodded. "Hagger-, Hagrid helped me too. He was the first friend I ever made."

Grawp grumbled deep in his chest. "Hagger help Grawp. Grawp not have 'rends too."

It took Zab and I almost an hour to remove the arrows and bandage all of Grawp's wounds. Throughout it all, Grawp sat still and silent in the dark, simply watching us work. He obeyed instantly if we needed him to raise an arm or shift his body to allow us access to his back or neck.

More disturbing than his uncharacteristic calm was the look of nervousness in his eyes when he glanced at me. On more than one occasion, he took a breath and began to speak, but stopped himself.

Zab busied himself behind Grawp, gently washing off small amounts of blood from each of the arrow wounds he bandaged. To distract the giant, I transfigured a stick into a bucket and filled it with an *aqueous* spell. I started washing the blood, grime and dirt from his skin, taking care not to press too hard on his wounds, no matter how much Grawp ignored the pain.

For some reason, the phrase, 'wax on, wax off' floated through my mind, causing me to smile to myself.

Zab cast a spell on a log, which levitated him high enough to treat the wounds on the back of Grawp's shoulders. As I cleaned and dressed the wounds on Grawp's legs, Zab found a wound near a vein and gently pushed a thick needle through the already damaged skin on Hagrid's brother's upper arm. He must have hit the vein first go, because the thick, syrupy blood flooded out through the needle and down the connected rubber hose, and began filling the enlarged container in earnest.

"Grawp, will you be OK living here?" I asked him, more to divert his attention than out of any real desire for an answer.

He seemed confused at the question. "'Ving?"

"Living. Um, staying here."

Grawp grunted with a small nod. "Grawp like here. Grawp stay here. No big ones."

I paused and made a guess. "No other giants here?"

Again, a grunt. "Big ones hurt Grawp. Say Grawp runt."

The expression on Zab's face was almost indescribable. I suppose if you were stealing several litres of blood from someone who both claims to have been called a runt and owns an arm thicker than your chest it would seem quite surreal.

Runt though he may have been, he was still pretty healthy. Zab removed the needle and staunched the flow of blood after bleeding off about fifteen litres or so. Even after all that, Grawp didn't appear to be inconvenienced, just a little pale.

Zab nodded to me, and waved his hand in a circle, indicating that I should wind the conversation up. I looked up at Grawp, myself a little awed at the expression of awe on his face.

"Grawp, we are going now. I'll tell Hagrid to come and visit when he can."

Once more, I got a grunt, which appeared to be Grawp's method of voicing agreement. As I stood back, an unwelcome realisation dawned on me.

Grawp and I were very alike. We were both alone in the world until Hagrid came and saved us. We were both unwelcome in what should have been our homes.

We were both under threat of death in the world that had become our home.

I swallowed, not wanting to pursue that line of thought any further. "Bye, Grawp. I hope I'll see you soon."

Zab had quickly packaged everything, levitating the enlarged containers of blood behind him. "Indeed. Farewell giant."

Grawp frowned down at Zab before looking back to me and slowly nodded. "Grawp see Haree soon. Grawp tired. Grawp sleep."

I nodded, and offered a final, "Sleep well," before silently following Zab from the clearing.

Zab spent some time in the Shrieking Shack erecting wards to prevent portkey tracking before using a rare portkey that deposited him and the blood directly into Zabini Manor, leaving me to floo home myself.

I could certainly understand why he did that. The portkey would only carry one person and the blood safely; adding my mass to the trip would have been risky. The blood itself needed to be removed from its temporary vessel and stored correctly soon, or risk becoming less potent at best, or unusable at worst. It wouldn't survive the long minutes of spinning through the floo system without ash and soot contaminating it, not to mention that there was still a better than average chance that I would drop what I was carrying to save myself from harm. I was getting better with practise though.

A house elf was waiting for me with a duster, a basin of warm water and a towel. The soot was brushed from my clothes as I washed my face and hands. The water turned a satisfying, not to mention surprisingly dark, shade of brownish red.

"Master is in his study."

"Thank you, Brennan," I replied to the elf. "Have you helped him store the blood we collected tonight?"

The elderly elf shook his head with gentle dignity. The oldest elf I had ever seen, Brennan would have looked for all the world like a royal butler, if he was not dressed in a simple cloth toga. "Master prefers to work on new items himself. He left a standing order with my grandfather that he be left alone when studying a new magical item."

I nodded to myself. Given Zab's previous occupation, it didn't surprise me that he may have handled items of such danger that he determined it prudent not to have untrained help when examining said item. "Thanks again. I'm done," I said, dropping the damp towel on the table next to the bowl.

Brennan bowed deeply, and quickly vanished the cleaning tools, before popping out of sight himself. I quickly made my way to Zab's study and gently knocked on the door.

"Enter."

I pushed open the imposing door to find Zab painstakingly siphoning off precise amounts of thick red blood into prepared containers. I watched him silently, trying to determine exactly what I could do to make his task easier.

I discerned his routine fairly quickly and began preparing for each step. I did manage to spot a small smile on his face as I took spent items from his hands and handed him the tool necessary to do the next task. It actually felt good to work out myself what was necessary rather than ask myself. Even satisfying.

Despite my minor role, I felt involved as the precious blood was stored, sealed and catalogued. After almost an hour, we were down to the bottom of the container, the remaining blood remaining caked to the sides and beginning to smell.

"I believe that is all we need, Harry. A most profitable evening. I doubt there is this much giant's blood in any one place outside of," he gave a small snort. "well, a giant."

A small chuckle escaped me. "You beat me to it."

Zab smiled himself. "Yes, well, great minds and all that. Now, I believe we should both retire for the evening."

I nodded, stifling a yawn. "Good night, Master."

Zab nodded. "Good night to you as well, Harry."

Apprentice Potter Conversations

Conversations

Since we had to wait a few days anyway for some of the other potion ingredients, Zab had me study the tomes to memorize exactly how each of the ingredients reacted with each other. Since mixing two ingredients with a third or more could conceivably change how the individual items would react, this was a mammoth task. I made copious notes, cross-referencing with tables and charts, since in some cases, different amounts would change the reaction. My efforts produced what could be considered a fairly thick book in the process, not to mention an arm that felt like I'd be going blind sometime soon.

The research was tedious, but not boring, and towards the end of the three-day study session, I actually felt like an expert.

On this one potion.

Which we hadn't actually made yet.

But I still felt like an authority, and when I went back to read the original recipe, I could infer a great deal of information from what survived into the illegible parts of the page. On the third evening after our evening visit to Hagrid's brother, I gave Zab my notes, and he presented me with a repaired hand mirror.

"Go on. Go and call your friend. I'm sure she will be waiting with bated breath."

Despite my excitement, having not had a chance to say goodbye to Hermione, I did hesitate.

Zab smiled. "No, there are no security implications. Just sit with your back towards a non-descript wall and ensure you can see nothing in the mirror that gives away any clue to your location before you use it. Not even Albus could divine your location through the mirror with magic. Now, scoot, you've given me a fair amount of reading to do tonight."

"Yes, sir," I said, and bolted.

As soon as I entered my room I jumped on the bed and shifted the pillow around so I could lean against it. I figured that the headboard of my bed wouldn't divulge anything about my location.

I lifted up the mirror and said, "Hermione!"

Nothing happened. My frowning face stared back at me.

"Hermione!"

The mirror stubbornly showed only my face.

I bit my lip, thinking hard. Would the mirror work if Hermione wasn't in the room? Even if she was, would she hear it, or would the mirror glow or give an alarm? What if Hermione had given it to Ron? Or even Blaise, if they ended up rowing.

"Harry?"

I blinked and looked down into the mirror in my lap. It wasn't Hermione's voice that called my name. It was a particularly unwelcome voice.

I sighed deeply with frustration as the bearded face swam into focus in the mirror. "Dumbledore. What the hell are you doing with this mirror?"

He actually had the gall to look chastised. "I must apologise, Harry. I persuaded Miss Granger to allow me to use the mirror to talk with you."

Wonderful.

"Well, you can forget about trying to divine my location from the mirror. I've made sure that not even you can trace me with it."

The old man's expression didn't change, even for an instant, but his eyes narrowed ever so slightly, telling me all I needed to know about his motives. "Harry, the entire Order is looking for you. Please tell me where you are. We cannot keep the fact that you have disappeared a secret much longer."

"So?" I snapped, a sneer on my face.

Dumbledore shook his head and began to speak rapidly, far faster than he usually did. He was rushing things. Probably because he thought that I'd stop using the mirror the moment the conversation got boring.

"Harry, if the Dark Lord discovers that you are no longer protected by the blood magic, he will come after you. It is imperative you return to your relative's care before it is too late."

"Look, you moron, Voldemort has been coming after me since I was born, blood magic or no. I'm not going back there, no matter what you say."

"It is for your own protection, Harry. And that of your family's. Despite their feelings, they do need you there to ensure their own protection."

I sighed. "And?"

He looked confused. "And what, Harry?"

"And what else? You'd hardly expend all this effort to keep one average student and a bunch of bigots safe. Ergo, you have another motive. What is that motive? You want me there so you can keep your bloody secret weapon under your thumb, to be released when needed," I growled. "Don't try and pretend you only have my best interests at heart."

"Firstly, I *would* expend this much effort and more to keep a single person safe, and secondly, I do not, and have never, considered you my secret weapon. In this one instance however, both our best interests are satisfied by the one course of action."

"Bollocks. If you truly had my best interests at heart, you'd weigh up what you know of my current circumstances with what up until a few weeks ago was the status quo. I'm unlocatable, defended and safe. I'm learning Occlumency, among other things, so my time is not being wasted by having to do pointless chores for my pig-headed relatives. I'm not confined, restrained or lonely, I have freedom here that I've never had before. Not to mention that I'm mature enough not to abuse it, and that I'm taking an active interest in maintaining, and even increasing, my security. So exactly what makes you think that going back to a prison for my body, spirit and mind will be, in any way, in my best interest?"

He sighed again. "You are not as unlocatable as you believe, Harry. I know that you are at an unplotable location. These locations are documented at the Ministry by law, and are publicly accessible. A suitably thorough search through the records will give anyone a list of your possible locations."

I shrugged, quite confident that Zab both already knew that, and had taken appropriate action. I opened my mouth to suggest that I could be at Grimmauld Place under my invisibility cloak and not be discovered, but that may give the old man a clue to the level of security surrounding me. Certainly, the number of properties masked to the degree of Sirius' house was low enough that it would narrow the search dramatically. It would probably be better to throw him off the trail all together. "Ah, the logical approach. Well, if you want to go down that road, allow me to toss a stick through the spokes of your bike. What about places outside the country, hmm? Come on Dumbledore, as much as you've stuffed up over the years, you're smarter than that! The wizarding world doesn't end at the edge of the country."

He blinked. "Are you not even in the United Kingdom?"

I raised an eyebrow. "You honestly expect me to answer that?"

He seemed to deflate. Probably because he really thought he had no chance of finding me. "No, I don't suppose I do, though I had hoped you would reconsider."

"Don't bet on *that* happening any time soon. My chance of living a normal life was taken away because of you. Even after that, you again and again messed up with your lies and manipulations.

You lost all right to have a say in my life through your own choices and actions, old man."

Dumbledore was silent for a few moments. "Very well. What happens now?"

I snorted. "You stop looking for me for starters. I'm safe, alive and learning. The fact that you couldn't enter my mind at the twin's store or at my party proves that to you. The Order have more pressing issues than chasing down my location."

Dumbledore lowered his head briefly before looking up at me. "Very well."

"Second, you give this mirror back to Hermione. Today. I didn't give it to her just so you could bully her into giving it to you."

"I didn't bully her-"

"I'm not finished!" I interrupted. "I don't care how you got it, I didn't want to talk to you in the first place. And you would have received an invitation if I wanted you at my party."

"I'm sorry, but I had no idea you were having a party, Harry."

I rolled my eyes. "Merlin's balls, you must think I'm an idiot! Remus and Tonks, the two adult members of the Order who I am closest to, both arrange to go to my best friend's house on my birthday. Unless you are even more incompetent than I currently believe, you knew exactly what was going on there."

Dumbledore winced. "It would be closer to say that I *suspected* , Harry. I-"

"So you just lied to me again," I snapped.

"No, I merely said-"

"I'm so glad you can justify your lies to yourself, you bastard. I'm sure it helps you sleep at night. Me? I'll just accept that whatever you tell me is definitely not the truth, just what you can semantically defend as being close enough."

Dumbledore winced again, jerking his head down in self-recrimination. "I'm sorry, I promised myself that I would be totally honest with you. I was worried that if I admitted bringing Severus to your party you would stop this conversation immediately."

I pushed my eyes open as wide as they could go. "Bloody hell, Dumbledore! You actually told the truth! For an entire sentence!" I said, sarcasm flooding my words.

The old man's expression relaxed slightly as he realised that I was more likely to continue the conversation than end it, even if that was just to heap abuse upon him. "I shall continue to do so, you have my word."

I rubbed my chin. Perhaps I should test his resolve. "Really? Why did you bring Snape to my party

in the first place?" I challenged.

Dumbledore paused before replying. "I'm sorry, Harry. I would prefer not to answer that."

I gave him an unfriendly grin. "You're getting better. Perhaps you *can* learn not to manipulate people. But that's OK. I've already figured out why. I was just wondering if you could admit it."

He looked pained. "Yes, I rather suspect you have come to some conclusion."

My grin probably turned evil. "You had Snape charge out to confront me, since that would be totally in his character. Knowing that since I was surrounded by my friends, I wasn't likely to lash out at him, even though I would get angry. As a matter of fact, you were counting on him *making* me angry. You were hoping to use Legilimency to pick up a hint or two about where I am, under the cover of my rage." I shook my head. "No matter what I've accomplished over the years, he still underestimates me though. Both of you do."

Dumbledore visibly swallowed. "Once more, I am humbled by your abilities. You have become far more like Miss Granger over the past few weeks. I am stunned at the progress you have made in such a short time in both logic and perception."

I flushed red. "There's nothing like having someone you love die because of your actions to prove that you need to progress, old man. I've learned that I can't trust anyone, least of all you, so I need to rely on myself. I won't be manipulated again. That said, I certainly don't want to talk to you. Give the mirror back to Hermione and tell her to call me. I won't initiate another call until it is back in her hands. Goodbye."

"Harry, please! We must be able to talk to each other at least. Your anger with me appears to have run its course; at least you are not incoherent with rage when speaking to me. Surely with your much-improved analytical skills you can see that it is best to keep in touch? There is no reason to turn away a willing ally."

I growled at him. "If there is anything you want to say to me, tell Remus. I'll keep in touch with *him*."

"What of Molly and Arthur? They miss you, Harry; they miss you terribly."

"You're bloody incredible, you know that? You wouldn't let them see me if I was stuck at Privet Drive either, so you can shove that argument where the sun doesn't shine."

The wave of sadness that crossed his face was almost palpable. In almost a whisper, he said, "Is there anything I can do to make up for the errors I've made? It pains me to see such an angry expression on you, Harry."

I snarled, not falling for his tone even slightly. "I'll tell you what, as soon as you get out of my face, my frown will disappear. As soon as you stop trying to manipulate me and my life, I'll start smiling. As soon as you take a wizard's oath to stay out of my life for good, I'll start fucking

partying. How does that sound?"

He flushed, though with anger or shame, I couldn't tell. "As you wish, Harry. I shall conduct any further conversations through Remus. If you ever find it in you heart to forgive a foolish old man, I will be grateful for the opportunity to talk in person. Perhaps, given time, you can learn to trust me again."

I leaned forward, so that my face filled his mirror. "Oh, I guarantee I'll eventually trust you again."

Dumbledore looked taken aback. Not surprising, since this was the opposite of what I'd been saying for the last few minutes. "Really?"

I nodded slowly. "As far as I'm concerned, I'll trust you completely again, but only after you are referred to as *the late Albus Dumbledore*."

With that I rapped the rim of the mirror with my wand, breaking the connection.

"Harry?" came a muffled voice.

I glanced over at the mirror where I had left it face down on my bed. I had only broken off the connection to Dumbledore less than ten minutes ago, so unless he was at the Grangers or Hermione was at Grimmauld Place, then he probably wouldn't have had time to pass the mirror to her. Neither scenario filled me with anticipation.

I blinked and shook my head. The voice was both feminine and familiar, though with the mirror being face down, I couldn't able to recognise the voice immediately. It didn't sound like Hermione.

I reached over and picked it up by the handle. Lurid pink hair caught my eye, almost making them water. "Wotcher," I said.

Tonks grinned back. "I've never had a fan who copies what I say. I could get used to this."

I smiled. "Don't let it go to your head."

Tonks' own smile disappeared. "Listen Pup, what did you say to Albus?"

"None of your business," I said shortly.

Tonks pursed her lips together. "Look, maybe it isn't, but he had something that he needed to tell you. Something about something you saw in his pensieve. Did he tell you what it was?"

I shook my head. "It never came up."

"It sounded important."

I shrugged. "I gave him a couple of chances to bring stuff like that up, nothing was mentioned. Perhaps he decided it wasn't the right time. I don't really care. I had a few words with him myself, and then I stopped the conversation."

Tonks looked down and shook her head in disbelief. "Whatever you said really hit him hard, Pup. He's drinking firewhiskey like it was pumpkin juice."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "How many has he had?"

"Do you mean how many glasses or how many bottles?"

I let out a low whistle. "That many?"

"Too right. Look, you're right that it isn't any of my business, but are you sure you can't tell me what set him off like this? Severus is with him right now, trying to get him to stop, or at least slow down, but he's already stumbling around and slurring heavily."

I shrugged. "Essentially, I told him he was a liar, a thief and a bully."

Tonks' eyes widened. "Ouch."

I shrugged. "And I told him that I'd lose the frown and start partying once he promised to stay out of my life."

This time, she winced. "Double ouch."

"Oh, I also told him that I'd trust him again, but only once he was dead and buried."

Tonks shook her head. "Three for three. Damn, remind me not to ever piss you off."

"It wasn't the fact that I'm pissed off with him that I said those things, Tonks."

She frowned, looking most confused. "Then why?"

I let out a deep sigh. "Look, I really don't want to have to relive it, Ok? If you want to know, ask the grand high idiot himself. Don't be surprised if his version of events doesn't gel with the level of my reaction."

Tonks looked down and ran her fingertips back and forth over her forehead. "I know that, well, that you still sort of blame yourself for what happened to Sirius, but to say-

"This has nothing to do with Sirius!" I spat, covering the mirror with specs of spittle.

Tonks drew back, her eyes betraying her nervousness. She swallowed with some difficulty. "Um, Ok. I guess I was wrong."

I took a deep breath and wiped the mirror with my sleeve, leaving faint smears. "Look, Tonks. I

just want to be left alone. I don't want to have anything to do with the wizarding world right now. For the last five years, I've either been a celebrity, a dark wizard in training, a psychopathic killer, a delusional, attention-seeking freak or a hero standing alone against the world. I just want time to be me. To be Harry. Not the Boy Who Lived."

Tonks nodded. "Alright, Pup. I guess you've earned that right. But I warn you, the world seems to have a rather irritating way of intruding into your life. If you need me, I'll be here for you. Remus too."

I swallowed myself. "Thanks, Tonks. Say, can you do me a favour right now?"

"Name it."

"Can you floo over to Hermione's place and hand her the mirror yourself? I'm not sure I trust anyone else there to do it."

She smiled back at me, the skin around her eyes crinkling merrily. "Sure thing, Pup."

I cleaned the mirror of my spit properly; so that when Hermione's face finally appeared it was as though I was looking through a nice, clean window, rather than a cloudy piece of glass.

"Harry?"

"Hermione. Finally," I said, a little harsher than I meant to.

She blushed rather prettily. "I'm sorry Harry. I didn't want to let Professor Dumbledore take your mirror."

"Really?" I asked. "What the hell happened? I gave you the mirror because I wanted to talk to *you* ! I thought I made that pretty clear."

She nodded mournfully. "You did. But can I tell you what happened from the beginning without you yelling at me?"

I nodded slowly. "Sorry, 'Mione. It was just a bit of an unwelcome shock to see Dumbledore when I expected to see you."

She arched an eyebrow. "Now that, I can understand."

I chuckled softly, feeling the tension of the past conversations easing. "Yeah. Even in your modesty you can accept that you are prettier than Dumbledore."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, Harry. You just spent a great deal of effort informing me that you only want me as a friend, and then you start flirting with me?"

"Since when was making statements of fact equate with flirting?"

She huffed a little, making me smile even more. "Well, anyway, I'm glad that you aren't angry at me. I do have an explanation, you know."

"Yes, you mentioned that. Go on."

"The headmaster and Remus were in the kitchen having an argument when Blaise and I finally finished our little talk," she started with a little heat in her voice. Apparently the pair still had some issues to work out. "I knew that you were angry with him, so I hadn't told him that you were having a party."

I smiled at her. "And like I just told him, two Order members, Remus and Tonks, oh, three if you count one of the twins, went to your house on my birthday. It wasn't a great stretch to figure out what was going on."

Hermione's brow creased slightly. "I suppose. I asked Remus and Tonks to arrive early to set up wards around the house."

"Good idea. I'd hate to think of what would have happened if you'd asked Fred to set them."

A look of horror flashed across her face. "Don't even joke about that!"

I chuckled again. "Anyway, keep going. Dumbledore and Remus were having a spat."

She laughed out loud. "A spat? Good word. Yes, now that I think about it, a spat is a good description. They were both talking heatedly at each other, but not raising their voices, if that makes sense. I wondered what was going on, since one of the twins was in the kitchen with them too. Um, my parents, Professor Snape and Tonks were there too."

I waved my hand in a circle to signal my impatience. "Right, so we've established who was there. Keep going."

Hermione gave me a mock look of frustration. "OK, slave driver. I butted in and asked what was going on." She looked at my expression, probably noting the disbelieving look I was giving her. "Hey! It is my house, and they were not invited!"

"Fair enough. Don't keep stopping!"

This time the look of frustration was a little less mocking, but I could see the humour under it. "Fine. The Headmaster asked me if I knew where you were staying. I said no."

"Good."

"Remus then tried to tell him he should leave, and to take Professor Snape with him. Come to think of it, Professor Snape looked a little unwell."

"Did you find out what happened to him?" I asked innocently.

Hermione shook her head. "I heard a few different things afterwards. He came out and challenged you and you stunned him. He came out and challenged you and Ron stunned him. He came out and challenged you and the entire room stunned him," she ticked off her fingers.

I shook my head. "He marched out to goad me into being angry so that Dumbledore could try and use Legilimency to get into my mind, so I had Fred stun him from behind."

Hermione blinked. "That's one version of events I hadn't heard."

I grinned. "Did Ron enjoy Susan's attentions?"

Hermione clicked her tongue in disapproval. "She was all over Ron when I went back to the party."

My grin didn't waver. "You didn't answer my question."

She set her lips into a McGonagall-esque straight line. "He seemed to be," she said evenly.

"Good for him."

"Oh, Harry. He shouldn't be abusing his celebrity like that!"

Huh? "What do you mean?"

It was Hermione's turn to look blank. "You-, Harry, what do you know about how the press reported the night we went to the Ministry?"

"Hermione, I'm in a communications black out. While it is helping my studying, I've got no idea about what is happening outside."

She swallowed. "Well, the Quibbler wrote what happened, Luna told her father everything. Oh, she told me to tell you that she was sorry she couldn't come to your party, by the way, but she is out of the country. Anyway, the other major papers picked up the story, and we were all named."

Hermione shifted slightly, looking most uncomfortable. "The fact that we all survived the Death Eater attack made us all famous. The papers were lauding Dumbledore and Hogwarts for producing students who could survive and even fight off a Death Eater attack so well. I've been getting fan mail for the last few weeks."

I digested this. "Um, is Ron getting his share of fan mail?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, but nodded. "You wouldn't believe some of the things *some* witches are sending him."

My lips twitched, no matter how hard I tried to keep them steady. "I probably would, you know."

"I suppose you would. Anyway, Ron is enjoying his fifteen minutes of fame to the hilt. He's been

interviewed by *Teen Witch* , and it came out that he is a genius chess player. He's been offered membership in the most prestigious chess club in the wizarding world."

I blinked. "What about Ginny? And Neville?"

Hermione shook her head. "Ginny has tried to keep a low profile, but stories about her first year have surfaced. I'm glad I still have some influence over that Skeeter woman, since I was able to convince her to report it with the view that Ginny had already fought Voldemort and won."

I nodded. "Thank you."

She nodded her acceptance. "Neville has been almost as timid as Ginny, but what Sirius' cousin did to his parents has become common knowledge again. A lot of people have owed him to say that his parents would be proud of him. It means a lot to him."

"I'll bet."

"He told me at the party that he'd been given an invitation to join some European company researching new medical aspects of magical plants once he leaves Hogwarts though."

"Cool. Will he accept?"

Hermione shrugged. "He seemed happy, but I think that after that night, he has a more active role in mind."

I nodded. "That doesn't surprise me. Are you going to continue the DA?"

She looked a little unsure. "Um, do you mind if we do? I mean, Ron and I have discussed it, and we think that it would probably be a good idea, since-"

"Mione, slow down," I said, my voice tight with suppressed laughter. "I don't mind, not that you needed to get my approval in the first place. I think that you'll all do fine. I just have one suggestion."

Hermione's expression went from grateful to disapproving in an instant. "Let me guess, you want us to invite Zabini."

I sighed. "Yes, I do. For a very good reason."

"And that is?"

"She has been trained by members of her family. She knows spells I've never read about."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Really?"

I nodded. "Yes. When she arrived where I am staying we sort of, well, duelled. It was at night, it was dark, and we didn't recognise each other."

Hermione smirked. "And you handed Miss Slytherin her ego on a platter?" she said with an almost greedy expression.

I shook my head. "Sorry to burst that bubble of glee, but we fought to a standstill. When we were broken up, we were wrestling. Neither of us could claim to have beaten the other."

She gaped. "What? Harry, there isn't a single person in the DA who has beaten you in a duel. What the hell happened?"

I shrugged. "In my defense, she did arrive ready for a fight, while I was completely surprised."

"But-"

I held up one hand in front of the mirror. "'Mione, just don't, please? She is good. Better than most of the DA. Apparently, she was the only Slytherin to get an 'O' on her Defense OWL. She'll be a great addition, if she wants to join, that is. Now, stop delaying and tell me why Dumbledore ended up with your mirror?"

She looked as though she was about to argue, but took a breath and let it out slowly. "Fine. What was I up to?"

"You'd told Dumbledore you didn't know where I was staying."

"Right! He then kept asking me questions about how long it took to send an owl to you, and how long it took to get a reply. I mean, really, how was I supposed to know that?"

"No idea. Can you please get on with it?"

She huffed a little. "I told him that you were at the party if he really wanted to talk to you, but he said that he tried and that you'd run off through the floo."

I winced. "That's not exactly how I'd like it to be remembered, but that's essentially correct."

Hermione gave me a sympathetic look. "He then said that he had some information that he desperately needed to get to you. Information about what he showed you in his pensieve."

"Interesting. I never told you what he showed me."

She nodded. "He seemed surprised that I didn't know. Remus was nervous though, and Tonks was almost frantic at the news. They told the Headmaster that they gave you a mirror from Sirius. He asked where it was now, and, well..."

I sighed, but gave her a sympathetic expression myself. "You couldn't keep it from showing on your face," I offered, but it soon became apparent that she wasn't listening to me.

"I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't say anything, but he just *knew* ! Do you think he used Legilimency on me?"

I shook my head. "Hermione, you are the most honest person I know. Every emotion you have shows on your face for all to see. I was just afraid that he bullied you into giving him the mirror."

Hermione winced. "Well, *he* didn't."

I blinked, but then rolled my eyes and groaned. "Tonks."

"Yes. She took me aside and said that if it was what she was thinking, then you needed to know. You admitted that you hadn't told me everything, so I wasn't sure what to do. I thought for a minute that it was quite convenient that this happened just as you'd given me a way of contacting you, but I wasn't sure I could take the chance. I gave him the mirror then. I'm sorry Harry please forgive me!"

I smiled. "Of course I forgive you, 'Mione."

She didn't appear to hear, or at least take notice. "I mean, if I could call you right then, if your mirror was OK, I'd have asked you, but there was no way to contact you to find out and-"

"'Mione? Hermione?"

"-Tonks kept saying that it might be important. But he only really became agitated when he found out that I had a way of contacting you straight away, you know, it just seemed strange that he only-"

"Hey!" I shouted at the mirror, trying to get her attention. Her descriptive stream of excuses was amusing, but unnecessary. "Stop!"

She looked as though she was about to burst into tears.

"Right. If there was something to forgive, then I would forgive you. You wouldn't have done it if you could check with me, but you couldn't. Don't worry. The old coot can be quite subtle when he needs to be."

Hermione frowned. "But I didn't quite believe him. It was Tonks who... convinced... me..."

I nodded at her realisation. "Yep. And Dumbledore manipulated Tonks. Good at it, isn't he?"

Her frown deepened. "I can't believe he'd do that!"

I sighed. "Believe it, Hermione. He has manipulated all of us over the years. I just refuse to let it happen to me again."

"Then I shouldn't let him manipulate me either."

I shook my head. "He will try, and even if you do what you can to defy him, he may well succeed in the end anyway. Remember, you don't have the kind of freedom that I do at the moment. The instant that I resolved not to return to Hogwarts his power over me collapsed."

She didn't look too happy with that, but she did accept it. Eventually. She railed at me for a while on my decision not to return, but finally got it out of her system. For now.

"Actually, speaking of Hogwarts, I got a letter from Hagrid," she said.

"Really?"

She nodded, her eyes narrowing. "He got back from a mission, and can now visit Grawp more often. Apparently, the centaurs are now leaving his brother alone."

I grinned. "Hermy no visit Grawp?"

Her soft brown eyes blazed. "Don't you *dare* start calling me that! I only put up with 'Mione from you and Ron because you've earned the right, but if you start calling me Hermy, I'll- I'll..."

"What? Go all tongue-tied?" Oh it was fun to goad her.

"Ooooooh! I hate it when you do that!"

"Fair enough. I'll have to remember that. "Now, what else did Hagrid write?"

Hermione stared at me silently for about a second longer than was entirely comfortable before continuing. "The usual. Asking if I knew where you were staying. I think the headmaster has asked all the teachers to be on the lookout for you."

I gave her a mock yawn. "You know, this conversation would move a little quicker if you didn't editorialise."

"It would also finish quicker if I hung up, you know."

"Point taken," I offered, giving her a completely unconvincing contrite look.

She couldn't stop herself from smiling. "Now, after that he told me about Grawp. Apparently, he's found a friend. The last time Hagrid visited, Grawp had bandages all over him, on wounds he got from the centaurs."

I nodded solemnly. "It took my master and I an hour to bandage them all. The centaurs put fifty-eight arrows in him by my count."

Her mouth opened into a perfect 'O', and stayed that way long enough that I thought that she had lost control of her drool reflex. "Are you serious?" she finally managed.

I grinned. "Absolutely."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Harry James Potter! What were you doing in the Forbidden Forest?"

I shrugged. "Getting some giant's blood for a potion."

"Rubbish. Any decent apothecary sells that!"

"Guess again."

"What do you mean?"

I sighed. "Because the giants have joined Voldemort, their blood has become rare. There is a delay of several months before any can be available in any large quantity. You know, if we sold what we collected that night, we'd make a fortune."

"We?"

I frowned at her. "My master. Don't pry."

"Wait a minute! Your new master took you into a highly dangerous situation for some idiotic potion reagent?"

"Well, since I was the guide, he could hardly leave me behind."

"Guide?"

I rolled my eyes. "To Grawp, Hermione. Where else would we be able to collect giant's blood in the UK?"

"You stole blood from Grawp?"

I wondered how she thought everyone else got their potion ingredients. Given her moral stand on SPEW and things like that, I decided to downplay exactly *how* Zab extracted the blood. "Not exactly. He was leaking pretty badly all over the place. Is it stealing if he was giving it away to the world at large in the first place?"

She shuddered at the image. "What happened?"

"Bane. He was leading an attack on Grawp, who, by the way, was holding his own against a few dozen centaurs. He'd just ripped a tree out of the ground to use as a club when we got there. We stopped the fight, patched his wounds and left him asleep in his clearing."

Hermione bit her lower lip. "That sounded like you edited a great deal of detail out of it."

"True. I didn't think you'd want to hear more."

"Did you do something stupidly heroic?"

I slowly raised an eyebrow. "Exactly why would you think I would do something like that?"

"Because I know you."

I gave her a sad smile. "Then you'd be disappointed in me. About the only brave thing I did was insist on accompanying my master when he went to face the centaurs."

"And?"

"That's it. I cast a sonorus charm on myself, and shouted them into submission. Bane left shouting threats, but the rest of the centaurs just started picking up their fallen and left. Grawp followed us back to his clearing, we patched him up, took some blood in the process, and left him snoring so loudly it measured on the richer scale."

"Oh, Harry!" she said in a despairing voice.

The next two weeks were filled with flying, talking with Hermione, writing letters, studying and performing experiments with Zab's potion recipe. I could not in all honesty say that I have ever had a less stressful time in my life. There were no expectations other than those I set on myself, though I did have an implicit one in assisting in the creation of the new potion.

Zab turned out to be a fairly adept potion brewer, but certainly not an expert or a natural. While he could brew any potion listed in the NEWT potion text, he drew the line at attempting dangerous recipes like the Wolfsbane. But it seemed to be *practise* that allowed him to achieve such success. Whenever he made a mistake, and he made them fairly often, he thoroughly documented the incident, recording even the most obscure circumstances that I had assumed would have no affect on the potion. Things like the weather.

It turned out, however, that some older potion recipes did require that they be brewed during certain weather conditions, if not for success, then at least potency. One of Zab's older potion texts referred to a recipe that allowed the imbiber to withstand the elements with much greater stamina. If however, that potion was brewed during a thunder storm, apparently it would also allow the drinker to withstand a lightning strike with little more than a hair style that would put you in mind of a certain famous ex-patent clerk.

Without the artificial time limit of a school period or idiotic Slytherins distracting me, I discovered that potion making wasn't exactly the torturous activity I had become accustomed to. Having harvested some of the ingredients myself gave me some pride not only in the potion itself, but also the giant blood's potency.

In hindsight, it may have been a mistake to have mentioned the new potion to Hermione. She insisted on calling me at least once a day to talk about the progress Zab and I had made. The majority of each of our conversations was taken up with discussions about how the potion was going, and theories on how it was forgotten in the first place.

Zab took Hermione's interference with good grace. Though he never spoke to her directly of course, he did take her comments and suggestions to heart. I didn't have the nerve to tell her that for the most part the things she was suggesting he did as a matter of course.

Remus' letters kept me informed as to the wizarding world at large, something that I found increasingly more difficult to care about. More and more reports surfaced of people claiming that they'd been attacked by Death Eaters and that the Ministry wasn't doing enough to keep them safe. Order members were being stretched by their responsibilities, for the most part keeping up with their Ministry jobs and the missions Dumbledore assigned them.

My disappearance hit the headlines a few days after getting the mirror working, and it began to look like I'd need to make an appearance at some point to prevent the Ministry from doing something rash. One headline screamed "**Harry, please contact me! - Fudge**", yet despite the fact that I wrote him a letter telling him to leave me alone, the requests for contact began getting more shrill.

Zab vetoed my idea of writing a letter to the Prophet explaining that I had in fact already contacted the Minister, and that he was too incompetent to realise. As much as it dismayed him, he decided that a public appearance was the best way to stop all the silliness.

Obviously, he couldn't come himself, since the world thought he was dead. And there was no way I was going to put myself into a position where I couldn't control my own exit, so both the Ministry buildings and Hogwarts were out. The twins' store was probably a better bet, since it was both public and reasonably safe, but it lacked the non-partisan feel. It would be possible to believe that my appearance there was a hoax perpetuated by my friends.

In an effort to diffuse that scenario, I decided to make an unannounced visit. With any luck, there would be enough people in the shop to testify to the fact that the twins were just as surprised as everyone else at my arrival.

Zab handed me a small bag of his floo powder, enough for only two single trips. "We had better teach you to apparate soon, Harry. I've made more trips through the floo in the last month than I have in the last decade."

I grinned at him. "I'd like that. Another way I could run from Voldemort that he doesn't know about."

Zab nodded, but guardedly. "It would be a good idea, but not for that specific instance."

I frowned, but Zab turned me towards the fire. "Think about it on your own time. Go, convince your friends and the Ministry that you are still alive and well."

"Yes, sir," I said, and tossed half the floo powder into the flames.

Luckily, it was only a short walk from the Leaky Cauldron to number ninety-four. It would have been quicker to floo to somewhere like Borgon & Burkes, but I had no desire to wander around Knockturn Alley if I didn't have to.

I attracted more than a few stares as I strolled quickly and directly to Fred and George's shop. More than one person dropped whatever they were carrying at the time as they laid eyes on me. A

couple even called out, though I ignored them for the most part. I only waved at a student I vaguely recognised from the Gryffindor third years.

I did pause before entering WWW though, my hand on the door. With a shove, I pushed the door open quickly and stepped to the side.

True to form, the prank I expected missed me, but my precautions were a little excessive. Nothing shot out of the store to where I had been standing, but a puff of multi-coloured dust at head height indicated that something I breathed in would have affected me if I'd just stepped through.

Cautiously, I stuck my arm through the door and gave it a little wiggle around. Muffled sniggers could be heard from inside from various parts of the room.

Steeling myself, I took a deep breath and walked in, only to have the mirth from my antics change to gasps of shock.

Several dozen people were browsing the packed shelves. Well, they *were*, before my entrance. Both Fred and George were among the crowd, and both looked absolutely delighted to see me.

"Harry, old chum! Welcome back!"

"Indeed. Sporting of you to make an appearance, old boy! Fudge has been getting quite upset that you haven't been around for him to take advantage of!"

I gave their antics a crooked smile. "It's good to see you both again. How's business?"

"The-"

"-usual," they replied, with identical nonchalant shrugs, fingering their fine clothes.

With their casual acceptance of me in their store, some of their customers started firing their own questions at me. Within seconds, a rather dense crowd of babbling witches and wizards had surrounded me.

I held up a hand and shouted, "Enough!" The group quietened quickly, though probably out of surprise rather than out of any real need to obey. "I'm sorry, I didn't come here to answer any questions. I only dropped in to see my friends."

"But did you *really* see You-Know-Who?" a waspish looking woman snapped at me. Her daughter, who looked vaguely familiar though she was probably around seven, rolled her eyes and gave me a look, imploring my forgiveness.

I gave the small girl a quick smile then raised my eyebrows at her mother. "Who?"

She blinked. "You-Know-Who!"

I shook my head, exaggerating polite incomprehension. "I'm sorry. Who are you referring to?"

"You jolly well know who I'm referring to, young man!"

I leaned forward. "I tell you what. You say his name, and I'll answer your questions."

She swallowed, looking around the now silent shoppers. "Well, L-lord V-v-"

"Oh!" I exclaimed, and clapped my hands. "You mean Voldemort!"

A palpable shiver ran through the crowd.

"Yes!" the woman snapped, clutching her daughter's hand tighter.

"Right! We've established who you are talking about. Now, which time?"

Her smug features were apparently taking an internal battering. "I beg your pardon?"

I rolled my eyes. "You asked me if I'd really seen Voldemort. I asked which time do you mean?"

"You've seen him more than once?"

"Yes," I said simply. "If you read the interview I gave detailing his resurrection, you'd know that."

"Mother! Hannah said that he did!" the little girl said, tugging on her parent's hand.

I twigged as to why the little girl looked familiar. "Hannah Abbott? In Hufflepuff?"

From the way the little girl blushed, I guessed I hit the mark, and she nodded quickly.

I smiled and crouched down to look the young girl in the eye. "Hannah is a good friend. She really supported me last year, when I was having a hard time. Is she your sister?"

She shook her head. "She's my cousin."

"You should be proud of her." She blushed even more fiercely. "Tell me, what is your name?"

She bit her lip for a second before replying. "Mirriam."

"Mirriam Abbott?"

The domineering mother spoke up. "Mirriam Forthwright. Hannah's mother and I are sisters."

I nodded, but didn't take my eyes off the little girl. "Do you want to be in Hufflepuff too?"

She shook her head nervously. "I want to be in Ravenclaw!"

I grinned at her. "I have a lot of good friends in Ravenclaw. Well, it was good to meet you, Mirriam."

She blushed more fiercely as George shooed the customers away from me. Fred escorted me away through them and into the backroom, via Butt. I sat down at the triangular table on the couch and let my head rest against the top of the headrest. "You know, this would be so much easier if you guys were connected to the floo."

Fred grunted, a curiously unamusing sound. "We put in an order ages ago. It got *lost* . We put in another one. It got lost *again* ."

I frowned, and raised my head from the chair to look directly at Fred. "You don't sound as though you believe that."

Fred tilted his head to one side. "Don't you remember who works in that department?"

I blinked, and the word 'Sneak' flashed through my mind. "Marietta's mother," I said with a grimace.

He nodded. "Right. Bitch. Anyway, what brings you here? Looking for some stock to use on whoever you're staying with?"

I shook my head, but couldn't help but smile at the mental picture of Zab's reaction to some of their 'stock'. "Nope. That idiot Fudge wants me to make a personal appearance, since he can't get a good photo opportunity by putting his arm around a letter and make the public think that everything is just peachy," I snorted.

"And you made a personal appearance *here* ? Why?"

Because I can control my exit from here. Because I trust you with my life. Because despite having to duck every time I enter the door, I enjoy spending time here.

I didn't say any of that of course, this was Fred I was talking to. I'd never hear the end of it.

"Because I'm pretty sure that Fudge has at least one person watching your shop. I figure it would be the best place to wait for someone from the Ministry to appear and demand an explanation," I offered.

Fred coughed. "You don't really believe that, do you? I mean, why would Fudge have someone watching over us?"

"Well, Fudge knows that your dad has been working closely with Dumbledore since Voldemort returned. He knows that despite the way you two clowns left school, you are astute enough to start and build a thriving business in only a couple of months. I assume you've been supplying the Order with some of your inventions?"

Fred nodded thoughtfully.

"If the field agents use that stuff, and they appear on your stock lists, someone will make the connection. Look, I'm guessing, but if I was Fudge, and I was determined to stay in power, I'd

keep an eye on those who supported Dumbledore, like your father, and those close to them with similar values."

Fred pursed his lips together and tilted his head from one side to another as if listening to some internal beat, but finally shook his head. "I can't believe that anyone in Fudge's circle would see us as a threat."

I nodded. "Maybe. At any rate, I hope you are right. But I think the quickest way for the Minister to hear that I'm around would be to either appear at the Ministry, Hogwarts, or here."

Fred laughed out loud. "Good choice, you get to have fun here!"

"Exactly," I said.

From behind me, I heard the sound of Butt grinding to one side. Fred, who was facing the entrance, lost all emotion on his face. "Well, partner, it looks as though you were right," he said, his voice tight and void of humour.

I didn't turn round. "Ah, our visitor is a Ministry toady?"

"Oh, yes," growled Fred, his hate-filled gaze never leaving the newcomer.

And that gave me all I needed.

"Hello, Percy. What brings you here?" I said, not turning around to face him.

You know, somehow, I just knew I was going to *enjoy* this.

Apprentice Potter Potter v Ministry

Potter v. Ministry

Percy had both changed and not changed. The smug, insufferable air was still well fixed in place, but he had lost weight, and his hair had begun receding quite starkly. He looked as though he was in his mid-thirties at least, his tired eyes accentuating the differences.

"Mr. Potter. The Minister has requested that I escort you to his office immediately."

I tilted my head to one side and studied him further without answering. Fred's spluttering in the background gave Percy something to focus on rather than me, and I took full opportunity of the distraction.

I had been so angry at Percy last year, both for the way he treated me and the letter he wrote to Ron. But Zab's influence had started to change me too; now, I looked before I acted, thought before I jumped.

"Fred, why don't you leave Percy and I alone? We have a few things to discuss."

"Harry, you can't do magic out of school to defend yourself."

I snorted. "Fred, I'm not going back to school, so I don't really care. As for defending myself against him, he's been sitting behind a desk for two years doing some painfully useless work. Unless he attempted to bore me into submission, I hardly think he could even overcome a third year student now," I delivered in a monotone, while staring straight into Percy's eyes.

Fred chuckled softly, and left without further words, but did signal to me with his hands before leaving the room.

Percy's eyes had flashed with anger at my insult, but he kept his cool, disinterested expression firmly in place. "Mr. Potter, I have a portkey here that will transport us-"

"Then take it, go, and tell your precious Minister that I'm alive and well."

"I'm afraid you will need to come with me."

"No."

"This isn't a request."

"Am I under arrest?"

That brought him up short. "No, of course not!"

"Then what makes you think that I give a shit what Fudge insists upon, but doesn't request?"

"He's the Minister! He deserves respect!" Percy said firmly, spittle flying from his mouth.

"He's an idiot, he deserves contempt," I retorted.

Percy tilted his head back. "I see. I was right about you."

I grinned at him with no humour. "The way you were right about Voldemort returning? The way you were right about Umbridge in that letter you wrote to Ron?"

His right eye twitched. "She claims to have been under the influence of the Imperius Curse, so-" he said, ignoring my first question.

I held up a hand. "Isn't that the excuse Lucius Malfoy used fifteen years ago after Voldemort blew himself into dust trying to kill me? *Please* tell me you don't still believe that one."

His eye twitched again. "Mr. Potter, the Minister-"

"Harry!" I spat at him, louder than he expected. "My name is Harry! I'm sure you know it."

"*Mister* . Potter, the Minister needs you to come with me to his office," Percy repeated, louder this time, to cover the startled jump he made. "There are certain questions he needs answered, and he also intends to make an announcement."

I rolled my eyes. "You think that delivering the same sentence in a louder voice will make me give in?"

Percy drew himself up to his full height. "The Minister was afraid of this."

I snorted. "Afraid of what?"

"That you would be uncooperative."

I shook my head. "I was afraid of this," I said, mimicking him.

Percy frowned. "What?"

"That you'd got more stupid over time. I honestly didn't think it was possible, but you've managed it."

"I am not stupid, Mr. Potter."

I raised my eyebrows as far up my forehead as they'd go. "Really? I tell you what, if you can answer some questions, I'll go with you to see Fudge."

Annoyance flickered across Percy's face, but there was curiosity there too. "Very well."

I smiled. "Excellent. Now, here is my first question, are you ready?"

Percy nodded.

"A public servant makes a series of massive errors of judgement in his first year of employment, one which indirectly leads to the death of his superior, even though he had been warned during the year of various-"

"That's enough!" he almost shrieked, looking paler than before.

"Why Percy, what on earth is the matter?" I sneered.

"Potter, I was cleared by a tribunal."

Ah, so you can call me something different when you have to. Interesting, your professionalism is not so iron clad when you are under pressure. "So? Malfoy and his cronies were cleared after Voldemort fell the first time, and we all saw how well *that* turned out."

"That was different-"

"Bullshit!" I spat. "The same players were involved, Percy. Crouch, Fudge, Malfoy, Avery, Nott, they were all there. And now, fifteen years later, they're all involved again. And guess what? They've *still* got a tattoo on their arm!"

"That has nothing to do with me!" he challenged, sticking his chin out. It really made an inviting target. I resisted the urge to discover how satisfying it would be to hit it.

"Yet you are afraid of the question," I pointed out.

Again, the eye twitch betrayed his internal fight to remain calm and professional. With an internal grin, I wondered just how far I could push this pompous arse.

"Just, just come with me, please," he almost pleaded.

I shook my head, with no trace of a smile. "No. I don't trust you; you believe any idiotic idea fed to you by a superior, no matter how untrue. I don't trust Fudge either. Minister or not, I will not put my safety in the hands of someone who, just a couple of months ago, was friends with Lucius Malfoy. A man who has sworn to kill me." I gave him a winsome smile. "Anyway, you haven't answered my questions."

Percy set his lips. "If you don't trust me, Mr. Potter, why would you go with me even if I answer your questions?"

I let my smile disappear. "Because, you idiot, by answering them, I'll know whether or not you've changed enough that you are now, in fact, trustworthy."

That brought a frown to his face. "But, how?"

I rolled my eyes. "Just answer them, Percy. You'll figure it out."

He swallowed. "Very well, go ahead."

"All right, let's dispense with the euphemisms. You were warned, by several different people, that Crouch was acting strangely. You did nothing. Why? You can take your time in answering, if you like."

Percy rolled his tongue around in his mouth for a while, which surprised me. I had expected him to blurt out whatever self-deluding reason he had told himself at the time. I looked directly into his eyes, wondering just what was going on behind them. Slowly, as Percy thought to himself, the background colour in the room around him faded away, until Percy himself was the only coloured being in my sight.

"I'm not sure."

I was about to snort with derision, but I got a comforting sense of, well, *truth* . "Fair enough. What about at the time?"

Percy looked visibly uncomfortable. "I don't know."

This time, a clanging, disjointed sensation accompanied his announcement, almost shouting, *lie* ! This time, I did snort. "Try again."

He swallowed. "I, I guess I didn't want there to be anything wrong."

Truth .

"Interesting. You can tell the truth when you need to," I said.

Percy almost snarled. "Is that all of your ridiculous questions?"

I shook my head. "No. What did Fudge tell you about the night after the third task of the Tournament?"

"Well, nothing."

Lie .

I narrowed my eyes.

"Well, nothing straight away," he clarified, looking abashed. *Truth* . "Um, do you have to look at me like that?" he asked, shifting his gaze and shuffling his feet.

Given that I was concentrating on him completely, I guess it must have been a little disconcerting. "Yes," I answered simply. "What did he tell you *later* ?"

"Um, just that you claimed to have seen the Dark Lord reborn, and that you named several prominent wizards as Death Eaters."

Truth .

I grinned evilly. "Fudge was told a fair bit more than that. Shown stuff as well. Snape even showed him the Dark Mark on his arm, and told him that it had burned black, a summons from his old master. He was told about how Crouch smuggled his son out of Azkaban, which I suppose makes two escapees from that supposedly 'inescapable' prison. He was told how Crouch's son had admitted under Veritaserum to plotting to bring Voldemort back." I tilted my head to one side. "Did he tell you that he had a dementor kiss Crouch Jnr. before his testimony could be publicly heard?"

Percy blinked, a look of horror in his eyes. "No," he almost whispered.

An odd mixture of comfort and discourse followed that announcement. *Lie* and *Truth* .

"You mean, 'Not all of that', don't you Percy?"

He swallowed, but nodded.

My grin was still in place, obviously making him more than a little uncomfortable. "And do you know what he said, when presented with all this? 'He can't be back, Dumbledore, he just can't be...'," I said, mimicking Fudge's voice, probably badly. "Tell me, Percy. Does that sound like someone who didn't want there to be anything wrong?"

Percy coughed softly, but nodded.

Truth .

Interesting, I could get the impression of how truthful he was being even when he didn't say anything. "Do you remember the blood nose you got at the World Cup?"

Percy frowned. "Yes. How on earth is that relevant?"

"How did you get it?" I asked, ignoring him.

He coughed again, covering his mouth. "Is that really important?"

I shrugged. "That depends. Do you want me to trust you or not?"

He gave a little sigh. "Charlie and I got separated from Bill and," Percy stumbled a little here. "And my father. Charlie noticed something, and pushed me to the ground, saving me from a stray curse. A woman running around trying to find her child accidentally kicked me in the face while I was down," he finished, blushing.

Almost Truth .

Close enough, but he was probably quite embarrassed at the turn of events. Given what he just told me, I wouldn't be surprised. "Right, now, do you remember what the official Ministry line was after the debacle at the World Cup?"

"Yes," he said sullenly.

Truth .

"And?"

"What?" he challenged, suddenly back to being defensive.

I snarled at him. "Did the leaders in the Ministry sound like they didn't want there to be anything wrong?"

He stiffened, and squared his shoulders, drawing himself up straight. "Mr. Potter, you've made your point. Will you now come with me?"

I stood, and I'm quite sure my eyes were blazing. Now that my taunting had become boring, the familiar, and almost comforting, sensation of bubbling anger stoked in my belly. Colour rushed back into the world, and the instinctive information I was receiving from Percy's answers ceased. "Oh, you think so? You think I've made my point? You stand there and admit to yourself that Fudge did nothing to prevent the return of the most dangerous wizard in recent times, and you expect me to just present myself to him at the drop of a hat?" I spat.

Percy swallowed, biting back his first reply. "Your opinions of our Minister aside, he is the Minister, and as such, deserves respect."

Within my mind, I felt a truly startling dichotomy.

I could feel my anger, both the physical manifestations around me (like the trembling table behind me), and the internal effects, like my cheeks heating. But part of my mind became disassociated from it all, observing and cataloguing.

"He deserves NOTHING!" I shouted loudly, grabbing the armrest of the couch and heaving to one side. I let a little of both my anger and magic leak out through my hand. Percy's eyes betrayed his shock at seeing a slight figure like me hurl a heavy couch aside like it was paper maché.

I strode forward, closing the gap between us. "Fudge tried to get me expelled last year because I was inconvenient." I twisted to one side and jabbed my finger out towards him, pointing directly at his nose. "You helped him! If he had succeeded, Voldemort would have caught and killed me within a week!" I dropped my arm and rounded on him, stepping forward threateningly. "Tell me, *Percy*, how the hell do you respect a man who was willing to sacrifice me for his own political ends?" I shouted, my voice probably carrying into the next room quite easily.

Percy's jaw trembled. "We, we didn't know."

"Bullshit!" I spat, kicking out at the chair next to where I had been sitting, again letting my rage and magic seep out. It flew across the room, shattering against the wall. "You had been told. You had been told **repeatedly** ! You just didn't listen! Don't you *dare* to claim ignorance!" I yelled in his face.

Percy took a couple of steps back. "Your claims were destabilising the Ministry," he said, his voice hollow.

"WHAT?" I bellowed, not quite believing what he just dared to say. "What the hell do you think the Ministry is there for?"

"To serve the wizarding world," he replied quickly.

I stopped suddenly, clenching my fists. The magical potential in the air grew, causing the furniture to tremble, much to Percy's discomfort. "You say that, but you sure as hell don't believe it. You stand there and claim that I need to show respect to someone merely due to his position, never mind the fact that he has put the entire country in danger with his actions, condemning hundreds to a death he could easily have prevented. You claim that the Ministry should be excused for its actions so far because it didn't *know* ! But it did, Percy, the people in charge just stuck their fingers in their ears and sang lullabies to themselves." I leaned back, shaking my head. "No, I have nothing but contempt for the Ministry, and anyone who uses it to further their own political goals," I finished, my voice as cold as the December wind at Hogwarts, yet simmering with anger.

Percy somehow managed to get his wand in hand, despite trembling like the table behind me. "Please, Harry, calm down," he said, his voice wavering, his eyes fearful.

"Give me a reason, then. Give me one good reason why I should come with you."

Percy swallowed. "I already have, but you refuse to-"

"NO!" I shouted at the top of my lungs, sending cracks through the lenses of both our glasses. "It is you who refuse to recognise your actions. You have just admitted that there is a habit the Ministry and its leaders have, of wishing that there was nothing wrong. Of hoping with all their black little hearts that things will just stay the same. Tell me, *Percy*, honestly, is that a trait you actually *want* in people charged with maintaining the security of the wizarding world in a time of war?" I asked incredulously.

Something cracked in Percy's countenance, some small flaw in his pride and self-delusion. He struggled to rebuild the wall around his private little world, but the foundation was just no longer there.

"Tell me, *Weatherby*, exactly why do you respect Fudge? He's the only person in the Ministry who has stuffed up worse than you."

"Because, he is the Minister," he whispered, still struggling to maintain some semblance of control, but my use of the name Crouch used for him pushed him off balance again.

"That isn't respect!" I spat in his face. "That's sycophantical worship! You are nothing but a yes-man, a toady! Why do you think Fudge would want a failure like you around? Because you'll tell him what he wants to know!"

Percy shook his head, still in denial. "No. He recognised-"

I slashed my hand across the air in front of his face, startling him into silence. "Tell me something, idiot. If he had acted on what I told him, and force-fed Malfoy and the others veritaserum, and nipped this whole war in the bud, would you think he was worthy of respect?"

Percy blinked. "Of course."

I nodded. "Yeah. So would I." I snarled at him. "Dumbledore told him after the Tournament that if he did those things he would be remembered as one of the greatest Ministers the country ever had. But he didn't, and because of that, he's lost the respect of the wizarding world and I've lost-" I blinked and took a deep breath, willing the guilt to subside and the sudden lump in my throat to shift. Clutching onto the anger I felt helped wash the feelings of self-hatred away. But Percy needed to know just how much I had lost.

Feeling a lot more Slytherin-like than usual, I decided to push him even further. "So now you stand there, content that the Ministry you support is finally doing its job. Tell me, what is it like, knowing that a condemned criminal has been doing more against Voldemort than you?" I seethed, memories feeding my anger.

That snapped him back into reality. "What?" he asked, confusion evident.

"My godfather, who wasn't a Death Eater, was sent to Azkaban without a trial, while those with a tattoo burned into their bloody arm were free to go. By the very Ministry officials whose arse you kiss each and every day."

"Your godfather?" he asked, still confused.

He didn't know. Oh, this was going to be fun. "I'm sure you've heard of him."

"I wasn't aware you *had* a godfather," he said in a vaguely unsettled voice.

"Does the name 'Sirius Black' mean anything to you?" I asked with a smile of unholy glee on my

face.

Percy took a step back, only to find he had backed all the way to the wall. "Sirius Black is your godfather?" he wheezed.

The smile disappeared quickly. Anger continued its slow boil in my stomach. "Was, Percy. Was."

"He's dead?" he said, hope in his voice. That tone caused a red veil to cover my sight, and I probably ground a few layers of enamel off my teeth by grinding them together.

I stepped forward until I was nose-to-nose with the middle Weasley. "Yes, he's DEAD! He died protecting me, Percy! You know, what the Ministry is supposed to do? He believed me when I said that Voldemort was back! That night at the Ministry, when Fudge and all his arse-kissing toadies were praying their pleasant little world wasn't going down the toilet, he was fighting wand for wand against Voldemort's most powerful followers," I said, in a low, level voice, barely concealing my anger.

"But, he, but he-" Percy stammered. "But he attacked Ron!"

I growled deep in my throat. "Because Ron was holding onto Peter Pettigrew, the *real* traitor who betrayed my parents."

"What?" asked Percy, linguistic genius.

"Remember a rat with a missing toe? The one you gave to Ron? The one that happened to be both an illegal animagus and a Death Eater?" I asked, my voice rising with each question.

"You- you mean, *Scabbers* ?"

"Yes, Scabbers! Bloody hell, has even one of you bastards at the Ministry listened to what I've been saying?"

"B-but, Black was trying to kill you in my seventh year!"

I took a deep breath, and let my next sentence explode out with my rage. "He was trying to protect me! Sirius died for me, because the Ministry wouldn't live up to its obligation to protect the public. He died because your precious Fudge wouldn't admit to the world that Voldemort was back. He died because the Ministry didn't do its JOB!"

Percy's eyes raced around the room, and the air once again felt heavy. The odd, dispassionate separation of my mind and anger surfaced again. Once more, I could think without my rage clouding my mind. Perhaps Zab's methods of examining new phenomena were rubbing off on me.

"How do you think the world will view your precious Minister, when it comes out that someone incarcerated in Azkaban without a trial fought against Voldemort when no one in the Ministry would admit he was back? What do you think that says about you?" I growled. The soft, uncomprehending stare on this idiot's face just reinforced just how far removed he and the

Ministry was from the sacrifices Sirius had made for me. I could feel my hair wave around, with no wind in the room to explain it.

"Mr. Potter, you need to calm down!" he almost yelled, raising his wand.

"Point that wand away from me or I'll shove it down your throat," I promised.

"Mr. Potter, I had no idea that you had a godfather, and I'm sorry for your loss," he said, not moving the wand from pointing between my eyes.

"Move your wand, Percy."

He swallowed. "Not until you calm down."

"Last chance," I said flatly.

"Not until-"

I grabbed the front of his robes, and swung him around like a toy. Just as a curse formed on his lips, I *pushed* him away, just like I'd done with Snape in the next room. Just like I'd done in the kitchen at Privet Drive.

He flew across the room as though I'd banished him, hitting the opposite wall hard enough to almost break through to the next shop. He left a deep impression at any rate, before falling to the floor in a crumpled heap, his wand rolling away. To my complete surprise, after a couple of seconds he groaned softly, and slowly pushed himself to his hands and knees. Must be that bloody thick skull of his.

Once more, I focused on him, boring my gaze into the back of his head. After a few moments of intense concentration, despite my anger, the world again lost its colour, leaving Percy's bright red hair and gaudy robes as the only objects with any hue in my vision. I watched as he managed to stand on exceedingly unsteady legs. One lens of his cracked glasses had come free, leaving one eye unfocused and unimpeded, the other behind a spider web of cracks.

I shook my head. "You are being used, Percy."

He blinked in an effort to focus, but was obviously beyond him at this point. "No, I'm not," he slurred.

Lie and Truth .

"Why would someone straight out of a scandal be offered a position in the Minister's office then?"

That snapped some vague spine into him. "Minister Fudge recognised my talent and ability!"

Lie .

I almost laughed out loud. "You lie even to yourself. You are absolutely pathetic." I slowly walked over to the trembling young man.

"No," he whispered, stepping backwards. Once more, he backed up into the wall.

It didn't take the discordant note in my mind to tell me that he didn't believe his own words. I glared at him with contempt, scorn filling my words. "You willingly gave up your family, something that I have never had and would give anything for. And exactly what have you gained? Scorn, ridicule, and contempt. Was abandoning them worth it?" I asked, forcing the reality of just what his family thought of him and his actions into his mind. I pushed through all the internal walls of denial and self-delusion. I burned the image of the truth into his mind, deep within.

A look of absolute horror crossed Percy's features. He fell to his knees, his trembling legs no longer able to support him. With an explosive breath that I hadn't been aware I was holding, I let the colour return to the world. It took a couple of seconds for me to catch my breath, while I blinked rapidly. Once my vision had returned to normal, I looked down at the pathetic waste of space and oxygen blubbing at my feet.

I reached out and grabbed a handful of his thinning hair, and pulled his head back so he was looking into my eyes and I had the chance to almost stare up his nostrils. "You say that my claims were destabilising the Ministry. So in your mind, the wizarding world exists to serve the Ministry. That we mere mortals should fall to our knees and give praise that Fudge deigns to guide us."

My sweet expression twisted into a scowl. "Well, guess what, *Percy* ? You are all about to discover just how wrong you are." I waited until his eyes focused on mine, his mouth still agape. "There are two paths in front of you. One would be taken by a Weasley, the other by a Weatherby. A courageous one, and a cowardly one. Either go back to your family and accept the forgiveness they will no doubt give, or go back to your master, like a dog, and beg him not to beat you for failing your task," I said softly.

I pushed his head down and let go of his hair. I walked over to the door, casually drawing my wand and repairing my own glasses, daring him to object. "I personally have no doubt that you will show the world that the Sorting Hat can be wrong," I said, a sneer both on my face and in my voice.

What greeted me as I left the pathetic remains of Percy Weasley in the back room could only be compared to a sunrise on a world with a binary star. Both Fred and George stood before me as I passed Butt with identical grins that were so large and bright that their molars would get sunburned if they stepped outside.

The twins, along with a fair portion of the customers in the store, held an Extendable Ear in one hand. With an internal groan, I realised that nearly every person in the room heard what I'd just said to Percy.

"Harry, old chap, you really let him have it!" said George, pumping my hand up and down.

Fred grabbed me round the neck, only just short of a headlock. "I say we make him an honorary Weasley, George. We've been down one brother for about a year now. It'll be good to have five brothers again!"

Their banter was interrupted by a familiar voice. "Assaulting Ministry staff, Harry? Tut tut."

I clenched my teeth together. "He was threatening me with his wand, Skeeter. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, just browsing. What a coincidence seeing you here!"

I glared at her, finding her expression of artful innocence highly irritating. "How much?"

She blinked. "How much what?"

"How much did you pay your informant for my location?"

She stiffened momentarily, but I was waiting for it. The smile she put on her face was almost convincing in its innocence. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Of course you don't. You have less idea than you have scruples."

Oddly, it wasn't me that said that. Skeeter turned to face George, her lips twitching, but not with humour. "Stay out of this, Weasley."

I raised an eyebrow. "Nice to see your manners have not improved."

The reporter looked back at me, and her face split into that false smile. "You've had the Ministry in quite a spin, Harry. Where have you been?"

I smiled back at her, equally falsely. "Here and there."

"Oh, come now, Harry. Our readers have been worried about you."

My smile disappeared. "Really? They weren't too worried about me when you were defaming me over the last year."

Rita actually had the gall to shrug, as though it wasn't important. "Well, you should take the opportunity to set the record straight. Give me an interview and-"

"What? You'll stop *bugging* me?"

Her breath caught in her throat. She swallowed, but her nervousness remained. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She said something light, but I ignored it, focusing on her eyes.

"I'm surprised you're here, Rita."

She blinked. "Why wouldn't I be here, Harry?"

I kept my face clear of emotion, but continued to stare her down. "Given you were in Malfoy's pocket, shouldn't you be in prison?"

Gasps from around the room indicated my comment was well received. She tilted her head back, to look at me down her nose. "That is slander, Harry. I have never accepted money from the Malfoy family," she said loudly, more for the benefit of the other customers. Her nose was so far up in the air, I'm amazed she wasn't faint from lack of oxygen.

A wicked smile traced over my lips. "That isn't what I said," I murmured.

A sharp intake of breath indicated that she now understood what I meant, and that it certainly wasn't slanderous. Her face paled quickly behind her thick makeup, making her appear almost gothic. "Perhaps this isn't the best place to discuss this," she said; hope tinging her suddenly wavering voice.

I started laughing, a low chuckle building up into a full belly laugh. "Oh, you bloody hypocrite. You're more than happy to tell the world about everyone else's secrets, you even make up stuff if you can't find anything juicy to report, but you're terrified at the threat of having your own secrets revealed."

Her eyes flickered over the crowd, now extremely interested in what was happening. "Now Harry, there's no need for this sort of thing."

I was still chuckling. "Well, why don't we step into Fred and George's office? That way, we'll have the same amount of privacy that you gave me over my forth year," I offered, not gesturing at all towards all the Extendable Ears gripped in the hands of the enthralled crowd.

"Now, Harry, my stories may have made your life a bit difficult, I admit, but they didn't send anyone to prison."

I raised an eyebrow. "I suppose you're right. After all, your stories about me merely made the Minister think that I was delusional, so he denied Voldemort's return for a year. I could make a fairly compelling argument that your stories are partially responsible for every single death that occurs in the war."

Skeeter blinked, and opened her mouth to form a response. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched a furious looking Mirriam shake her hand out of her mother's, and storm up to the journalist's side, three and a half feet of steaming indignation. She drew back her tiny foot and kicked Skeeter as hard as she could on the ankle. I noticed that she was wearing brand-new, hard leather shoes, so it must have hurt quite a bit.

Skeeter shrieked at the sudden assault, and all but collapsed to grab her foot. Mirriam put her balled fists on her hips and assumed an air of affronted anger. "You're a bad lady! My mummy doesn't like Harry Potter because of what you said! But he was nice to me, and he didn't lie! I hate

you!" She drew back for another go.

Her mother's shocked "*Mirriam !*" was drowned out by the applause the crowd gave to her little outburst. Skeeter, who I'm sure was used to being on the other side of the applause, turned a rather ugly shade of grey and leapt ungainly out of the way of a vengeful mini-witch.

"Why you-" she started, before catching herself. It wouldn't do to ruin her reputation, or at least what was left of it.

I grinned down at Mirriam, who blushed and smiled back, before returning my gaze to the reporter. "Look, Skeeter. You finally did a good thing by printing my account of what happened the night Voldemort was reborn. But don't think that wipes the slate clean between us. You lied, you made up things about me, wrote things that I never said, and pretty much made my life a misery, just to sell a few more papers." I took two steps towards her, and leaned forward so we were almost nose-to-nose. "But if you want a story, I'll give you one. I'll give you one that will embarrass the Ministry so badly that Fudge himself will wet his pants at the thought of it getting out."

Confusion blossomed on her face, before settling into a hard, sceptical look. "And the catch?"

"Simple. You have to be honest when writing it. You have to actually write what happened, and not embellish at all. Editorialise all you want, but the facts stay. What do you say?"

"What story is that?" one of the customers asked.

I turned to him. "The true story of Sirius Black."

"Your godfather? Was what you said to that Percy chap true?"

I nodded. "Every word. I'll tell this parasite here what happened," I said, nodding towards Skeeter. "I'll check the story she writes to make sure it is honest, then will add to the bottom that I will happily take veritaserum to confirm its accuracy."

Mirriam frowned. "What is verysilly-um?"

I smiled down at her, laughter threatening to bubble up. "Veritaserum. It is a potion that means that if you take it, you have to tell the truth."

She frowned. "Why didn't they use that on the bad people?"

My smile turned sad. "Because they didn't believe me. They wouldn't use it because they didn't want to hear the truth."

Mirriam bit her lower lip. "But that's silly!"

The crowd chuckled at this, and I joined in. "Of course it is, but no one ever accused the Minister of being intelligent."

Percy had either apparated or used the portkey to the Ministry. Skeeter glanced around the room, noting the broken chair and the upside-down couch. She turned to face me, but didn't comment.

Fred led us over to the triangular table and sat down, before drawing his wand and restoring the various pieces of furniture to their original state and location. "Sit down. Now, Harry, are you sure you want to do this? As much as I hate how Fudge has handled things, this is really going to mess them up."

I nodded, ignoring Rita's suddenly interested look. "There is a reason beyond getting Sirius' name cleared, Fred."

He grinned back, but suddenly became very serious. "Yeah, look, I'd love to embarrass Fudge too, but the O-, our friends are trying to keep a lid on things. They are trying to make sure that the Ministry doesn't melt from the inside; they want to keep things stable."

I shook my head. "No. They are trying to keep the same faces in power in an effort to maintain the illusion that everything is stable. But stability is not just about maintaining the status quo. If the truth can topple them, then exactly how stable are they?"

Fred sighed, but nodded, a smile creeping back onto his face. "Yeah, you might be right. But at least let me tell the others so they know what to expect."

"Be my guest," I said, frowning. "Why would you think I could even stop you saying anything?"

Fred tilted his head to one side. "I'm not sure. I guess, I just..." Fred coughed, looking embarrassed, something rare enough to warrant comment at the best of times. "I guess I didn't want to do anything against you."

I nodded to Fred in thanks as Skeeter drew her damned quill from her bag. I looked at it and then focused my gaze on her pointedly.

She swallowed nervously. "No quill?"

I shook my head slowly.

She nodded unhappily. "All right." She pulled out another quill, obviously non magical. "Where do you want to begin?"

I leaned back in my chair. "How about the true events leading up to my parents' murders?"

Over the next hour, I related just about everything that happened to Sirius. From how he became an animagus (which caused Skeeter to cough uncontrollably for a few seconds) with my father and Wormtail, to convincing my parents to swap Secret Keepers. From being framed by Wormtail, to his unjust imprisonment. She asked several questions, especially about his subsequent escape.

I described his escape in great detail, and also threw in the escape of Barty Crouch. The fact that there had been two escapees from the prison was news to her, and something I was sure would be

in the paper within hours.

It took some doing to convince her that terrorising schoolchildren was not Sirius' intention, that all he was after was a rat. I glossed over Remus' involvement in the climax of my third year, focusing on how Snape was willing to have a dementor kiss an innocent man, even though he was willing to give himself up quietly, as long as Pettigrew came too.

She already knew about the events after the Tournament, so a lot of that was skipped. The conversation with the Minister afterwards was recorded in detail, as well as the fact that a wizard was kissed by a dementor without a trial, something Fudge considered inconsequential at the time.

I skipped over most of the last year at Hogwarts, not feeling the need to describe what Umbridge had me do during my detentions. I did explain how the DA was started, and how Ministry personnel put pressure on the parents of children at Hogwarts. I snarled while describing the fact that our mail had been opened and read by members of the Inquisitorial Squad, a group of people made up almost exclusively of the children of Death Eaters.

Oddly, it was this fact that made Skeeter the most excited. Once I thought about it, I could understand why. The Ministry had spent an entire year denying Voldemort's return, even cozying up to some of the very Death Eaters who were present at the Dark Lord's resurrection. Much of what they did however, could be written off as simple social meetings. There was no hard evidence that Voldemort's followers had any direct input into the running of the Ministry. The entire government was now doing its level best to distance itself from any hint of official collusion with the enemy.

Having a Ministry decree creating the Inquisitorial Squad, whose members' names had a startling correlation with the list of Death Eaters, completely destroyed that position. Despite the fact that I hated the thought of someone being on the receiving end of Rita's quill, the fact that she was reporting facts rather than innuendo did mean I felt a lot less uncomfortable.

It certainly gave the impression that the Ministry bigwigs trusted the families of the Death Eaters. Something that I'd imagine would be very inconvenient in the current political climate.

I described the events leading up to Dumbledore's flight from Hogwarts, including how Fudge was desperately trying to have me expelled from Hogwarts. I went into great detail at how personally satisfied the Minister was at finally having what he thought was evidence to justify my expulsion. I chuckled a bit when I described how Dumbledore actually stunned everyone in the room briefly so he could leave final instructions before taking off. I left out Kingsley's modification of Marietta's memory though; there was no reason to include that.

Luna had already told her father what had happened to her at the Department of Mysteries, and he had published every word. But there were things she was not present for, things I was able to finally tell.

It hurt. It hurt a lot to replay Sirius' death to someone else. To someone I didn't trust. But painful as it was, the entire scene was retold, and even Rita, unemotional cow that she was, had unshed

tears of sympathy in her eyes. I described how I was so angry with Bellatrix, that I chased her down myself.

I even admitted to casting the Cruciatus Curse, causing Skeeter's eyes to bulge almost out of her skull. I did point out that the spell had little effect other than to destroy any shield she had, and that Bellatrix was back on her feet in seconds. The rest of the story didn't take too long to complete, but my description of Fudge when he actually saw Voldemort with his own eyes gave her pause to smile.

Finally, an hour or so after tossing Percy into the wall, we were done. She gathered her copious notes and held out a hand. I shook it tentatively.

"Thank you, Harry. As agreed, I'll send my story to you first," she said with a rather brittle smile.

I waved away her worry. "Don't send it to me, send it to Hermione. I won't be contactable by the time you finish it."

If she was surprised at that, she didn't show it. "I still can't believe you told me about your casting of that curse."

I narrowed my eyes. "What would you have done? This was a witch who had killed a powerful wizard in his own right, and had easily deflected spells cast at her by Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard in the world. I could cast Ministry-sanctioned spells at her all day, and then watch as she calmly killed me, or I could cast a spell that has no defense, and knock her off her feet."

Skeeter blinked, frowned and opened her mouth to speak. I held up a hand to stop her.

"I've had a few discussions over the past few weeks with someone. He has tried to get me to think my way through an idea before forming an opinion. There are a couple of things I want you to ask your readers. One, if aurors are allowed to use Unforgivable curses, then does that mean that dark magic can be used for good? Almost any spell taught at Hogwarts can be used for dark purposes. Does that mean that magic is inherently evil? Ask yourself and your readers this. Is it magic that is light and dark, or is it the user's motive?"

From her face, I could see I was missing something. "Harry, that debate is as old as magic itself."

I shrugged. "Never mind then. Next, If someone who the Ministry has summarily declared to be a criminal without a trial can be legally given a dementor's kiss, would you trust the current justice system, given the direct influence the Minister has?"

Rita scribbled something down looking more and more interested.

"Get your readers to consider this. Last year, those who believed me were actively working against Voldemort. Fudge did everything in his power to stop us. He was willing to weaken the wizarding world, making us more vulnerable, just to solidify his power. How much trust are the people

willing to put in this man, considering he has the power to order the kiss on someone not ever given a trial. Given he is willing to have the kiss administered to someone before testimony is taken."

I just couldn't help adding, "And are those who bowed to his influence as guilty as he?"

She broke the nib of her quill at my not so subtle jab at the media. After taking a deep breath, she looked up from her sheet at me. "Is that all?" she asked hoarsely.

I shook my head. "Sirius, who was under the threat of instant death if captured, still stormed the Ministry buildings when the Death Eater's arrived. He fought some of the most feared witches and wizards in the country. Ask everyone that if a man with nothing to gain was willing to give his life in the fight against Voldemort, then what excuse does everyone else have not to take up the fight?"

Rita bit the inside of her cheek, repaired her quill, and wrote down a few more words, before folding her notes and placing them in her bag. "I suppose you want his name cleared."

I shook my head. "No."

"No?" she exclaimed. "Then what do you want?"

"I want something the Ministry doesn't have the power to give. I want my godfather back. But I'll settle for having his name cleared. I'll settle for him being remembered as a hero."

She gave me a sympathetic look, and nodded. "All that is left is what you are going to do with the information you have on me."

I glared at her. "First, you tell me what Malfoy is getting you to do."

A spark of fear flashed in her eyes, but she managed to put on a confused expression. "I told you before, I have never, and will never, accept money from the Malfoy family."

I sneered. "That's not what I said. Draco knows you are an animagus. He's a Slytherin for a reason. He wouldn't waste an opportunity like this. What are you doing for him?"

She swallowed. "I have to send him any information I get, even things I don't report on."

"So you'll send him the information you got from me today?"

She twitched, but nodded slowly.

I thought deeply for a second. "How much longer?"

"What do you mean?"

"How much longer are you obliged to humour him?"

She raised her head high. "He hasn't told me."

I smirked at her. "Don't play the innocent with me. You must have realised that you could register to become an animagus. Once the required length of time has passed, you could claim to be a new one. You'd be out from anyone's thumb then."

She glared at me for a few moments before responding. "Six more weeks."

That probably only meant three weeks; I sure as hell wouldn't tell the truth in her situation. "Then I hope you don't have to do anything too bad before his blackmailing gets too much."

She nodded and turned to leave. Just as she passed through the door, I called out to her one last time. "Oh, and put in the story that I've already written three letters to Fudge telling him that I'm fine. He's just upset that I'm not coming in for a photo op."

Even though she didn't turn around to face me, I could sense the smile on her face as she left. I turned to Fred, who had sat silent throughout the entire interview. He had his head tilted to one side and was looking at me with an intense expression of concentration.

"Remind me never to get on your bad side," he said with a familiar grin.

The rest of my visit to the twins' store went well. Knowledge of my presence there ran through the residents of Diagon Alley like a very bad curry. Fred and George were rushed off their feet as people flooded the shop to catch a glimpse of me. I deliberately put myself behind the counter, taking the money for the items.

I have no doubt that at least half the stock sold that afternoon were impulse purchases, simply made to get a chance to talk to me.

I recognised several past and present students in the crowd, and even exchanged some polite words with most of them. The conversations always began the same way, an inquiry into where I had been staying, which I refused to answer. The only member of the DA to enter was Cho Chang, and she was embarrassed enough over recent events not to try and make conversation.

Oddly, no more people working directly for Fudge came in, or at least, they didn't approach me. I think Tonks was in the crowd too, since there were more stumbles and crashes in the crowd than I'd have expected. Several people even patted me on the back and offered a word or two of thanks. One or two shouted uncomplimentary things, but they were quickly booed out of the store or made the targets of the twins' attentions. It would have taken someone stupider than Crabbe or Goyle to try it again after that.

After several hours, with my identity, continued existence, good health and waspish tongue firmly established, George escorted me to the Leaky Cauldron to floo home. At least thirty people followed, all trying to hide behind one another. Honestly, it was one of the funniest things I had ever seen. If Dumbledore or Voldemort was having me tailed, their job wouldn't have been more difficult if they'd painted themselves luminescent white.

The Leaky Cauldron was almost empty as we stepped in the front door, allowing George and I to get to a free fireplace without too much difficulty. I thanked him, shook his hand, and flooed away to Hogsmeade.

From there, I went to the Burrow, then to Hermione's place. I didn't stop at either places long enough to even shout out a greeting, but I knew that each of their floo connections had the highest security, so it was safer to travel through their fires than picking out random destinations myself.

I stopped at one of the locations that Moody introduced me to when he took me to meet Zab that first night. I shook off my robes, leaving me standing in a t-shirt and jeans. I made sure I was alone, drew my wand, and cast, "*Veneficus manifesto* !"

Three separate glows appeared on my robes, and one in my hair. Two tiny pins, a stray hair and a piece of thread lodged in my hair had magical signatures. Probably tracking charms. I withdrew all four items from my person, and wrapped them in a handkerchief. I was going to leave them there in the corner of the empty room, but decided on something a little more devious.

Facing the fire, I tossed in a pinch of powder and said, "Albus Dumbledore's office." As the fire flashed green, I tossed my handkerchief into the fire, hoping that it would arrive in the old idiot's office. Whatever, they were no longer bothering me. I continued my floo jumping for another three stops before making my way home.

"Harry!"

I blinked, and looked over my shoulder at the face-down mirror on my bed. Hermione generally called me on the mirror at regular times. I wasn't expecting to speak to her until morning. I rose from my desk and walked over to the bed, sitting down at the head. I checked to make sure there was no distinguishing marks before picking up the mirror. "'Mione?"

"Harry!" she said in a businesslike voice. "I've just got a letter from Skeeter. Someone has told her Sirius' story, and she's asked me to comment on its accuracy."

"Have you read through it?" I asked, amusement building.

She nodded. "Where on earth would she have heard the true story?" she asked rhetorically.

I rolled my eyes. "Your Honour, I plead guilty by reason of stupidity."

Hermione giggled. "You told her the whole thing! Why?"

"You've read it, are there any editorials?"

Hermione frowned for a second, and flicked through the pages. "Nope," she said, shaking her head. "And that's odd, because she normally puts all these snide comments in."

I nodded. "I told her not to. I told her the story on the proviso that she stuck with just the facts, and to ask her readers some questions at the end."

Hermione flicked to the back of the pages, but shook her head again. "There are no questions here."

I shrugged. "She'll probably put them in when she writes the full story. All I asked her to do was to send it to you for accuracy."

Hermione nodded absently. "Well, it is accurate. It leaves a few things out, but I assume you didn't tell her them."

"Like what?"

"Well, for starters, how Sirius escaped from Hogwarts on Buckbeak."

"Yeah, I skipped over that."

Hermione fought a grin, looking back down at the story. "She all but has Sirius take on all the Death Eaters by himself at the Department of Mysteries."

I blinked, thinking. "I don't think I told her who else was there, just that some people who believed me when I said Voldemort was back helped. You don't think they'll be angry?"

She shook her head. "At this point, it is common knowledge who was there that night, with the exception of Sirius. But the idea of a criminal fighting Voldemort when the Ministry wasn't will strike a chord with a lot of people." She looked back up at me. "Harry, if this story goes out in the papers, Fudge won't be able to survive this time."

I grinned back. "That is kind of the idea."

Apprentice Potter What Have I Done?

What Have I Done?

The most relaxing sleep I'd had ever since the night at the Department of Mysteries came to an abrupt halt at an obscenely early hour the next morning. My eyes felt like they were almost burned to a crisp by the sunlight streaming in through the window, suddenly unimpeded by the blinds, which had been swept aside in a most unseemly manner.

I covered my eyes with an incoherent, "Gaah!"

I heard Zab clear his throat. "When Minister Fudge was elected to represent the Magical community of the British Isles, he made many promises. Only the childishly naive actually believe a politician will make good on the majority of promises made to ensure their election, but to discover that the very man who has been charged with the security of every witch and wizard in the country has actively used his influence to undermine that very safety he was sworn to defend simply beggars belief."

I tried to lift my eyelids, and even managed to crack them open a little. All I got for my efforts was a stinging pain and a blurred outline of my Master, holding some papers. He reached out and pulled aside the curtains of the other window to my room, making the room even brighter.

"When Minister Fudge and his administration denied the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, he neglected to inform the public that he had his personal dementor bodyguard kiss a wizard without a trial. A wizard who would have confirmed the Dark Lord's return the very night he stole the Boy-Who-Lived's blood."

I groaned loudly, hoping that Zab would just get the gist of his dispute with me, and just piss off until I'd returned to the world of the living.

"When Minister Fudge and his administration denied the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, he neglected to inform the public that Severus Snape, an ex-Death Eater who renounced his former master and turned spy for the Ministry during the last war, showed him the Dark Mark on his arm, revealing that it had burned black, the usual method He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named used to summon his servants."

Realising that Zab wasn't leaving until he'd finished reading whatever it was he was reading, I

grabbed one of my pillows and held it over my face. His dulcet tones still reached my ears easily enough.

"When Minister Fudge and his administration denied the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, he neglected to inform the public that the Boy-Who-Lived named every single Death Eater in the Dark Lord's inner circle, claiming that Mr. Potter must have discovered that information from court records. Given Mr. Potter lives in the Muggle world during the holidays, and Hogwarts is not the official store for court records, one is given to wonder exactly how the Minister expected Mr. Potter to have come into contact with that information."

Finally, my partially slumbering mind woke up, and I realised he was reading from a newspaper. Obviously reading Rita's article. Oh, bugger.

"But not even the now legendary incompetence of the current Minister cannot explain away the viciousness with which he sought to destroy the Boy-Who-Lived. A year ago, Mr. Potter was dragged before a full Wizengamot to answer a charge of simple use of underage magic. The spell he used was the Patronus charm, one that Mr. Potter had good reason to become quite expert in a few years before. The fact that he was driving off two dementors was not enough to convince a sizable minority of the Wizengamot that he should be exonerated. The fact that the two dementors were sent to attack Mr. Potter by Dolores Umbridge, then Undersecretary to the Minister himself, is of such stunning implication that it is inconceivable that the Minister still honestly believes that he deserves to remain the head of our government."

I swore, though muffled as I was by the pillow, Zab could not have heard. He just continued, his even toned voice belying the importance of what he was reading.

Zab turned the page. "Hmmm, well, it continues on in a similar vein for quite a while. Apparently, every member of the Wizengamot who voted against you has ties to the Minister, either business or underhand. Oh, here is a good bit. 'Surely the actions of our government, transfiguring itself from a democracy to a totalitarian regime almost overnight, demand its removal. When was the last time our government gave itself the right to monitor communications of private citizens without just cause? Including communications from the parents of Muggle-born students who have no recourse to our legal system? When was the last time more than a dozen Educational Decrees were issued in a single year, effectively transferring control of an ancient establishment which has run unimpeded for a millennium to those who are in power for a handful of years? When was the last time the Headmaster of Hogwarts was considered a criminal, for merely telling the truth, and doing everything in his power to protect the wizarding world?'" Zab hummed for a bit, as he skimmed down the story. "Oh, I like this part too. 'Ironically, had the Minister targeted the Dark Lord and his minions with the same fervour and zeal as he attacked Mr. Potter and Albus Dumbledore, this article may well have been praising him for destroying the greatest threat to the wizarding world in recent years.'"

I reached under the pillow on my face and rubbed my eyes, shifting the sleep. "It that the *Prophet*?" I croaked.

"Exactly how many reporters did you speak to?" Zab snapped.

I groaned. "One, but interviews can be sold between papers," I mumbled.

"Stories like this certainly are not!" Zab grumbled, which I took to mean that I was right, it was the *Prophet*. "You gave an interview? To Rita Skeeter no less?"

Not in the mood to banter, I decided to give him some of his own medicine. "What stunning powers of observation you have," I groaned.

Zab turned back to the paper. "Ah, here we are, the contents page. The full, true story of Sirius Black, pages three to six. Why Sirius Black is a hero, not a criminal, page seven. Is Sirius Black the only innocent in Azkaban? Page eight. A comprehensive list of the Minister's illegal actions, pages nine through fifteen. How the Dark Lord infiltrated the Ministry, pages sixteen through twenty. Hmm, I wonder if they bothered to print any other news in the *Prophet* today?" Zab mused, absently flicking through the remainder of the paper.

"How did the Cannons do?" I asked sourly.

"Surprisingly well, they didn't lose," Zab replied quickly. "The fact they weren't playing may have something to do with that," he added absently. "Ah yes, here we are, you are apparently willing to take Veritaserum to confirm any of the story's contents, but only if Minister Fudge does the same."

"What?" I exclaimed, sitting up straight, tearing the pillow from my face. A mistake, it turned out, as I was staring wide eyed at the early morning sun as it rose above the horizon. "Gah!" I finished, falling back and again covering my face.

"You didn't agree to that?"

Slowly I lowered the pillow, blinking rapidly as my eyes adjusted. "Not exactly. I said I'd take Veritaserum to confirm anything in the story. I didn't say anything about Fudge." I pushed myself up onto my elbows.

Zab looked surprised. "Then you owe Ms. Skeeter, Harry. If anyone had called for you to confirm your story, they could have torn you to pieces over what you've got up to over the years. They would have destroyed your credibility. By challenging Fudge like that, if he doesn't call you in, he is confirming its authenticity by default, if he does call you in, he will have to take Veritaserum and perhaps confess to more wrongdoing. He won't want that."

I frowned, trying to get my brain working. What would I do to lessen the impact of such a story, if I had the power Fudge did? I smiled as the answer hit me. "Then he'll probably call me on it."

Zab frowned. "You thin-," he began before a devious smile crossed his face. "Oh, clever. I'm impressed you managed to think of something that devious, given your current, rather befuddled state of mind."

I shrugged. "He's as slippery as a Slytherin, so he'll publicly call me on it, then quietly cancel,

hoping to manipulate opinion for one last push to stay in power."

Zab nodded. "Well, you should read this, to make sure it is all correct. Once you've done that, we need to have a little-" Zab's eyes flickered over my bedside tables, and his expression turned dark. "Where is your wand?" he snapped.

I blinked, and waved towards my workspace. "It's over there, on my desk."

Zab glanced at the desk, and rolled his eyes. "So is half the clutter in the country. Aurors in training are expected to keep their wands on their person at all times. Alastor would be most put out with you. Always keep your wand at your side! Get it now!" he commanded, angry at my laziness.

I nodded slowly, and rose. I stumbled over to my desk dressed in nothing but my boxers, and patted the piles of parchment down, trying to find the holly wand. After a few moments of no success, knowing that Zab would probably punish me quite severely for not being able to put my hand on it instantly, I sighed, drew a deep breath and shouted, "*Lumos* !"

One pile began to glow from underneath. I shifted the notes and snatched up my glowing wand. "*Nox* ," I said casually, extinguishing the light. I steeled myself and turned to face Zab, only to see him staring at my wand as though he'd never seen one before.

"Do that again," he said softly, all traces of anger gone, his face schooled into an expressionless mask.

"Do what?" I asked, confused. "Cast a Light spell?"

Zab nodded absently. "Without holding your wand," he clarified softly.

I put my wand back down on my desk. "*Lumos* ," I said.

Nothing happened.

I frowned, and forced more power into my voice. "*Lumos* !"

The wand tip burst into light, making me blink. Zab's mouth was slightly ajar. But only for a second. He shook his head and recovered his attention. "How long have you been able to do that?"

"You mean cast a spell without holding my wand? I've only done it once before today. When the dementors attacked. My cousin hit me, thinking that I was the one doing what he was feeling from their presence. I dropped my wand." I shrugged, not caring to perfectly describe the events of that day. "I couldn't find my wand, so I called for it. It got dark, and I shouted '*Lumos* ' in desperation. My wand lit up normally, so I grabbed it."

Zab's expression was still carefully schooled into neutrality, as he mulled over what he had just heard. The longer the better, in my opinion, since he seemed to have forgotten the little talk he'd been preparing for.

He remained silent for far too long to be comfortable. "Um, Master? I assume this isn't normal."

He blinked quickly and focused on me. "Rare, Harry. Very rare. I've not met someone who could do such a thing. The more I get to know you, the more I'm becoming convinced that I left the wizarding world far too early." Again, his eyes lost focus, and he thought deeply. Finally, his head snapped up and he grinned, making him appear three decades younger. "Get dressed. This is something I must take the opportunity to examine."

With that, he turned and drifted silently out of my room, his robes trailing behind him. I rubbed my eyes, and yawned. I was thankful for delaying, if not avoiding completely, a lecture on exactly what I did wrong speaking to Skeeter. In any event, it looked like it was going to be an interesting day, and I wondered just how many rare abilities I had. Perhaps that was what the prophecy was referring to.

While it was interesting, it turned out to be an absolutely exhausting day. Even an hour before lunch I was physically and magically drained to the point of collapse. Casting a spell through a remote wand cost me a great deal more energy than normal, leaving me staggering, and unable to improve on my performance. Even after two hours of practise, I only managed to fire off the most simple spells; the light and levitation spells, a simple fire-starting charm, and couple of minor hexes and jinxes. Simple first year spells which required almost no effort for a wizard to cast. Any spell requiring more power left me with a migraine and severe dizziness.

Once Zab had established what spells I could cast, he then experimented with distance. We discovered that I could fully light up my wand up to about three metres away, but any further than that caused the spell to lose power rapidly. From around seven metres, I couldn't even get a glimmer out of my wand.

Throughout all the experiments, Zab made page after page of notes. During one of the exceedingly rare breaks Zab afforded me, we discussed the theory behind my unusual skill.

"Well, other wands placed between yourself and your wand don't appear to make a difference," Zab noted after he had put his wand on the middle of a table and mine at the far end, and my spell had lit up only my holly wand. "Therefore it is reasonable to assume it has to do with the link you have with your wand."

"The wand chooses the wizard," I quoted, remembering my first visit to Mr. Ollivander.

Zab nodded. "But the level of connection you have with your wand is," he paused, searching for the right word, "more *intimate* than most. Your wand would appear to be uniquely suited to your hand and yours alone."

I bit the inside of my cheek, but decided to tell him. "The core of my wand is a feather from Fawkes, Dumbledore's familiar. Voldemort has the only other wand that had a feather from the same phoenix as its core."

Zab appeared intrigued. "Your wands... are brothers?"

I nodded. "That's what saved me the night Voldemort rose," I said, explaining in detail what happened when our wands joined that night. "I'd like to say that I forced the shades of Cedric and my parents out of his wand, but I'm pretty sure I only managed it because he was still weak."

Zab nodded. "That may be one reason the Minister refused to believe your story. What are the odds of a student, even one that had just won the Tri-wizard Tournament, defeating the Dark Lord in a duel? It does sound rather far fetched, not to mention egotistical."

"I never claimed that I'd beaten him in a duel!" I spat, instantly angry again.

Zab lowered his head, looking at my from under his eyebrows. "Are you sure? Think about what you told Albus. It was he who then explained events to the Minister. However he decided to present your account of events, our Minister is not renowned for his attention span, so it is entirely possible that he believed the Headmaster told him that you defeated the Dark Lord in a duel." Zab made a face. "No matter where you work, there are people like that. It took me a long time to work out why they always seemed to have management positions. I decided that they'd been promoted in an effort to put them in a place where they could do the least damage. Regardless, it does sound like the claims of someone who craves attention."

My anger slowed as I thought. "I'd just won a bloody tournament, one that I was not considered old enough to enter. I had all the attention I could want. If I truly wanted attention, why would I jeopardize that by telling a lie?"

Zab tilted his head to one side in acknowledgement. "I'm not suggesting that the Minister's actions were correct. I'm suggesting that they may have been explainable, at least to someone of his somewhat limited mental gifts." Zab leaned forward. "Don't ever let your emotions rule your thinking. Don't ever let your hatred or anger at someone to cloud your analysis of their actions. Remember, people judge their own behaviour by their motives, but judge others by their actions."

"He could have given me Veritaserum. He could have had Crouch testify, instead of letting his pet dementor destroy him."

Zab nodded. "Absolutely correct. I sometimes wonder about how the Ministry operates. In theory, with access to Veritaserum, it should be impossible to send an innocent man to prison. It should be impossible to infiltrate the Ministry. Security procedures involving potions like Veritaserum should ensure that the people in power are there because they want to make a positive impact on society, not because they want power."

I chuckled softly. "The desire to be a politician should ban you for life from ever being one."

Zab leaned back in his chair, and stroked his goatee with a smile on his face. "Precisely. Now, let us get back to work."

A few hours later, I staggered back to my room, gently thumping into the walls. I could hardly stay upright, and given that my eyes were half closed, I probably looked like I'd been partaking enthusiastically of the firewhiskey in Zab's liqueur cabinet.

It took me a while to figure it out, but my newly found skill wasn't rare, as Zab claimed. It was probably unique. It had not been documented at all, meaning that Zab was being quite obtuse about it. He'd never even heard of someone who could do such 'tricks', and fully intended to document every single aspect of my ability. Magic with a wand, yes obviously he'd heard of. Wandless, likewise. But remote casting, no.

Zab finally let me go, after about six hours of experimentation with my remote wand casting. As much as we tried, certain spells just couldn't be cast from a distance, either I just didn't have the power or the wand was too far away. I did finally manage to cast a stunning spell, but my hand was hovering over my wand, and the miniscule blip of red light would have had difficulty in toppling a rodent.

I missed my door, and it took me a few minutes to work out why I'd reached the end of the corridor. By the time I'd retraced my steps to my room, I'd almost collapsed from sheer exhaustion.

I pushed my door open, finding that the elves had obviously cleaned. My bed was made and the notes on my desk sorted into tidy piles. I shrugged off my robes and glasses, then threw myself onto the bed face down, not caring that I'd barked my shin on the bed stand. It was with a great relief that I closed my eyes.

"Harry? Harry?"

I groaned, cursed and swallowed. With my left hand, I groped the bedside table, looking for the mirror. My questing fingers found the handle, and I picked it up and angled it towards my face. "Mi'ne?" I queried, not bothering to lift my face from the bed, leaving me looking like I'd been pressed out of clay by someone with as little talent as Malfoy has for self-preservation.

"Harry! Have you-, what on earth happened to you?"

"Tired."

"I can see that. Are you hurt?"

I grunted what I hoped was a negative sounding answer.

"What have you been doing?"

I forced an eye open and looked at her. "Go 'way," I offered.

She blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Go 'way, pl's." I mumbled. "Sl'py."

Her eyes narrowed. "Harry, it's not even five in the afternoon. Why are you so tired?"

You know, for someone so bright, I can't believe she expected an in-depth answer from someone

who was slurring the word 'please'. "L'ter," I said, before putting the mirror face down on the bed. I don't remember what she said after that.

"Harry?"

I coughed and slowly blinked my eyes open. My neck hurt from lying on my cheek, and a trail of drool from the corner of my mouth had dampened the sheets beneath my face. I lifted my head, only to discover that the damp patch had attached the sheet to my cheek. Ugh.

I tilted my head to detach the sheet from my cheek, rolled over onto my back and wiped my mouth with my forearm. I let my tongue roll around in my mouth. It tasted like Hedwig had coughed up her last dinner into my mouth.

"Harry? Are you there?"

I blearily looked over at the mirror, shook my head to clear it and picked it up. "'Mione?" I asked, looking at my blurry friend's face.

Even unfocused, I could tell she was angry. "What has gotten in to you?"

I yawned. "What do you mean?"

"Why did you tell me to get lost?" she snapped.

"I did?" I asked, confused.

"Yes, before you started snoring for three hours. You didn't break the connection before you fell asleep."

"Well, I was tired. My Master has had me practising something." Another yawn escaped. "Don't ask, it's too boring to explain. How did you know that I'd woken up?"

Hermione's expression turned a little worried. "You stopped snoring. Are you sure you're all right? Your Master isn't overworking you is he?"

I rolled my eyes. "What, you think I'm going to bed at four in the afternoon because I'm bored? Yes, he's overworking me."

Her expression turned concerned. "Then you should say something to him."

I snorted softly. "'Mione, you'd work much harder than this if you knew what we were doing," I said with absolute certainty.

"Well, what are you doing?"

I sighed. "Experimenting with a new form of magic."

Her eyes bulged almost out of her skull. "You said it was boring!"

"No, I said it was boring to explain. Look, enough, I've been told not to talk about it until we know more. Why did you contact me in the first place? It wasn't your usual time."

She blinked, obviously consternated that I was deeply involved in something that she would give up her ability to bear children to be involved in. "I-, your story."

"In the *Prophet* , you mean?"

She nodded. "If you wanted to damage the Ministry, you couldn't have picked a better time to publish it if you tried. The draft of the internal report on what happened in the Department of Mysteries was released today, and a few of the Order members got a copy. It praises the six of us for our role, even suggesting that we get the Order of Merlin, second or third class, for our efforts. With your story coming out this morning, and the report being published today, the Ministry cannot attack our characters without looking like hypocrites. Ron's father has been in meetings all day, and every single Ministry worker has had to go to work, even if they were sick or on holiday."

I couldn't help but smile. "What's the verdict?"

Hermione shrugged. "Fudge is out. He has to be. There are just too many bad decisions on his part in your story for him to retain enough support to remain in power. The most devastating thing was the fact that he had Barty Crouch kissed before he could offer testimony. A lot of people have been pointing out that it makes it look like he was hiding something, more than one claiming that you may have been right to say he was a supporter of Voldemort."

It was my turn to shrug. "For all we know, he might have been."

Hermione frowned. "I doubt it. If he was a Death Eater, he would have had you killed before this," she said solemnly.

I shook my head. "No, I meant that for all we know, he may have been hiding something. I know he isn't a Death Eater, like I said during my testimony, he is too incompetent to have lived for so long as a Death Eater. No, I was thinking more along the lines of the way he threw his support behind Barty Crouch Senior even when he was behaving oddly. Having Junior appear when he was supposed to be dead couldn't have been a good sign. No, the more I think about it, the more I think that we don't know everything about Fudge and his history."

Hermione's eyes widened during my explanation, then became heavy-lidded. "Harry Potter, you need to stop doing that to me," she said in a sultry voice.

I sighed, but grinned at her. "Sorry. What else have you heard?"

She pouted briefly, but continued. "The Order has been hectic, but they've been like that since last night. Somehow they got wind of your story before it broke. Did you tell them what you were doing?"

I nodded. "I told Skeeter the story at the twins' shop, and said that they could tell the Order. You know, Fred actually asked permission to tell them. He said that he didn't want to do anything against me."

"Well, according to Ron, there was even talk of obliterating Skeeter to stop the story from coming out, but that idea was so radical that the opportunity to do anything like that passed while they were arguing about it."

"Ron's allowed into the Order meetings? Or is he just making use of Fred and George's merchandise?"

Hermione grimaced. "He's allowed in. I'll give that boy credit, after spending too much time around you, what he wants, he gets. He spent the summer putting Extendable Ears in different places around the main room the Order meets in. Any time Professor Moody wasn't attending, he could listen in as much as he wanted. Since he was getting the information anyway, his parents let him sit in."

"Well, he's done more to fight Voldemort with us than a lot of the people in charge have, I'm not surprised that he is allowed in."

"Anyway, with the twins' warning about your mad little scheme, the Order members were able to make the best of an exceedingly bad situation for their personal standings. Kingsley and the other aurors were able to submit official reports stating their opposition to many of Fudge's laws, and Mr. Weasley was able to use the fact that he was being investigated last year to his advantage too, with the help from some well placed official memos."

"That all sounds rather like civilised warfare."

Hermione smirked. "Don't you believe it. Mr. Weasley was threatened with the sack last night for putting down most of those thoughts on parchment, he had even been scheduled to attend an official hearing about his continuing future as Head of his Department, and probably even his future at the Ministry. But with your story bursting through whatever agenda they had, he came out looking like the one Department Head in the entire Ministry willing to put his career on the line by speaking out against Fudge."

I nodded, pleased that Mr. Weasley wasn't in any difficulties, then chuckled softly. "What about Percy?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, when an oddly echoing knocking sound came out of the mirror. Hermione looked away from the mirror in her hand, and called out, "Who's there?"

I missed the response, but Hermione's eyes lit up. "Come in, Professor! I'm just talking to Harry."

I blinked, wondering which Hogwarts' teacher would be calling on Hermione, who she would be pleased to see, and who she had no trouble admitting that she was talking to me. The view in the mirror tilted and twisted as it was passed from one person to the other. The answer hit me just

before the teacher's face appeared in the mirror.

"Remus," I greeted him. "Is Hermione still calling you 'Professor'?"

The werewolf smiled thinly, his mind obviously elsewhere. "Hello Harry, and yes she is. I can't seem to do a thing about it."

I frowned at his apparent mood. "Something up?"

The smile disappeared completely. "Harry, what the hell were you thinking?"

I rolled my eyes. "I assume you mean about Skeeter's story?"

Remus' eyes narrowed. "Yes," he said tightly.

I shrugged, no prepared to take flack for something like this. "I told you on my birthday that I'd be trying to get Sirius' name cleared."

"By destroying confidence in the Ministry? Have you any idea just how much chaos you've caused?"

I yawned, still tired, but mainly because I felt that it was an appropriate response to hearing about the Ministry's woes. "I assume you mean, the chaos they have caused themselves, if what they had done was ever revealed to the public."

"Harry, the entire government is in an uproar! There are no services running! If Voldemort attacked now, muggles could be killed with impunity, there'd be no one to protect them!"

I sighed. "First of all, Voldemort has enough brains not to go after muggles. He knows that if he kills a muggle family, and the Ministry isn't there to clean up after him, he faces having magic being exposed. The Prime Minister knows about the existence of magic, and he wouldn't hesitate to take action against the wizarding world if it became apparent that it couldn't police itself. Anyway, Voldemort's only really interested in getting rid of Muggle-borns and their families. Since the Ministry has been stretched to its limit protecting Fudge and his pure-blood cronies, there was no guarantee that those families would be protected anyway."

"Harry, that is just sophistry. Just because something may not have occurred does not mean that ensuring it doesn't occur is morally acceptable. Dammit, there was no need for this! With this one act, you've put the wizarding world in more danger than Fudge managed to in the whole of the last year!"

I leaned forward, so my nose was almost pressed against the mirror. "You know what, Remus. I don't care. I. Just. Don't. Care. The wizarding world can go to hell as far as I'm concerned. It's mostly made up of idiots, bigots and arseholes. I remember reading once that people get the government that they deserve. Well, as far as I'm concerned, it holds true in this case. You say that I've put everyone in danger because of my actions, well guess what? The wizarding world is about to learn that the price of freedom is constant vigilance."

"People are going to be killed, Harry. Real people! Real people are going to die because the Ministry will not be able to function!" Remus spat, his voice becoming filled with anger.

"Oh, grow up!" I shouted back. "It's time to stop trying to protect every one of those pampered, over-indulged fuckwits, and let them either grow up or die! Every witch and wizard in the country has the ability to defend against Voldemort and his Death Eaters, so stop wasting time trying to keep them from harm, and let them take responsibility for themselves."

"What about the young students who are Muggle-born, Harry? What about them?"

"Hey! I've faced down Voldemort so many times that I can doze through the boring bits of my life as it flashes in front of my eyes, and I am effectively Muggle-born! I was eleven when Quirrell tried to strangle me, and I was twelve when I had to kill that bloody basilisk to prove I wasn't the heir of Slytherin! Don't you dare try and suggest that young Muggle-born students are helpless! Give them all a portkey if that salves your conscience, but give them the credit they are due."

Remus clenched his teeth together, obviously trying hard not to lose control. "Dammit, Harry, this is not just about you! I know what you've gone through, but not everyone has your strength of character!"

"How do you know? Huh? Most would have said the same thing about Neville when he started Hogwarts! Since then, I've been hounded, mis-quoted, photographed and stalked by the media for being famous for something my mother did, but no one was surprised when I won the bloody Tournament! People have a far greater expectation of me than I deserve, yet Neville, who has been underestimated his entire life, was with me, fought at my side, at the Department of Mysteries, and he faced down the very woman who took his parents away from him! He took the Cruciatus, accepted a broken nose, and was still trying his damndest to fight! Now you stand there, and tell me that people like him need the protection of the Ministry, and that their imminent deaths are my fault! Bollocks to that!"

Remus simply seethed throughout my rant. "Harry, we *needed* the Ministry in place! The Order is - we are *all* -- in the middle of a war, and you just took away our only major ally!"

"Don't you get it? You don't need the Ministry! You need people who believe in what you are doing, not going along because they'd get voted out if they didn't!"

"Harry, a leadership and power structure are vital to any military or guerrilla activity of this magnitude. The Ministry structure was perfect to distribute orders, aid and personnel! Now that you've effectively destroyed it in the eyes of the public, we will need to create a new one from scratch. The Order is not a military force, it never has been!"

I rolled my eyes. "Remus, relying on the Ministry in any capability was a mistake. Basically, it is an organisation made up of people who joined to gain power, and who will jump ship the moment it appears they can no longer get it. They would be a liability in a fight. You are better off without them."

Remus' expression darkened, his cheeks becoming even redder. "So Severus suggested. Dammit, Harry-" he growled.

"No!" I shouted, cutting him off. "There are people out there, people who have powers that any almost any muggle would give their right arm for, and all they do with it is waste it. They read a gossip column, send curses through the mail, and bitch and moan to all their friends about the state of the world. Now, look me in the eye and tell me that the world is better off with them in it."

Remus actually looked shocked. "You can't seriously be saying that? You'd let people die just because of the sort of people they were?"

"No, I'm saying that if people want to have the right to live in the wizarding world, then they need to take some sort of responsibility for it. They need to put their hand up and say that they are willing to do what is necessary to make sure the world is safe for themselves and others. Just like Sirius did. It didn't matter to him that it was dangerous, it didn't matter that if he got caught he faced the Kiss. All that mattered to him was to do the right thing; to make sure that those he considered family were safe. If people won't take responsibility for themselves, then I sure as hell won't, and you shouldn't either."

Remus swallowed a couple of times, trying to keep his voice steady. "You've grown hard, Harry. You're not the same boy I taught."

I fought to keep a snarl from forming on my lips. "Perhaps. Or maybe I am the same person, but the world has changed around me. Look, put me on the front line against the Death Eaters, and I'll fight. I'll do everything in my power to ensure that every one of my friends remain safe. I'd give my life for them in an instant. But I will not fight for the Ministry, an organisation that is corrupt, decadent and wilfully ignorant. If the simple truth can topple it so easily, then it sure as hell shouldn't have been standing in the first place."

Remus sighed, looked down and shook his head. "Harry, I wish that things were different. I wish that I'd been a larger part of your life. But most of all, I wish that you didn't harbour all this hatred, this anger."

This time, I did snarl. "Well get used to it." His eyes widened in surprise, as though he was expecting an apology, or at least an agreement. "What?" I asked. "You wish I didn't have all this rage? Well guess what? If I didn't, it would mean that I was broken. It would mean that I'd just given up, and was ready to let the world kill me. Well, the hell with that."

"Yet, you've effectively left the wizarding world."

"What rock did you crawl out from under? I've left nothing! I'm still here, I'm just not accepting calls right now. I needed a break, so I'm taking one. One where I won't be lied to, manipulated or controlled. I've learned more here over the last few weeks than I learned in that pathetic school called Hogwarts over the last year. When I tell the truth here, I'm not tortured, belittled or made into a hero once it becomes apparent that I was right all along. The wizarding world has grown introverted, selfish, and self-indulgent. I want no part of it. Take it and go."

Remus just stared blankly at me, then lowered his head and sighed deeply. "Harry, I-" He stopped and tried again. "OK, I'll go. But please, just do me one favour. Please, just promise me that this will be the last thing you do to the Ministry? We now have to clean up after you, and I'm not sure we'll be able to do it now, let alone if you do something else too."

"Well, that all depends, doesn't it."

"On what?"

"On whether or not Sirius' name is cleared. If it isn't yet, I'll have to try again." I drew my wand and tapped the rim of the mirror, ending the call. I put it down next to me, and lay back, thinking hard.

"It would appear that you have thought through the consequences of your actions, Harry. I had thought you had spoken to that reporter without thinking about the repercussions."

I blinked and pulled myself up onto my elbows, and nodded to Zab. "That's something that everyone does. They always underestimate me."

Zab nodded, humming to himself. He entered my room and turned my chair around to face the bed. "I presume that was your werewolf friend?" he asked as he sat.

I nodded. "I thought you were distracted enough to forget about this little talk."

Zab shook his head. "You are partially right. I had not forgotten, but you certainly distracted me. I'm sorry to admit that I listened in on your conversation. Do you wish to discuss it?"

I blinked. "What about it did you want to talk about?" I blinked at Zab's expression, realising that I'd asked a question. "I mean, go ahead."

"Your characterisations of the Ministry and those who work there are both crude and generalisations. Your friend was right about a few things, not the least being that it will be far more difficult now to organise a comprehensive defense against Voldemort."

I raised an eyebrow. "Given how involved several Death Eaters were within the Ministry ranks, I'd say that any attempt to use it to fight against Voldemort would be doomed. The Ministry would be leaking information, information that Voldemort would exploit. Starting from scratch now would mean being able to put in place security procedures that would enable proper screening of those in key positions."

"But how would you ensure that it was your new organisation that people joined? How would you give it legitimacy?"

I shrugged. "There is an existing Order, one that the people who fought at the Department of Mysteries belonged to. They could use that fact to give the Order legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Couple that with several famous and respected wizards like Dumbledore who are already members, and have someone like Madam Bones join too, and the public sees visible, prominent

people behind the Order. You don't need to maintain such an idea for very long though. Once people start signing up, it will take on a legitimacy of its own, simply through strength of numbers."

Zab gave me a thin smile. "Perhaps. Having the Boy Who Lived as a figurehead would no doubt be of great assistance in such an endeavour."

"They'll have to struggle along without me," I said flatly.

"True," Zab murmured. "Tell me, is what you said about people in the wizarding world your true opinion, or were you simply taking a radical view to support your stance?"

"My opinion. A great many of the witches and wizards in the world are bigots. Idiotic bigots at that."

"A great many are not."

"True, but they're not in charge."

Zab tilted his head to one side, then the other. "Point taken." He was silent for a few moments, before summing up all his questions into one.

"Harry, are you prepared to be a catalyst in the destruction of the Ministry, simply to clear the name of a deceased wizard?"

I nodded emphatically. "Absolutely. It was that very Ministry which condemned him, remember. If it cannot survive its own history being revealed, should it exist in the first place?"

"Ah, *rhetorical questions* . Wonderful things, aren't they?"

Apprentice Potter Whoops (again)

Whoops

The first of September appeared on my calendar remarkably quickly, sending a odd combination of relief and longing through my heart. As much as I was glad I was not returning to the wizarding world to be tormented or idolised, the thought of my friends enjoying each other's company sent me into a melancholy mood.

Of course, the thought that I wouldn't have to put up with Malfoy cheered me up more than just a bit.

Zab, of course, had some practical tasks for me.

"Put your wand away, Harry. You've been working quite hard for the past week. I'd like you to take a break today, go to Diagon Alley, and pick up some supplies for me. Visit your friends, take your time."

A flash of irritation swept through me, (If he'd asked me yesterday, I'd have been able to see my friends one last time before they headed off to Hogwarts) but I silenced it with some thoughts. As much as I would have liked to visit with Ron and Hermione one last time before they went back to school, September the first was the slowest day in Diagon Alley. I should be able to pick up everything Zab wants without difficulty or delay. That was why he waited until today to send me in errands, instead of sending me yesterday.

Zab handed me a list. My eyes widened. Some of the stores were in Knockturn Alley!

I frowned as I scanned the rest of the list. "This makes no sense. A single item from some stores, and a list from others? Some of the single items can be bought from other stores," I said, trying to work it out.

Zab stayed silent.

Oddly, the only stores that had a single item against them were either Dark, or borderline. If I lost the list...

"They're codes. If I ask for that item, I'll get the whole order," I suggested.

Zab nodded, looking pleased. "Excellent, Harry. We'll make a competent wizard out of you yet."

"Thanks," I replied dryly.

Zab nodded, ignoring my tone. "And stop in on Ollivander too. Get yourself another wand."

I grinned. "I had already planned on doing that. It doesn't make much sense to practise hurling spells through a remote wand if you can't summon it back to your hand when you need it."

Though I had expected Diagon Alley to be quiet, I didn't expect it to be almost deserted.

I had been to Diagon Alley only a handful of times in my life, and each time, it had seemed to have a life of its own. There were always hundreds of brightly dressed people making their way through the district, on errands of their own. To someone like me, who had grown up in a very sombre environment, it was like a carnival or circus.

Today, however, there was nothing. Half the stores were closed, with signs on the doors informing the public that they were in the process of restocking. Many storekeepers were standing outside, chatting with one another, obviously taking some measure of relief from the crowds of the past week. Even the twins' store was closed, which depressed me a little.

My excursion in Diagon Alley took far less time than I expected, and probably even less than Zab expected. Storekeepers all but jumped to attention to assist me, most of them thanking me for finally getting the Ministry to acknowledge Voldemort's return, or apologising to me for believing the worst.

Knockturn Alley was a little different. The looks I got there were guarded, suspicious. Even though the shops I entered were all legitimate vendors, it was obvious that I was not expected, or particularly welcome.

Despite the difference in welcome, my shopping was completed just as quickly, and I found myself in front of Gringotts with more than two hours before I was due to return.

I shrunk the last bag of Zab's goodies, and marched towards Ollivanders' shop.

"Well, well, well. Mr. Potter. Eleven inches, holly with a phoenix feather core, yes?. Exactly how is your wand functioning?"

"Perfectly," I replied quickly. Not even Merlin himself could convince me to discuss the experiments I was doing with my wand with another person. "I need another wand."

Ollivander looked me up and down for a long moment, lost in thought. "If the wand I sold you five years ago is still functioning perfectly, exactly why do you need another, hmm?"

I narrowed my eyes at him, not in the mood to be intimidated or frightened. "You know there is a brother to my wand out there," I said, trying to imply that I wanted a wand that wouldn't react to Voldemort's.

His silver eyes flickered up to my forehead, to my bloody scar. Not that he could see it, my fringe was just as thick and long as usual. "Ah, yes. That is, unfortunately, very true. But I suspect that you are not being entirely truthful with me."

Inwardly cursing, I raised my mental shields. "I just told you why I need it, I don't care if you don't believe me," I snapped, feeling a faint touch to my defenses. "And keep your Legilimency to yourself."

Ollivander blinked, and then, to my surprise, smiled. "You are maturing well, Mr. Potter. I told you the first time we met that I expected great things from you. It pleases me to know that I was right. From what Albus has told me of your exploits, I have not been disappointed." The old man turned and began extracting armloads of boxes from the shelves. "Come, experiment with these."

The first few dozen 'experiments' were utter failures. Though I could get spells through them, it was far more difficult than using my own wand. None of them lit up at all when I waved them.

"Do you have any holly wands? Or wands that have a phoenix feather core that didn't come from Fawkes?" I asked.

"It doesn't work that way, Mr. Potter. Simply having a close affinity to your wand does not make it any more likely that holly wands in general would be more to your liking. Although wands made with feathers of Albus' phoenix would have a high probability of responding to your touch."

"And here I was thinking I was trying to get a wand that *wasn't* a brother to Voldemort's." I said snidely.

Mr. Ollivander hummed a bit. "True."

I grunted, and went back to waving wands. We finally found one that vaguely reacted to my touch, willow with a unicorn hair. To test it, I tossed my glasses onto a padded chair in the corner of the shop, then summoned them, using my new wand. They hesitated momentarily, but flew to my hand."

"This will do. I'll take it," I said, pulling out my money pouch. "Seven galleons?" I asked.

Ollivander nodded, his unblinking silver eyes following my own. "Should you ever feel comfortable to tell me the real reason you need another wand, I would be-," was all I heard, before slamming the money down on the counter and the door behind me.

I lay back on my bed, almost fizzing with energy. The trip to Diagon Alley had been fun, it allowed me to get out and about for half a day, but I hadn't managed to catch up with the twins. My new wand still felt odd to hold, the magic flowing through it felt different to my normal wand.

It didn't take a genius to work out why I was so energised. For the first time in over a week, I hadn't spent several hours forcing my magic to work from a distance. I looked down at my body, noting that my feet were tapping to a silent beat.

I glanced at my watch, noting that it was almost eleven. Hermione was overdue to contact me.

I wasn't worried. She probably had her prefect duties to attend to, or more likely, Dumbledore was interrogating her about me. Ron was probably caught up too.

"Harry?"

A smile spread slowly over my face. I picked up the mirror and held it over my horizontal form. "Good evening, 'Mione. You're late."

She frowned at me. "Harry, we went to the Room of Requirement tonight, just like you asked, but the mirror wouldn't work!"

I blinked. "Um, Ok. I'm fine, thanks for asking."

She shook her head for a second, and gave me an apologetic look. "Sorry Harry. How are you?"

I grinned. "I wonder why the mirror didn't work."

"Well. We did what you said. I thought of the most secure room I could, we went in and sat down to call you. I guess that it was so secure it stopped any communication outside of the room. Luna tried to get the room to accept mirror communications, but with no luck."

I opened my mouth to respond, when voices from Hermione's side interrupted. "Herm? Who are you speaking to?"

I was suddenly treated to a wonderfully close up view of Hermione's chest, as she pressed the mirror into her pyjamas. "No one," I heard her say, though her voice was muffled.

Sounds of a struggle came through, and the material pressed against the mirror twisted and shifted along as Hermione wrestled with whoever it was who interrupted her. Probably Parvati or Lavender. Smart as she was, Hermione didn't grow up with brothers, so it was inevitable that the mirror was torn from her grasp.

"-some sort of speaking diary? Or a present from *Harry* ?" I heard Parvati ask her, leering my name, as the scene shown in the mirror tumbled around chaotically. After a few seconds, Parvati managed to hold the mirror steady and look into it, while holding Hermione at bay with her other hand.

Rather amusingly, during the tussle, certain parts of Parvati that usually remained hidden had emerged from her rather loose-fitting nightwear. I gave her the biggest grin I could. "Hi, Parvati," I said, nodding in greeting, then looking down at the rest of her on display. "Nice breasts."

Parvati shrieked, and struggled to cover herself, dropping the mirror in the process, sending my perspective tumbling again. I got a scene full of fluffy carpet before Hermione scooped the mirror up, hissing at her assailants. "Serves you right," she spat towards someone off mirror.

I couldn't help but smile. "Are things always so entertaining in the girl's dorm?"

Hermione glared at me, making final adjustments to her own, far more modest clothing with one hand. "No. But the pair of them haven't shut up about you and I since we got here."

I raised an eyebrow. "You and I?"

Hermione huffed as she sat back on her bed and violently drew the curtains. "Your party, remember? We came down from my room together." She gave me a sour look. "They seem to think we are an item."

I shrugged. "Well, if Parvati usually wears that skimpy thing to bed, I'm not surprised that there are charms to keep the boys out."

Hermione grinned almost evilly. "I'll tell her you said that. Did you get a good view?"

"A particularly educational one."

"Good. I'll let her know. But I can't talk for long. I have double potions tomorrow morning."

I gave her a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry, 'Mione. Go to sleep, we'll chat later."

She pouted slightly. "But you said you'd tell me what was going on! Why you were so angry!"

I nodded. "And I will. But if the mirror won't work in the Room of Requirement, then I'll have to meet you on a Hogsmeade weekend to tell you."

She sighed, but nodded. "Fine, but you better promise."

I smiled softly. "I promise, 'Mione. I promise."

The first three weeks of term time were just as exhausting for me. Zab had me practising my magic without holding my wand more often than not, which always left me drained to the point of collapse each night. After three solid weeks of this sort of training, I was almost desperate for a break. After all, I was supposed to be learning from the Auror syllabus, and casting spells through a *remote* wand certainly wasn't taught at the Auror academy.

Mind you, the more I practised, the more powerful spells I could cast from a distance. I even managed to summon myself (from a metre or so, not way across the room) to my wand. Now *that* was an experience. Apparently, Newton's laws don't apply to summoning spells.

When Hermione told me that the first Hogsmeade weekend had been brought forward, I would have jumped for joy, if I wasn't lying flat on my back. I'll have to give Zab credit here. He had a moody, angry teen dumped on him, and he managed to keep me out of trouble with little effort on his part.

His not so subtle tactic was, obviously, to have me completely exhausted at the end of each day.

As much as I found it almost impossible to keep up with the demanding workload, sleeping for twelve dreamless hours each night was the best gift anyone could have given me.

The night before the Hogsmeade weekend, Zab warned me that I would most likely be under near constant surveillance for my entire time I was in the town, and to be doubly sure there were no tracking charms placed on my clothes or person before returning to Zabini Manor.

I woke on the long awaited Saturday, my entire body screaming at me to let it sleep a while longer. I gave in to the temptation.

I woke again, a few hours later. Blearily, I glanced at the clock on my wall, and a surge of panic washed any trace of fatigue from my mind.

"Oh, *bugger* ! I've got twenty minutes!"

Twenty-two minutes later, I emerged through the fire at the Hog's Head tavern in Hogsmeade, my hair messier than usual, my stomach growling at my lack of attention, and (I noticed as I looked down at my recalcitrant tummy) the buttons on my sweater in the wrong holes. The same, disreputable barman was sitting in the same spot and, for all I knew, was polishing the same glass as the last time I saw him.

The place was empty, except for two other patrons. I selected a large table at the rear of the building, put my backpack down on the chair next to me, sat down, fixed my buttons, and began to wait. The table was at the back of the common room, allowing me to watch the entire place, but not have anyone behind me.

I picked at my fingernails nervously, absently kicking the already well-scuffed table leg. The Hog's Head barman barely registered my presence, simply sitting at one end of the bar in deep conversation with two tavern regulars.

The door finally creaked open and several figures entered. It took me a second to register that they were wearing Hogwarts robes, but the members of the Ministry Crew were instantly recognisable. Susan Bones was with them, her hand firmly gripping Ron's. Ron, in the lead, scanned the room, his face splitting into a massive grin as he noticed me.

Neville said something to him, and made his way over to the bar while the remaining four joined me at my table. "Nice to see you all again. You especially, Luna. I missed you at my party."

Luna gave me a dreamy smile, her trademark wand-behind-her-ear look still firmly in place. "It's good to see you too, Harry."

The rest of the crew exchanged greetings with me, Hermione giving me a brief but tight hug, Ron a rough one. Neville finally sat down too, carrying three butterbeers by the bottle necks in each hand and one under his arm. "Hiya, Harry."

"Neville," I replied with a nod, accepting one of the bottles. I ran my eye over him, noting a new

addition to his wardrobe. "Um, why are you wearing a prefect pin?"

"Ron had his prefectship revoked," Hermione said darkly, glaring at him.

I raised an eyebrow. "I'm guessing your mother doesn't know, you've still got your eardrums intact."

A small flicker of dread passed behind Ron's eyes, but he covered it well. "She'll probably find out sometime this weekend. Probably at an Order meeting. We'll have to think up something to explain it away," he finished, grinning at Susan.

Ginny snorted into her Butterbeer. "Good luck."

Ron gave her a sour look. "No thanks to you. If you remember, I had to bribe you not to tell Mum."

I chuckled at the siblings' banter. "You realise that if she finds out from someone other than you, you'll have to commit hari-kari."

Hermione coughed. "It's hara-kiri, Harry."

I blinked, then frowned. "Are you quite sure?"

She nodded. "Yes. It comes from—"

I held up a hand to stop her before she launched into a long winded description of the history of Japanese suicide. "I believe you, I just always thought it was hari-kari."

Ron's frown looked most amusing. "What the hell is hari-kari?"

"Hara-kiri, Ronald," corrected Luna.

"Whatever! What is it?"

"I've no idea," the blond Ravenclaw replied.

Hermione took a deep breath, but Ron leaned over and pinched her lips together gently with his fingertips. "Someone *other* than Hermione?"

Hermione's eyes crossed amusingly to look down at Ron's fingers, then widened with anger as she shifted her focus to his face, but I managed to keep my composure enough to answer Ron before she exploded. "Japanese suicide, Ron. You cut open your stomach with a special dagger."

Susan winced. Ron blinked and let go of Hermione's mouth. "Ouch. Sorry, 'Mione."

I coughed softly. "Um, Ron? What did you do?" I asked, hoping against hope that Hermione would be distracted enough not to hex him on the spot.

Ron shrugged and took a sip of his drink, apparently nonplussed. "Malfoy."

"Malfoy what?"

Ron grinned at me. "Malfoy has been running off his mouth ever since we got back to school. He's telling everyone that you were scared. That you were too frightened to come back to Hogwarts."

"And you hit him?"

Hermione grumbled. "And everything else."

Ron gave her a satisfied smile, while Susan buried herself deeper under his arm. "It was a good piece of magic, you have to admit," she said in defense of her (I assumed) boyfriend.

"Neville's was better," Luna injected, dreamily.

I cleared my throat, though Neville blushed. "Would one of you mind telling me what actually happened?"

Ron refused to let anyone steal his thunder. "Malfoy cornered Hermione in the potions classroom and tried to hex her. Even though she was the only Gryffindor in the class, nearly all of the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students taking NEWT level potions were members of the DA last year. There was a full scale magical battle in the dungeon lab, Slytherin against the rest."

"Which you must have missed, not being in that class," I reminded him, but not able to keep a smile from my face.

Ron grinned back. "Sure, but later, when I was visiting Dumbledore's office, I was just in time to hear Snape get threatened with the sack."

"Come again?"

Ron's grin was so wide it threatened to show whether or not his wisdom teeth had come through. "Dumbledore was giving Snape the riot act."

"*Reading* the riot act, Ron," corrected Hermione, rolling her eyes, her tone exasperated.

"Thanks, 'Mione. *Reading* the riot act," Ron agreed absently. "Full out told him that if he couldn't control the Slytherins, then he'd be replaced. Both as head of house and as Potions Master."

I snorted in disbelief. "Yeah right. Like he'd even threaten that. The old bastard brought the greasy bastard to Hermione's place on my birthday to try and get into my mind."

Hermione glanced from me to Ron and back. "Um, Harry? The Headmaster didn't bring Professor Snape to my party. He arrived afterwards."

I frowned. "What? But he said..." I mumbled, trailing off as I thought about the mirror

conversation I had with Dumbledore.

"He said what?" asked Ginny, her features alive with curiosity.

"He said he brought him," I whispered absently to myself. No. No he didn't. He said that he was worried that if he admitted to bringing Snape to my party I'd end the conversation. Not that he *did* bring him.

An unwelcome sensation washed over my stomach. He was testing me. He was testing the waters. When I asked why he brought Snape, he said he preferred not to answer. I wouldn't have believed him if he denied bringing Snape, even though it was the truth.

"Oh, bugger," I said out loud.

"What?" asked Ron, echoing the question on everyone's faces.

I shook my head. "I made a mistake. I was so angry with Dumbledore that I made assumptions that were wrong."

Luna looked vaguely interested, which was odd in itself. "What assumptions did you make?"

"That he brought Snape to my party for starters. I-, he's been lying to me for so long that I wasn't prepared to believe anything he said."

Ron perked up a bit. "Was that the conversation where you told him you would only trust him when he was dead?"

The others around the table coughed into their drinks or gasped in shock; I just nodded morosely. "Yeah. I, ah, I need to think about this." I looked up and around at my friends and forced a smile onto my face. "But not right now, what did Snape say back? When he was threatened with the sack, I mean?"

Ron looked into my eyes for a few seconds before responding. "The usual. He denied that it was his student's fault, that Malfoy was the victim. Dumbledore pointed out that it had been nearly three centuries since the last classroom battle between students of different houses, and that every time Malfoy has been in the hospital wing it has either been because he was faking it, ala Buckbeak, or because the victim of his taunts put him there."

I snorted, trying to inject something other than forced humour into the conversation again. "Not to mention the last two trips home on the Hogwarts Express."

"Exactly! You know, even though he is an inbred idiot, you'd think that even he would be able to pick up that he is outgunned by now."

I tilted my head to one side. "Why were you in Dumbledore's office in the first place?"

Hermione and Ron exchanged wary glances. "Dumbledore has been asking each of us about you.

About your letters, your use of the mirror, everything," Ron said blandly. He suddenly grunted with a wince, and leaned over to his side and grabbed his shin under the table.

"We agreed not to tell him!" Hermione hissed, giving Ron a pointed glare.

Ron shook his head. "No, *you* thought it was a good idea not to tell him, I just didn't disagree at the time because I didn't want an argument," he retorted, giving her an aggrieved stare.

Ron turned back to me, ignoring Hermione's look of shock. "Anyway, I stuck my head in the door and asked Dumbledore if he wanted me to come back later for our meeting."

"I can't imagine Snape was too impressed."

Ron shrugged. "Yeah well, he can't do anything about it. I'm not in any of his classes, and I always carry the map around, so I keep out of his way."

"You gave him the map?" Hermione blurted at me, her eyes wide.

I frowned. "It's not like it was any use to me! What was I *supposed* to do with it?"

"Well, you could have given it to me!"

"I gave you the mirror. Anyway, I thought that you'd share with each other!"

Ron snorted. "When? I'm in less than half of her classes, and she's studying more this year than last."

"Well, if you want to fail your NEWTs, go right ahead and waste time now," Hermione shot back.

I noticed the door open and another, rather familiar figure entered. I elbowed Neville gently to get his attention, and to distract everyone else. "Since I'm not around anymore, it's up to you to keep these two from killing each other."

Neville smiled back. "What makes you think I'm that suicidal?" Ginny rolled her eyes at us.

"Anyway!" Ron said in a raised voice, trying to regain everyone's attention. "Dumbledore told me to supervise the detentions *he* gave to the Slytherins. Snape shouted that it was his responsibility, but Dumbledore yelled back that it was Snape's responsibility to manage the detentions he gave to the others. I got to take care of a bunch of whining losers, including those in the hospital wing who still hadn't woken up."

"Wait," I said, slightly confused. "Did Snape only give detentions to the other houses? Even after a full scale battle?"

Hermione nodded, looking angry, but curiously satisfied as well. "Of course. The fight didn't go well for the Slytherins." Her expression darkened momentarily. "Except for Blaise."

"Ah," I said, "I told you she was good." The figure who entered threw back the hood of her cloak, revealing Blaise herself, a smirk on her face. She winked at me, though I didn't let it register on my face.

Hermione shook her head. "She stayed out of it, smirking at us all. A couple of the DA tried to stun her anyway, but she deflected their spells easily," she said darkly, obviously annoyed to report this. "With that one exception, the DA pretty much wiped the floor with them." Hermione perked up at a specific memory. "I jinxed Pansy pretty well. She's still walking with a limp, and Madam Pomfrey hasn't been able to get her teeth to remain attached to her gums yet." Hermione gave a satisfied sigh. "She can't eat anything but soup and mashed food."

A vindictive Hermione? This was different. "What happened to the others? From the DA, I mean." Blaise silently sat down at a nearby table, listening in to our conversation. I was glad of the fact that the story being told was amusing, I'm pretty sure I couldn't have kept a smile off my face.

Hermione shrugged. "I only had to remove a bat-bogey hex from Lisa Turpin and cast an enervation spell on Terry. The rest easily defended themselves against the Slytherins, and blew them away with the counter attacks. Remember that the Slytherins didn't have much in the way of practise last year during DADA."

"Too bad for them!" I said.

Ron grinned at me. "Yeah, the DA members really miss you, by the way. Anyway, Snape gave everyone still standing except Blaise a week of detention, and let his Slytherins off without even a slap on the wrist. Dumbledore stepped in behind his back and gave them identical punishments that Snape gave out."

"And you got to supervise the Slytherins at their detentions?" I asked Ron, absolutely flabbergasted.

"Yep. Malfoy wasn't too pleased either." Ron held up a hand in front of Hermione's face. "And yes, Hermione, I was completely professional, no matter what you heard. I didn't give into temptation at all." He turned back to me. "Blaise thought the whole thing was funny. Malfoy and Pansy were almost hissing when I pointed out when they'd missed a spot, and that they had to clean it again."

Blaise's shoulders were shaking. "What were they cleaning?"

Ron grinned. "Toilets. Blaise got into the spirit too, helping me out."

What do you mean?"

Ron grinned. "She started pointing out how bad they were doing too. You know, for a Slytherin, she's alright."

"Then how did you lose your prefect pin?" I asked in a desperate attempt to change the topic, since

Hermione's expression was getting steadily darker throughout Ron's description of my Slytherin friend. Blaise herself looked a little shocked at Ron's thoughtful comment.

Ron smirked at me. "Malfoy and his goons attacked me the day before yesterday. Revenge, I s'pose, for making them actually work during a detention."

I looked Ron up and down, noting that he didn't appear to be carrying any injuries, and that he looked to be quite pleased with himself. "Things didn't go well for the ferret then, I take it?"

Neville gave an uncharacteristic snort. "Nope."

I blinked at him. "You were there too?"

Neville nodded. "Malfoy cast a curse at Ron from behind, but he heard it being cast. He did some ducking and weaving to dodge the spell, turned, and then he punched Malfoy so hard he broke the git's jaw." Neville smiled with unfocused eyes, obviously enjoying the memory by rerunning it past his mind's eye. "Goyle leapt at Ron, who just levitated Malfoy into his path. He cast a couple of leg-locking jinxes at them, and since their legs were tangled to start with, it stuck them together like glue on a couple of combs. Then Ron cast a banishing spell at them both, hurling them through a classroom door. Oh, he also covered them with some sort of slippery stuff. They couldn't stand up or hold onto anything to keep their balance. They kept falling onto each other." Neville blushed slightly. "A bit like the mud wrestling that you suggested at your party. Crabbe, on the other hand, tried to grab me in a headlock." Here, Neville's expression turned exasperated, and he started waving one arm wildly. "Why is it always a headlock? After what happened in Umbridge's office last year, I figured out what I could do though. I stuck my wand in his ear and cast a Sonorous charm."

"Neville! You ruined it for me!" Ron wailed.

"Oh, Ron, you were taking too long to tell the story," Ginny moaned.

I coughed. "Sorry, did you say that you cast a Sonorous charm into that gargoyle's *ear*?"

Neville nodded with a big smile on his face. "He ran around clutching the sides of his head, trying to squeal *really, really quietly*. From what Blaise told us afterwards, his heart beat was magnified about a thousand times in his ears."

"Ooo, nasty," I said, nodding appreciatively. Blaise nodded her head too, silently agreeing with me.

Luna finally entered the conversation, her dreamy expression still in place. "I imagine it was quite like a Chinese water torture, without the water."

Ron blinked and gave her a blank look. "Um. Yeah. Right." He turned back to me. "Anyway, the classroom I tossed Malfoy and his goon into was one McGonagall had a class in at the time. She went ballistic at me, and stripped me of my prefect pin."

I laughed out loud, with Ron, Neville and Ginny joining in. Hermione and Luna looked on with expressions of disapproval and serenity respectively.

"I told you that you would be able to get away with things that would normally get you banned from Hogsmeade weekends," Blaise said from the next table, once our laughter had quietened down.

Each of the Ministry Crew jumped to various degrees. Ron's reaction was the most vocal, Neville's was the most physical, and Luna's was the most intriguing. Hermione noticed my own lack of reaction and punched me in the arm. "You knew she was there!"

I nodded as Neville picked himself up off the floor and Luna pulled her head back through the neck of her jumper. "Of course. I thought she'd join you before you got here, but failing that, she'd follow you."

Blaise poked her tongue out at me, rose from her chair and dragged it over to our table. "Don't go thinking you can predict my actions, Potter."

Surprisingly, it was Ron who shifted over to allow Blaise space to sit. Both Hermione and Susan were guarded, for similar reasons, I suppose. Ginny and Neville were cautiously curious while Luna was her usual vague self. I certainly hadn't expected Ron to be the first of my friends to accept Blaise into the group.

She sat down between Ron and Neville. "Oh, and I thought I'd better give you some news. Malfoy is hunting for you. He's sure you'll appear in Hogsmeade this weekend."

I rolled my eyes. "That's not news, that's olds," I replied. "And I've been thinking on how to deal with him. Another round?" I asked the group, draining the last of my butterbeer. A chorus of nods answered me, and I rose to get the drinks. Passing Blaise, I put my hand on her slim shoulder and squeezed gently. "Thanks for coming, it's good to see you again."

She smiled up at me, but turned back to Ron. "What else did you get away with?"

The bartender gave me a long look, his eyes flicking up to my scar, before grabbing eight butterbeers from under the bar. He passed them to me and swept my coins from the bar top, depositing a handful of Knuts change. I put them in my money pouch, grabbed the drinks and returned to the table. "How's things at what was formerly known as the Ministry?" I asked.

Most of them silently accepted their drinks, but Ron refused to be quiet. "Ha! Fudge came around to the Burrow after your little rant in the paper, when Dumbledore was visiting. He and my parents were having a meeting when the little turd arrived."

"Ron!" gasped Hermione.

"What?"

"You can't call the Minister that!"

"Why not?" I injected. "He is short, so calling him 'little' isn't going to get him sued for slander."

Neville snorted into his butterbeer, while the other girls laughed out loud. Ron just grinned at me, and continued. "He was ranting and raving, shouting, 'How could he do this, Albus?' and 'They're being awarded with the Order of Merlin!'"

"Are we?" I asked Hermione.

She shook her head. "We were, but it takes a Ministry committee to consider our actions before they formally award them. Since the Ministry is in the middle of a shake up..."

Ron's grin got wider. "Believe it or not, Dumbledore actually took your side."

I frowned. "He did? What did he say?"

Ginny pipped up, mimicking Dumbledore's voice quite well. "You have brought this upon yourself, Cornelius! Had you not attempted to destroy his character, he may have proven more forgiving."

Ron gave Ginny a mock glare. "The argument went on for a while. Fudge said that you'd been forgiven, Dumbledore said that you obviously hadn't accepted it, and more to the point, that you obviously hadn't forgiven Fudge. Fudge said that you had to be contacted immediately in order to publicly recant, but Dumbledore said that was impossible, he didn't know where you were and that owls were coming back. Fudge accused Dumbledore of wanting to destabilise the Ministry, and Dumbledore rolled his eyes and said, 'Wonderful, we are back to square one again.'"

I laughed out loud, probably causing the other three occupants of the building to pay attention to us, but I didn't care. It appeared that Fudge hadn't learned his lesson, and that he was still in his usual hard-wired state in which he believed that anything bad was caused by a conspiracy.

"How's you Dad going?" I asked Ginny, hoping things weren't difficult for the financially strapped family.

Ginny gave Ron a look and lowered her eyes down to her butterbeer. "He's had offers from a lot of people to tell his story. The Lone Ministry Holdout, The Man With Honour. But he's turned them all down. Dad's not really into the whole fame thing."

I frowned at her evasive answer. "I assume something else is wrong then?" I said, noting that she wasn't particularly happy.

Ron shook his head, his smile gone. "He's involved in trying to prove the Ministry is still trustworthy. Since he was the only Department Head who spoke out against Fudge, he's being pulled in all sorts of directions by people who have different agendas. He's not used to the sort of power he has now."

I glanced between the two Weasley siblings, a mounting feeling of dread accumulating. "But things aren't going well, are they?"

Ginny shook her head. "He hasn't been paid in a month. Ever since you threw your hissy fit in the paper."

"Ginny!" snapped Ron. "It's not his fault! I'd have done the same in his shoes."

Gin again looked down, seemingly embarrassed. "Well, hardly any of the top Ministry people have been paid in a while. There's a theory running around that Fudge stopped all the high level pay, and is skimming money off other budgets and making payments under the table, but only to those who are loyal to him. It's in a effort to get all the disloyal people out of the way before the vote of no confidence can be held."

"Merlin, no! How are your parents coping?" I asked, dreading the answer. "Do they need help? I'd be happy to--"

Surprisingly, Ron smiled. "Forget about it mate. Most businesses are willing to take Dad's note, given he stood up to Fudge before your rant got published, and that the Ministry owes him. When he eventually gets paid what he is owed, he can pay them off. Anyway, Fred and George are helping out in the mean time, enough so that Ginny and I were able to buy new books and school equipment this year! Let me say that their shop is booming! I overheard them talking about opening a new one in Hogsmeade." He smiled at me. "Don't sweat it, Mum and Dad are fine. Well, except for the fact that Mum can't yell at the twins anymore for leaving Hogwarts to start their own shop."

Despite Ron's assurances, the guilty feeling didn't leave me. "What about the other Ministry workers? The ones without family members with successful shops? I didn't think this would happen!"

Ginny shrugged, looking too pleased for someone whose family was in financial chaos. "Most of the others that I know are handling it quite well. The goblins are extending credit for those who are publicly against Fudge, and Hogwarts itself waived the fees for students of parents who work for the Ministry. About the only family I know that is in trouble is Marrietta's."

I blinked. "The sneak?"

Ginny grinned viciously. "Yep. It's common knowledge that Marrietta betrayed you to Umbridge, and since Umbridge sent the dementors after you, a lot of people are blaming Marrietta's family for the trouble you've had. Few stores are giving them credit, and her mother is high enough in the Ministry to have her pay stopped, but not important to get hand outs from Fudge."

Hermione nodded firmly, apparently pleased too. "She came back to school with her acne still faintly in place. She hasn't been able to get rid of it completely yet. It's lasting longer than I expected."

"Well, she did put her name down willingly on the sheet, didn't she."

Hermione nodded. "You're probably right."

Ron turned from me to Hermione and back again. "Right about what?"

I grinned at him. "The fact that may well be her own magic that is maintaining the jinx. Until she comes to terms with what she did, she'll keep getting spots in that shape."

Susan frowned. "Couldn't one of the teachers fix it? Professor Flitwick should be able to get rid of something like that in seconds."

I smiled at the thought that occurred to me. "Probably. Umbridge was stuck with Fred and George's swamps, but Professor Flitwick managed to get rid of them in a second. But I wouldn't put it past the teachers to leave the magic in place, just to teach her a lesson. Remember, Umbridge undermined them too last year."

We left the Hog's Head, and made our way into Hogsmeade proper. Dozens of familiar faces called out to me in welcome, and I responded in kind. Despite being at least indirectly responsible for a fair number of student's parent's financial difficulties, I was greeted by all. I decided that meant that none of the newspapers were writing about me in derogatory terms.

A fair few of the DA joined us as we sat in one of the small parks, enjoying the gentle sunshine. A sudden stiffening in the posture of some of the Slytherin students in the group indicated the proximity of a certain ferret. Malfoy's obnoxious laughter could be heard over the local conversations, meaning he was definitely nearby. With a grin, I whispered in Ron's ear for a minute. He grinned as evilly as I'd ever seen, nodded, grabbed my bag and slipped away, disengaging himself from Susan's embrace.

A group of Slytherins, Malfoy in the lead, rounded a corner up ahead. The group was tossing a small doll between them, one of the Slytherins would occasionally punch it before tossing it to a friend.

Malfoy stopped in his tracks as soon as he saw me. A massive grin spread over his face. "Well, well, lads. Would you look at who decided to come out from his cupboard. It must have been smelly in there, since he has been shitting his pants for months now."

Crabbe, Goyle and the rest of Malfoy's posse burst into laughter, right on cue. I rolled my eyes, ignoring the muttering that was coming from my own group.

"Tell me something, Malfoy. When was the last time you didn't need someone to help you off the Hogwarts Express?" Hermione challenged.

"Yeah, did those slime stains ever come out?" jeered Ginny.

A dark expression flickered across Malfoy's face, but it was gone soon enough. "You caught me unawares, that's all."

I burst into laughter, along with a great many of my friends. "Malfoy, you were looking to catch *me* unawares. For someone so incompetent, I'm amazed your father even thinks you'd make a good

Death Eater." I tilted my head to one side. "Let alone a *long-lived* Death Eater, considering how the Dark Wanker deals with those who fail him."

Malfoy whipped out his wand and began to scream an unintelligible curse, but Ron was quicker, since he didn't have to think about what he was going to do.

From under my invisibility cloak and from behind Malfoy's two walking behemoths, he cast "*silencio* ," stopping the unusual curse in its tracks. Unable to complete the incantation, Malfoy's face reddened even further, putting him in danger of setting his hair on fire.

"Tut, tut, Malfoy. What on earth would Snape say? A Slytherin prefect, cursing someone while on a Hogsmeade weekend? In front of witnesses too! And *losing* , heaven forbid! Dear oh dear, if a complaint was made, well, he'd have no choice but to ban you from leaving Hogwarts in future. Oh, I suppose you could appeal to your father the governor. Oh wait, no you can't! He's in prison!" I taunted, giving Ron time to get away.

Malfoy snarled silently, glanced at Crabbe, and jerked his head in my direction. The hulking moron took two steps forward, before stopping and blinking in surprise. I glanced from side to side, and guessed there were in excess of twenty wands pointing towards him. The Slytherin group also drew their wands, which resulted in the rest of *my* group drawing their own.

"Isn't it interesting how Malfoy has been the catalyst for both recent magical battles between student groups?" I asked, stepping out in between the bristling battle lines. "Is he really worth it? Everyone in the potions lab got a week of detention because the little haemorrhoid couldn't control himself. Fighting out here could have far more imposing repercussions."

Slowly, one by one, the wands on both sides disappeared. Malfoy was glaring at me without bothering to conceal his hate. I sent him a smirk, designed to infuriate him into agreeing to anything just to salve his pride.

"What say you, Malfoy?" I asked, as a seventh year Slytherin had the presence of mind to remove the silencing charm. "Just the two of us, mano-en-mano. No one else, friend or house mate. No one else to get in trouble. No one else to break it up. We can finally find out just who is better."

He hesitated, something that was immediately noticed by both my friends and his housemates. A chorus of jeers erupted from behind me, and more than a few Slytherins behind Malfoy looked curious as to why he hadn't immediately accepted.

I held one hand up, and the group behind me quietened down. "He didn't agree because he knows that I'll beat him. He knows he doesn't have a chance."

"I could wipe my shoes on you, Potter!" he snarled.

I nodded, surprising him. "Of course you could." I waited until the gasps of shock from behind and the sniggers in front of me finished. "Of course, I'd have to be unconscious at the time, and since you don't have the skill to do that yourself..."

"When the Dark Lord catches you, he's going to make you squeal, just like your mudblood mother," Malfoy said, his voice trembling with hatred, and probably a touch of fear.

I buried the flash of anger. "At least I have a mother, Malfoy. You were produced when your father had a particularly pungent bowel movement," I said, to a bigger laugh from the crowd.

To say Draco's face coloured would be an understatement. He went from his usual pasty white to an ugly (well, *uglier*), splotchy purple. The air around him felt heavy, something I quickly recognised. It would appear that Malfoy was having some emotional trouble of his own.

With his anger fuelling his own magic, this could be an interesting confrontation.

"Fine!" he snapped, shrugging off his outer robes. "I'll kill you!"

"Get back!" I snapped myself, sending people from both sides scurrying away, leaving us in the middle of a clear, grassy area. "Clear the area behind me," I finished, and the gathering crowd bulged at our sides.

"You're dead, Potter," promised Malfoy.

I yawned. "If you could fight half as well as you can talk, you'd be ruling the world by now, idiot."

With a shriek of rage, he started hurling curses at me. Curses enhanced with his rage. Curses that sure as hell aren't on the Hogwarts' syllabus. Some of them he was tossing in my direction were capable of crippling me. Permanently.

Since I knew just how strong spells were when powered by powerful emotions, I did as little as possible to dodge Malfoy's efforts. Stopping them point blank with a shield charm would drain my energy too quickly, whereas gently guiding spells away behind me had the dual benefit of taking little effort and making Malfoy look incompetent. The fury etched into Malfoy's face reminded me of muggle cricket fast bowlers who have just had their best efforts casually nudged behind to the boundary.

Malfoy was obviously pissed off far more than I expected. The raw strength of the spells he was hurling at me meant that it took a great deal more effort than usual just to deflect them. Despite the power he was exhibiting, I quickly discerned a rhythm in his casting; one which allowed me some time to provoke Malfoy even further.

In one gap where he took a breath, I theatrically raised my left hand and glanced at my watch. Several titters in the ever-growing crowd followed my action, which, as planned, only raised Malfoy to even loftier heights of spluttering ire.

Despite his disintegrating wits, he didn't cast *Serpensortia* , which dismayed me a little. The restraining spells he tossed at me were dealt with easily, they had been one of the major topics of study in the DA. The hexes and jinxes were likewise countered, before their effects came to pass. It was the dangerous curses that I saved all my attention for.

Once Malfoy's aura began to weaken, I slowly advanced on him, causing more than a few cries of alarm in the ever-growing crowd. Not willing to be driven backward without my having cast a spell at him, Malfoy dug his heels in and continued to fire off spell after spell, weakening more each time. My plan required me to be close enough not to miss my target, or someone could get very hurt. Someone other than Malfoy, that is.

Once I was close enough to do what I had in mind, I waited for Malfoy to take a breath before shouting, "*Everto veneficus!* "

The ferret's wand, already overloaded with magic from the last few minutes, should have crackled and spat before fizzing out and dying like a spent muggle firework. Instead, it shrieked like a tree in a cyclone, then exploded with the force of a live muggle firework on Guy Fawkes Night. Splinters of mahogany rained down around the pair of us, while Malfoy looked down in shock at the remains of his hand.

'Remains' was a good word, very descriptive in this case. Not a single finger remained intact on Malfoy's right hand, and most of his palm had been shredded off the end of his arm in the explosion. His thumb hung loosely, like a flap of skin that had been peeled away. About ten centimetres of his forearm was blackened below the wrist, some of the soot now being washed away by the blood running down, dripping off his elbow.

With a forlorn shriek, Malfoy clutched at his destroyed right hand with his left, and collapsed on the grass.

I managed to keep the sudden sensation of horror I felt off my features by looking down at my own wand. "Whoops."

Apprentice Potter Explanations

Explanations

The cheers and jeers generated by the crowd during our duel silenced as soon as Malfoy's hand was blown off. The only sounds in the clearing were the ferret's faint sobs and the sound of the few remaining mahogany wand splinters falling to the ground. In a sort of daze, I walked over to where Malfoy lay, whimpering and barely conscious, and crouched down beside him. Blood was running freely from the stump of his wrist.

With a quick tear, I ripped a piece of cloth from Draco's robes and tied it tightly around his forearm as a tourniquet. The blood loss slowed to a trickle.

"Um, Harry? What-?" asked Hermione, sounding very distant, and probably ready to faint.

I held up a hand. "Later. Actually, Blaise? 'Mione? Would the two of you mind taking Draco here to Madam Pomfrey? The sooner the better, I'd say." I looked up at the group of Slytherin students who arrived at the park with Malfoy. "She'll be able to repair his hand if you get him there quickly enough," I said confidently, sounding much surer than I was. I felt a sort of dual hope that he could both be fixed and that he couldn't be. "I'd take him myself, but I'd like to have a chat with his friends. Before they bugger off."

At my soothing words, the crowd let out its collective breath and began babbling amongst itself. Most discussions centred on miming an exploding hand, complete with sound effects. Blaise and Hermione shot each other a look. Hermione was about to complain, but a single smirk from Blaise both closed her mouth and set her determination. The pair nodded, and after a few seconds of first aid to staunch the blood flow further, they picked him up and half-led, half-dragged him away. Well, quarter-led, three-quarters-dragged him away at any rate, through an accommodating gap in the crowd.

"You know, I'm beginning to realise just why Snape is the bastard he is," I said absently, watching them go.

I turned to the crowd, noting that most of the younger students were still silent in shock after the events of the duel. "Ever since I arrived at Hogwarts, Snape has blatantly favoured his own house. He's ignored their rule-breaking, fed their indulgences, protected them from the consequences of their actions, pampered them all throughout their anti-social behaviour, and for the most part has

assisted in making Slytherins pretty much universally hated throughout the school."

I looked over at the large group which had accompanied Malfoy. "And now I know why he does it. He is basically sacrificing you to Voldemort so that Dumbledore can win."

A few questioning sounds spread through the crowd, but I shouted them down. "Think about it!" I said loudly, gesturing towards the pathetic figure being helped away between two witches. "*That* ... is a Malfoy. A family that has always been associated with Dark Magic, a family Voldemort sees as one of his most faithful. Ever since the Dark Lord returned, Draco has been taunting my friends and I, claiming that when Voldemort takes over, we'll all be killed." I looked down at my feet, shook my head and snorted. "Well, if this is the best of the next generation of Death Eaters, then we sure as hell don't have anything to worry about. Snape has got these idiots believing that they are invulnerable; that they are invincible. Yet they continually need to hide behind his skirts."

There were a few muffled laughs, probably from those who were in Remus' class when he showed us the boggart. The image of Snape in Neville's grandmother's clothes could still bring a smile to my lips. "Well, Voldemort doesn't take to failure kindly. He left eleven of his Death Eaters to be captured by the Ministry because they failed him. If the Dark Lord is forced to rely on the current crop of Death Eater progeny, then there is simply no way he will achieve his goals, simply because he will be left with the crappiest bunch of henchmen in the entire history of goonery."

The laughs were louder this time, but shorter, as a great many people in the crowd had the humour they found in the situation overtaken, frowned and began to think on what I'd just said. "Just imagine the scene!" I called out, my voice gently building in volume. "Voldemort tells Draco to go and kill some muggle-born witch, say, oh, Hermione Granger. So far, every time he's confronted her at school, either Snape has saved his arse from a good hexing or he's run away after she slugged him one. So Draco, while dressed all in black with a white mask, confronts 'Mione and guess what? *She doesn't run away!* " I exclaimed with a false tone of surprise in my voice. I even held my fingers up to my mouth to emphasise the point. "Even worse, she *fights back!* "

The laughter grew. "As a matter of fact, she blocks his spells as easily as I've done here, and then curses him all the way back to Voldemort's lair. What does this prince of cunning, this, this paragon of blood-purity do?" I began prancing around in an effeminate manner, waving my arms around. "Master, please! Sa-aaa-aave me! She's got a *wa-aaa-aaand !*"

Some applause accompanied the laughter this time. I stopped prancing and waited until it subsided. "Snape has been carefully preparing those most likely to join the Dark Lord to be complete and utter failures. Crabbe and Goyle here need hourly instructions on not forgetting to breathe. Pansy still can't work out how to reverse a hex cast on her, and Malfoy's ego has been so pampered that he can't believe anyone would actually fight back in a duel. Although, after seeing their parents in action, I'm not really sure Snape's efforts were really necessary." I grinned at Ron, who was standing between Luna and Susan. "Ron? How many Death Eaters attacked us at the Department of Mysteries?"

He laughed. "Twelve!"

"How many of us were there?"

"Six."

"How many of us did they manage to kill?" I finished, throwing my arms out wide.

"NONE!" came the response, from more than one person in the crowd. There were a few smatterings of people shouting 'ZERO', but they quickly shut up after getting a few odd looks from the rest. You just can't get a good mob chant going when there are options in their responses.

"Yes! So exactly what are people afraid of them for?" I called out, drawing attention back to myself. "I've faced Voldemort a half a dozen times! He's so incompetent that he gave up on trying to kill me directly, and tried to get his follower's to do it for him."

I spun round to face the Slytherin contingent, who were shuffling and mumbling to themselves. In the group I could see at least six sons and daughters of the Death Eaters who were present at Voldemort's rebirth. "An entire dozen of those pure-blood wizards and witches. Supposedly the cream of the wizarding world. The pinnacle of what it means to be a witch or wizard. Yet not one of them was competent enough to kill even one of us. And you want to know what is the really ironic thing?" I asked as I walked up to the group. "Well? Do you want to know something about Voldemort that he's tried desperately to keep secret?"

I was almost nose-to-nose with Goyle, who stepped backwards to keep some distance between us. "Voldemort is a half-blood."

The laughter, applause and chatter ceased. I looked around at the shocked faces, a massive grin on my face. "You don't believe me? Voldemort went to Hogwarts fifty-odd years ago; as a student his name was Tom Riddle. His magical mother got pregnant to a muggle aristocrat, who wanted nothing to do with her. She died giving birth to Snake-face." I spun back and pointed towards the Slytherins, who were muttering and mumbling amongst themselves. "So the very man many of your families support, the man whose arse is wiped clean by your Death Eater parent's tongues, isn't even a pure-blood wizard."

"You're lying!" spat one Slytherin at the back of the group who found enough courage to stand up for his beliefs, so long as he could do it anonymously and from behind a big crowd.

I grinned at the group, probably looking quite insane, given the fact that I'd just ruined one of their number's ability to both hold pornography and wank at the same time. "Tom Marvolo Riddle. He was a Slytherin Prefect, and Head boy about fifty years ago. His name is an anagram for 'I am Lord Voldemort'. His wand was thirteen inches long, made of yew, with a phoenix feather core." My tone changed to be earnest and encouraging, not to mention patronising. "I tell you what. In the future, when Voldemort is casting the Cruciatus curse on you for failing whatever task he set, check out the wand he uses. The thirteen-inch yew wand with a phoenix feather core."

Most of the Slytherins were shuffling their feet. It was the best time for me to strike. I reached out and grabbed the front of Goyle's robes and pulled the much larger wizard's face down level with

mine.

"Do you remember the Sorting Hat's song from last year? We need to unite, not separate. What Draco seems to think is that means is that he needs to keep the houses apart to allow Voldemort to win. Well, how's this for a different translation? The Sorting Hat wants all the students to have the best chance of living, and so is telling the Slytherins to join up with the other houses, because that way, most of you will survive the coming war, since we will be the winning side!"

I heard a fair bit of scoffing at that, but also quite a bit of mumbled acceptance. Things like, 'He's got a point,' and 'I didn't think of that'. I only heard it, mind you, because my entire vision was made up by Goyle's, less than pleasant, visage. His expression was one of extreme nervousness. Or perhaps concentration, to keep himself from pissing his pants. "Blaise has already proved that you don't have to be the big bad boogey-men to get respect at school. She's been accepted by all the other houses, and has been welcomed into the DA. She's learning new things, and teaching too. Gryffindors are learning how to be subtle, Hufflepuffs to be ambitious and Ravenclaws to be devious. We are all stronger for her being there. Do you actually think a pissy little bunch of bigoted, inbred, mono-browed, mouth-breathing intellectual cripples can win a war?" I pushed Goyle backwards, and he stumbled back into the group who kept him on his feet.

"Voldemort is going down. He just doesn't have enough competent followers at the moment. The only things going for him are an incompetent governing body and fear." I turned away from the Slytherins and faced the crowd. While mostly students, it did have a fair smattering of Hogsmeade locals. "Fear. That's all. He doesn't have many followers, he doesn't have more magical power than those on our side. He doesn't even have more experience, since he's been living as a ghost for the last thirteen-odd years.

"If he appears in the village, gather into a group and attack him. Curse him, hex him, jinx him. I guarantee he'll be so surprised that you didn't immediately run away that a small group of you will be able to take him down. Don't wait for someone else to protect you! I didn't! Stand up to the bully, punch him in the nose as hard as you can, and he'll leave you alone."

I ranted and raved for a while, bemoaning the fact that the wizarding world just seemed to want to wait for someone to save them. I preached about how simple it was to fight back against the Death Eaters, so long as you overcame your fear at seeing them.

The main body of Slytherins were sort of wordlessly hemmed in by the rest of the crowd, not letting them slink away. Some forced their way out, and left in a huff, but far more than half actually stayed and listened to what I had to say. I suppose after watching our duel, it would be hard to believe in purity of blood made you a better wizard. Of course, they could have listened just so they would know how to debunk any points I made in future. They were Slytherins, after all.

The applause I received when I finished speaking was intense, but both short and sporadic; most people were too busy being deep in thought, hopefully re-evaluating their pre-conceived notions, though in all probability they were still thinking about how the duel ended. The crowd, which at its largest would have been close to five hundred people, slowly broke up and drifted away. A

fairly large group of Slytherin students cautiously made their way over to me, nervous at the looks they were getting from the DA members who took it upon themselves to stand behind me.

After a few seconds of hissed deliberation, a third year student was nominated spokeswizard, and cleared his throat. "Um, is it true you started a duelling club last year?"

I shook my head, and the group almost sagged. "We," I began, gesturing behind me, "started a club to practise the practical aspects of magical combat, not just duelling. We practised all sorts of spells, including a spell that can drive off a dementor. Last year we had about two dozen members." I turned back to face Ron. "How many are there this year?"

Neville coughed, attracting my attention. "Um, about eighty," he said, sounding embarrassed.

I blinked. "*Eighty?*"

Neville nodded. "All of the fifth, sixth and seventh year Gryffindors joined, and most of the upper class Hufflepuff and Ravenclaws too. Professor Wilkins told us to stop it, he wanted to be the sole judge of what we should learn, but that just made more people want to join."

A couple of months ago, I would have asked, "Is this Wilkins the new Defense Professor?", but Zab's reluctance to answer questions was making me hesitant to ask if I could work out the answer myself. I turned back to the Slytherin student. "Talk to Blaise about joining. I certainly don't have any authority now."

It was gratifying to note that only a couple of members of the DA vocally expressed surprise at my offer, but what surprised me was that Ron took them to task for it. "Hey? Didn't you just listen to him? We're stronger together than apart! Padma, you learned a spell from Blaise last week that tricked me in our last duel. You beat me for the first time! Now you don't want others to join?"

In the sudden silence I raised my eyebrows and gave him a sort of half smile, waiting for him to explain.

"Well?" he asked me, unabashed. "If Blaise decides to let them join, I've got no objections. I might even find a good chess player to have some games against," he finished, sticking his chin out.

My half smile turned into a full one. "Thanks, mate." If I could persuade Ron to set aside his prejudices, maybe I had a chance of opening the eyes of some of the Slytherins too. I turned back to the nervous speaker. "There you go. Speak to Blaise. The more people with different skills who join, the better everyone in the DA will be. You don't just join to learn. You join to teach too."

A few nods and mumbled "Thanks," signalled the end of the conversation, and the group drifted away. The student who spoke up bent over to pick something up off the ground, and ran back to me. "Um, Draco was using this," he said, holding out the doll the Slytherins were tossing around when they first arrived.

The doll was quite a good caricature of me. The oversize scar on the doll's forehead was scarlet, the glasses over its eyes were grotesquely thick. I chuckled at the baggy clothes it was dressed in; someone had gone to a lot of effort to make it accurate. I reached out, but hesitated before I touched it. I could feel a slight buzzing, a faint vibration. But the sensation wasn't physical in nature.

"Just a second," I said, drawing my wand. With a few quick passes and muttered phrases Zab taught me, the doll lit up, glowing a faint orange-brown. I gave the Slytherin a tight grin. "Malfoy was looking for me, wasn't he?"

The young wizard nodded, looking a little awed.

I turned back to Ron. "I think this helped him work out where I was. It has the same sort of enchantments as used by Messers. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs."

That cryptic statement brought a few questioning glances from most of the people still hanging around, but I ignored them. Since there weren't any curses on the doll, and that at least four different people had held it at some point before the duel that I had seen, I reached out and took it. It thrummed a little like my holly wand did whenever I picked it up. "Ah, it's charmed specifically to me." I glanced up at him. "What's your name?"

The Slytherin bit his lip, looking even more nervous. "Um, Nathaniel Brunel. Draco did seem to know where you were. He even drank a potion before we came round the corner."

A potion? Why would he drink a potion before coming around? Ugh, stupid question. If it gave him an edge, he'd have swallowed basilisk venom. I frowned in thought briefly before a slow smile spread over my features. "A darkish-red potion? With thick, purple froth?"

Nathaniel nodded, looking even more surprised. His eyebrows were probably about to enter orbit.

"That explains so much. Thanks, Nathaniel."

The Slytherin nodded, and bolted. I tossed the doll to Neville. "Dumbledore might be interested in this."

The new Gryffindor prefect turned it over in his hands. "How do you use it?"

I shrugged, but thought for a second. "Hit it."

"What?"

"Punch it," I clarified.

Neville's expression was one of confused acceptance, and he lightly punched the doll in the stomach. He blinked in surprise. "Uh, that was weird."

"What?" asked several members of the crowd in unison. Now why couldn't they have had that sort

of cooperation earlier?

"I, er, I sort of got the impression of what direction Harry was from me."

Susan looked from Neville to me, obviously not quite up to speed. "Why did you tell Neville to punch the doll?"

Luna spoke up. "Because that way, Draco could track Harry."

Ron punched me lightly on the arm. "Hey! What was the potion? How did you know what it was?"

I gave him a cheeky grin. "My Master and I are working to make a new potion. We've brewed a heap of *other* potions that have similar effects to try and work out how the new potion will react to modern ingredients. If Draco drank the one I think he did, then he came looking for a fight."

Ron frowned, Ginny punched me in the other arm, much, much harder than her brother. "You didn't answer!" she pointed out over my small yelp.

I chuckled softly, rubbing my left tricep. "Come on. Let's go to the Room of Requirements. I'll tell you there."

Once we'd left the main group behind in Hogsmeade, the walk back to Hogwarts was peaceful, even relaxing. Even though it had been an accident, shredding Malfoy's hand did send a few tingles of schadenfreude down my spine.

Ron was quite happily rambling on about Quidditch, complaining that having been made Captain, he had to do all sorts of paperwork. I had no idea that one of the House Quidditch Captain's duties was to liaise with McGonagall to make sure each team member's marks were not being affected by their time spent training.

I looked back at the other five in the group, making sure they were out of earshot, and lowered my voice so only Ron could hear me.

"That wasn't the only reason you wanted the Slytherins to join the DA, was it?"

Ron's expression was momentarily one of confusion, but he quickly caught up with the change in conversation topic. "Nope. You know how I've dreamt being all the different Death Eaters?" he asked, surreptitiously tapping his forearms.

I nodded.

"Well, they knew exactly how to manipulate us. You didn't see them when they went their separate ways, but in their minds, they could predict our reactions, well, my reactions anyway. You frustrated the hell out of them," he chuckled, a proud look on his face. "Anyway, Hermione told me how you knew Blaise was listening at the door at your party when you went to talk to her. I thought that it was really cool, even if it was sort of a Slytherin-ish thing. I thought about it for a while over the rest of the holidays, and figured that if you trusted Blaise, then I should too."

"What has she taught you so far? Was I right about what I said?"

Ron made a face and tilted his head from side to side. "Sort of. But it wasn't Blaise who taught me to be more sneaky."

"Really? Then who?"

He chuckled softly. "You, idiot."

"Huh?"

Ron shook his head. "I just told you I spent the rest of the holidays thinking about how you could read someone else's actions. Well, the night before we came back to Hogwarts Bill and Fleur came around to visit, and Bill challenged me to a game of chess. Normally when we play one game can take hours, but he was really keen for a game, and I thought he was probably going to be really aggressive. So instead of thinking about the best moves he could make, I assumed he would make attacking moves."

I raised my eyebrows at Ron's pause. "Well?"

"I beat him inside of ten minutes."

I sort of coughed and laughed at the same time. "He can't have been pleased with that!"

Ron shook his head, but had a massive grin. "Nope. So he challenged me again. That time, he was cold and calculating, determined not to make the same mistakes, so I thought about what sort of moves he'd make in *that* mood."

"And you beat him again?"

A nod. "In fifteen minutes."

"Nasty," I offered.

"The third game we had only lasted ten minutes too, and it frustrated the hell out of him. He seems to think that I'd suddenly become a Grandmaster."

"So you're OK with other Slytherins joining the DA?"

Ron shrugged. "So long as Blaise vouches for them, I don't have a problem. I even think it will be a good thing. Mind you, she and Susan are getting along really well. Too well. It's scary watching them giggle and then look over at me."

I couldn't help but laugh at that. "You and Susan are getting on all right then?"

He blushed slightly, but nodded. "Yeah. At your party I was sort of ready to watch all the girls trip over themselves to get your attention, like usual," he said, not unkindly. "But after what happened

at the Ministry got out, I'm famous for being something other than the Boy-Who-Lived's best friend. Susan wasn't the first to snog me at your party, but she told me she had a crush on me before all that stuff happened."

I nodded. "I'm happy for you, mate," I said as we approached the castle.

With the majority of the students over third-year in town, Hogwarts itself was very quiet. Even so, I had a specific destination in mind, and I didn't want to be interrupted.

"Ron? Have you got the map?"

"Er, not on me," he said, blushing. "Didn't think I'd need it in town."

I suppressed a little sigh of frustration, and shrugged. "No worries," I said as we entered the main doors. "I'd just have preferred to have it, you know, to avoid-"

"Who?" came an unwelcome voice from the shadows on one side of the hall.

This time, I did sigh. "You, idiot," I said, echoing Ron's words from earlier.

Snape emerged from the shadows, drifting like a dementor across the marble floor. "Members of the public are not permitted in Hogwarts without an escort, Potter," he snarled, his dark eyes glittering malevolently.

I gestured over my shoulder with my thumb towards Neville. "What's he, a cooked snail? Prefects are permitted to escort people around Hogwarts."

"He needs permission, Potter."

I'd had enough. "Right, well, piss off to the old man's office, I'm sure he'll let you have a cry on his shoulder at not being able to take points from me. He may tell you that Neville has permission to escort me around, or he may not, but by the time you get back we'll be gone and you sure as hell won't be able to find me again."

He hissed through his teeth. "I am no longer obliged to protect you, Potter. And accidents can happen. To you, they appear to happen quite often."

"Assaulting a member of the general public can't be condoned by the Governors," I said without a trace of fear. After all, when you've plastered someone to a wall, it's not difficult to understand why you no longer have any fear of them.

A flicker passed in front of the greasy git's eyes, but he buried it well. "Hm, you have not changed. Just as always, you are an egotistical prima donna. Now, more than ever, you are a danger to every one around you. I was going to give you a warning, but now, I think I'll let you discover what awaits you for yourself," he said with glowing anticipation.

I rolled my eyes. "Let's see. Draco, the bouncing ferret Malfoy has some method of divining my

location when I'm nearby, and has brewed a potion that acts like pure magical adrenaline. Actually, he probably stole it from the infirmary, since I doubt he has the skill to brew it himself." I looked Snape up and down. "At least, not without you holding his hand. He plans to confront and beat me into submission in front of a crowd, proving once and for all that he can actually do something other than bully, strut around taking points and smirk."

Snape was a far too skilful spy to react to my words, and indeed, not a single flash of anything but hatred appeared on his hawkish features. But I could sense the sudden change in his demeanour. "So, one of my Slytherins warned you. Pity. I would have loved to have seen your expression when you faced off against someone prepared for you."

Oh, this was going to be beyond satisfying. "You're not exactly, shall we say, *up to speed* on current events, are you?" I smirked.

Again, nothing behind the eyes, but the temperature changed, and his tone got much colder. "We'll see."

My friends behind me were having trouble keeping their composure. "Yes, you shall see. Especially if you go and visit the Hospital wing. I'm sure it will prove... *illuminating*."

He glared at me for a few long moments, before finally asking, "What have you done?"

I shrugged, and remained silent, the biggest grin I could make on my face. Finally, with a hiss of frustration, he spun and stalked away in the direction of the Hospital wing.

I heard Neville let out a breath he had obviously been holding. "Merlin, Harry! He's going to be furious with you."

"Don't care," I nonchalantly replied, and began making my way up the stairs.

Neville, Luna, Ginny and I sat around in comfortable armchairs in the Room, waiting for the others to get back. Ron and Susan had gone to Gryffindor Tower to get the Map, so they could locate Hermione and Blaise, and bring them here. Ginny was shifting in her seat, fidgeting wildly. Luna sat dreamily with a simple daisy she had picked between her fingers, spinning back and forth. Neville sat silently, his cheek resting on his fist.

"Bloody hell, where are they?" sighed Neville.

I couldn't help but be surprised. "Nev? I think that's the first time I've ever heard you swear."

"What, you can get away with it but I can't?" he said sourly.

I laughed out loud. "By all means, swear away until the air turns blue."

Before he could respond, the door swung open, revealing the four remaining members of the group. Hermione and Blaise stormed in, noses held high. Obviously they've been in deep discussion about something. Susan was glancing tentatively from one to the other, while Ron's

expression appeared to be one of mild disappointment. I was willing to bet that he'd been highly entertained by the two girls.

"Look, before we start, I want you all to know that I trust you. All of you," I clarified, placing no particular emphasis on the word 'all'. "Now that we are in a secure room and can't be overheard, I'll answer nearly all of your questions."

"Nearly all?" Ron said, frowning.

I sighed softly. "I can't, and won't, answer some questions about my education or my new teacher. You can ask, just don't be annoyed if I don't give you an answer, or at least give you an evasive one."

The group suddenly went sober. I looked around at their faces. One Hufflepuff, one Ravenclaw, one Slytherin, and four Gryffindors. Hermione looked around, bit her lip, and spoke up. "Harry, what did you do to Malfoy? I've never heard of that spell before."

I gave her an amused look. "You've been desperate to get me here for months now; you've been bursting at the seams with questions, and the first thing you want to ask me is what I did to the ferret? Why? So you can blow off his other hand if he annoys you?"

Blaise snorted in a not-really-trying-to-repress-her-laughter kind of way. Hermione shot her a death glare before turning back to me. "No, of course not. But Madam Pomfrey doesn't think she will be able to fix his hand."

Oddly, I didn't feel apprehensive at that. "Really?"

Blaise interrupted. "What Granger is leaving out of that sentence is the word 'fully'. She doesn't think she can *fully* fix his hand."

"Shut up, Zabini!"

"Mione? Is that true?" I asked, more amused than anything that she was implying something else.

"Well, yes. It's the same thing, surely."

"I thought you were smarter than that, Granger."

Hermione drew in a deep breath, and I realised I had to act. With a flick of my wand, I cast a silencing charm over the pair. "Kids, if I have to stop this car..."

Hermione instantly went red and looked embarrassed, but Blaise just looked confused. So did the others in the room. Muggle studies doesn't go into phrases as deeply as it should.

"Never mind. Look, if I take off the charm, will you stop arguing?"

Both witches cast glares at each other, but nodded. I wondered if I could hold them to that promise

forever.

"Now, 'Mione, I suspect Blaise will suggest that even without a fully repaired hand, he will still be able to use it to some degree, so it isn't as bad as you made out." I turned to face Blaise. "Blaise, I suspect Hermione wanted to point out that he will *only* be able to use his hand to some degree, so it is worse than what I made out."

Both girls opened their mouths to reply, and both shut them at the same time.

I suppressed a laugh. "Good," I said, and removed the charm. I leaned back in the chair and addressed the entire group. "Now, before you all go crazy, you know I'm in an apprenticeship. My new teacher has been showing me a few things that aren't strictly taught here. In deciding exactly what he needed to start with, he tested me and my magic. He found that I've got a pretty decent amount of raw power, but as I'm just coming into it, my control is a little off."

"Yeah, we noticed," smirked Ron. "I think the whole of Hogsmeade did."

"Thanks, mate," I said dryly. "He decided that the best spells to teach me to start with were spells that took strength to cast, and were not *precision* -based."

Hermione shifted in her seat, still not satisfied. "You said you were experimenting with a new form of magic," she said almost accusingly.

I waved her statement away, despite Blaise's sudden interest. "That's in the afternoons. We started experimenting with it all day to begin with, but I couldn't keep that up, you saw what I was like after a full day of it. So now, I'm learning auror-like stuff in the morning, and we are practising the other magic stuff in the afternoon."

"Ron and Neville exchanged looks. "Um, Harry? You've found a new form of magic?"

I shook my head. "Not exactly, but sorry guys, I can't talk about it. This is one of the things I'm not able to discuss with you. Yet."

Ginny was all but jumping up and down in her seat. "What spell did you use on Malfoy?" she asked loudly, displaying all the classic signs of an imminent trademarked Weasley Temper Outburst.

"It's a corruption of another spell." I paused, thinking hard. "Well, perhaps a modification, rather than a corruption. My teacher developed it himself as a way to disable a wizard without, well, harming him. It floods the opponent's wand with raw magic, but forces it the wrong way." I pointed towards Ron. "Your dad often messes around with muggle electronics. But after he does, they often start smoking and stop working, right?"

"Um, yeah," Ron said, wondering where this was going.

"Well, this basically short-circuits a wand; by pushing magic through the core the wrong way. Same sort of thing. It takes a fair bit of effort to pull off, let me tell you."

Ginny sounded almost disappointed. "So it *doesn't* blow up a wand normally?"

I chuckled softly at her expression. "Of course not. But the idiot had dosed himself with Potensavenenum beforehand."

"Potensa-whatsis?" asked Ron.

"Potensavenenum," corrected Blaise and Hermione in unison. Laughter from the rest of us surrounded their attempts to glare each other into submission. This was beginning to become a habit; one I'm not sure I was too happy with.

Susan leaned over and slipped her arm through his, giving Ron a wonderful view of her cleavage. "It's a medical potion, Ron. We brewed it in Advanced Potions last week. It's used to give patients a burst of magical energy if they've lost nearly all of their power, through magical disease, vampire bite or even just exhaustion through over-use."

Ron looked up from Susan's chest to me. "Ah, right. That magical adrenaline stuff you told Snape about. So, if Malfoy drank it just before a duel..."

I shrugged. "While not illegal, it's not exactly safe. Unless you're really strong to begin with, you're gonna to be horizontal and snoring twenty minutes after swallowing a dose. Like adrenaline, it will give you strength you didn't know you had, but it's fleeting, and when it runs out, you're stuffed."

Luna's attention on her flower faded, and she stopped spinning the daisy without noticing. "So that's why Draco's wand suffered. He was pushing too much magic through it before you cast your own spell."

"But aren't you worried at all that you destroyed Malfoy's hand? You may have crippled him for life!"

I sighed and shook my head. "No, 'Mione, I'm not. The idiot tried to get an advantage over me, and it was a direct result of that action that he lost his hand. People have been telling me forever that I take on blame for things not within my sphere of influence. Well, no more. And it feels liberating."

Blaise gave me an odd look. "But if Malfoy was pushing more power through it, wouldn't it have taken more power from you to cast the spell?"

I frowned, but nodded. "I suppose, but that was the first time I'd ever cast the spell outside of practise. I wasn't sure how much power to use."

Neville grinned. "I'd say you got the level about right."

"Yes, well spotted, that man," I said, trying to hide a grin.

Ron leaned back in his chair. "Well, can you teach us that spell? Sounds dead useful."

I chuckled to myself. "I suppose. But I'm sure you have more questions for me."

Hermione nodded. "Harry, why have you been so angry?"

This time, I sighed deeply. "It's a bit of a long story. I asked Dumbledore at the end of my first year here why Voldemort wanted to kill me. Why he wanted me dead. He refused to answer. Again, after Ginny, Ron and I came out of the Chamber of Secrets, he didn't tell me. Again and again, he kept that information from me."

I stared straight at a point in front of me, focusing on that to the exclusion of everything else, letting my voice run on autopilot. "If he'd told me about the prophecy, I think Sirius might still be alive," I said, trailing off, finishing the sentence in a whisper.

I blinked at the sudden silence, realising that they were still waiting for me to finish. "The prophecy that Voldemort wanted was stored in the Department of Mysteries. We found it first, because only I could take it down from the shelf. What's so stupid about it is that it was made by Trelawney."

Ron coughed, and laughed out loud. "Good one!"

Ginny looked at my face, at my eyes, then swallowed. "He's not joking, Ron."

Ron kept laughing, but it sounded forced. "Yeah, right. That blind bat couldn't pick her nose if she tried, let alone the future."

I looked up at Ron. "Remember in our third year? She made a prophecy then, about Wormtail returning to his master."

Ron winced, remembering that night all too well. "Well, all right."

"Trelawney was having an interview with Dumbledore for the Divination Professor's post. She was staying at the Hog's Head. He was about to turn her down when she went into a trance and spouted the prophecy."

"Wait! The Headmaster was the person who heard it made?" asked Susan.

Neville half stood. "That means that it isn't lost! Professor Dumbledore knows it!"

I nodded. "He showed me it in his penseive after we got back from the Ministry. I suppose it was a pretty cool thing to happen in an interview for the post of Divination Professor. She got the job and the chance to traumatize the student body from third year up."

Luna was still twirling the daisy in her fingers. "How did the Dark Lord find out about the prophecy then?"

Nearly all the others reacted in surprise at her question. "Part of it was overheard. I never found out which one of Voldemort's goons was there, but he got tossed out of the Hog's Head halfway

through the prophecy. Missed the last bit. The most important bit."

Blaise leaned forward. "Well? What does the prophecy say? Does it say if the Dark Lord will be defeated?"

I shrugged. "It's not that sort of prophecy."

Ginny's knuckles were white from gripping the arms of her chair so tightly. "Harry," she said warningly. "What in Gryffindor's name does the prophecy say?"

I shook my head. "I shouldn't recite it. If you don't know it, you can't divulge it."

There was a chorus of disagreement. I sighed and waited for the objections to subside. "Basically, the prophecy says that one person, born at the end of July to parents who defied Voldemort three times would have the power to defeat him."

I let this sink in. Six of my friends almost erupted with glee as it hit them, one sat still and went very pale.

I nodded sadly to the silent Neville. "What are you all so excited about?" I asked the rest evenly.

Hermione clapped her hands. "Harry, don't you see? It's you!"

I raised one eyebrow and remained silent. One by one, the rest of the group quietened down, confusion evident on their faces. "No, it doesn't describe me," I said.

"What?" came a chorused reply.

I closed my eyes and held out a hand, tilting it from side to side. "Well, it doesn't *just* describe me."

Hermione and Ginny exchanged confused looks. "What do you mean?"

I looked over at Neville, who was looking frightfully ill. "I mean that there are two people in the room who it could refer to."

Ron looked from me to Neville and back again, looking comical. "What do- Do you mean- Neville?!"

Neville swallowed a couple of times and nodded. "That could mean either of us," he said.

I nodded. "What Voldemort's thug didn't hear, was the rest. It basically said that he would mark the child as his equal." I lifted my fringe. "Neville doesn't have Voldemort's mark."

Neville sagged as relief shot through him, an almost palpable field of relief flooded out from him.

Susan again clapped her hands. "So it *is* you! You're going to beat him!"

I clenched my eyes closed, and shook my head, trying to keep the rage I felt when I first heard those unwanted words from flooding me. "No. The last part doesn't say that. It doesn't say that at all."

Hermione leaned over and took my hand in hers. "Then what?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, keeping my eyes closed. "Basically, it says that either I will kill him, or he will kill me. Murder or be murdered."

The silence that followed that announcement was stifling. I slowly raised my eyelids, and looked into the shocked and frightened faces of my friends.

"You have what, a fifty-fifty chance?" Ron asked hopefully.

I snorted derisively. "You think even any of the seventh-years would have a one-in-two chance against Dumbledore? I was there when he took out a room full of Ministry personnel, including aurors, without any effort. He faced down Voldemort and his Death Eaters at the Ministry, and drove them off without raising a sweat. Do you think I'd have even odds against him? Or even against Flitwick? No, Ron, I *don't* have a fifty-fifty shot at killing the bastard.

"What I do have is a incompetent old geezer who has interfered in my life since my parents were killed, who has lied, manipulated and kept me ignorant of what fate has in store for me." Throughout my rant, my voice rose in volume. "He's made decisions that he was not qualified, required, authorised or even asked to make. He took away everything Sirius had left that night, leaving him nothing by revenge to live for!" I shouted.

It was with almost amusement that I noted that I was angry, and that the trembling magical potential in the air was frightening my friends. With a mental shove, I brought my anger back under control. "Sorry about that."

Hermione looked as though she was about to burst into tears. "That's why you've been so mad at everyone?"

I nodded. "Being responsible for Sirius' death was part of it. Discovering that Voldemort had manipulated me made me so mad. But finding out that Dumbledore had been doing it too, and for much longer, well..." I took a deep breath to calm down, rather than finish the sentence and want to blow something up.

"Anyway, everything just built up to a head, and I just couldn't take it any more." I stopped and frowned in thought for a moment. "Actually, that's not quite right. I decided I *wouldn't* take it any more. Look, all through last year I was considered a freak. It was just like our second year all over again. At King's Cross, Moody, your dad, Tonks and Remus threatened the Dursleys to make them treat me nicer. I could have used that sort of warning when I was two. Then there was the Wizengamot's letter, the aurors response to my first surge, it all just kept building."

I looked down to see that even though I was trying to be calm, my knuckles were almost white and

I was gripping the chair almost hard enough to break it. Luna stood and calmly walked over to me, wordlessly handing me the daisy that she had been playing with. I took it just as wordlessly, and resumed her task of spinning it between my fingers. In seconds, I felt my body relax and let go of the anger. It really was a stress relief.

I turned to Blaise. "You know, after his poor daddy was put in prison, I'd have thought that Malfoy's influence on Slytherin house would have been killed off."

Blaise shook her head. "No. He turned seventeen in August and is now of age, and so legally he has access to the entire Malfoy fortune. With that amount of money, you can bribe a hell of a lot of people. Not to mention the fact that he has been claiming that his father and the other Death Eaters escaped before they'd even spent a night in Azkaban and the Ministry has been covering it up."

"Are there a lot of people buying that?"

Blaise shrugged. "There are a lot of people who are acting like they believe it." She gave me a smirk. "We are Slytherins, you know. We want to be on the winning side."

I started nibbling on a thumbnail. "So, the best way to destroy his standing is to convince people that we are the winning side," I muttered. "Perhaps blowing Malfoy's hand off was a good thing."

Silence descended on us, and in that moment, the door to the room swung open. I didn't need to look to know that it was Dumbledore in the doorway.

"Ah, here you all are. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I need to speak to you, Harry."

"No, you *want* to speak to me. I'm quite sure the world will survive if you don't."

The old man tilted his head in acknowledgement. "As you wish. Would you care to follow me to my office?"

I shook my head. "There is nothing I want to hear from you. As soon as I leave this room, I'm leaving Hogwarts."

Dumbledore glanced around the room at the apprehensive looks we were getting. He looked far older than I'd ever seen him. "Are you prepared to compromise?"

"Do you know the meaning of the word?" I snapped.

"I will allow you access to Hogwarts and the Room of Requirement at any time. You will also be welcome here to go about without an escort at any time. I only ask that you come and speak with me now."

I leaned back in my chair, looking over my shoulder at him. "OK, but I'll speak with you for ten minutes, on the proviso that you listen to what I say, and not make any assumptions."

Dumbledore took a deep breath. "An hour, Harry. I'm not sure I can tell you everything in just ten minutes. I promise to listen to everything you say, and you are welcome to leave if I do not."

I narrowed my eyes, thinking. "Half an hour."

With a sigh, Dumbledore nodded. "Agreed."

Fawkes sat serenely on his perch, swinging his feathered tail side to side gently. The scarlet and gold phoenix looked down at me with an unmistakably sad expression, which surprised me on two counts. Firstly, I could hardly believe that Dumbledore would bother telling his familiar the detailed difficulties between us, leaving aside the obvious question on whether or not Fawkes would understand him. Secondly, I was shocked that I could actually *decipher* the expression on a bloody magical turkey. I gave the bird an even look, silently daring it to pity me. Fawkes blinked, and swung his head away.

The old man sat down behind his overcrowded desk, knees and chair creaking, probably to put some distance and a few disposable objects between us. I can't imagine he'd have left out the more expensive items this time.

I simply sat still, my mental shields raised, my face blank, trying to calm the chaotic mess of emotions tumbling around in my stomach. I had made a mistake the last time I spoke with him, and I needed time to think about the repercussions of that error. Until I'd done that however, I needed to give him the benefit of the doubt. Even so, I wondered what tactic he would use here.

Would it be the kindly grandfather act? *'Harry, we've all been worried about you. Please tell us- '*

Or would it be the distant authority figure? *'Mr. Potter, members of the general public are not permitted- '*

I suppose there was an off chance of him being intimidating. *'Harry, I've indulged you enough! It's time- '*

Nah, but it could be some sort of comrades-in-arms act. *'The time has come, we'd like you to join- '*

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, looking older than I remembered. "You will be pleased to know that Mr. Malfoy's condition has been stabilised. He is not in any mortal danger," he stated without inflection.

"Ah, the caring Headmaster approach. I didn't think of that one," I said absently. I wasn't sure he was capable of pulling it off.

His bushy eyebrows converged above his nose. "Approach?"

I grunted something that vaguely sounded like agreement. "I was wondering which one you'd take," I said around a yawn. My blasé tone was getting to the old bastard. He wasn't used to people who didn't care what he had to say.

Dumbledore's eyes lowered for a moment. "Are you not even a little concerned for a fellow student? You may have crippled him for life."

Fellow student, eh? I let that one pass for now, maybe it would lower his guard slightly if I didn't attack everything that came out of his mouth. "Nope," I said promptly, if not excitedly. "If Madam Pomfrey can't fix his hand, he can cut off what's left and get a new one, as long as he likes it in silver," I replied absently, shrugging.

Dumbledore swallowed, still reserved and guarded. "Somehow, I don't think Tom will be kindly disposed enough towards young Mr. Malfoy to comply."

I shrugged, looking at him through heavy-lidded eyes, not even caring enough to bother saying anything. I started drumming my fingers on his desk. In trying to project a 'not my problem' expression, I forced him to change the topic.

He took a deep breath at my efforts to provoke him, obviously not expecting how little effort I was putting into the conversation. "I'm truly devastated at how far our relationship has disintegrated around us, Harry."

I raised an eyebrow and gave a short, sharp bark of laughter. "We didn't have a relationship. You used me for your own purposes."

"That has never been the case, Harry," he replied sternly. "With your new-found powers of observation and deduction, even you can see that that was beyond exaggeration."

I shrugged. "Maybe, but a relationship goes both ways. I've got nothing from you besides manipulation, pain, suffering and more manipulation."

"Since your birthday, I have tried to give you room to work this self-pity out of your system. I have tried to respect your wishes for more freedom."

"But not enough to respect my wishes to stay away from me," I pointed out.

He gave a deep sigh. "I'm more sorry than I can say, but circumstances have forced my hand."

I mumbled that sounded like, "Yeah, right," but didn't express interest in any way. I even glanced at my watch and mumbled, "Twenty-six minutes."

He ran his fingers back and forth over his forehead. "Though many others would prefer I gave you as much time and distance as you require, I'm not convinced that would be in anyone's best interests. And since you are quite unsubtly informing me that my time is running out, I will say what needs to be said with no embellishments or distractions. You are turning dark, Harry. I cannot permit that. You need to return to Hogwarts where your friends can keep you grounded."

My breath almost caught in my throat, but I had enough presence of mind to cover the shock I felt. Slowly, I raised my gaze to look directly into the blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore and took a second to think of a rebuttal. "Really? What if my turning dark gave me the power the Dark Lord

knows not?" I asked, not believing for a second either what I was saying or the fact that I was turning dark.

"I do not believe that is the case at all."

I casually tilted my head from one side to the other. "You *really* don't want to get into a discussion about your less-than sterling record at being correct in the past when it comes to me," I said, my voice carrying a hint of a threat.

The old man grumbled softly under his breath, and massaged his temples. "Harry, please, I ask you again, who is teaching you?"

I remained silent, the only sounds in the office were Fawkes' tail feathers rubbing against the bars at the back of his cage and the almost inaudible scratchings of the portraits listening in as hard as they could.

Dumbledore actually got frustrated. "Keeping silent is not going to prevent me from discovering your teacher's identity, Harry! I can not allow you to continue to learn such dangerous lore, not while you retain such anger with the world. There will be time enough for that once you've calmed down and matured. The young boy who you once were would never have been so blasé at the horrific wounds given to Mr. Malfoy."

"How many students got an 'O' on their defense OWL last year?" I asked softly, not prepared to be lectured on how I've changed over the years.

"Pardon?" he asked, looking bewildered.

"You heard me," I replied flatly, not prepared to do any more work than necessary in this conversation.

He swallowed, and cleared his throat. "Fourteen. A record this century."

I raised an eyebrow. "Want to bet that I could name them all?"

He remained silent for a few moments. "I believe you could. Besides Miss Zabini, each of the other students to achieve the feat belonged to your little club."

"So thirteen out of thirteen in the DA got an 'O'. How many people failed it?"

Again, he swallowed, though this time, it was because he didn't want to answer. "Too many. Also a record this century."

"I shudder to think how badly the Defense NEWTs went. So, a class in your school produced people incapable of defending themselves to an acceptable standard, but people I taught are able to survive despite being outnumbered two to one by Death Eaters, and you think I'm the one who's going dark?"

Dumbledore stood, trying intimidation by standing over me when intimidation by other means failed. It's a pity (for him, at any rate) that Zab has been teaching me about auror tactics in interrogation; I could recognise and ignore Dumbledore's amateurish attempts. "Harry, I have not crippled another student, attacked and rendered a Professor unconscious, or sought vengeance against those who wronged me in the press!"

I blinked slowly, and yawned theatrically. "You weren't attacked beforehand in all three instances."

Dumbledore lowered his head and stared at me over the top of his glasses. "Why didn't you simply incapacitate Mr. Malfoy? I know for a fact that you are skilful enough to do that."

"I did," I chuckled.

He slammed his palm down on his desk. "Damn it, Harry, this is no laughing matter! You could face charges over this!"

I let my head loll to one side and sighed. "Just as I expected. You didn't listen to what I said. Well, there goes your promise. I'm out of here." I rose to my feet.

A chorus of objections arose from the portraits, covering Dumbledore's response. "Wait. I did listen to you."

"No, you didn't. I told you one thing, and you assumed another. By the terms of our agreement, I'm leaving."

The open door swung shut with a muffled boom. I ran my tongue across the front of my teeth without parting my lips as I felt my anger slowly build. Not only was he breaking his promise, he was turning me into a prisoner. Not this time.

"Enlighten me then. What did I assume?" the old fart asked.

"Open the door," I said, lacing my words with anger, so he could not mistake my words for a simple request. "You promised."

"No," he said simply, proving that while he may be the most powerful wizard of the day, he wasn't exactly top of the class when it came to ethics. "Not until you tell me what I missed."

I drew my wand, and forced the split in my mind, so I could access my anger but keep part of my thoughts clear of its clouding influence. Almost instantly, I felt a brush against my shields. I wonder what he will think about the fact that I'm capable of keeping him out of my mind while incoherent with rage. "Fine. You asked why I simply didn't *incapacitate* the little toad. I replied that I did. And that was the truth," I hissed through clenched teeth. He'd have to trust me on that one, since I sure as hell wasn't going to let him near my mind enough to determine that for himself.

"Harry, I know of no spell that would maim someone in that way that could be used to incapacitate

someone *without* injuring them," he said calmly, but he surreptitiously drew his own wand.

My face twisted with hatred at this incompetent moron's logic. "Well *there's* your problem, you damned mental cripple. You think the spell I used was supposed to maim him. You actually think I would deliberately blow someone's hand off." In the uncluttered part of my mind, I could sense the old man's confusion. I suppose it wasn't too hard to see why he thinks I have been turning dark. With the assumptions he was making, he was still coming up with some pretty absurd conclusions.

Something I would strive never to do.

He blinked. "What spell did you use?"

I hissed with frustration, whipped my wand up and aimed it at his own, forcing my anger to power the spell. "*Everto veneficus!* "

Despite the fact that Malfoy had artificially given himself more power, it took almost as much energy to cast the spell at Dumbledore's wand. At least he hadn't used it recently. At any rate, Dumbledore reacted too late, his wand hissed and spat, then seemed to, well, *deflate* , giving a huge long fart as its magic died. With a cry, he tried to hold the temporarily useless wand out of the way of my line of sight. "Harry! What have you done?"

I snarled. "A little modification on a spell designed to remove magic from cursed items I learned recently. It floods the core with magic, forcing it back through the wand the wrong way. And get this, you'll love it. It *innnnnncaaaaaapaaaaaciiaaaaaatesssss* a wizard without harming them," I said, trembling with the effort of restraining my combination of anger and hate.

He stared down dumbly at his wand, gently waving it to and fro absently. Not so much as a spark jumped out. "You ruined my wand?" he asked dumbly, proving that besides ethics, he wasn't exactly in the upper percentiles when it came to intelligence either.

"Ollivander can fix it," I snapped. I made a tight fist with one finger extended and shook it at him. "And that's all it would have done to Malfoy's too, if he hadn't dosed himself with Potensavenenum before we duelled. His wand core overloaded with all the extra power he was pushing through it. Now open the bloody door. You've blown your chance."

He spoke again, and my anger at his continued refusal to open the door flared. "Destroying a wizard's wand is not something that should be taken lightly!"

With a snarl, I reached into my pocket and grabbed a handful of coins. "I grew up as a muggle because of you, you bloody bastard, so you'll have to get over the fact that I don't know things like that," I spat. Far more powerfully than necessary, I hurled them onto the old man's desk, knocking over a tub of ink and an odd looking desk ornament. He flinched and twisted to avoid the heavy metal coins from striking him on the rebound. "And here, go have Ollivander fix your wand. Now open the bloody door!"

"You were being rather cryptic, Harry."

My clenched fists actually began trembling. "You've been nothing but cryptic since before I even stepped foot in this damned castle. Now, for the last time, open the door or I'll blow it up!"

The door slid open, much to Dumbledore's surprise. The reason became clear when Snape barrelled up the stairway, an aura of fury surrounding the man like flies on a corpse. "You!" he thundered, drawing his wand and raising it at me. "What the hell did you do?"

Oh, this just couldn't be better. Despite Dumbledore's barked warning, I spat out the same spell and Snape's wand also joined the old man's in the 'temporarily useless' pile.

You know, since he asked what I'd done, he could hardly be angry with me for showing him now, could he?

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Snape was in far too much of a rage to notice a little thing like now being helpless. He trained his wand on my heart and barked out a curse that would have had me in Madam Pomfrey's tender care for at least six hours.

The expression that flooded his features at his spell's failure was one of the great looks of all time. I imagine that it ranked up there with Napoleon's when he had been informed that his army had just come second at Waterloo, Madison's on being told that the White House had been burned to the ground by the British and on whichever poor, undeserving sod that discovered the platypus. I'd have given half the contents of my vault to have had a camera in my possession at that very instant. I decided that buying a pensieve would be first on the agenda on my next trip to Diagon Alley. I'd replay that memory on cold winter nights to keep me warm.

I gave a quick flick of my wand and magically shoved Snape out of my way, far more gently than he'd have done to me, I'm sure. He crashed into one of Dumbledore's shelves and crumpled to the floor. Though as luck would have it, he did cushion the fall of several rather heavy-looking magical objects with his head. The door to Dumbledore's office remained open through our altercation, and I stormed through, stomping down the stairs as though each one had personally offended me.

Behind me, I heard Snape say, "Why you little-", before the old man barked a warning. A pity really, I'd have given even more gold to see him try to attack me without magic.

I blinked as I reached the bottom of the stairs. Strolling down the corridor towards me were Blaise and Ron, both looking back at me and grinning.

I jogged over to them. "What are you two doing here?"

Ron turned to grin at Blaise. "Well, the others thought you'd spend the entire half hour talking to Dumbledore, but Blaise and I thought you'd be down much sooner."

I glanced from one to the other, a massive smile forming on my face. "Oh, you bastard! You're turning what I taught you back onto me!" I said with delight.

Blaise took a couple of steps to cross the gap between us and slipped an arm around my waist. Once more, I was astounded at just how nice it was to have a soft, female body pressed against my own. "I think I'm rather liking having a devious Weasley around, you know. For the novelty value at least," she said without malice.

Ron's grin didn't waver, his eyes filled with humour. "A bit like a Slytherin who'll stand up for herself, and not run behind Snape's skirt, eh Harry?"

I barked a laugh, feeling my anger at Dumbledore fade quickly. "So only the pair of you figured that Dumbledore would break our agreement? Even after everything he's done, the others still had that much faith in him?" I asked as I slipped my own arm around Blaise's shoulder.

Ron frowned. "No, I thought that you'd trick him into assuming something, so that you could escape."

That brought me up short. Is that what I'd done?

I had gone in there willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, but as uncomfortable as the interview had been, I wriggled out of talking to him the first chance I had. Even though he was making some severely messed up conclusions about me, I hadn't exactly given him anything to convince him that he was wrong.

Yes, I'd been cryptic, and I'd explained that away by saying that he had been too. But did I really want to justify my actions on his? Was I becoming more like Dumbledore in my efforts to become independent? Did I really want to turn into someone whose actions infuriated me?

Without answering Ron, I turned to face the still-open portal to Dumbledore's office. He and Snape appeared, slowly descending the stairs. Snape was holding a white handkerchief to his forehead, which was rapidly becoming stained with blood. Dumbledore was holding onto his other elbow, steadying him.

The greasy git noticed me and sent a fiery glare my way. Dumbledore sighed softly and gently steered him away, softly saying, "Come, Severus." The pair left in the direction of the infirmary.

Blaise started, and almost jerked away from me. "Professor Snape? Are you all right?"

An incoherent snort was the only answer she got from her Head of House.

Ron glanced down the hall at the retreating Snape and back at me. "What did you do to him this time?" he asked with an expression of intense anticipation.

"Never mind," I said, not sure how either Ron or Blaise would take the news that I'd shorted out his wand, then tossed him into some of Dumbledore's shelves. "It doesn't matter."

He looked at me closely for a few seconds, then nodded. "Come on then, mate," he said, with a tilt of his head. "Let's get back to the others, and you can teach us that spell."

I bit my lower lip, still looking back to where Snape and Dumbledore had left. With a sigh, I said, "Later. I'll be there as soon as I finish here."

Blaise tugged on my elbow to attract my attention. "You don't need to, you know."

I nodded without looking down at her. "I know. But I don't want to keep fighting him. He thinks I'm turning dark, and having both Dumbledore and Voldemort against me is a little more than I'm prepared to endure."

I gently disengaged myself from Blaise's embrace and again ascended the stairs to Dumbledore's office.

Fawkes trilled nervously at my entrance, but I didn't approach him. "Don't look like that, Fawkes. I'm not going to hurt you, or the old man." I frowned slightly. "Though why you didn't use your tears to fix Snape's head... Can't you use your tears on a Dark Wizard?"

A few of the portraits scoffed at me, and I turned around to look at them. Most of the canvases were empty, their occupants obviously off doing something else. Probably, given what just happened in here, trying to follow me around the castle. Phineas however, was in his usual place, looking down at me with a particularly unexpected expression.

It looked almost like... pride.

"What?" I snapped at him.

The expression on the portrait vanished. "Mr. Potter, you have recently risen in my estimation; enough that I was beginning to understand Sirius' interest and pride in your accomplishments. Keep your tongue civil when speaking to me, and you may continue to enjoy my good graces."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise, but bit back the sarcastic reply my brain supplied. "Curious. While the current Headmaster regards me as little more than a Dark Wizard in training, a previous Headmaster considers my actions to be praiseworthy," I said, consciously mimicking the style of speech Sirius' ancestor used.

Phineas nodded. "Albus has been exceedingly worried about you, blaming himself for the gulf that has grown between you. Consider that he has seen first hand another students indulge themselves in dark lore, including young Tom Riddle, and you can understand why he has been, shall we say, less than his usual subtle self in trying to keep you safe."

I nodded glumly. "There are a few fairly significant differences between us," I said dryly. "Riddle had a desire for power, I just have a desire to be left alone to live my own life as I see fit. Riddle hated muggle-born and half-blood wizards, whereas I don't hate anyone except those who attack me."

"Indeed. However, Albus has been both expecting and fearing the worst, and it has clouded his thinking. I hope you didn't come up here to apologise, young man."

I shook my head. "No. I came here to hear him out, and to put his fears to rest. I can fight both him and Voldemort if I really had to, but if I can convince him I'm not turning dark, Dumbledore at least should leave me alone. While I won't allow him any power over me, I don't want him distracted from his real obligations to the school."

Phineas nodded, a small smile on his lips. "Then you continued to rise in my esteem. Good luck to you, young Harry."

I nodded my thanks, leaned back in the chair and waited. Within another five minutes, I heard a single set of footsteps on the stairs. Dumbledore slowly cleared the final few steps, only to start slightly when he noticed my presence.

"Harry? Why?"

"You've still got twenty-four minutes," I replied softly.

Dumbledore took his seat behind his desk. "Severus will be fine."

I put on a faintly curious expression. "Who? Oh, that git who just tried to curse me." I shrugged, eloquently expressing just how little I cared for the greasy idiot.

Dumbledore sighed, but changed the subject. "I'm surprised that you decided to return. Exceedingly glad too, for what it's worth."

I looked him in the eye. "Yes, I imagine you are."

"Dare I ask what caused your sudden reversal of intention?"

"I realised that I had been acting very much like you."

Dumbledore winced. "I see."

I leaned forward, and rested my elbows on my knees. "Look, I'm not turning dark. I tried to neutralise Malfoy in a way that would be humiliating for him but wouldn't hurt him. It didn't work, and he was, well, maimed."

Dumbledore nodded, but stayed silent.

"You said that a younger me would have been devastated at causing that sort of injury to another. Well, you were probably right. But that boy accepted too much responsibility for things outside of his control. I refuse to even think that I am responsible for what happened to Malfoy's hand, when it was he who took the action that resulted in the injury."

"It was your spell," Dumbledore pointed out.

I rolled my eyes. "Stuffing that potion down his throat opened himself up to a far greater potential for injury no matter what tactic I used. Even if I hit him with a simple body bind it may have

caused the excess magic in his system to poison him if he couldn't release it. It's happened before when Potensavenenum has been administered incorrectly. It was a dangerous thing he did, and while I wish he hadn't, I'm certainly not crying over it." My lips twitched. "I bet he wishes he hadn't either."

Dumbledore looked at me for a long while, a mental argument going on behind his eyes. Finally, he made his mind up and leaned forward himself. "As interesting as that is, what is the real reason you returned for this conversation, Harry?"

I smothered the flash of anger I felt, and analysed my reasons internally. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps there was a different reason. "When we spoke through the mirror, I made some assumptions, and didn't listen to what you said. Because of that, I resolved to give you the benefit of the doubt today, but, as you said, I was cryptic and evasive. So in that way, I was acting very much like you. After I met Ron and Blaise downstairs, I decided that I didn't want to act like someone who I've lost respect for." I shook my head. "But I suppose the real reason is that I'm tired of fighting you. If you can accept that I've made decisions about my own life, and if you can release any desire on your part to control me and my life, then we can co-exist without fighting. I may at some point in the distant future forgive you for keeping that information from me, but I will never forget it."

Dumbledore was silent for a long time. "I have been roundly criticised for how I have handled your situation, by nearly everyone with whom you have come in contact during your lifetime. All I can say is that prior to the events in the Department of Mysteries, I made decisions for what I truly believed were your best interests. Since then, however, I have been stumbling somewhat blindly; seemingly proving that I am incapable of changing my ways when events do not transpire as I expect them."

"You mean you've been acting like an idiot?"

Dumbledore gave me an almost bleary expression. "Blunt, but not inaccurate. Harry, I made a mistake in not telling you the contents of the prophecy earlier. I made a mistake in not ensuring that your life at the Dursleys was satisfactory. It was an enormous mistake on my part to insist that Severus instruct you in Occlumency. I made several more mistakes over the holidays, including making assumptions on the amount of anger you stoked within, and the reasons for that anger. I would like to say that if I knew then what I know now, I would not have made the same errors - especially that I would not have used force against you in an effort to return you to your relatives - but I am honest enough with myself to admit that I probably would still have attempted something."

"And you just might have saved yourself a rap on the noggin with a poker in the meantime."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. "Quite possibly," he said vaguely, probably wondering just how much I knew about what he knew. Changing the subject, he asked, "Will you answer some questions I have then? Truthfully?"

I nodded sharply. "Provided I haven't been forbidden to answer them."

I saw a flash of something behind his eyes, but it was gone too quickly to identify. "What are you learning?"

I leaned back, and crossed my arms. "On the active magical side, I've learned several techniques to disarm or disable an opponent in combat, along with a fair few defensive, camouflage and misdirection spells. I'm also beginning to learn to apparate. On the passive magical side, I've been practising both Occlumency and Legilimency to both defend my mind and to learn how attacks are made, enabling me to defend my mind even more effectively."

Dumbledore held up a hand. "You are learning both disciplines? Simultaneously?"

I nodded. "How else do you think I was able to break into your mind at The Burrow?"

Dumbledore shook his head slowly. "I'm afraid that I again made an incorrect assumption. I was afraid that you were actively studying Legilimency specifically to break down people's defenses, not to help understand weaknesses in your own mind. I'm sorry."

I nodded in acknowledgement. "I'm also trying to recreate an ancient potion that I only have a little over half the recipe for, and I've been brewing several other potions that have similar effects or use a similar base in an effort to discover the original recipe." I laughed softly with humour here. "One of the potions I brewed in the last week was Potensavenenum."

Dumbledore actually slightly smiled at that.

"On the non-magical side, I've been studying tactics and strategy, both in duels and in large scale magical combat. Psychology too, both of the individual and of a group. I've been learning how to deduce answers from what information I have, so my logic and reasoning skills are being developed.

"The most time consuming part of my learning has been experimenting with a new way of casting spells. Half of each day is devoted to that. So, as you can see, I'm keeping myself busy. I've learned more since I started my apprenticeship than I did in the whole of last year."

Dumbledore's expression went from apprehensive expectation, through pleasant surprise, finishing with open-mouthed shock. "A new way of casting spells? What on earth do you mean? Wandlessly?"

I shook my head. "No, 'new' as in not done before. By anyone. I've seen you use wandless magic before. No, I'm talking about a new way of casting spells, and anything more than that, I'm not permitted to discuss." At his expression of acute disappointment, I added, "Not yet, anyway. Not until we test the limits of what is possible. Don't worry, you're taking the news far better than Hermione."

Dumbledore coughed, and flushed slightly. "Yes, I imagine Miss Granger was far more vocal on discovering this facet of your education. May I ask though, is it magically draining?"

For a fraction of a second, I froze, wondering why he would think that. "Yes, quite." I offered cautiously. "Why would you ask that?"

He nodded. "Your aura is, well, impressive to say the least. It has grown at least ten-fold since our encounter at The Burrow. I've only seen something similar during one exceedingly drawn out battle during Voldemort's first reign. Your father had magically exhausted himself day after day in a series of particularly nasty skirmishes that in total lasted nearly a week. Two days after it was over, his aura was very similar to yours. Similar, but not as..." he trailed off.

I frowned. "As what? What does it look normally like?"

Dumbledore winced softly. "There are no really acceptable words in English to describe an aura. But currently," he said, tilting his head forward to look at me over his spectacles, his eyes faintly losing focus, "yours is far more, *vivid* than usual. It is almost... musical... with uncountable, well, multi-hued tendrils coiling and writhing within."

I chuckled softly. "Multi-hued?"

"I mean they are changing colour as I look. It's almost fractal. Yes, the closer I look, the more the patterns repeat themselves. It is both chaotic and ordered. It is... beautiful." Dumbledore blinked and shook his head, seemingly trying to clear it. Once more he focused on me, but looked through his glasses. "You are turning into a particularly powerful wizard, Harry. I must admit, I'm very relieved to hear that you are not focusing on dark material. I had made even more assumptions recently that appear to have been incorrect."

I nodded, keeping my mouth shut. Verbalising what was on my mind at that point would not help matters at all.

Dumbledore leaned back, looking more relaxed than I'd seen in a while. "What of your other subjects? Transfiguration, Care of Magical Creatures, Herbology? I assume you are no longer interested in taking History and Astronomy, or even Divination, despite your exceptional OWL score."

"My Divination score was luck, nothing more. As for the others, they haven't yet turned up to any great degree in my lessons yet, but I'm assured they will. I've been harvesting my own ingredients for the potions, both from the greenhouses on site and from creatures themselves on occasion, which has been exhilarating. I even managed to obtain about fifteen litres of giant's blood for my potion experiments."

Dumbledore tilted his head to one side. "You extracted it from Grawp, I presume? He is the only living giant in the British Isles."

I smiled without answering immediately. It wouldn't do to give him a clue that I was actually living in the UK. "No," I replied. After all, *I* didn't extract it from him, Zab had. Despite feeling a little uncomfortable being deliberately evasive and cryptic, I was determined not give him a clue as to the whereabouts of Zab's home.

"No? Then that was exceedingly dangerous, Harry. The giants-" he said, his voice gruff with recrimination.

"Don't go there," I snapped warningly, waving a finger at him. My patience was beginning to fray.

He sighed, but fell back into a more relaxed pose. "Yes. I'm sorry. It's just that I'm still worried about you. I still feel that it is my responsibility to do all I can to reduce the amount of danger you tend to find yourself in."

"Well, that's something you'll have to deal with yourself. I'm in danger no matter what I do, so learning in a secret place is better than learning in a place where everyone knows where I am."

Dumbledore sighed. "Perhaps there is something in that. You have managed to quite convincingly evade even the most determined pursuit recently, despite the fact that you appear to have a great deal of freedom of movement. I don't suppose you have any idea how three separate Ministry departments all thought on the same day that you were hiding in my office?" he asked, his eyes faintly twinkling for the first time since before I trashed his office.

I raised my eyebrows. "Only three? There were four tracking charms on me that day. What departments?"

Dumbledore almost smiled. "Ah. The auror division, the Unspeakables and Minister Fudge's office all thought I was hiding you. Perhaps the Unspeakables planted two charmed objects on you. They are known for ensuring redundancy in their operations."

I thought about it for a second. "Nah, for my money, it was either someone from Voldemort's camp or someone from the press. I suppose if someone learned of my new location it would be front page material?"

He nodded with a smile. "Yes, I imagine so."

"Speaking of the Ministry, what is the latest?"

The old man suddenly looked older than a few seconds before. "Minister Fudge is still clinging to power, though his support base is dissolving quickly. His idea to hold back wages from high-level Ministry personnel is backfiring quite spectacularly. Rumours of his payments to loyal underlings have destroyed any chance he had of retaining the Minister's office. Unless a miracle happens for him, this coming Friday's vote of no confidence will remove him from power."

I nodded, satisfied. "Finally. What about Sirius? Has his case been reopened?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Not formally. But since your rather vivid expose, only a tiny minority of people still believe him guilty. I imagine whoever takes over as Minister will call for an inquiry as one of their first acts. I doubt that most would like to have you as an enemy."

I shrugged, not at all concerned with how I was viewed by the Ministry. "Who's the smart money on to take over?"

If my choice of phrase surprised him, he gave no indication. "Many people are backing Madam Bones, though young Percy and a large group of middle-level Ministry personnel have thrown their support behind his father."

Huh? "Sorry? Did you say Percy?"

Dumbledore nodded. "He travelled to The Burrow one night, a day or so after your story broke. He sought forgiveness from his family for his actions over the past year. I understand that while Molly and Arthur have fully embraced him back into the family fold, his relationship with his siblings remains cool."

"Only cool? I can't believe that Ron would be anything but livid with him."

Dumbledore winced at a memory. "Yes, you are correct at that. Ronald has not forgiven Percy for what he sees as a betrayal of family. Although during his rather heated exchange with Percy, I caught reference to a letter about you."

I chuckled. "Yeah, that would be a bit of a sticking point between them."

Dumbledore actually looked curious. "I gather Percy wrote a letter to Ron?"

I nodded. "It was after Percy found out that Ron was a prefect. He wrote to congratulate him, and to suggest he join the Ministry side of things; you know, stop listening to you and start supporting Umbridge. He also suggested that Ron should stay away from me. For what it's worth, Percy seemed to be picking up every trick Fudge could teach him. He said that I was unbalanced, and for all he knew, violent too."

Dumbledore sighed. "You can be," he whispered.

I shook my head. "Not at the time," I said flatly. "That built up over the course of the year. It was as much the Ministry's fault as Voldemort's that I've turned out this way."

Dumbledore inclined his head, acknowledging the point. "At any rate, young Percy has returned to the family home, and is currently trying to rebuild his reputation, something that may take a while."

I barked a short laugh. "Two monumental stuff ups in the two years he's been employed? I'd be surprised if he isn't considered jinxed by the people he works with."

Dumbledore gave me a sad nod. "Yes, he hasn't exactly had a dream start to his career, has he? I imagine that many of his goals will have to be abandoned once the inevitable fallout from the Ministry's blindness comes full circle. I simply hope that there will be enough people who still wish to work for the government afterwards for it to function effectively."

I almost snarled. "A functioning government? Why would you want one of those? It's not like we haven't gotten along fine without one."

Once more, a look of pain crossed Dumbledore's features, and he rubbed his temples with his fingertips. "Harry, regardless of your personal views, deeply cynical as they are, the government does have a necessary role in maintaining our society. Claiming otherwise simply ignores the sterling efforts made by the majority of civil servants. Good, honest people who are for the most part, underpaid, overworked and undervalued."

I leaned forward. "Perhaps there are people who fit that description. I'd be happy to include Ron's father in that lot. But in my experience, it is full of self-serving morons who simply want whatever power and prestige they can get. In other words, overpaid, under-worked and overvalued. You know Percy actually claimed that his father was a traitor to the Ministry by siding with you? This came from someone who had been working for the Ministry for just over a year." I snarled, revealing my anger at the situation. "Here I was thinking that you could only be a traitor to your *country*. I had this seemingly quaint notion that not only was it legal, but that I actually had the *right* to question the workings and decisions of the government. Colour me surprised to discover I was wrong."

Dumbledore nodded sadly. "Yes, the Minister and his staff did lose sight of the fact that they are servants to us, and not the other way round. His paranoia has weakened our standing at a time we cannot afford to be anything less than strong."

Again, we sat quietly for a long time, lost in thought. I looked at my watch at one point and noticed that the agreed time was nearly over. "Is there anything else you'd like to talk to me about? Anything else you'd like to ask me?"

Dumbledore nodded quickly, thinking I was about to walk out the door. "Just one last thing, if you don't mind."

I smiled softly. "Take your time. I'm not leaving until you're done."

Dumbledore actually sighed with relief. "Are you happy?"

I blinked and answered without having to think for a second. "I'm in a place where I can learn about potions without having to worry about someone knocking my potion off the desk and getting a zero for that lesson. I don't have to worry about losing house points for simply daring to exist. My teacher has passed me more knowledge about protecting my mind than I thought existed; enough that my scar has only itched on occasion, and I haven't had a headache or had to listen to Voldemort since my apprenticeship started.

"I don't have to bother with idiots taunting me; I don't have to watch my back for attacks from behind or worry about being set up. My teacher is patient, proficient, and caring. While he does his best to keep me safe, he realises that there will be times when I will be in danger, and has taught me to look for ways to minimise the risks. We got into a fight before managing to get the giant's blood, but his first order to me was to escape at the first sign that things were getting out of hand.

"I have been able to set my own schedule, help with truly pragmatic research, and through it all,

my teacher still insists that I have contact with my friends at every opportunity. He wants to make sure that I still enjoy my time.

"Am I happy? Hell yes."

Dumbledore seemed far less stressed after I left, even reiterating that I could have full access to the Library and other Hogwarts' resources during my apprenticeship. Zab may be interested in some of the books in the restricted section. Perhaps I could borrow and copy the ones we needed.

I pushed the door to the Room of Requirement open and stepped inside, only to be brought up short. Not only were the Ministry Crew, Blaise and Susan there, but a large group of senior students from every house too. All waiting with an expectant look on their faces. I grinned as I entered, feeling almost as though I was back with the DA.

My grin widened without help. I had no idea how much I missed teaching. This was going to be interesting.

"OK, I assume you're all here to learn the jinx I just used against the ferret." With a quick thought, the room provided me with several dozen foot-long crystals, lined along the far wall. "Each of you take one crystal, and charm it so sparks flow up through the crystal and are emitted in a stream from the tip."

Without hesitation or question, each and every one of the students in the room stood and collected a crystal. Most cast the simple *Mano Lux* charm to produce the flowing motes of light, but a couple, including Hermione and Blaise, used a far more advanced spell, one that would keep the sparks flowing more or less permanently.

Oh, that might be interesting. Would the crystal shatter?

"Right, the jinx. What it does is force magic back through a wand the wrong way. If cast correctly at a wand, it will effectively fry the wand's core, making it impossible to cast a spell from that wand until it gets repaired. Do not try this on each other. I mean it. Ron? No, you can't cast it on Crabbe and Goyle's wands. No! Look, practice all you want on these," I warned, holding up and wiggling one of the crystals. "Although, you can use it on every Death Eater you see," I relented, before sighing at Ron's grin. "Neither of them are Death Eaters yet."

A couple of hands rose. "Um, doesn't it blow up a wand? That's what you did."

I shook my head. "That's not what is supposed to happen."

I took some time and explained what Malfoy had done to give himself a power boost and how that reacted with his wand. "Right, When you cast the jinx, the motes of light will be pushed back through the crystal. Watch, here is the wand movement. Got it?" I asked, repeating the movement a few times. "The incantation is *Everto Veneficus*. Watch."

I placed my crystal down on the shelf, its tip spitting sparks. I aimed my wand at the crystal and

cast, "*Everto Veneficus* ."

Immediately, the motes of light were forced back into the other direction. Without a source of tiny lights, the crystal darkened.

"There. Now, give it a go yourselves."

In a chorus, they all cast the spell. Most people had no lingering effect on their flowing lights, a handful slowed down the flow, but only Neville managed to stop it. Oddly, no one managed to reverse the direction of the sparks. "Right, again," I called out, knowing that this could take some time.

I wondered if my teaching methods needed improvement. I had no difficulty in turning the flow of sparks in the practice crystal Zab set up for me.

I stepped through the fire, landing lightly in the main room of Zabini Manor. I was not surprised to see Zab sitting in one of the armchairs facing the fire, obviously waiting for my return.

"I understand that you have had a rather interesting afternoon," he remarked. "Would you care to relate a version of events based from your point of view?"

I nodded, a small smile on my face. "It's nice to have someone ask me for my side of the story for a change. Normally everyone assumes the worst."

Zab tilted his head slightly in acknowledgement. "Fortunately, that will not happen during your apprenticeship."

I chuckled softly, and threw myself into a spare chair. "Don't bet on it. Dumbledore just accused me of turning dark."

Zab leaned back in his chair, and steeped his hands, placing his fingertips together. "Very well. I will say that I will not assume the worst during your apprenticeship. Though that is certainly a conclusion one could come to, given one side of the story and a few assumptions."

I nodded glumly. "Yeah. Anyway, Malfoy, er, Draco that is, was hunting for me in Hogsmeade. He had a doll made up with certain charms that could direct him to me if he hit it. Just before he-"

Zab held up a hand. "I do believe I asked you to relate events from your point of view, not Mr. Malfoy's. At the time, you had no way of knowing what his motivations were, so I would appreciate an uncluttered version from your perspective only."

I blinked, not having thought of that. "Uh, OK. Sure. I met my friends in the Hog's Head, then we went for a walk around Hogsmeade. A group of Slytherins, Malfoy in the lead, rounded a corner ahead when we were in a park. They bore down on us, Malfoy tossing taunts and insults."

Zab raised his eyebrows. "How did you respond?"

I shrugged. "Insulted him back."

Zab rolled his eyes. "Displaying such maturity in the process."

I shook my head. "Ignoring him would have been a mistake. I could feel his aura, and it was hissing and spitting like mine does when I'm angry. He was ready to attack me."

Zab actually looked curious. "And what did you do?"

"I challenged him to a duel, at which point he threatened to kill me. I cleared the area behind me of people, and lined up ready for him to attack."

"Go on."

"He used some pretty heavy-duty spells. Affligo and Vulnero curses, along with some other spells that would have crippled me if they'd connected. I just stood there and gently deflected them behind me."

"You toyed with him?"

I took a breath to deny that, but it caught in my throat. "I suppose I did. By taunting him like I did, I forced him to lose control of some of his more powerful curses."

"And then?"

I pursed my lips together. "Well, I used the Everto spell you taught me. I tried to neutralise his wand."

Zab's eyes remained steady, but something behind them told me that he was surprised. "You used it? It worked correctly?"

I frowned. "Well, yeah, it neutralised his wand, but no, it didn't work correctly. I had to get close enough that I wouldn't miss, but I felt the sensation of forcing magic back up the ferret's wand. The only problem was that instead of fizzing out, the thing exploded. Ruined his hand."

Zab leaned forward, lacing his fingers together, leaving his index fingers pointing out towards me. "That spell should not have had that effect."

I nodded. "I know. But afterwards, one of the Slytherins with Malfoy admitted that he drank a potion before confronting me. Potensavenenum."

Zab's eyes finally showed some semblance of surprise. "Ah, I see. And you believe that dosing himself with Potensavenenum was what caused his wand to explode after your spell?"

I frowned. "Well, yes, of course. He had forced more magic through his wand's core in the previous five minutes than he had in the last five months. What else could have caused it?"

Zab waved a hand airily. "A result of your mutual enmity, maybe over-excitement, or a subconscious miscalculation on you part on the amount of power to use, maybe even a miscalculation on my part on the result of using that spell on the wood that particular wand was constructed from; it could be any number of things. But yes, I agree that the most likely reason by far would be young Malfoy's use of that potion. Just remember to keep your mind open. Once you have made your mind up, you have closed it off to anything else you could possibly learn from that experience."

I laughed softly. "Fair enough, but I think that trying to determine if it was something else that caused the explosion would be a waste of time. I hardly think that you'd be able to find a willing volunteer to experiment with."

Zab inclined his head in acknowledgement. "What happened after you maimed young Malfoy?"

I shifted in the chair to get comfortable. "I tied off his forearm to slow the bleeding, then got Blaise and Hermione to take him to the infirmary at Hogwarts."

"No, I'm referring to your soapbox oration delivered in front of the gathered Hogsmeade residents."

I didn't even bother to try and figure out just how he knew what had happened. Zab had already demonstrated that he had a great deal of information about recent events in the wizarding world.

"Oh, well, all I said was that they needed to stand up for themselves. To stick together and attack anyone who attacks them. I suggested that Snape is coddling the Slytherins in an effort to produce dud followers for Voldemort, which seemed to both shock and annoy the Slytherins present."

"I can imagine."

"I sort of accidentally let slip that Voldemort is a half-blood. Well, when I say accidentally, I mean-"

Zab held up a hand. "I believe I fully understand what you mean. Please continue without the tiresome justifications."

I hummed an agreement. "That news was greeted with suspicion, alarm and not a little shock. At least one student didn't believe me, and I suggested that he examine the wand that is casting the Cruciatus curse on him when he fails whatever task Voldemort sets him. I described Tom Riddle's wand for comparison purposes."

Zab actually chuckled.

"Anyway, after that my close friends and I went to Hogwarts, to the Room of Requirement. Blaise was included, you'll be happy to know. I answered their questions, keeping a few inconsequential things under my hat."

"That's good to hear."

"Then Dumbledore interrupted. He said he wanted to speak to me, and that in return I could have free run of the castle."

Zab rolled his head around, stretching his neck. "Hardly something of worth to give away, since it would give him ample opportunity to observe you."

I shrugged. "Anyway, I agreed only if I could leave if he didn't listen to what I was saying. He accused me of being dark. No, sorry, he accused me of *becoming* dark." I shook my head at the memory. "He was trying to convince me to rejoin Hogwarts, so that my friends could keep me grounded."

Zab ran his fingertips around the edge of his goatee. "He thought you deliberately maimed young Malfoy, didn't he?"

I nodded glumly. "Yeah. I fried his wand when he wouldn't let me leave, and I fried Snape's wand when he tried to attack me."

Zab's head slowly twisted around to face me directly. "I beg your pardon?"

I swallowed, but pressed on. Zab had been understanding up to this point. "He refused to let me leave. I said if he didn't open the door I'd blow it up, he drew his wand, I neutralised it. It worked that time correctly."

Zab's eyes narrowed. "And Snape?"

I shrugged. "He barged in as angry as I'd ever seen him. He'd obviously just come from the Hospital wing. He took one look at me, whipped out his wand and demanded to know what I'd done. I cast it on his wand too."

Zab narrowed his eyes at me. "Wonderful. You just demonstrated a relatively unknown spell in front of two highly intelligent wizards. Perhaps we should again go over the principle of keeping some skills secret."

I winced. "Um, I sort of tried teaching that spell to a few dozen people."

Zab almost bolted upright. "What?!"

Oh, bugger. "Um, Blaise, Ron and a few others wanted to know how to cast that spell. I showed them."

Zab's face coloured. "Do I need to specifically define what you can show others?"

I took a deep breath. "Perhaps it would help. On the rather good chance that any of them encounter a Death Eater some time soon, they may stand a better chance of survival!"

Zab loomed over me. "Damnit, I developed that jinx specifically for a reason. To have an advantage over everyone I met in a duel! I used it quite extensively in the past, and I was famous

for refusing to teach it to anyone! Once Ollivander starts getting a long line of wands with burned out cores to repair, someone is going to put two and two together and realise that I'm still around!"

My eyes narrowed. "What, two people can't come up with the same or similar spells with no contact between them? Anyway, for all Ollivander knows, you showed your son, who showed his Granddaughter, who showed me. Yes, it is a bit of a roundabout explanation, but now that Blaise knows it too, your anonymity is preserved."

Zab drew in a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Perhaps. But you've got more to lose than I should knowledge of my continued existence become public."

I nodded. "But consider. Besides Dumbledore and Snape, there aren't going to be any more wands sent to Ollivander to repair. I told the group to only use it on Death Eaters. I'm pretty sure that those wands will be snapped rather than repaired."

"And what of Snape and Dumbledore?" he snapped. "Ollivander's memory is legendary. If he happens to mention that their wands have been burned out like some others he fixed forty years ago, connections will be made!"

I felt my face flush, not with anger, but with shame. "That didn't occur to me."

"Obviously," Zab spat, flushed with anger.

Should I say that I was sorry? No. I wasn't. I'd happily take whatever punishment Zab deigned to deal out ten times over and I'd still take the chance to teach my friends that spell again. I was sorry for putting his lifestyle at risk, but again, I'd do it again to help my friends.

I remained silent, waiting for him to respond.

The way he did so surprised me. "Go. Leave me be. I shall decide what I am to do with you once I have composed myself."

Considering the Dursleys blamed me for everything, and the teachers at Hogwarts gave me detentions for things that I did out of everyone's best interests, being told that my punishment would be decided with a clear mind was certainly different. I realised that once he thought about what I had done, Zab was less likely to punish me severely.

Of course, if his location was discovered, that would be punishment enough.

Apprentice Potter

The Return of the Dark Lord

The Return of the Dark Lord

The next fortnight passed quietly. Quietly enough that Zab's eyes and ears in the wizarding world didn't report anything earth shattering, including speculation that Zab had returned from the dead. My punishments were simple -- and painful. First, I simply couldn't visit my friends on Hogsmeade weekends until Zab deemed my punishment done. This was in itself no great hardship, though my friends and I were more than a little upset when I was forbidden from speaking to them in the evenings through the mirror.

It had taken a fair while, but Zab eventually calmed down when it appeared that his secret was safe. He didn't really make my life hell, not being the kind of person whose professionalism is affected by personal difficulties. He did think hard about teaching me other things though, and I'd guess there were at least a couple of things he didn't show me over the next few weeks that he would have under different circumstances.

Not that my freedom was restricted in any other way. I was permitted to visit Diagon Alley, occasionally to purchase something for Zab, sometimes just for me to go shopping for myself. Despite being unhappy with my indiscretion, Zab had been impressed with the level of security measures I undertook myself, allowing me to pretty much step out into the wizarding world every second weekend unsupervised.

I picked up a pensieve, initially balking at the cost, but I wanted to be able to review a lot of my memories from a third party perspective. I didn't want to make the same mistakes I had in the past.

The memories I put in were benign to start with. Snape's expression the last time we met, Malfoy, the bouncing ferret, winning the Quidditch cup in my third year. In the spirit of enquiry, I put in every single memory I had of doing magic as a child.

Though it took some courage to face, I put the memory of what happened before, during and after the third task of the Tournament, all the way through to Fudge refusing to acknowledge Voldemort's return.

In an effort to rebuild the trust between us, I showed that memory to Zab. He sat through it, watching the rebirth of the Dark Lord with stony silence. He watched in surprise as the two

phoenix-feather-cored wands joined, protecting me from the other Death Eaters. In the chaos of the final seconds, the details became sketchy, but Zab nodded with approval at how I escaped so quickly.

As we emerged from the pensieve, still looking ludicrously unfilled compared to Dumbledore's, Zab regarded me with an intense expression.

"Please tell me you can understand why Fudge was initially disinclined to believe you. The fact that your wands are brothers explains why they reacted to each other in that rather unexpected way, but the whole scene was unbelievable, bordering on farcical. No, I think the only reason Dumbledore believed you immediately was that he has knowledge of a prophecy regarding the two of you."

I hadn't thought of it in that way. "But if Fudge had listened to Crouch, he would have confirmed my story!"

Zab waved away my indignation. "Again, I'm not suggesting in the least that Fudge acted correctly. The fact that his personal dementor guard kissed a man who was supposed to be dead instead of ordering an investigation implies that at best, he didn't want to hear the truth, and at worst, that he was involved himself. But remember, as a politician, Fudge exists, excuse me, existed in a realm where personal standing and integrity were paramount, and that any hint of-

"So he was kicked out!" I blurted, before immediately giving Zab a contrite look. "Sorry. I just couldn't stand that prick."

Zab's lips twitched through his goatee. "Understandable. He was barely adequate as Minister during times of peace, squandering time and public resources building a circle of friends and acquaintances he hoped would keep him in A-list society once he had resigned from politics. The vote of no-confidence was held Friday last, and, as expected, Fudge was expelled from his role. In a statement to the press, he claimed that he was being made a scapegoat for errors made by other government personnel, but as of that moment, he was no longer a power."

Though the news thrilled me, I couldn't help but think that Fudge had got away with little punishment, if being publicly ridiculed and recorded in history as a self-serving weasel could be called 'little'. Zab's next words stunned me.

"Weasley appears to be making a fair impact so far. One of the best things he has put forward is Defense against the Dark Arts lessons to adults in the general public."

I blinked. "Arthur Weasley?"

Zab rolled his eyes. It had probably been a fortnight since I'd accidentally asked a question. "Do you know of any other Weasleys in politics?"

At least I had an answer for this one. "Besides his son Percy, you mean?"

Zab's look was one of pure disgust. "You actually believe that idiot has a chance at becoming Minister at any point in his lifetime?"

I shook my head. "Of course not. But Mr. Weasley has three brothers, and six sons. I don't really know anything about his extended family. His daughter Ginny was the first female Weasley to be born in generations. For all I know, there could well be dozens of Weasleys in the government."

Zab scowled briefly, but it was an expression of humour. "Point taken. Yes, Arthur Weasley was appointed interim Minister. Initially, he had minor, but visible backing. Smart money was on Madam Bones, since historically, when going to war, someone with experience in law enforcement has been chosen to lead. But Bones refused the post, and threw her backing behind Arthur at the last moment. As someone who spoke up against Fudge before the midden hit the windmill, his recent reputation was one of integrity. Throw in the fact that Dumbledore and several of ex-Minister Fudge's lower-level personal staff were backing him, and he had just enough support to pip the other contenders."

As I absorbed this, an unbidden memory surfaced, and I burst into laughter. To Zab's enquiring expression, I said, "I think Ron's Divination skills may be more substantial than he thinks. Last year, when it didn't look like Gryffindor had a chance at winning the Quidditch cup, he said that his Dad had just as much chance of becoming Minister as we had of winning the cup. Well, we won. So did his Dad."

Zab's smile grew slowly, but broadly. "I don't suppose this young man would mind making a few vague statements regarding some upcoming horse races, would he?"

My apparition lessons also progressed quickly, considering I was only being instructed in that for an hour every other day. Zab's manor had anti-apparition wards around it, similar to Hogwarts, though nowhere near as extensive. Also, oddly enough, they didn't extend underground. Where the dungeons of Hogwarts were protected by the wards, generations of Zabinis had been taught to magically hurl their constituent atoms across vast distances in a cavern somewhere beneath the manor.

Zab's apparition lessons were conducted in a chamber lit with glowing globes. One globe acted as a portkey, taking us up to the manor, and then down to the chamber again. Without an accurate idea where the chamber was located, apparating directly to it would be impossible, or at least stupid in a *very* terminal way. The chamber itself was about half the size of a football pitch, with a high, stalactite-encrusted ceiling. The uneven floor added an unwelcome complexity to practising apparition, though the cool, silent environs almost made up for this by being conducive to relax and concentrate in.

Despite being unlicensed, the knowledge that I could now escape from a great many traps gave me a sense of security. The fact that I'd not have to rely on portkeys again for most things helped considerably.

At my suggestion, once I was proficient, we even had a dozen or so mock duels down there. The idea was to use apparition to pop around the chamber, firing off marking hexes to spatter on

contact. I admit, I shamelessly stole the idea of a paint gun for this, but Zab actually took to it like a professional.

Though we both started cautiously, apparating so that our backs were always to the wall, soon we were laughing as we popped around the cavern, hiding behind bumps on the ground and in little valleys in the rock. After almost an hour of this, we both took the portkey back, I thoroughly stained, Zab with a few secondary splatter spots here and there. The old guy could apparate and disapparate in less than a third of a second, giving him a rather useful advantage over me. Quickly running through the checklist of what I needed to do to disapparate took me almost a full two seconds. Despite my competitive streak, this was not something I wanted to rush, given the consequences of splinching myself.

Even so, the humour in the situation filled us both, and my faux pas of a while ago seemed to be forgiven.

Once Zab was satisfied with my apparition work, we busied ourselves in his research. Occasionally, we dipped into his family pensieve, searching for clues, with no real luck. He did ask if I was willing to add my memories of Voldemort to the enormous memory store, to which I hesitatingly agreed. I wasn't sure I was happy with the idea that my memories would be viewable by any Zabini in the future, but the fact was that if I was to die in the upcoming war, there needed to be some record of what happened.

Besides Voldemort's resurrection, I put in the battle with a young Tom Riddle and the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets, my fight with Quirrell, and the recent battle in the Department of Mysteries. Zab examined all in minute detail, coming to the conclusion that while I had good instincts *during* a battle, I needed some work in ignoring my emotions in such intense times, as well as serious lessons in identifying and avoiding battle in the first place.

Though the family pensieve was no help with the potion, we had managed to rebuild a great deal of the fractured recipe, but two full steps were illegible. Once more, we branched out into other potions and drafts, trying to determine exactly how this one fitted together.

The breakthrough came when Zab noticed a similarity between a potion for increasing the muscle strength of the drinker had an identical step as the unknown potion. Unfortunately, the ingredients were out of proportion in the two recipes. While it was possible to do calculations to determine the amount of the potion was necessary for an imbibor, Zab's skills didn't extend that far. At least, not so far that he'd risk his life on the results.

"No, we will test the volume of potion necessary to increase strength, and also the duration," he said, meticulously noting down in his journal what the forthcoming experiments would require. "It would probably not be a good idea to experiment on you, Harry. With your body going through a growth period, it may affect you in unexpected ways."

I sure as hell wasn't going to add anything to that. I knew that there were some potions that could be used with impunity on adults, but were poisonous to those going through puberty.

"Well, instead of experimenting on you, why don't I try and get Grawp to help?" I asked. "I can measure him, and it will take far more of the potion to poison him than it will us, so it'll be safer while experimenting."

Zab gave me that blank look, making my heart soar. "Intriguing. We shall have to use a ratio between his body mass and our own, and you will need a baseline from which to test his gain in strength, but that is... not a bad idea. Not a bad idea at all. Assuming, of course, he agrees," Zab finished, looking at me over his working glasses.

I winced. "Yes, there is that."

I popped into existence on the edge of Grawp's clearing as quietly as I could, pleased that my long-distance apparating was just as good as short distance. Even though I'd only been here a couple of times, I found it surprisingly easy to push myself to a remote location with magic. I suppose having done it before as a child (when I apparated onto the roof of my primary school to escape Dudley and his gang) I sort of subconsciously knew that I could do it again. Despite Zab's instruction however, I was still nervous about apparating without a licence to a controlled area. The Ministry may be overwhelmed enough to overlook the odd trip, but I still thought it would be better to avoid calling attention to myself unless absolutely necessary.

The first thing that caught my eye was a massive fire-pit, live with glowing coals in the middle of the clearing, with a thick, wooden post at either end. Across the two posts sat a long metal shaft, acting as a skewer for a massive carcass. The scent of roasting meat filled the area, and I was at first surprised that the smell wasn't attracting other predators. Though, I suppose even the stupidest predator soon learns that a giant's home is off limits. At least to those who wish to continue to donate the species gene pool.

The roasting pit was not the only new addition. A massive lean-to had been set up against where part of the mound had been. Grawp had obviously excavated the mound into a vague 'U' shape, producing a fairly snug sleeping area, one where he would always be protected from the wind. The changes had transformed the scene, making the clearing seem more like a semi-permanent campsite rather than a temporary dwelling. Despite all this, Grawp was not in attendance.

"Bugger," I said softly, drawing my wand. The fact that it was a giant-sized meal told me that Grawp was still around, and that Bane hadn't managed to make good his threat yet. But I was still worried about how Grawp would react to my presence. While I helped save him from the centaurs the last time I was here, things may have changed. If he was eating, he may not appreciate even friends as company. Hell, for all I knew, he might not even recognise me.

I sat down on a sun-warmed patch of grass at the edge of the clearing, putting my backpack next to me and leaned back against the surprisingly smooth bark on the tree trunk behind me. Zab hadn't let up with his experiments at remote casting; at least, not since he noticed that my range was increasing. At the rate he was going, I'd be able to cast spells from the other side of the house by the time I was Dumbledore's age.

My weariness gently overtook me, and in the unseasonably warm, late autumn sun, I dozed off.

My eyes flickered open at sounds of eating. Either Grawp was moving a lot quieter when moving around than usual, or I was far more tired than I thought. I straitened my glasses and looked over at Hagrid's brother.

Grawp was sitting on what was left of his mound, tearing at the freshly roasted carcass with his teeth. He was holding the skewer bearing the carcass in one hand, with a grubby sheet wrapped around that end to prevent him burning himself. Obviously, the now-unidentifiable blob had been cooking on the pit for some time. After all, it must take several hours for a slab of meat twice the size of a bison to even get to medium-rare.

"Hello, Grawp," I said loudly as I rose, trying not to startle the giant.

He grunted in surprise as he over his shoulder towards me, tendrils of uncooked intestines hanging down from his teeth. My stomach lurched at the sight, and I decided at that point that I would never make jokes about seeing spinach stuck between Hermione's teeth ever again. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, flicking the offal onto the ground, and rose to his feet.

"Haree with big voice?"

Relief ran through me like a reverse cold shiver. He recognised me. Not only that, he remembered something about me that awed him. I nodded, struggling not to smile. "Yes, Grawp. How are you?"

"Grawp good," he said with a big smile. "Not hungry. Not cold. Good food." He held out the metal skewer towards me. Whatever creature was unfortunate enough to have been cooked, its remains were still larger than I was, despite the fact that a giant had been tearing at it for a while. "Haree want some? Meat good," Grawp offered.

"Ah, no thank you, Grawp." I smiled at the giant, wondering if I should approach. "Haree already ate." While he was rather nervous around me the last time we met, I had just blown his tree-sized club from his hand and shouted down a herd of centaurs into submission. I decided to risk taking a few steps. "Has Hagrid been to see you recently?"

A frown appeared on the massive humanoid's face, one I recognised as him not understanding the question. "I mean, has Hagrid been here?"

Grawp nodded slowly. "Hagger come two sleeps ago." Grawp put the skewer back on the roasting pit, rose to his feet and stretched. "Hagger say-," he started, before dropping the sheet held in his hand. His eyes were focused on something over the tops of the trees behind me, and his docile expression slid off his face. "No," he grunted, looking scared. No, looking petrified.

"What is it?" I blurted, looking over my shoulder in vain. Like I could see anything behind me more than a few metres through the thick wood.

"Others," was all he said, in almost a whisper.

I frowned. "Other what?"

"Other big ones!" he almost shrieked, looking terrified. I almost jumped at the sudden change in volume. He stood up on his mound on tiptoe. "There, other big ones," he said, pointing at something distant. I had no idea what direction he was pointing, and without my broom, no way of knowing what was going on there. I looked around for a tree to climb, noting that around the clearing, most had been stripped of foliage and lower branches. I grit my teeth, knowing that there was only one way to find out what was going on."

"Um, Grawp? Can you show me?"

The idea of touching someone with a voice that could be as big as mine seemed to shock him into something resembling normality. He swallowed, but held out a hand. As cautiously as I'd ever been, I knelt on his palm, and grabbed his wrist for support.

Hagrid's brother lifted me up easily, only to show me a nightmare.

A half dozen giants were slowly crashing through the outskirts of Hogsmeade. Even as far away as I was, I could see the press of bodies as they ran in terror from the sight. But there was something odd about the way they were acting. From what I'd thought, these giants would be bloodthirsty, howling for a kill. But they were not actively trying to injure anyone.

An icy shiver ran through me as realisation struck. The giants were not attacking. As relieving as that sounded, the reality was far worse.

They were herding. Herding the Hogsmeade residents and students into a trap.

I looked up at Grawp's face, and I could see that he was terrified. "Grawp!" I shouted, with no response. I swore, drew my wand and cast, *Sonorus* . "GRAWP!" I said in a normal tone of voice, which still shook the trees at the edge of the clearing.

The giant's head snapped around to face me, looking suddenly more afraid of me than of his kin. "GRAWP! I HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU. SOMETHING THAT WILL MAKE YOU STRONGER THAN ANY OTHER GIANT!"

He frowned, not understanding my long sentence, and I rolled my eyes at my idiocy. "HAREE HAS DRINK! MAKE GRAWP STRONG! MAKE GRAWP STRONGER THAN OTHER BIG ONES!"

I scrabbled through my backpack, and drew out the ten-litre bottle of strength potion. I tore the lid off and held the entire container out to him, hoping both that he would trust me, and praying that he could take the lot without poisoning him with a strength overdose.

Tentatively, Grawp reached out and took the container from me, holding it like a shot glass. "Make Grawp strong?"

I nodded. "STRONGEST!"

Grawp swallowed nervously, but tilted his massive head back and tossed the entire container down in one gulp. He blinked for a couple of seconds, then a frown crossed his face. I almost lost my balance when he belched like a thunderclap and started trembling like an earthquake. Almost absently, he lifted me up even further and gently placed me on his shoulder. It was like sitting on a table, albeit an unstable table covered with a greasy tablecloth twenty feet in the air.

Grawp silenced and stood still, looking down at his hands. With sudden determination, he took two steps and snatched the biggest tree he could see from the ground without apparent effort, even slightly losing his balance as the tree provided no apparent resistance.

"Grawp strong!" he shouted in wonder. His massive head turned back towards the encroaching giant force. "Grawp stronger!" He shouted, almost deafening me. With massive strides, he charged towards them, still over a kilometre distant.

Watching a magically strengthened giant run through a densely forested area was a sight no one would ever forget, no matter how much they tried. With each loping stride, I had a sensation of weightlessness, before a shuddering crash as Grawp's foot hit the ground. An instant of crushing weight as he pushed forward and up, and then the weightlessness again.

Throughout it all, the noise of deforestation was almost deafening. Trees that would have towered over even Hagrid simply tumbled and cracked as they struck Grawp's chest, leaving a trail of uprooted trees behind that any wood chipping company would be proud of. It was like he was running through tall grass, for all it slowed him down.

The tree in his grip was being de-branched quite effectively by our rush through the forest. Doing my best to adjust for the I aimed my wand down at it, despite the jostling, and cast an unbreakable charm down at it. Instantly, it started shredding the trees it struck, instead of the other way around.

Though it felt like only seconds, it was probably half a minute before Grawp reached the edge of the forest. The part of the fleeing crowds that were running towards us halted and broke in another direction in terror. Grawp ignored them.

One of the other giants noticed our approach, and my eyes widened as I realised just why Grawp was called the runt of the family. Hagrid's brother hardly came up to their chests.

Not that Grawp slowed. He drew back the unbreakable tree-club in a double-handed grip, and with a battle cry of, "GRAWP NOT RUNT!" he swung the club with all his enhanced strength at the body of the closest giant.

The noise of the connection nearly blew me off Grawp's shoulder. I only just managed to grab more tightly to a secure enough handful of his greasy, hide tunic to prevent me from falling to my death twenty feet below. Once safely tethered, I looked up to see one of the most majestic, terrifying, yet awesome sights of my life.

A thirty foot humanoid flying backward through the air in a beautiful parabolic arc, doubled over from the blow to the stomach.

Grawp gave a roar of pure power, staking his claim of ownership of this area. I was thankful that he was screaming straight up in the air, or my poor eardrums wouldn't have survived intact. As it was, they rang from the war cry. The other five giants stopped their terrorising, and turned to face Grawp.

The nearest one raised his club and closed the distance between us with two hulking steps. The massive club in his hand arced down, and would have driven Grawp's skull into his chest, strength potion or no, had I not cast "*REDUCTO*", noting that I was becoming rather proficient at the curse. The club turned into a shower of wooden shards, which only attracted Grawp's attention.

With a grunt of effort, Grawp swotted the second giant under the chin on his back swing. The massive creature's head snapped back and his feet left the ground, but his body landed at the same time as Grawp's club slammed down into him with a double-handed blow, powered by all of Hagrid's brother's rage. The strike was hard enough to lift Grawp's own feet off the ground. The stricken giant's ribs splintered audibly and caved easily under the blow, delivered with another shout that Grawp wasn't a runt.

My left-handed grip on Grawp's tunic failed me at that point, and I fell down from Grawp's shoulder without making a single noise, since I was holding my breath in panic. I thudded down on the edge of the fallen giant's stomach, losing my own breath and winding myself at the impact. While it wasn't exactly a bouncy castle, it broke my fall enough that I didn't injure myself in the initial landing, and I rolled over for another six foot fall onto the soft, damp grass. Grawp stood and held his tree above his head and bellowed another challenge.

I got unsteadily to my feet, using my left hand on the recently expired giant to keep my balance. I took a couple of quick gulps of air to get my lungs working properly. Now that I was no longer in danger of falling to my death or being swotted out of the sky by a rogue club, I shouted my approval, the sonorus charm still in place. "GET THEM, GRAWP! GO GRAWP! YEAH!" I shouted.

Grawp gave another bellow and charged the closest pair of giants. With his enhanced strength, rage and weapon, he proved no less controllable to the second pair than the first.

Figuring I could safely leave the remaining giants to my enraged friend, I removed the sonorous charm, and scrabbled underneath my shirt for the talisman Zab gave me. Holding it in my left hand, I said, "Assistance required." Not waiting for said assistance to appear, I turned and sprinted towards the main part of town. If the residents and students were being herded towards a specific point, I'd bet quite a number of internal organs that it was the worst place for them to be.

"Harry! Harry! Over here, mate!" came a familiar voice.

Panting, I glanced over to see almost a hundred younger students huddled together along one side of a stone building, with a handful of older students were keeping them calm and together. Dean Thomas was desperately waving me over. I skidded on the dusty road, turned and jogged over to the group. With a deep breath, I leaned against the wall, trying to catch my wind and slow my heart.

"Harry! There's bloody giants out there mate!" he said, rather unnecessarily in my opinion. I cannot think of any situation where that statement would convey unknown information.

I nodded, clutching my side where a stitch was starting. "Yeah, but there's at least two less than there were a couple of minutes ago before I got here with a friend," I said, just before a muffled crash flattened a building a few doors along. The ground trembled at the impact enough that the stone wall protecting the students began cracking and flaking, threatening to collapse on us. "Oh, shit! Into the street! Everyone!" I shouted, running out there myself.

Two doors down, the giant lying on the collapsed building had one end of Grawp's club held tightly in his hands, the other end stabbed through his chest. While fatal, the blow had obviously wrenched the mighty weapon from my friend's grasp. The three remaining giants had attacked the now unarmed Grawp from different sides, one snatching the tiny giant from behind in a massive bear hug.

Grawp wasn't in the mood to fight fair though. With his arms pinned to his sides, he shifted one hand slightly and took a *giant* handful of the front of his captor's loin cloth. From the determined bunching of muscles in Grawp's forearm, I'd say he was squeezing hard enough to turn the giant's stones into sand.

The hideous squeal erupting from the throat of the suddenly sterile giant holding Grawp sent shivers of shared pain down the spine of every single male present, to the confusion of the females. The witches seriously had no idea why every pair of wizard's knees pressed together at the sound.

The poor giant let go, and went to clutch at his groin; Grawp took the opportunity and tore his hand away, deciding not to follow suit. Blood from the stricken giant sprayed out with great force from the now opened artery, and I found myself vaguely wondering if I could find a container to collect it. I shook my head to clear it; I needed to think clearly right now.

With the remains of one giant's reproductive organs in his fist, Grawp slugged another in the jaw, nearly tearing the bone from the giant's face. The blow was hard enough to spin the creature around in a circle. Once the full three-sixty was complete, the struck giant gave Grawp an odd look, accentuated by the fact that his jaw was all but hanging from one side of its face, and fell over backwards. The shock travelled through the ground, and we all jumped as a group.

I gestured towards the terrifying fight. "Hagrid's brother is a bit of a handful, isn't he?" I said with a massive grin.

Dean's eyes bulged quite impressively. "That's Hagrid's brother?"

I nodded happily. Grawp was grabbed around the throat and throttled, and we watched with fascination as the smaller giant planted his foot hard into the groin of the last uninjured giant with enough force to lift the two and a half-tonne behemoth off his feet. Another wince ran through the male portion of the group as the giant let go of Grawp's throat and collapsed into a groaning heap.

"Yep. Name's Grawp. Nice guy when you get to know him, a real party pooper when he's pissed. Come on, he's having fun. Let's leave him to it."

"Um, Mr. Potter?"

I frowned at the oddly formal address and looked down at the uncertain face of a young Hufflepuff witch, probably a third year. "Yes?"

She pointed away from where Grawp was explaining the finer points of fisticuffs as it pertained to a small group weighing in at almost ten tonnes between them. The muffled cracks of metre-thick bones breaking were becoming irritating. The fact that the sounds were getting echoes set my teeth on edge. Grawp's repeated claims that he wasn't a runt were becoming tedious too. Given he was delivering a punch or kick with every denial, either the other giants were slow learners or he was working off some considerable stress.

I turned to see a half dozen or so Dark Marks floating up at the far end of the village. "Oh, bugger," I said. I reached out and grabbed the front of Dean's robes. "Right, Dean, take everyone here to the Shrieking Shack over there," I said quickly, pointing to the decrepit building with my wand. "In the main room, you'll find an entrance to a tunnel. Get all the kids into it and follow it to the end. Once you're there, you'll hear creaking and thuds. You'll be under the Whomping Willow. You'll be safe there. *Stay there*. I'll organise someone to come and get you when it's safe. Got that?"

Dean opened his mouth. "But the shack! It's haunted!"

I growled softly. "So is Hogwarts, and you live there."

He nodded dumbly, then signalled to the rest of the group.

I nodded back, and gave him a shove in the right direction. "Good. GO!"

All but one student ran for the shack. A very familiar witch. "Cho?" I said as the group left me behind.

The tiny Asian witch nodded. "I'm not leaving you this time, Harry," she said with the determination of a Gryffindor, twirling her wand in her fingers.

I gave her a tight nod. "Fine. But you obey anything I say immediately, understand?"

She nodded again. "Yes."

Without another word, I began jogging towards the marks. I counted eight floating at various points. As we ran towards them, I asked, "Your best subject is charms, isn't it?"

She nodded. "I'm top of the class," she panted.

"Do you know how to dissipate one of those? How to dispel it?"

Cho shook her head. "No, it's not covered in any of the Charms' text books. If I knew the incantation I might be able to do something, but I don't think I'm powerful enough to dispel it."

"Morsmordre," I puffed.

"What?" she asked, startled.

"That's the incantation. Morsmordre."

Her pretty features were a mess of emotions, confusion and fear amongst them. "H-How do you know that?"

I realised what she was thinking. In an instant, my expression screwed up into one of intense impatience. "Oh for fucks sake. Look, I was almost standing next to the person who cast it at the World Cup. That sort of thing tends to stick in your memory."

She had the grace to look abashed. "Sorry, Harry. I promised after last year that I'd always believe in you."

I snorted, slowing to a jog as we neared the first one. "Yeah well, you wouldn't be the first to break such a promise."

Before we could reply we heard a Cruciatus curse being cast from behind a Gladrags, followed by a high pitched scream. I quickly cast a disillusionment charm over Cho and sent her around the far corner, with franticly whispered instructions to stun the Death Eater once I distracted him.

I watched her footprints in the grass disappear behind the far corner of the building. With a deep breath, I cast *Imago* on myself, silently thanking Blaise for introducing me to that one. Cautiously, I crept down the length of the tight alley between buildings, and stepped out into the rear courtyard to find two figures in black torturing a group of bound students.

One Death Eater, obviously the lookout for the pair, shouted a warning as I stepped around the corner. The other, obviously in charge, spun around ready to curse me, only to hesitate for half a second, trying to decide which of the three of me to curse.

Cho made up his mind for him, casting *Stupefy* from her cover. The lookout Death Eater slumped to the ground with a sigh, causing the remaining Death Eater to spin and hurl a killing curse in Cho's direction.

The curse crashed against the edge of the building, blowing a fist-sized hole in the corner of the building, setting the edges on fire. Thankfully, the vague outline of Cho I could make out ducked back behind the corner and underneath where the curse struck. My own *Expelliarmus* picked the remaining Death Eater up bodily and hurled him over his group of prisoners, head first into the trunk of an elderly tree while his wand flew easily to my free hand.

An unexpected and exceedingly unwelcome killing curse was thrown my way, passing through one of my images.

I threw myself flat, feeling another curse zip over my head. Grunting slightly at the impact with the ground, I rolled up into a crouch and cast, "*Protego* ," knowing that it wouldn't stop a killing curse, but might give Cho or I enough time to take out the hidden Death Eater.

Two more hexes sparked off my shield from the unseen assailant before Cho captured his attention with a professionally executed spread of curses. I threw a curse at a compost heap near where the invisible Death Eater stood, showering the area with soft, damp dirt, vegetation and mud.

Even under an invisibility cloak, you can't hide from a short, sharp shower of shit. From behind the partially ruined wall, Cho kept the Death Eater's attention divided, enough that he fell victim to a quick *Tarantallegra* , which caused him to get tangled in and trip over the edge of the cloak.

A stunner from both Cho and I hit him at the same time. The tableau held for a few seconds before the group of people bound in front of me burst into tears, laughter tinged with hysteria, or pleading for help.

I glanced over to the bound group, feeling like crying myself with relief that no one was hurt. "Any others?"

One wizard shook his head, panting through his gag as though he'd been in the duel too. I recognised him as one of the adults who occasionally worked at the Quidditch shop, and I released him from his bonds first.

"Here," I started, handing him the Death Eater's wand. "Snap it, find the other two bastards' wands and snap them too." I turned to Cho, still only just able to discern her outline. "Cho, let a handful of these people go, get them to bind the three morons, then hit them with enough stunners to have them sleeping for a fortnight, *then* get them to untie the rest of the group." Orders given, I turned to leave snatching up the invisibility cloak. I hadn't thought to bring mine. It was rather accommodating of the Dark Idiots to supply me with one.

On a whim, I nudged the mask off the Death Eater whose cloak I had just purloined. I rolled my eyes as I recognised Marcus Flint. No wonder he only threw two killing curses at me, he'd have been exhausted after that effort.

One of the freed villagers flicked off the masks of the other two. Goyle Senior and a young kid I didn't recognise. Looks like there's been a jail break.

"Harry, wait!" Cho exclaimed as I threw the cloak on and started to leave. "What about that?" she asked, pointing to the sky.

"Can you dispel it?"

Though I couldn't make out her expression due to the disillusionment charm, I could almost feel her anxiety. She raised her wand and chanted softly for a few seconds, but eventually said, "No, I don't think I can. It's too strong."

I thought for a second, and what crossed my mind split my face into a massive grin.

"Do you think you can modify it?"

A pause. "Probably. What do you have in mind?"

I crept slowly, under Flint's invisibility cloak, towards the next floating Dark Mark, close enough to pick up the hideous laughter coming from the Death Eaters beneath it. I snarled to myself, feeling my anger build. These bastards were so cocky and incompetent that two students had taken down three of them, yet grown men and women ran from them like they were invincible or something.

The laughter came from behind a particularly impressive house. The building was separated from its less impressive, but far tidier neighbour next door with a thick hedge. Thick enough to provide serious cover, but still contained a few gaps to look through. I crept along behind the hedge, getting myself into a position from where I could launch a surprise attack against the two visible Death Eaters, without giving my position away to the probable remaining third.

I didn't get a chance to ambush them however. From my cover, I saw one Death Eater gasp in shock and point to the sky behind me, reaching out vaguely to try and get the other's attention. The other, busy cursing open wounds on his bound captive, was finally distracted from his task turned to see what the problem was.

I turned to look myself, wondering how Cho had managed. It took all of my discipline not to cough with repressed laughter and give away my location. I made a mental note to case a silencing charm on me as soon as possible.

The massive skull's eyes had been slightly enlarged, while it's mouth and jaw had been likewise reduced, giving the overall feeling of a caricature. Cho had replaced the serpent in the mouth with the Sherlock Holmes style pipe that billowed pink bubbles instead of smoke. The fluffy ear-muffs, spectacles and handlebar moustache I suggested had been added to perfection.

All in all, it looked like a child's drawing; about as threatening as a member of a boy band.

The flashing, lightning-bolt on the forehead was an unexpected, yet most welcome, touch. It meant that Voldemort would be quick to blame me, and not the other students for such a sin.

With me hidden, and the Death Eater pair standing still and gawking at Cho's work, I took the opportunity to examine my surroundings to get an advantage.

The building behind me was made of stone, and the well maintained lawn shouted louder than words that the perfect hedge I was hiding behind belonged to the owner of this house. With a grin, I knew just how to take care of these bastards.

I stood, still invisible, and cast, "*Accio Death Eaters* ," over the top of the hedge.

Once I was sure the magic had worked, I ducked and leapt to one side (not an easy move in an

invisibility cloak), allowing the two visible threats to slam hard into the unyielding stonework, one flying over the foliage, one through it.

As I half expected, a third shriek accompanied the two muffled shouts, and a third, black-robed body became visible half-way through their short flight, and hit the wall in time with the others. I managed to get off two *Stupefy* spells before having to dodge a killing curse from one of the recuperating Death Eaters.

Unfortunately, two of the three rose, one very groggy. I cursed at my bad aim. With no thought for the pain involved, I cast "*Incendio* ," in an attempt to ignite the dark robes on all three Death Eaters. With my attention not exactly focused, only one set of robes did anything other than smoulder, but the wearer panicked and tried rolling to put the flames out.

The third witch aimed her wand towards me and cast, "*Accio invisibility cloak* !" In an instant, I cast a banishing spell, accelerating the cloak so that it struck and tangled the witch instead of being caught cleanly.

I managed to stun the Death Eater still rolling on the ground, his robes still on fire. The witch was still trying to extract herself from the invisibility cloak, so I began chanting *Aqueous* in an effort to dispel the flames.

Before I finished, the witch finally tore the cloak away, raised her wand and began the killing curse.

Time slowed while my heart-rate skyrocketed. Panicking, and unable to change my mind in the heat of the moment, I finished the *Aqueous* spell in almost a shriek. Instead of a stream of water like you'd expect from a garden hose, a shocking jet of water like you'd get from a water cannon shot out from the end of my wand and struck the witch in the face, knocking her backwards. The sickening sound of her head hitting the stone wall as she fell indicated she was no longer a threat.

I swallowed nervously, looking down at my trembling hands. No matter how often I'm in a life threatening situation, I'll never get used to the panic. Once more, I took a deep, calming breath. My efforts had left me with three slightly charred, soaking wet, unconscious Death Eaters.

I clutched my heart too, in an effort to try and slow it down, realising that I was breathing hard. Throughout the ten seconds the fight took, my heart probably beat about a hundred times.

I summoned both of the invisibility cloaks, suddenly feeling a little exposed. A few gasps of relief came from the smaller group the Death Eaters had been tormenting, but I just couldn't do anything at that moment but try and compose myself.

An unwelcome noise from behind the pile of Death Eaters startled me, and I was moving before I realised. I dove to one side, cursing that I no longer had the invisibility cloak on, rolled across my shoulder and rose into a crouch. At least that was the plan. I used a fair bit more effort than was required, promptly overbalanced and fell over into the hedge.

I guess my agility on the ground isn't anywhere near as good as it is in the air.

A familiar laugh welcomed my reaction. "Harry, it's just me. And you might need some more practise before trying that."

I grumbled as I rose to my feet, brushing my backside off. "Cho, you've still got my disillusionment charm on you. And I have been practising, thank you very much. I just used a bit more effort than was strictly necessary."

She probably looked down to see for herself, but I was buggered if I could tell. "Sorry," she offered, her voice still tinged with humour. "How did you like my changes?"

I grinned, still a little embarrassed at my clumsiness. "Perfect. Stun those buggers again will you, then help me untie them," I said, pointing over the hedge towards the group of hostages.

Cho set about her task with fervour, hitting the slumbering Death Eaters with a couple of stunners each. If any of them had a heart condition, then they probably didn't any more.

Once the babbling group was freed, I turned back to Cho. "You up to change another one? I think something different this time. We wouldn't want Voldemort to think we were boring now, would we?"

Instead of answering, she cast a stream of chanting charms, and the remains of the group and I watched as the hideous illusion slowly morphed into an oversized skull painted with clown's makeup, a bulbous red nose in the middle, the snake changed to a drooling, slobbering tongue that looked like it had come from a St. Bernard. Or possibly Snuffles. An orange wig topped the changes, and Cho added the flashing lightning bolt on the forehead again to finish. Within two minutes, everyone in the group was free and the change was complete.

Madam Rosemerta, who had been in the captured group looked up. "If that doesn't annoy the Dark Lord, I can't think of anything else that will."

This pronouncement seemingly incurred a detonation overhead, causing everyone in the courtyard to duck involuntarily, with more than a few people screaming. I looked up to see one of the remaining Dark Marks disappearing into a cloud of smoke. I laughed with delight, others were fighting back!

A few seconds later, another Mark began morphing. I simply clapped my hands together and shouted with laughter as I recognised the abused features of Butt appear on the illusion. Instead of a flashing lightning bolt, the three letter W's appeared on the forehead. "Well, it looks like Fred and George are here," I said to no one in particular. "Only they would dare to try to use a Dark Mark as an advertising medium."

A terrified witch who was sitting alone under a tree and hugging her knees looked up at me. "Why are they changing?"

I glanced down at her. "People are fighting back. Now that the giants aren't herding people anymore, the Death Eaters won't be able to spring their traps."

She gibbered to herself, rocking backwards and forwards. "We'll all be killed! We shouldn't fight back! It just makes them worse! I remember!"

One student witch, who I sort of recognised from my last, impromptu DA lesson, grabbed the older witch by her upper arms, jerked her to her feet, and gave her a resounding slap across the face. The sound of palm on cheek echoed around the small courtyard.

"No! We fight! If you want to hide under a tree and piss yourself with fear, go ahead, but I'm with Harry, we're fighting."

I probably looked just as surprised as the slapped witch. "Um, I can get someone to take you to a safe place if you want," I said to the crowd.

"Sod that!" shouted Padma Patil, who I just recognised under the thin veneer of mud and untamed hair.

"Piss off!"

"No bloody way!"

Cho placed a hand on my shoulder, still covered by the charm. "Harry? Don't make us leave this time. You've fought for all of us by yourself enough. Now, it's well past our turn to help."

In the end, nearly fifteen people from the group stayed, while the rest, including a pair of vocally disapproving Gryffindor third-years, made their way to the Shrieking Shack.

It soon became obvious that the while Voldemort and his Death Eaters had put up anti-apparition wards over Hogsmeade, so had someone *else*. We passed one splinched Death Eater, and couldn't resist giving what remained of him in town a few gentle nudges. And a lot of not so gentle nudges.

"So, they not only trapped us, they've been trapped themselves?" asked Padma.

I shrugged. "Sort of looks like it. I can't tell until we work out who put the other wards up. If the Ministry set them up to keep anyone from escaping until they got here then there could be a problem. But I'd have to guess that either the town council or Dumbledore set them up."

"But why would they do that?" asked an adult we picked up hiding in his devastated home.

I shrugged. "If it was the Ministry, it would be so they could catch whoever it was who killed you all after the fact," I said flatly to a few gasps. "If it was the council, it was because they thought that they had a chance to overpower and catch Voldemort and his idiotic followers."

Cho, whose disillusionment charm had evaporated, frowned and glanced at me. "And if it was the Headmaster?"

I snorted. "I wouldn't even try to assign a motive to him."

Further discussion was halted as we carefully eased around a corner. About thirty metres down the main street, spells were being traded between the Three Broomsticks and the home opposite. Whenever a spell broke through the wall or a window, spells from within would repair and shore up the hole.

It rather reminded me of a muggle science fiction movie, with different coloured lasers being shot from each side of the street. Reds, greens, blues, yellows and every colour in between. Any poor bugger caught in the middle wouldn't need to be buried in a coffin, they could just scoop up the rainbow-coloured remains and bury them in a bucket.

The battle in front of us looked to be a stalemate. Even with one side hurling killing curses, the balance didn't seem to be tipping in their favour.

I turned to the group behind. "Who can cast *Serpensortia* ?"

Twelve out of fifteen hands rose.

"Excellent. Let's add a distraction. Those who can, cast it now."

Thirteen snakes of various size appeared on the road in front of us. I pointed at the building in which the Death Eaters had barricaded themselves and hissed at them, "*Go into that house there from the back. Scare and restrain anyone in black robes you find. But do not bite.* "

Instantly, the snakes slithered away, and at least half the group behind let out a collective breath they had been holding. "Merlin, I've never heard anyone speak Parseltongue!" said one homeowner.

Padma snickered. "Remember when Malfoy cast that spell at you in Lockhart's class? He was expecting you to be terrified, and everyone else to be in awe of his spell casting, but you just told it to sit down."

A couple of other students chuckled at the memory, though it had probably been modified in their minds. I don't recall anyone but Hermione being anything but suspicious at the fact that I could talk to snakes.

After a few minutes, startled yelps and screams began to erupt from the Death Eater's hideout, causing much mirth amongst the group behind me. Such a simple victory did wonders for the spine of the unseasoned wizards and witches. Watching men and women who they were brought up to fear run around shrieking with terror gave their morale an extra boost.

I leaned against the wall of one building nonchalantly. "I could never figure out why people were so afraid of these idiots. Gang up on them, cast a couple of unexpected spells, and they go all to pieces."

A few of the Gryffindors in the group were itching to get into the battle. It took me pointing out

that since they were covered in dark mud, charging into battle with people who are casting spells at every dark robed figure they see wasn't the best way to ensure longevity. Friendly fire is not a nice concept.

In any event, the battle, such as it was, soon faded from a raging spell fest into an almost disappointing one-sided triumph, with a variety of hexes and jinxes hitting serpent-fleeing Death Eaters from every direction. The sheer number of spells indicated that there was an enormous body of people in the pub, all of whom would be annoyed at being attacked. Not even Butt looked as bad as some of the Death Eaters lying in the street.

A group burst from the pub, led by two people in auror robes, and flooded the house opposite. More spells were cast, lighting up the windows at the front quite prettily. At least four of Voldemort's followers were caught in the building itself, either wrapped by a boa or on a chair to escape a hissing cobra. All were dragged out into the street and hexed into oblivion.

The members of the home team were surprised initially on discovering that it had been a brace of serpents who had assisted them to victory, but that mystery was solved once I was spotted. Though the greeting shouts were initially so enthusiastic that some of my group weren't sure we would be safe from the battle-drunk mob, their sheer joy proved that we were not going to be attacked on sight. As one, we strolled down the street and met the victors.

It became apparent, to my absolute delight, that the majority of the DA had been eating a late lunch in the Three Broomsticks. Eight Death Eaters had attacked the building, only to be driven into the house opposite for cover. Ron, Hermione, Blaise and Susan had assumed command (despite and over the objections of the two off duty aurors in the pub), and effectively won the battle by driving the Death Eaters away.

Padma found and embraced her sister with a cry of pure relief, and it occurred to me that I'd never realised just how close they were. As I watched them amongst the cheering chaos, Parvati noticed my attention and blushed a deep scarlet. Despite the congratulations and the pervasive joyous feeling of victory, I managed to keep a knowing smile from forming on my face. From what Hermione had told me, Parvati had been teased mercilessly among the Gryffindor girls about the mirror incident. I didn't want to ruin her relief at discovering her sister was alive and well.

There would be plenty of time for teasing once the day was over.

I waved Cho and Hermione over to began discussions on what to do about the Death Mark over us, though I soon had to excuse myself from their conversation. The pair were just talking about illusion theory on a different level than I could follow.

Eventually, they came to an agreement, and joined forces to turn the Dark Mark above the Three Broomsticks into what looked like a magical mini-movie. In a loop, a Monty Python-esque foot would stamp down on the skull, leaving it looking like a two-dimensional skull-shaped road-kill pancake which would slowly fade to be replaced by another Mark, ready to be squashed again. No matter what direction you looked at it from, you got the same perspective. It was a brilliant piece of magical engineering.

Looking up, there was only one Dark Mark left that had not been dispelled or modified.

No prizes for guessing where Voldemort was holding court then.

I blinked my aching eyes open, absently wondering why my shoulder joints felt like they were alight with fire. I tried shifting my arms to relieve the pain, only to have them forcibly wrenched the opposite way. Once the stars cleared from my vision, I craned my neck to see what was happening. Two Death Eaters were holding me by my arms, twisting them cruelly behind my back, not too far from dislocation. My scar was hot, on the verge of burning. With some mental discipline, I forced my Occlumency shields up, and the sensation faded. Once free of the oddly familiar pain, I tried to remember just what the hell happened.

Had I been hit with a memory charm? No, wait. I remembered being in a pretty big battle. I remember diving to the ground as spells zipped by overhead. I remembered driving my thumb into Lucius Malfoy's eye and smashing his head on the ground like I was holding a bowling ball.

Yeah, that's one for the pensieve.

Hell, I even remembered seeing Grawp wade into the fray, sending wizards from both sides fleeing.

I forced myself to think, using every mental discipline I possessed to focus. I had led the main group, not as a general, but as a figurehead. The two aurors from the Three Broomsticks had been directing the mob.

It was on the outskirts of Hogsmeade, on the path to Hogwarts, that Voldemort had set up his flag. Spurred on by the sporadic successes throughout the town, the group of students and townsfolk had broken lines and charged. Despite the efforts of the aurors to keep them back, they just ran forward, flinging hexes in every direction. I imagine it would have been like wolves being charged by sheep.

The main battle had been chaotic, loud and frightening. No matter what I did, I hadn't been able to restore order, and a great many people were being hurt. But for a while, it looked as though the Death Eaters were going to be overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

Then Voldemort had driven a staff into the ground and summoned...

Oh, damn, no. I didn't want to remember that.

The dementors.

Hundreds of the demonic bastards had flooded the scene through some sort of rift. Surrounded by fighting, filled with fear, listening to people scream, I hadn't been able to come up with a happy memory to cast a patronus. Especially not with a dozen dementors closing in on me.

Well, that explained why I fainted.

My scar started itching wildly, and a scaly hand grabbed my chin and lifted my head up sharply.

And here he is, Ladies and Gentlemen. The lord high dickhead himself.

"Well, Potter, I was beginning to think that you were avoiding me. This is the third Hogsmeade weekend that we've been waiting for you to appear to spring my trap."

I took in the scene in an instant. We were on the top of a small hill, the base protected by a ring of floating dementors. Maybe four or five Death Eaters were in my line of sight, staying behind the dementor line. On the other side, I'd guess nearly three hundred people were milling about. I blinked in the sudden light. "Oh dear, who'd have thought that being grounded would increase my life expectancy," I replied absently.

My jaw was sharply pushed to the side, wrenching a muscle in my neck. "Just how are you planning to escape me this time?" he said, his scaly voice filled with confidence and ease.

I snarled up at him, ignoring the pain in my neck, confident that I *wasn't* going to be escaping this time. "You think I've had plans in the past? Ha!"

He leaned down, and put his face so close to mine that I could smell his breath. "Oh, I know. You've had nothing but luck on your side. Well, it has run out today." A slow, languorous smile spread over his features as he straightened. "Yes, I have. That idiot Dumbledore was forced to show the other members of his so called 'Order' that very prophecy. Most of whom well known, visible, and not trained in Occlumency. I know exactly what the prophecy says." He gestured towards the crowd of people. "As for your friends, they stopped attacking the moment you were captured. So easily distracted, wouldn't you say?"

"They'll fight again," I stated, surprised at how steady my voice was.

Voldemort snatched a handful of my hair, and tilted my head backwards, making my neck muscles scream in protest. "No, they won't. Once you are dead, your 'power the Dark Lord knows not' dies with you. The loyalty you inspire in others is indeed something I do not understand. Why do people follow you when all they have to look forward to is death? Fear is what drives people; it is what makes them follow. When they see that you can die so very easily, they will realise that they can die too, just as easily. Once my dementors gather the crowd, I'll kill you in front of them."

"Fuck, you're an idiot," I said with feeling. "Get yourself a bloody dictionary and look up the word 'martyr'," I spat.

I grunted as something hard slammed into the side of my face, and my glasses tilted, almost falling off. Once the stinging pain and disorientation passed, I looked up, seeing him massage his fist. "Resorting to muggle methods of inflicting pain is crass, yet so very, very satisfying. As for your impending martyrdom, I have something to tell you."

He waved a short Death Eater over, and my stomach turned as I recognised Wormtail, even behind the mask. The silver-handed prick withdrew a scroll from his robes and handed it and a vial to his master, who jerked his head in my direction.

Pettigrew sidled over to me cautiously, apparently trying to stay out of reach and avoiding my gaze. I spat at him anyway. "I'm sorry, Harry," he whispered, ignoring the spittle running down his mask, and he reached out with his silver hand. Not in the mood to be cooperative, I waved my head around, trying to keep my scalp away from him. After a few seconds, he managed to get a grip on my hair, despite my thrashing head. He tore the lock from my scalp without another word. Through the tears of pain that gathered in my eyes, I saw him sprinkle the stolen hairs into the vial for his Master.

Voldemort accepted the addition to the vial from Wormtail silently. Once the rat had finished, the Dark Lord turned to face me and spoke up, waving the scroll in front of my face. "This is a spell that is now charmed especially to you, Potter. Your death will fuel a Dark Mark which will hover over this very spot and will not fade. The cold you feel as the dementors devour your memories will be tied to this place. The despair you feel will flood the heart of everyone who comes near. Your own power will maintain the curse here until the end of days, a permanent reminder of what happens to those who defy me."

I looked around, noting that the small hill we were on gave everyone below a fantastic view of my execution. He slowly drew out his yew wand, and with a smirk of pure pleasure, he began chanting.

I struggled briefly, but the two goons holding my arms were too strong. I tried gathering my magical strength fuelled by my anger, using my fear to amplify it. As drained as I was, it was taking far too long.

Not sure what else to say, I blurted, "What, aren't you even going to use my own wand to kill me, you coward?"

The snarl on my face should have been a clue, but Voldemort's pride was at stake here. With a massive crowd, held at bay by the dementors below, he had to respond to my challenge.

But not as I had expected. Voldemort sneered back. He drew my wand from a pocket, twirled it in his fingers, then pocketed it again, all the while keeping his out. "No Potter, whatever trick you have will remain unsprung." Once more, he drew breath and began to chant. Suddenly, I felt a tug on my soul. Panic filled me, my heart beating wildly. Voldemort's casting caused another tug that felt like something was about to tear me apart. Like something was trying to eat my soul.

The End?

Apprentice Potter A Piercing Headache

A Piercing Headache

NO! THIS IS NOT HOW IT WILL END! THIS IS NOT HOW IT SHALL BE!

I forced my head up, and sent a glare at Voldemort. "Not working? Perhaps you should look at the end of my wand?" I taunted. I took the opportunity to relax my shoulders before drawing in a breath and holding it, hoping against hope that I would get a chance to use it. As far away as Voldemort was, the only thing I could throw through my wand would be a first-year spell, but I had to try. Anything at all to distract him.

A frown flickered over Voldemort's features. Slowly, he again drew my wand and raised it to eye height, noting nothing amiss. He twisted it, looking at the end from another angle; again nothing.

Oh, come on, please , I thought to myself, *look straight down the barrel* .

But he didn't.

I let my breath out in a explosive cry of defeat as Voldemort tossed my wand onto the ground. Well, that was it. He'd trumped my ace.

And he didn't even realise. Oh, the fucking irony.

"Master? I have arrived."

Every head on the hill turned to look at the newcomer. A figure stood alone, clothed in Death Eater robes and mask, but the voice was horrifyingly familiar.

"Zabini?" asked Voldemort after a few seconds? "You were killed! Before Wormtail here even joined my ranks."

The Death Eater reached up and slowly removed his mask. Zab's features, twisted into a superior smirk I had never seen. "I survived the attempt to arrest me, and have been recuperating in hiding, My Lord. While my health is not yet perfect, I am willing and able to finally take my place at your side."

Voldemort looked at him, deeply suspicious. "Why now? I am about to--" he started, gesturing

towards me, only to see my expression of betrayal. The Dark Lord snapped his head around, focusing on Zab, back to me, then finally back again to Zab. "Ah? You are Potter's enigmatic Master?"

Zab nodded lazily. "Indeed. I have been studying him for almost as long as that idiot Dumbledore. But recently, I have been working with him alone. What better way of learning about how he defeated you than to examine his skills, talents and innate abilities? Of determining how to prevent such an attack against your person in the future."

"Bastard!" I screamed through a raw throat, welcome anger finally rising through the mists of exhaustion.

But something didn't sit right. I forced the split in my mind, the part of me that controlled my body almost frothing at the mouth, while the other part examining everything I knew.

Zab drew his wand. "Let me guess, he told you to examine the tip of his wand?"

Voldemort's suspicion deepened. With a tiny gesture, Wormtail and one of the Death Eaters holding me had their wands out on Zab. "Yes, yes he did."

Zab raised his hands, and gently tossed his wand to Wormtail, willingly disarming himself. "Forgive me for both interrupting and giving you cause to doubt me, My Lord. But I needed to warn you of a danger in holding Potter's wand."

"What danger?"

Zab's features morphed into an evil smile.

"If I may?" he asked, striding forward and reaching out to pick up my wand from the grass in front of Voldemort, before pausing. He turned to Wormtail. "Ah, would you please cast a silencing charm on me? I would prefer not to accidentally set this off."

At Voldemort's nod, Wormtail cast, "*Silencio* ."

Thank you , Zab mouthed. Gingerly, he picked up my wand between a thumb and forefinger, keeping it pointed away from him. As though he was holding a basilisk chick, he gently placed it on the open palm of his right hand.

Suddenly, with a graceful step and leap, he closed the distance between us, placing himself close enough that I could use my connection to my wand to throw almost any spell. In a flash, he had my wand aiming at a point between Voldemort's eyes. Voldemort raised an eyebrow, and then his wand, almost daring Zab to try and cast a spell in his silenced state.

The sudden burst of hope released all constraints on my magic. I felt it coil around me, reaching out to my wand in the distance. As though I was drawing strength from the earth, the trees, the crowd around us; with every iota of magical strength I'd ever summoned, and more I had no idea I had access to, I screamed, "**CONCIDIO!** ", forcing everything I had down the faint link to my

wand.

Never had I managed to remotely cast that spell from this distance.

The sound of Voldemort's head being sliced up like a gore-filled balloon exploded and echoed around the crowd far more loudly than it should have; sounding like a hundred blades scraping along both each other and through frozen flesh. Despite the demonic sound of the curse tearing through what had been the brain of the Dark Lord, every single dollop of goo landing on the soft grass sounded like the most inspiring music my soul could imagine. Voldemort's black heart, not realising its owner was dead, sent blood arcing into the air a couple of times before the corpse dropped to its knees. It held there for a full two seconds, then continued to fall forwards where it landed with a rather final thump, gently pumping blood out onto the ground. I was faintly surprised that his blood wasn't acidic.

For three whole seconds, nothing moved. Not even insects buzzed in the air.

Then, in one single moment, a roar rose from the crowd, a guttural, primal scream of victory. Not even Grawp's voice came close to the majestic explosion of noise.

The Death Eaters holding onto my arms let go and clutched frantically at their forearms. Initially, I had assumed they did it in shock at seeing their Master gruesomely decapitated, but Wormtail himself shrieked and scrabbled at his own through his robes, giving me a sudden premonition.

I was almost glad to be already on my knees, since I was sure I wouldn't be able to retain my feet once I saw what was going to happen.

As one, the remaining Death Eaters squealed as the Dark Mark Voldemort burned into their arm ignited, flaring so brightly it looked as though the dark wizards were made of burning magnesium. If I had the energy, I'm not sure I could have stopped myself from laughing with relief. It seemed that Voldemort had made some changes to the tattoo since the last time I chunked him out of his body. He'd obviously made the decision that he wasn't going to let his Death Eaters return to polite society should he fail in his goals this time around.

Only Zab remained standing. He dropped my wand, threw me a wink, then whipped an invisibility cloak over his head, disappearing in an instant.

I glanced around at the burning Death Eaters. "Rather sporting of you really, Tom," I mumbled in my highly distracted state, "cleaning up for us like that."

One of my captors flayed around too close to me, bumping lightly into me. With a yelp of pain, I tossed him off me in shock. Looking down at my bare arm, I could see a bright, shiny patch of skin that indicated a burn. Good thing I got rid of him quickly, before I was burned too badly.

I reached down into my boots and withdrew my secondary wand from my left and a plugged vial from my right. Malfoy wasn't the only one who could make use of Potensavenenum.

Flicking the top of the vial off with my thumb, I tossed the entire potion back in one gulp, gagging slightly on the sickly sweet taste. Magical energy gently infused my body, giving me the strength to raise my willow wand, and cast, "*Accio wand* ."

My holly wand flew to my left hand almost eagerly, thrumming with power as my fingers closed around it. Oddly, Voldemort's wand arced through the air towards me too, torn from the dead wizard's hand, and I managed to catch it in the fingers of my right hand, noting absently that a similar, though not as powerful, sensation of coiled power hummed when I took hold.

I looked down at the remains of the man who had made my life a living hell. No more would he corrupt the young, manipulate others, or seek to rule the rest. Without thinking, I put both phoenix-feather-cored wands together, side by side, and tossed the relatively useless willow wand back over my shoulder. The increase in almost eager magical potential grew. On a whim I raised the brother wands as one and, filled with the most relieved and happy sensation, cast, "*Expacto Patronum!* " down at the milling dementors.

While brother wands don't work properly when used against each other, they certainly work well when they are called on to be used together. Even with the magically charging power of Potensavenenum in my veins, there was no way I could remain conscious for long as a twenty-foot Patronus charged down the dementors, scattering them like dandelion seeds in the wind.

The last thing I saw as I closed my eyes was Prongs rearing up high enough to tower over Grawp, thrashing its hooves in the air, a silent tribute to the freedom that had just been brought to the world.

I slowly blinked my dry eyes open, noting with relief that this time my shoulders weren't flaring with white-hot pain. Voices intruded into my peaceful slumber, although more than one was insisting that the rest be quiet.

Soft white sheets covered me, and that gave me all the clues I needed to work out where I was.

Bloody hell, I'm not even at Hogwarts anymore, and I still end up in the hospital wing!

I blinked my eyes fully open and flexed my hands and feet, noting that they were quite stiff. A twinge on my arm indicated that the burn had been treated and patched. Even as magically drained as I felt, I wasn't going to hang around here. Not unless they were going to tie me down.

"Will you let me in! He needs to be checked!" came the familiar voice of Madam Pomfrey.

"I said no! You said yourself that there was nothing wrong with him, that he just needed rest. Well, he's getting it! There are others over there that need you."

I covered my eyes with my hands and groaned softly. "Oh, Ron, you suicidal idiot," I mumbled under my breath.

"Mr. Weasley, it is imperative-" came Dumbledore's voice.

"No! We're not letting anyone Harry doesn't trust completely in there while he's asleep. That means you, Dumbledore, Snape, the rest of the teachers, and no one from the Ministry at all," Ron declared. "Sorry, Dad," he added after a couple of second's pause, sounding a little sheepish.

Mr. Weasley's response was drowned out by a simple, "That boy is just asking for trouble."

I almost jumped at the sound of the feminine voice to my side. Blaise and Hermione were sitting together, just watching me. Blaise had her ankle strapped, looking like she was waiting for medical attention. Hermione's hair had been singed away on one side, and her clothes were filthy, but besides some simple shallow cuts on her face that had already scabbed, she didn't seem injured. "You're probably right, Blaise. 'Mione, did you put him up to this?"

Hermione had given me a small smile when I woke, but shook her head with a disapproving expression. "He's acting on his own out there. The rest of the DA are looking up to him at the moment, since his Patronus managed to actually held off six dementors by itself. It's a badger, by the way. Besides Ron and Neville, there are about twenty students between you and the rest of the world out there," she said, nodding her head in the direction of the door.

I looked around the private suite. It was simple, utilitarian, and held about as much attractiveness as a rotting flobberworm. "So, how long have I been out?"

"We brought you back here about an hour ago, maybe an hour and fifteen minutes," said Blaise.

Something tickled my memory. "Oh, bugger. Has anyone been down to the Whomping Willow? There are probably about a hundred people in the passageway there, keeping away from the Death Eaters."

Hermione nodded. "Padma asked Ron about it, she figured that Ron would know how to get down there if you did. He told which knot of wood to press. She came back about half an hour later, with a big group of cheering people."

I nodded, relieved that those poor guys hadn't been stuck down in the dark for hours imagining the worst. "What happened after Voldemort went down?"

Blaise and Hermione shared a look, and oddly, a sad smile. "All the Death Eaters burst into flames. Apparently, rumour has it, even the ones in Azkaban are all nothing but ash," Blaise said with a satisfied look.

I snorted. "Cool way of covering up the fact that those who were in Azkaban took part in the attack today. I recognized Goyle's father by sight, and Malfoy Senior by voice." I gave a small sigh. "After I smashed his head against the ground, you couldn't be sure it was him by sight. But here or in Azkaban, I suppose either way, they're dead."

Hermione, who didn't even give Blaise a small frown, turned back to me. "Your Patronus inspired a lot of people to try to cast their own. Apart from the people in the DA, six or eight others, including older students and townsfolk, managed to get a corporeal Patronus for the first time.

Caught between Prongs and the rest, most of the dementors were either crushed or tossed so far away they haven't landed yet."

Blaise gave Hermione an odd look. "You *named* Harry's Patronus Prongs?"

I think that was the first time Blaise had ever called me Harry. Hermione launched into a detailed and lengthy description of why my Patronus is a stag and why its name is Prongs. After a while, Blaise's expression indicated that she was more interested in something else.

She butted in, more in an effort to shut Hermione up than anything else. "You know, Longbottom had to be physically dragged off one of the Death Eaters. Even then he shook off three bigger Gryffs and leapt back onto her and kept punching. He was busy turning her face into red goo, screaming point blank at her something about his parents. It scared the life out of me, seeing him like that," she said with a barely concealed shiver.

My eyes lit up. "He caught up with Bellatrix?"

Blaise looked bland and shrugged, but Hermione nodded. "It was a good thing you taught us to cast that jinx to short out a wand last time you were here, even though only Neville could cast it out of everyone in the whole school," she said with grumpiness in her voice. "Bellatrix was casting the Cruciatus on Luna when Neville found her. She tried casting it on him too, but he managed to get off that Evarto jinx at her. Thank goodness that *he's* the one who has managed to get it to work. Her wand fizzed out before she could get her spell off, he tackled her like they were playing rugby, and then he literally beat her to death in front of a group of students," she said, faintly sickly. She pointed out the door. "He's out there, waiting to get his broken hands set."

I looked over to the door again, wondering how he was. Neville had never shown the slightest inkling of killing in a rage. "I hope both of them are all right. I mean, I hope neither of them have been affected too badly."

Blaise snorted in a very unladylike manner. "Doubtful. According to Luna, being under the Cruciatus was 'jolly painful', while Neville hasn't stopped smiling since watching the Death Eater bitch's body burst into flames. That grin of his is bloody scary. Even the seventh-year Slytherins are giving him a wide berth. None of them want to see if he's capable of doing it to someone else."

I leaned back onto my pillow and despite the muted pain I felt, I let a smile of contentment spread over my face, which was soon overtaken by the unwelcome question I was trying not to ask. "Did we lose anyone?" I asked softly.

There was a pause before they answered. "Um, a lot of people were injured. Especially George. He had to be taken to St. Mungos. They're pretty sure he'll make it," said Hermione. "Fred said that he has too much pranking to do to die now."

I felt a fist close round my heart and squeeze. If this was how it felt to find out a friend had nearly died, I'm not sure I wanted to know who paid the ultimate price. I took a deep breath. "Anyone else?"

Blaise answered. "Luna will probably make it, we may not be able to tell for a while if her wits have been scrambled."

"Blaise!"

"Well, it's true!"

"Maybe so, but it's not nice to say things like that!"

"Do you want to do this?"

"Well, no."

"Then shut up and let me answer your boyfriend, eh?"

I frowned slightly. Why did Blaise think I was Hermione's boyfriend? Oh, of course. She's a Slytherin. If that's what it takes to exist peacefully with my friends, she'd accept that.

Before I could comment, she continued. "About a dozen students were killed. Despite the fact that your housemates charged into the fray, no Gryffindors died, but a lot won't be coming back to school whole. Stupid idiots," Blaise said darkly.

"Whole?" I asked, feeling horrified.

Blaise nodded. "Let's just say that your stalker Creevey won't be holding a camera that needs two hands ever again."

Hermione gave her a disapproving look, but didn't reprimand her. "Katie Bell lost her left leg below the knee. Lavender got hit with the same curse that I received at the Department, but in the belly, not the chest. She probably won't be able to have children, which at the moment she's claiming is a blessing. A lot of the seventh years were injured too."

Blaise nodded. "Gryffindor Tower is still going to hold the same hundred-odd students, but there are only going to be enough body parts for about ninety-five whole people."

I grimaced at the thought, and Hermione looked faintly sick. "Don't say anything like that again, please," I whispered softly, trying to keep my stomach contents inside.

Blaise nodded, actually looking sorry. "Oddly, it was Slytherin that got hit the worst. Bulstrude and Malfoy were ones who did die," she said, not sounding upset at all. "But they had bloody masks on and were busy cursing and killing students at school, so no loss there. Professor Snape is having to come to terms with the fact that he was nearly killed in an ambush set by someone he gave a prefectship to. That's why none of the teachers got down to Hogsmeade, by the way. They were busy putting out fires those idiots started here." She paused for a second. "Crabbe and Goyle actually tried to stop them, for some reason. They tackled Bulstrude, and got killed by Malfoy for their trouble. The little snot got hit by so many curses after that from the Slytherin members of the DA that he just stopped breathing."

I blinked, trying to take it in when she blew my breath from my lungs.

"Chang didn't make it," she whispered.

The fist clenched, and I grimaced and leaned forward, trying once again not to vomit. Cho had taunted the Death Eaters by changing the Dark Marks in the air, and by doing so had earned both their attention and ire, but she had done it at my behest.

"Damn," I whispered, tears slowly leaking from the edges of my clenched eyes. "What happened?"

Another pause. "No one really knows. Ron found her while he was looking for Ginny, he said she just looked like she'd been hit with the killing curse. Gin is fine, by the way. Just a concussion, but half her hair is blue now."

A faint, conciliatory voice in the back of my mind said that maybe Cho would be happier being with Cedric. It didn't really help. "Please tell me that no one else died?"

Another uncomfortable silence. Oh no. Who, I thought to myself?

"Terry Boot and Lisa Turpin from our year. A couple from fifth and forth years too. Besides Cho, another two seventh-years were killed too."

I nodded, suddenly feeling empty. "Anyone else? Anyone I know?"

"Grawp," said Hermione softly. "Sorry. He attacked the Death Eaters on the hill, going after Vol-Voldemort. Hagrid tried to get to him, but too many spells hit him at once. From both sides, unfortunately. His heart just stopped beating."

Despite the grim conversation, my strength quickly returned. The handful of other student casualties were not people I knew personally, probably since only Gryffindor was spared any losses. Oddly, my spirits did get a small rise over the fact that Blaise was beginning to refer to my close friends by their first names.

After a few moments silence out of respect for those who fell, we began talking about other things, light-hearted things. As difficult as it was, I was able to smile. Perhaps it was the feeling of freedom that seemed to encompass everything, even the light streaming in through the window seemed brighter than usual.

During a pause in the conversation, the two girls looked at each other and stayed silent for a few moments, which troubled me somewhat. Normally when forced together, you couldn't get them to shut up. I closed my eyes and lay back, waiting for whatever was coming.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Um, Harry? The prophecy did say that you were going to kill him. Who was that who killed Voldemort? Was it one of his Death Eaters?"

I cracked open one eye and glanced at them. "What did you see?"

They exchanged looks again. "Well, from where we were, you were being held down by two Death Eaters, Wormtail came over and pulled some hair out of your head, then added it to a potion. Vol-Voldemort then started casting a spell, but stopped, pulled out another wand and looked at it."

I nodded. "I tried getting him to look at my wand tip, looking down the length of the wand. It didn't work."

Hermione interrupted Blaise. "That's when the other Death Eater arrived. You called him a bastard, and he said some things to Vol-Voldemort and Wormtail. Then he jumped between you and Voldemort, raised his wand and pointed it at, well, him. "We heard you cast a spell without a wand. It sounded like a cutting curse."

I sighed. "OK. This goes no further than between the three of us. Agreed?"

Both nodded eagerly.

I nodded back. "It was the different form of magic I told you about. I've been practising casting spells while my wand is nearby, but not in my hand."

"Wandlessly?"

I shook my head. "No. The spell still uses my wand to amplify the magic, so no it isn't wandless. What happens is the spell comes out of my wand as usual, but I'm not holding it at the time. My teacher calls it remote casting."

Hermione blinked. "But that's impossible!"

I chuckled. "And yet you just saw a practical application of the principle. Voldemort's head spread all over the ground."

Blaise leaned forward. "What does G-, um, your teacher know about this?"

Hermione gave her an odd look. "You know who Harry's teacher is?"

Blaise rolled her eyes, but with humour in her expression, not malice. "Well done, Granger. Remember, I was staying with him for part of the holidays."

I coughed to get their attention. "He's been studying it with me. Every bloody afternoon he's had me throwing spells left and right from my wand, measuring the distance and the power of the resulting spell. It's really exhausting." I nodded to Hermione. "You called the first day we tried it. I was probably just as tired then as I was after getting rid of Voldemort today."

Blaise paled. "Was, was that-?"

I nodded. "Yes. That was my teacher."

Hermione's eyes opened so wide I thought they'd burst. "Harry? You're being taught by a Death Eater?"

I shook my head. "No. I'd tell you more, but I can't. Just accept that what happened up on the hill was an act designed to get my wand close enough to me to cast a powerful spell at Voldemort. Given how angry I was at the time, and you've never seen me that angry, it would have been like getting hit in the face by a ball of flashing razor blades."

Ron's voice rose over the rabble outside. "For the last time, NO! There are two people he trusts in with him who'll call out if he is in danger. Put your wand down or we'll just have to show you what Harry taught us the last time he was here, or you'll find out just how much Ollivander charges to fix wands."

I groaned and pulled the sheets over my head, noting that my robes were simply filthy with blood, dirt, gore and grass. "Laundry time, I think," I said, coming out from under them. "Cleaning charms aren't going to shift this lot."

The pair of girls looked at me and both giggled softly, before stopping and looking at each other in horror.

I pulled off the sheet, wincing slightly as I discovered the burn on my arm hadn't been treated. "Oh, come on, that's enough, the pair of you. Has anyone seen my wand?"

Hermione nodded, reached into her robes and drew out my holly wand. "And Voldemort's wand?" I asked, hopefully.

Blaise bit her lip, but followed suit and held out the yew wand. "Is this it?"

I nodded, taking them both. I looked at the girls again.

"My willow wand?"

The pair blinked. "Willow wand? How many bloody wands do you have, Harry?" barked Blaise through her laughter.

"Before today, two," I shrugged, wriggling out of the bed. "I got another wand so I could summon my own if I was casting spells remotely. Until I can cast a summoning spell wandlessly, I needed another one. But I cast that Patronus with Voldemort's wand side-by-side with my own. As brothers, they amplified each other."

Blaise's eyes widened. "Everyone was wondering how the hell you did that. Not even Dumbledore had seen a Patronus that large before. Putting brother wands together sort of makes sense. But I think your other wand got scooped up by the aurors on the scene. Most of the Death Eater's wands got snapped on the spot. It was only because they didn't know which wand in your hand was yours that they let us take them with you back here."

I turned to Hermione. "You know which is mine. Why didn't you just carry both?"

She coughed. "Um, they didn't want to be together when I held them."

I blinked and looked down at them, both sitting quite peacefully in my hands. I put them together and felt the magical potential increase. "There doesn't seem to be a problem."

Blaise cleared her throat. "Um, that didn't happen to us. They acted like magnets, and not in a good way, pushing away from each other." Her expression turned amused. "Perhaps they like you."

I slipped both wands into my sleeve, giving the pair of them a mock-irritated look. "Fine. Shall we go and fight our way out of here?"

Both smiled, and nodded.

The babbling crowd silenced at Blaise opened the door, everyone turning to look at me. Ron's face split into a massive grin, and he hurled himself at me. The fact that he out massed my by almost two to one meant that I was knocked back about two feet.

"Oof! Ron!" I wheezed.

"Sorry, mate, but we won!" he said, hauling me off my feet. "The tosser is dead!"

I frowned at him. "Mate, what about George?"

He barked a laugh. "'Mione hasn't heard the latest. He's fine."

"What happened?" I asked over the ever louder crowd.

Ron's grin widened even more. "He got trapped by a pair of Death Eaters, and started searching through his pockets for something to use. Of course, they were full of Wheezes, so he put a couple between his teeth to hold while he finished scrabbling through his pockets. An explosion surprised him, and he gulped them all down in one go. He turned into something like Malfoy on the train last summer, and the Death Eaters left him alone, thinking he was dead!"

Around both my soft laughter at George's brilliant solution and the shouts of congratulations from the rest of the DA, Dumbledore gently pushed his way through the dancing crowd, Mr. Weasley, Kingsley and Tonks on his heels. "Now, now, settle down please. There are still people here who need medical attention. If Mr. Potter would come with me, we can allow Madam Pomfrey to regain control of her dominion."

I held my tongue until we were bustled out of the infirmary. Once out the door though, I stopped, even though there were probably thirty people wanting to leave. I looked up at Dumbledore. "Sorry. But I need to report to someone else first. Once I'm finished there, then I'll come and see you."

"That's not acceptable, Potter," snapped Kingsley, pushing his way through the door. "I need to know what the hell you-"

"Shut up," I said, not loudly, but confidently. Kingsley obliged, more out of surprise than anything else.

I turned back to Dumbledore. "As I said, I'll be back when I'm done. Ron?" I asked, looking for my best friend.

He squeezed through the door and appeared from behind Dumbledore, his grin still well fixed in place. "Here, mate."

I noticed he was holding my bag. "Oh, cool. You've got my back pack. Thanks. I'll be back as soon as I can." I took the bag, and threw it on over my shoulder.

Ron nodded, his smile slipping slightly. "I put your dad's cloak in there. Thought you may need it getting out of here."

I blinked and barked a laugh; Ron must have found the cloak I was using and figured that it was mine. Kingsley butted in again, grabbing hold of my upper arm. "Now see here, Potter! I can't just let you wander out of here!"

Oddly, it was Tonks who came to my rescue. She took one look at my expression, which was probably pretty familiar to her, and reached out and placed a hand on Shacklebot's shoulder. "Um, Kingsley? You're getting him angry. This is the Harry who blew Snape across the room without a wand when he was irritated," she said, leaving the statement as open ended as a threat.

The black auror's hand was snatched back so quickly it almost created a sonic boom, but he wouldn't stop. "Harry, please, I need to debrief you! The Ministry needs to know what happened!"

I clenched my teeth together and forced out a snort. "No it doesn't. At least it hasn't in the past. Go and find some poor innocent bugger whose life has been destroyed, and throw him in prison without a trial. Then go and find every single other bastard still alive with a tattoo on his arm and let them go free. If there are any. There you go, all done! Nice and fixed. And before dinner time too. And just like last time too."

Mr. Weasley cleared his throat. "Harry, I understand that you think you should report to your instructor. But please believe me when I say that I personally have some questions that need answering. I'm afraid I can't allow you to divulge what happened today until we determine if anything needs to be classified."

I simply blinked at the sudden change in Mr. Weasley. Normally a good natured, gentle man, he stood here, as hard as granite, not budging an inch.

I opened my mouth to respond when a very familiar touch flickered against my mental shields. I shut my mouth, and slowly, I gently lowered them, getting an image of a bamboo stalk being pushed over by a wizard, then suddenly springing back to whack the pusher on the nose.

I grinned slowly. Not only was Zab telling me to submit, but he was telling me he was nearby,

close enough to hear our conversation. I suppose with the large number of invisibility cloaks on the field of battle, it wouldn't have been too difficult to move around unnoticed. But I needed to warn him.

"Fine," I said, earning a few odd looks of both relief and curiosity. I brought to mind the time Dumbledore looked directly at me under my invisibility cloak in Hagrid's hut, and gently pushed it out into the ether. I hoped Zab got it, I didn't want him to be seen at Hogwarts. "But as I told Dumbledore before, I reserve the right to not answer any question I haven't been given permission to."

Mr. Weasley's expression twisted into an uncomfortable mask. "Harry, I'm afraid that is not accept-"

Dumbledore interrupted. "Agreed. In my office, gentlemen?"

"Albus!"

"Arthur, one thing you will need to understand is that Harry here is quite capable of both making decisions, and sticking to them. I don't relish making any attempt to force him to answer anything he has been forbidden to divulge. As he is not under arrest, we shall have to make do with what we can convince him to give us."

At my request, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Blaise accompanied me to Dumbledore's office. Luna hadn't been able to come up, still bed-ridden after being subjected to the Cruciatus during the battle, while Susan was too busy assisting Madam Pomfrey to join us. Neville was considered too injured, which didn't really bother the Gryffindor wizard. Mr. Weasley made a call through the fire in Dumbledore's office, which summoned a number of other witches and wizards, some of whom I recognised from the Wizengamot.

As many as twenty people were crowded into Dumbledore's office, which had been temporarily expanded to accommodate the throng. Fawkes was trilling happily, obviously overjoyed at the news that Voldemort was no longer among the living. Many of the portraits were empty, and those who were present were wearing party hats. I'd never really thought about ensuring a portrait had a well-stocked wardrobe, but then again, there was a great deal in the wizarding world that I didn't know.

Madam Bones crashed through the door, panting heavily. "Albus! Is it true? Is the Dark Lord dead?"

Dumbledore nodded serenely, rising to his feet and pouring her a glass of water. "Here, Amelia, catch your breath. Yes, it is true, Lord Voldemort has fallen. And this time, we have his body."

Madam Bones collapsed bonelessly into a hastily conjured armchair, spilling water down her legs. "Oh, my. Oh this is wonderful news!"

"Is it?" I snapped.

Instantly, the room hushed.

"People *died* ! My friends *died* ! And they were worth a hundred Tom Riddles!" I spat at her.

Madam Bones' expression contorted, seemingly unable to decide on whether or not she was chastised, infuriated or apologetic. Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Harry, you are not the only person in this room who has lost loved ones to Voldemort. Yes, indeed, Voldemort has been defeated. That fact is wonderful news. The news that many good people have passed on as a result is not."

I glowered at him for a moment before lowering my head and sighing.

The Headmaster gave me an odd look, before turning back to the room's occupants. "First of all, I know many of you have been critical of me and my handling of Mr. Potter here over the last few years. To clear up a few things, I'd like to show you all something."

Once more, the overfull pensieve came out, and my ex-Divination professor's silvery form recited the sought-after prophecy. Once more, silence greeted the completion.

"Harry here was marked as Voldemort's equal the on Halloween, 1981. The prophecy finally came true this afternoon."

"But Harry didn't cast the spell!" Ron blurted, to a great many nods and murmurs.

I nudged him with an elbow, but I was too late.

"Then who was the person who cast the curse?" asked one of the Wizengamot.

I sighed. "Look. I really don't want to have to go over this again, so listen closely. The attack today had been planned for months. It was only my arrival in the village this morning that sprung the trap."

Despite having to stop and start over again a couple of times as a few stragglers deigned to arrive, the story of what happened today went through quite quickly.

Throughout my tale, I was initially admonished for letting a giant loose on Hogsmeade, for attacking Death Eaters without going for help, for taunting the Dark Lord by modifying the Dark Marks and for participating in a charge that left a great many people dead and injured.

When I described my ambush of three Death Eaters, I was subjected to a chorus of dismissive grunts and wheezes. Apparently, either I'm not permitted to defeat three trained adults, or that sort of thing just doesn't happen in the real world.

This is, of course, the 'real world' where the rebirth of Voldemort had been denied. Idiots.

My friends came to my rescue. Ron all but challenged those with dissenting voices with a duel, while Blaise and Hermione between them dredged up every single bad decision and vote each of

the disbelieving Wizengamot members had ever made. From memory.

It was rather satisfying to see the expression change on the face of one of Fudge's bought and paid for Wizengamot members. He had not accepted my story that I had been attacked by dementors during my hearing before fifth-year. Hermione rather tartly informed him that he had no credibility in dealing with me, since it was pointed out that Umbridge had admitted to releasing the dementors herself.

Ginny all but exploded with anger herself at various points, and rather vocally informed the assembled witches and wizards that I had always told the truth, and that they had been guilty of believing the lies fed to them by others. Essentially, she told them to shut up and listen to me.

If McGonagall had been there, Gin would have been serving detention with Filch for a month for the language she used. I'm sure Ron had never been more proud of his ickle baby sister than at that point. Even Blaise cast a wary eye between Gin and her father, expecting an explosion of Weasley tempers that would level the building.

Dumbledore had, surprisingly, stood up for Ginny.

My story continued, amidst gasps of shock when I described the death of Lucius Malfoy (though Mr. Weasley's gasp of shock sounded suspiciously like a snort of satisfaction), and my capture by the dementors. Voldemort's plan to pin a permanent Dark Mark over the spot generated a shiver of repressed horror, and both Hermione and Blaise took one of my hands each in support.

My conversation with Voldemort was not exactly repeated verbatim. I did add that he thought that my 'power he knows not' was the loyalty I inspired in others.

Madam Bones leaned forward in her chair. "So, who was this Death Eater who appeared?"

I shrugged. "I don't know his name," I said truthfully, since I didn't know Zab's first name. "But he had heard about what I'd said at Hogsmeade the last time I was there."

"Why did you shout out such a powerful curse?" came the expected, yet unwelcome question.

I sighed theatrically. "I was frustrated, and simply shouted what I would cast if I had my wand in my hand. My shout may have covered anything the Death Eater cast."

Several people scoffed. "Why would a Death Eater turn on his Master just as it looks like he was going to kill you?" one asked.

I shrugged. "Hey, you either saw what happened, or have heard about it by someone else. Since you all have a remarkable talent for ignoring the truth, I'm sure as hell not going to waste my time and energy trying to convince you."

Dumbledore barked a warning to me, but the babbling and shouting by the assembled wizarding leaders easily drowned it out.

Order was eventually restored, during which time, I simply leaned back in the chair, satisfied with what I had told them. If they didn't believe me, tough.

"Mr. Potter, you can't expect us to believe that, can you?" asked Madam Bones.

I stared at her for a few seconds before laughing. "You want me to convince you what someone wearing a Death Eater mask's motives were? Fat chance. No, I've told you what happened from my perspective. You've all heard what happened from other eye witnesses. Put the pieces together yourselves, I'm not going to be labelled a crank again for trying to do it for you and coming up with an answer you don't like."

I stood firm for the next half hour or so, long enough to be sure that no matter how long the members of the Wizengamot debated, they'd never come close to the real events. Satisfied that my remote casting skills would remain a secret for a while now, I simply crossed my arms and let them shout at each other. I did exchange amused glances with my friends, noting that Hermione's respect for these idiots was taking a fairly sustained beating.

Finally, Dumbledore stood and asked that the debate be taken elsewhere. Still spitting caustic insults at each other, the respectable Wizengamot members, aurors and politicians slowly exited. My friends were also politely asked to leave, but only did so after being placated that I would be fine.

Left alone with Dumbledore again, I observed the casual ease with which he practised his craft, shrinking the room back to its usual dimensions.

"Perhaps Aloysius, you would care to leave too? Or at least come out from under your invisibility cloak? I have things to discuss with Harry that are not for your ears either."

I frowned at Dumbledore. "Who?"

"Me," came a familiar voice from behind me.

I spun round. "Huh?" I gaped, watching my master emerge from under an obviously purloined cloak. How the hell had he managed to get into the Headmaster's office in the first place?

Idiot, I thought to myself. He'd have simply followed the last of the group up the stairs.

"Now I know what you were trying to tell me," Zab said.

Dumbledore coughed softly. "Tell you?"

Zab glared at Dumbledore, his invisibility cloak now folded neatly over his arm. "Nothing that concerns you, old man."

I blinked. Zab was using the same non-affectionate term I had been for Dumbledore. "You've been there since we first got here," I said out loud.

Zab nodded, confirming my suspicions. "Long enough to see that my decision to fake my own death and leave the wizarding world was the right one. Those babbling idiots that make up the Wizengamot couldn't be trusted to find their own arses with both hands."

"You're being a bit harsh there, Alo-"

Zab snapped up a hand, stopping Dumbledore in his tracks. "Enough! Do not say that name again. I despise it. And despite what you think, I am dead to the wizarding world. I came here only to ensure my apprentice was safe."

Dumbledore blinked, his mouth hanging open slightly. "Ah, I see. Finally, I understand your reticence to divulge your master's identity, Harry."

I rolled my eyes. "Why did you think he was here in the first place?"

Dumbledore shrugged. "This isn't the first time I've seen your Master since his death. Yes, Al-, er, Mr. Zabini, I knew you were alive; I have seen you under your invisibility cloak at two different Wizengamot sessions in the last few years. Alastor was with me on both occasions, so I simply assumed that he assisted you in your disappearance." Dumbledore's expression showed precisely the instant that the epiphany struck. "Alastor. He wanted Harry to meet someone. Oh dear. I have been given everything I needed to determine your whereabouts, yet for some reason, I didn't join the clues together."

Zab snorted. "Albus, I've known you to put every possible clue together and come up with two different answers. Severus is the only teacher here worth a damn when it comes to logic, and even his judgement is easily overcome by his bigotry."

Dumbledore didn't appear to be able to deny this. "You are probably correct. In my experience, you generally are. Though if I had known that you were Harry's Master, I would not have been as worried."

Zab snorted. "Rubbish. From that prophecy you just showed everyone, you'd have done anything to get Harry here out of my house and back into the school under your thumb."

Dumbledore sighed. "I would like to disagree, but I'm afraid you may be right. Though I do not know of any properties your family holds overseas."

"Overseas?" Zab asked blankly.

I snorted softly to myself as Dumbledore nodded and said, "Yes."

Zab snatched a look at me, and grinned, pride showing plainly in his expression. "You can't have lied straight out, Albus would have picked up on that no matter what skill you have with Occlumency. What did you do to make him think that you were being taught overseas?"

I shook my head. "Nothing really, I just suggested that the laws covering hidden properties in the UK didn't extend to those in other countries."

Dumbledore looked almost horrified. "But you... But I..."

Zab barked a laugh. "Albus, I've seen you being manipulated before, but not by a teenager."

Dumbledore coughed and absently rearranged his desk ornaments to cover his mounting embarrassment. "Yes, well, I shall have to include that in my memoirs. I'm sure many people will get a chuckle out of it."

Zab nodded. "Now, unless there is anything else?"

Dumbledore looked at us over his glasses. "I assume the Death Eater who appeared between Harry and Voldemort was yourself?"

Zab nodded. "I stole the robe and mask from Rockwood, after I took him down. My anti-apparition jinx set up over the town kept the other Death Eaters from escaping."

Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair intently. "So it was you who killed Voldemort? You were the Death Eater to whom Harry referred?" he asked, an odd tone in his voice.

Zab shook his head, causing Dumbledore to look even more confused than before. "Yes and no. Yes, I was the Death Eater who held Harry's wand. No, I didn't kill Voldemort, Harry did. Just like the prophecy said."

The old man shook his head. "What? No, what the hell happened?" he demanded, irritation flooding his voice.

I glanced up at Zab, still standing over me, who nodded in resignation. I turned back to Dumbledore, drew my wand (leaving Voldemort's in my sleeve) and said, "Observe, old man."

I tossed my wand onto his desk. Dumbledore glanced from it to me. "Yes?"

"Watch it!" I snapped. Once he was studying the wand intently, I cast, "*Lumos* !"

The tip of my wand burst into light, startling Dumbledore so much he almost leapt out of his chair with a shout. For such an old guy, he does retain a certain vitality of movement.

"What on earth is this?" he blurted.

"The power the Dark Lord knows not," I replied simply.

Dumbledore stared down at my wand for several long moments before he reclaimed his seat and took a deep breath. "Power everyone knows not, more like it. Harry, you've just broken one of the major rules of magic!"

Zab placed a hand on my shoulder. "Then the rules are wrong. As for Voldemort, all I did was make myself as unthreatening as possible, so I could get a hold of Harry's wand and get it close enough to him so that he could cast a spell through it. Fortunately, the spell he chose was powerful

enough kill Voldemort instantly, yet simple enough to cast from that distance."

"Distance matters?"

Zab rolled his eyes. "Of course. Once our research is complete, you'll receive a copy of the thesis. For now, we are leaving. It has been a rather long day, Albus. Mysteries have been solved, treacheries have been revealed, Dark Lords have been vanquished. We can discuss events at leisure at a later date. For now, it is time for my apprentice and I to leave."

Dumbledore paused for a moment, but nodded his agreement. "Take care, both of you. And Harry? Remember our agreement. You are always welcome at Hogwarts, should you wish to visit or use the resources of the castle. Always."

Zab and I tumbled out of the fire at Zabini Manor after finally leaving Hogwarts. As I brushed myself free of soot, Zab strode over to the sideboard and poured a couple of glasses of my favourite liqueur.

"A toast," he began, "to freedom."

"To peace," I replied, and we both sipped.

Zab sighed with contentment, and sat down in his favourite chair. "You did well today, Harry. I was almost convinced you believed that I was a Death Eater until I tried to glance into your mind. Despite your apparent rage, your shields were still firmly intact."

I sat down too. "It's a trick I discovered."

"Really? I'd like to hear how you do it one day."

I nodded, finishing off the rest of my drink. "There is one thing that I'm simply dying to know. May I ask you a question?"

Zab smiled, but raised his eyebrows. "Hmm, Alastor would be beside himself with envy, but I suppose you've earned it. Go on, ask."

I turned to face him. "Is your name really Aloysius?" I asked, before bursting into laughter at his rapidly darkening expression.

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Apprentice Potter

Epilogue

Epilogue

The next year and a half passed quickly. The official story of how Voldemort met his end was never really formalised. The Ministry set up and ran three inquiries (two formal, one independent) in the first nine months, each coming up with a different scenario detailing Voldemort's downfall. The fact that Voldemort's wand had disappeared stirred the conspiracy theory pot quite satisfactorily, but the fact that every person who had a Dark Mark was now a pile of ash was fairly convincing to the rest of the population that Voldy was gone.

Out of the public eye as I was, I loved it. I was permitted to visit Hogsmeade each time there was a Hogsmeade weekend, and I got to go shopping in Diagon Alley at least once a month. Despite only seeing my friends occasionally, learning from someone who both respected me and who was not impressed with the 'Boy-Who-Lived' nonsense was a pleasure. We progressed steadily with our potion, and in doing so let me overcome my almost instinctual hatred of the subject.

Directly after the battle, George recovered quickly, as did a great many of the wounded students. Those who had become amputees often wore their loss like a badge of honour. Most opted for replacements like Professor Moody, but some, like Colin in particular, refused to accept any artificial limbs. The respect the students and residents of Hogsmeade showed those students was both sincere and heart-warming.

Each time I went on a Hogsmeade weekend, I visited the memorial on the edge of Hogsmeade to those who had fallen, erected on the very spot Voldemort wanted to execute me. It was simple, yet beautiful; a marble fountain, continually jetting softly glowing water. When you looked in the pool at the base of the fountain, you could see the reflections of the fallen. Without exception, from Cho to Grawp, the reflections showed the fallen being happy and joyous, smiling and occasionally dancing.

Throughout the rest of the year, I visited and taught the DA, whose membership now extended to almost three-quarters of the school. It was the Slytherin Brunel who came up with a solution to the problem of overcrowding. As a brown belt in a style of karate, he suggested a similar ranking system. Eventually, the DA was running four nights a week, each lesson aimed at people of similar skill. Though it galled me to start with, when I taught at DA sessions, I only taught those who were the teachers of the rest of the members. The 'onyx' rings.

Inconspicuous rings were created for each member, which acted as both a membership token, and given a colour which showed your rank in the DA. While initially there was no formal method of rising through the ranks, (in the beginning, all you needed was three of the onyx-rings to agree the person should be upgraded), it soon became obvious that we needed to document the requirements of each level.

By the time the seventh-years' NEWTs came round, there were three student leaders (Hermione,

Blaise & Ron), forming a triumvirate that ran the DA. There were thirty-one onyx-ringed student teachers, whose number had grown during the year and would fall sharply at the end as the seventh-years left. I estimated that once the DA had been running long enough to become established in the mindset of the students and teachers, that the triumvirate would be made up with only seventh-years, or perhaps one skilled sixth-year on occasion.

Individuals in the rest of the ranks below were encouraged to specialise in different aspects of defence, creating a great pool of knowledge within the association that could be called upon when necessary. The result of having a student-led body became glaringly obvious as six months after Voldemort's death, an unprecedented number of 'O' grades were recorded at both OWL and NEWT level in Defense and Charms.

Zab again began teaching me the unique spells and techniques he had developed while an auror captain and instructor, to the point where as my own NEWTs rolled around, he estimated that my duelling skill rivalled many of the graduating auror cadets. My knowledge of laws and procedure was completely crap though. Not that I cared.

We did discuss what spells in his syllabus I could pass on to the other DA instructors, which turned out to be most of them. There were a handful that he strictly forbade me from ever performing unless in a life or death situation.

Over the summer holidays, we had a pleasant surprise with the potion, discovering that not only did it enhance the natural defenses to produce fairly impressive Occlumency shields on the imbiber, it also enhanced the user's natural affinity for Legilimency. Blaise, who according to Zab had very little aptitude for either discipline, became quite closed-minded. It took a fair bit of effort on both Zab and my parts to break through the barriers the potion presented.

For some reason, during the month Blaise stayed with us, we were closely chaperoned; a fact that Blaise got rather vocal about several times. While she continued to refer to me as Hermione's boyfriend in public, she certainly wanted to spend some time with me alone. And truth be told, I wouldn't have minded either, but Zab obviously had different ideas.

Some of his ideas bordered on the edge of complete bastardry. As a punishment for Blaise sneaking into my room in the middle of the night, he had the pair of us muck out the stables.

Wizards' stables, that is. Hippogriff dung is sticky and smelly enough at a distance, but when you are knee deep in it, even scantily clad and in close contact, teenage hormones had no hope of overcoming the absolutely unerotic situation.

Blaise left a few days before the start of her seventh year, and things returned to normal at Zabini Manor. I felt quite satisfied with my progress, just a year into a two year apprenticeship, and I'd assisted in developing a new potion, had made great strides in my spell work, had become a competent dueller, and was in the middle of a thesis on remote casting.

It was nearly a year later that we finally finished, just month before I was due to sit my NEWTs. Much to Zab's displeasure, he had had absolutely no success in replicating the skill himself. He

even disguised himself as a muggle with polyjuice and went to Ollivanders to try and get another wand with the same sort of connection that I had with mine. He failed, however; not even Ollivander's entire stock gave him a similar connection.

I spent the last month before my NEWTs studying hard, using Zab's, his two sons' and his multiple grandchildren's study guides. With over seventy years of material at my disposal, I was able to work out what sort of questions had been on the exams in previous years, and what I could expect this time. At Zab's request, I sent a letter to Dumbledore, telling him that we had finished, and that we had a couple of things to present to the Ministry board of Developmental Magic. I was requested to appear a week before my exams.

I spent the two weeks of exams staying in Gryffindor Tower, both revising and catching up with old friends. I was amused to see the number of people sporting a DA ring.

Most of my year-level looked far more frazzled than I was, having fed off each other's nervousness. Zab had quite easily reduced my stress level by half, just by informing me that NEWTs could be taken again the next year if you failed. Judging by how Hermione looked, that single piece of advice was worth a good twenty hours sleep per week.

The written exams were both long and difficult, and a couple of Muggleborn students whose parents were masseuses made a profitable sideline of massaging the aching hands, wrists and forearms of the fifth and seventh years. The practical exams were easier for me, but then the practical application of magic was my forte.

Once more, I was called on to demonstrate my patronus. Even some of the students who had no idea what the stag represented to me were calling it 'Prongs'.

Oddly, while the exams themselves seemed to crawl by, once they were done, it seemed as though they had flown past. Ron likened the realisation that we'd finished to blinking in relief once your ears had popped when you went too high on a broom.

Hermione found that quite amusing, if not poetic.

Late in the afternoon of the day after our final exam, the three of us lay on the warm grass near the lake, simply soaking in the early summer sun.

"So, mate, what are your plans for the summer?" Ron asked.

I sighed. "Well, I have to finish my apprenticeship first."

"How long will that take?" Hermione asked.

"An apprenticeship is usually for two years," Ron answered for me. "But Harry here has the first one in about a thousand years."

I chuckled softly. "About fifty, actually, you idiot," I said casually.

"Meh, whatever."

Hermione giggled at our banter. "So you'll finish before your birthday?"

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me. "At least, if my teacher is satisfied with my progress. In theory, he could insist I remain with him for a while longer."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about that, Harry."

"Maybe, but then I've got to spend a few weeks at the Ministry."

Ron rolled his head over to look at me. "Huh? Why?"

I sighed. "Didn't 'Mione tell you how I killed Voldemort?"

Ron frowned. "No. She said that she couldn't tell me. I figured it had something to do with your apprenticeship, and that you could tell me later."

"Well, you did!" Hermione said defensively, before I could respond.

"I didn't think you'd keep it from Ron!" I said, truly surprised.

Ron cut us off. "Will you just please tell me now then?"

Quickly, I explained about remote casting. Ron took it far more readily than the Ministry Board.

I sat in a small room at a small table, nervously tapping my fingers on the surface. In front of me I had placed the potion sample, the book containing the recipe and notes on how we created it, and the thesis on remote casting. A little way in front of me was a long table with five chairs on the opposite side. It was too like a panel interview for me to be comfortable.

The door in the opposite wall opened, and five people entered, only three of whom I recognised. Dumbledore sat in the middle chair, and to my utter disgust, Snape sat on my far left. To my even further disgust, Malachi sat between them. An elderly witch and a fat wizard took up the remaining seats on my right.

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore greeted in an oddly formal manner. "I understand that you have developed a new potion, and some new method of casting magic."

I snorted softly. "So you did read the letter I sent you."

Snape stood. "Show some respect, you little brat!"

"Severus!" Dumbledore barked, sounding more than a little weary.

"Why do you continue to tolerate him?"

I barked a short burst of sarcastic laughter. "The same could be said of you, you know. Why does he continue to tolerate your blatant favouritism?"

Snape's face reddened quickly, and Malachi to his left narrowed his eyes at me, but the witch and wizard to Dumbledore's left struggled to hide smiles.

Dumbledore slammed his hand down on the table and rose to his feet. "Enough, the pair of you! Must you antagonise each other every time you enter the other's presence?" he asked, sounding exasperated.

Snape remained staring furiously at me, but I just shrugged. "I simply responded to him, old man. If he doesn't talk to me, I'll be more than happy not to talk to him."

Dumbledore sat down slowly. "Unfortunately, in this instance, that is impossible. As one of the Ministry's Potion Masters, he is required to review all newly developed potions."

I shrugged and drew my wand. "Fine. Here is the sample, and the recipe," I said, gently levitating the items over in front of Snape. "You would have read the report I sent the Headmaster, what are your initial thoughts?" I sat back and waited for the vitriol to come.

Snape didn't disappoint. "The process was inelegant, taking far too many steps, you missed more than a dozen separate clues to what combination of reagents to try next, and even the final result could be made far more easily and with less expensive ingredients."

*I nodded my acceptance of his critique. After all, Zab wasn't a natural in potion making; it was likely that he would take more steps than necessary. And he **was** thorough in his testing to the point of almost being anal retentive, repeating many tests if he wasn't completely sure of the results. Not to mention the fact that his wealth meant that price took second place compared to availability when it came to potion reagents.*

"And the bad news?" I asked.

The sprightly, grey-haired witch to Dumbledore's left cleared her throat. "Severus, I do think you are being a bit harsh there. The steps taken were pedestrian, I'll grant you, but in all good conscience, I could not make the same criticisms unless the potion had been developed by another Master, or at least someone submitting a work for which they would attain the rank of Master. They are quite acceptable for someone quite proficient at the art of Potions."

Snape gave the witch a look which suggested that he'd swallowed some of Neville's first potions, but I didn't let him speak up. "Well, the person who took me on as an apprentice is not a natural at potions, but he does get there in the end."

Snape snapped his head around. "This isn't solely your work?" he spat, looking rather gleeful.

I shook my head. "Of course not. My contribution was peripheral at best. I noted everything I did in the journal in front of you."

"Then why is it only your name on the application?" Snape said, his dark eyes glittering with barely concealed hatred. "Claiming the work of others for yourself?"

This time, even Snape's apparent ally Malachi frowned as the other three voiced their disapproval loudly.

"Really, Severus, there was no need for that! Albus briefed us that one of the potion's creators preferred to remain anonymous," said the witch.

"Indeed," rumbled the wizard on the opposite end of the table from Snape in a voice like the prelude to an avalanche. The man had a beard so large and wide that it looked like he'd swallowed a bear and left the arse hanging out. "Does your professionalism always slip so?"

I sighed and tuned out, not listening to Snape's acidic reply. As much as many things have changed, some things will always stay the same. Snape's hatred of me is one of them. I can live with that. My pensieve is full of memories like Ron, Hermione and I casting Expelliarmus at him at the Shrieking Shack. Like me pushing him away at the twins' store. Like me tossing him around Dumbledore's study like a bag of rubbish. Ah yes, good memories...

"Potter!"

That brought me out of my reverie. "Hmm?" I blinked.

"Pay attention when we're talking to you!" Snape snapped.

"Oh, you're finished bitching and moaning, are you? Sorry, I was just reminiscing about the last time we saw each other."

While the witch and wizard to Dumbledore's left looked curious, Dumbledore was determined to change the subject. "Yes, well, regardless, we have examined your efforts and found them intriguing. A potion that gives the imbiber mental defenses would be of great assistance to those who face off against skilled Legilimens. But that it gives basic Legilimency skills too is extraordinary."

I nodded. "The most obvious use would be for juries, since at worst it enables them to better detect falsehoods," I started, looking with amusement at Malachi's sudden nervousness. "But use in auror investigations would be another application."

The interview continued in that vein for some while. To start with, I wondered if Dumbledore was in charge of the rubbish collection too, since he seemed to be involved with everything else in the government. But then I remembered my first Chocolate Frog card. Beyond being the most powerful wizard, he is also the pre-eminent alchemist of modern times. I suppose it was no great stretch to see why he'd be on this board.

It was decided that the potion be listed as 'rediscovered', rather than 'created'. Over both my and Snape's objections, credit was given to 'Potter and other'. While I wouldn't mind my name being

associated with assisting in the potion's discovery, I didn't want to be listed as the primary researcher. Snape's objection was slightly more personal. I doubt he'd ever want to brew a potion credited to a Potter.

The second part of the presentation fared little better with Snape still in the room.

"Here is a thesis on the new form of casting spells I have developed," I said.

"You've developed, Potter? Didn't your Master develop it and you've just added your name for the glory?"

This time, I stared him down. "No. My Master does not have this skill. He has not read of anyone who has this skill."

The wizard with the large beard leaned forward, and laced his fingers together. "Just what is this new skill, Mr. Potter? Albus has been rather close-mouthed about it." He rapped the top of the thick tome I'd levitated over to him. "While I shall look over this, perhaps you could explain it for us."

I nodded. "We have called it 'Remote casting'. Essentially, when a witch or wizard has a close enough bond with their wand, it is possible to cast spells from the wand, while it is not held in the wizard's hand."

Only Dumbledore remained still. Snape openly scoffed, while the other three leaned back in their chairs looking disappointed. Again, Big Beard spoke. "I'm afraid, Mr. Potter, that is impossible. There are at least two magical laws that premise breaks."

"Oh?" I asked.

Nods all round. "For example, even the simplest spell not only required an incantation, but also a wand movement. Without the correct movement, the spell will fail."

Snape's long lost twin Malachi scoffed. "Wand movements! Hah! The fundamental reason it could not work is because the wand amplifies the body's magical flow! Not holding onto the wand leaves the magic no where to go. The boy is wasting our time!"

I coughed to get their attention. "Perhaps a demonstration?"

Four pairs of disbelieving eyes greeted that suggestion. "If you can do this, I'll resign from Hogwarts, Potter," Snape sneered.

A massive grin flooded across my face. I casually tossed my wand towards him. "There. Pick up my wand and point it towards yourself."

"Harry?" said Dumbledore, not liking where this was going.

"Hey, he's the one who doesn't believe I can do it," I retorted. I looked back to Snape. "Go on. Aim

it at your heart. After all, my premise breaks two laws of magic..."

Snape's eyes narrowed, betraying only a hint of his sudden apprehension. He glanced over at Dumbledore, who was giving his head a slight shake, a warning expression on his face.

Malachi snapped first. "Oh, give me that, Severus. The boy is trying to bluff you. Honestly, I've seen this a hundred times in the courtroom," he growled, snatched my wand and aimed it at his chest, a challenging expression on his face.

Hey, I'm always up for a challenge. "Everbero!"

My wand flashed an ugly purple, and a sound like the flat of a shovel hitting wet concrete accompanied Malachi's sudden flight backwards across the room. He hit the wall hard, bounced off and landed on the floor, rolling into a quivering ball.

The room exploded into shouts and yells of both alarm and surprise. Oddly, Snape stayed in his seat, but he had paled so much that the Bloody Baron would have looked tanned compared to him. His reaction went beyond realisation that I had been right. Looking into his eyes, I almost laughed. In just one instant, he had put it together so quickly. He knew exactly who had cast the spell that killed Voldemort.

"Young man!" shrieked the witch. "What on earth possessed you to use such a spell?"

I shrugged as Dumbledore and Big Beard gave Malachi first aid. "I'm sorry? Didn't you just say that remote casting is impossible? I wasn't holding a wand. Why on earth would you blame me?"

She blinked and gaped for a moment. "Well, I..."

I interrupted her. "Let's see. For starters, that spell is particularly difficult to cast wandlessly, so I can't have cast it from over here without a wand. It also requires a complex series of wand movements to enact, proving that the movements are not necessary for this skill. Third, it produces a particularly vivid shade of purple that is not common to any other spell," I finished. "Basically, you now cannot dispute that I can cast spells remotely through my wand."

"Harry, Julius has several broken ribs, and probably has internal bleeding. I hardly think that it was a suitable spell to use!" yelled Dumbledore, before hexing the door open and shouting for help.

"Surely that depends on your point of view," I offered in a soft voice, unheard by all. "I thought it was a perfectly suitable spell to use." Looking at Malachi, the man who tried to destroy my credibility, lying on the floor injured gave me a small sense of shame, but a much greater sense of justice.

Or perhaps vengeance.

Whatever. It felt good. Perhaps it was childish. Perhaps it was excessive. But I will no longer stand idly by when someone tries to ruin me.

Hermione tried hard to look disappointed in me, while Ron just laughed out loud. "So it was your spell that knocked the Dark Lord's block off."

I nodded. "Yep. My teacher poached a Death Eater's robe and mask, and managed to get my wand in hand and pointing towards Voldemort, close enough to me that I could cast a powerful curse. After my demonstration, they did a few tests, Dumbledore and Snape that is, and they discovered that the magical signature is not recognisable. That's why when I cast the spell after fourth year, the Ministry only picked up the Patronus, not the *Lumos* spell I cast first. Anyway, there are a lot of people at the Ministry who want to do a lot of tests on me. If there is a way to cast spells that don't show up on their wards, they want to know about it."

"So when will you be able to visit?" Ron asked, being as persistent as a fly invading a nostril.

"I don't know. Honestly. But it should be in time for my eighteenth birthday. I'm just glad that I don't have to spend another summer with Blaise.

Hermione perked up. "Oh? Why?"

I winced. "Um, let's just say that my teacher has a perverted sense of humour, and leave it at that, eh?"

Hermione jabbed me in the ribs with a finger. "I don't think so, Potter! Spill!"

Describing the hot, sweaty jobs Zab had us do together in small, humid, enclosed spaces that required us to wear minimal clothing made both Hermione and Ron red, though I'd guess for very different reasons. Once I pointed out that we were hip deep in smelly shit at the time, and about as likely to act on our teenage hormones as Snape would have gone on a date with me, Hermione finally got the joke.

We again lay in silence after that, just thinking our own thoughts. Once more, Ron broke the silence, with something rather profound.

"Mate, Hogwarts just hasn't been the same without you."

I laughed, feeling so happy just being near my friends. "Maybe, but perhaps the world needed just one more Apprentice Potter."

The End.

Apprentice Potter The Final Battle

The Final Battle.

Number 12 Grimmauld place was a far different house than it had been. While it still had all the security and privacy charms in place, it was no longer the headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix.

Dumbledore had been rather put out when I kicked them out.

Not that he put up much of a fight over that, he could see the writing on the wall. With Voldemort gone, his Death Eaters (with the upgraded tattoo) turned to dust, there wasn't really a need for such a secure base of operations. Once they were gone, I had the *Fidelius* charm removed, and began renovating the place.

Now, it was like a home. The upstairs living room was cosy and comfortable. I'd enlarged the windows so that they covered nearly the entire wall so that, though now covered, they let in massive amounts of light during the day. The enormous blazing fire filled the room with both light and warmth. The ancient, leather sofa was stretched out in front, inviting me to sit down and relax.

I gave in without a fight, and sank into the soft leather. Soft music filtered through the room, not coming from any particular source. With an ice-cold cider in my hand, a quiet home and no relatives screaming for my help or homicidal maniacs screaming for my head, I was finally beginning to come to terms with the fact that the universe might have lost interest in messing up my life.

I was almost dozing off when the fire flashed green. Though it had taken me a while, I was now able to keep from flinching and reaching for my wand when that happened. The security on The Burrow's floo connection was nothing compared to this one.

Hermione stepped through, brushing soot off her sweater. My face broke into a large smile. "Mione! Welcome!"

She started suddenly, obviously not expecting that I would be in the room, but she smiled just as broadly. "Good evening, Harry. I just thought..."

I raised an eyebrow. "What? That you'd come over and keep me company on a cold winter night?"

"It's not winter."

"Whatever. It's cold out."

She lost her smile. "I just thought that you should have some company. The twins are worried about you. You've spent a lot of time away from the shop."

I shrugged. "With Ron and Susan working there, they hardly need me. Anyway, it was getting exceedingly uncomfortable." At Hermione's blank, questioning expression, I elaborated. "It's difficult to make conversation when the other participants are tongue-tied."

She frowned, then winced as she made the connection. "I didn't need that."

I gave her a small shrug. "Need, want, whatever. Come on over here and sit down. Do you want a drink?"

She shook her head, but came over and sat on my left. Looking around the room, she nodded in appreciation. "I like what you've done with the place."

I followed her gaze around the room. "I suppose. Once I started, it was hard to know when to stop."

Hermione pressed her lips together and looked down at her hands in her lap, trying hard not to laugh. "I remember the first change you made."

I frowned lightly for a second, before grinning myself.

It had not been a good day.

So far, I had yelled and been yelled at by Remus, Mrs Weasley, Dumbledore and, oddly, Dobby. Getting the former trio out of Sirius' house had been the bone of contention there, the latter had been deeply offended that I hadn't immediately told him that I had a massive house that was completely filthy from top to bottom.

Despite the amusing expressions on all the non-muggle-raised people in the room at the unique situation of a house elf yelling at a wizard, it was still a struggle to get them all to leave. Remus, while expressly allowed to stay, flat out refused. As much as I would have liked him to live with me, he had his own place, and he wasn't willing to impose.

But what really set my mood off was the effects of Tonks' entrance. She somehow tripped over the stand for walking sticks, which had been cunningly placed *behind* the front door. She sprawled straight into Sirius' mother's portrait, tearing down the curtains on the front.

"BLOOD TRAITOR! HOW DARE YOU ENTER THIS HOME!"

I winced at the magnified voice. "Damn it, haven't you managed to get rid of her yet?" I shouted down to Remus, who was helping Tonks to her feet.

He set his jaw and ignored me, making sure Tonks was uninjured. Hermione, behind me simply said, "No, he haven't. Sirius was here for months, and he was as good as, if not better than Prof-, Remus at that sort of thing. If he hadn't managed to take the painting down in all that time, what makes you think Remus could have?"

"GET OUT! GET OUT!"

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, for... Get out of the way!" I snapped, stamping down the stairs.

Both Tonks and Remus were suddenly nervous. "Um, Harry? What are you doing?" he asked as I stormed up to the portrait.

Hermione, who had seen me in such a mood before, simply remained silent.

"BEGONE, FOUL MUDBLOOD!" the portrait screeched.

I reached over and snatched up a walking stick that one of Dumbledore's acquaintances had left behind. Glaring at the portrait, I simply said, "No. You're the one who's leaving."

Mrs. Black almost looked gleeful. "DO YOUR WORST, BOY!"

With a shrug, I slowly drew my wand, leaving Voldemort's in my sleeve, and transfigured the walking stick into a wicked looking axe.

"Um, Harry?" Tonks tentatively said. "Sirius already tried to attack her with an axe. The head broke off and nearly killed him."

I ignored her. I took a massive wind up and swung the axe as hard as I could.

Into the wall next to the portrait.

The massive hole I made was quite satisfying. I tugged the axe out and swung again, working my way down the wall. Once there was a hole down below the bottom of the portrait, I chopped my way across the wall below, then up the other side and finally, across the top.

Screeching insults all the while, the portrait dropped down still attached to the wall behind. In its place was a massive hole in the plaster, showing the interior of the wall cavity. I grabbed the frame and gave it a twist and a shove, pushing it over so that it landed face up on the floor. I stomped onto the ugly bitch's face, grinding her ugly chun under my heel.

"There! That's how you get rid of the bloody bitch!" I shouted to my suddenly rather bashful audience.

I took another sip of my cider. "The bonfire in the back yard was very satisfying, as I recall."

Hermione chuckled softly, and leaned onto my shoulder. I gently placed my left arm around her, and she sighed, sounding content.

We sat in silence for a few moments before the fire flashed green again. This time, Blaise stepped out, dressed in a tight black dress, which showed off the petite witch's wonderful legs to perfection.

I didn't move, but Hermione's head lifted off my shoulder. I nodded in greeting. "Hello, Blaise. Welcome."

Blaise blinked as she took in the scene. "Uh, hi. Hello, Hermione."

"Blaise."

Well this was awkward. "Blaise, please, take a seat," I said. "Would you like a drink?"

She shook her head, and half turned to go back into the fire. "Sorry, I didn't realise you had company."

"We were just reminiscing. You're welcome to join us," I said, much to Hermione's disappointment, if the sudden jab in the ribs she gave me was any indication.

Blaise must have caught it too. She gave a sudden grin and sat in one of the single armchairs. "Well then, all right. What were you talking about?"

I smiled again at the thought. "Oh, just about when I removed a portrait of Sirius' mother from downstairs."

Her smile went slightly wooden. "Ok. Sounds like fun," she said, not sounding at all convinced.

"You'd have had to be there," I said, a large smile on my face.

Blaise's eyes flickered between Hermione and I, and her smile turned sly. "Hermione, did Harry ever tell you about what happened between us on his bed in the summer before our last year?"

My eyes flickered open as the hinges on the door to my room creaked softly. I tightened my grip on my wand under my pillow, and gently pushed my mind out. I couldn't see a thing in the pitch darkness, but I had practiced this sub-discipline of Legilimency enough that I could recognise people by the shape of their minds.

I relaxed slowly as I recognised Blaise. In the few days since she had joined us for her summer holiday, Zab's attitude towards us had changed. While we were permitted to spend time together, we were discretely chaperoned at all times, much to both our displeasure. Though Blaise was much more vocal about it than I.

"Harry?" Blaise whispered softly.

"I'm awake," I answered, in a normal tone.

"Shh!"

I chuckled quietly to myself. "Why? No one can hear us."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded, then caught myself. Duh, we were in the dark. I pushed myself up onto my elbows. "Yes. I put silencing charms on my room a while ago," I said without offering any other explanation. I'd erected them when I was first practising remote casting. To begin with, shouting spells was the main way for me to force enough power down the link to cast them remotely.

The bed shifted, the mattress settling under Blaise's weight. "I've really missed you."

I took a deep breath and concentrated. Remote magic was fine, but wandless was in a different league. I'd only managed to do one thing deliberately. Above our heads, a fist sized sphere of soft, gentle light slowly faded into existence above us. I let out my breath explosively, and looked at my midnight visitor.

Blaise's raven hair was tied back at the nape of her neck, though a few tendrils hung down from her temples, framing her pretty face quite nicely. But it was her nightdress that caught both my attention and my breath. Though it was severe, white cotton, even under the gentle light of my magic, it was quite obvious she was wearing nothing underneath.

She gave me a wicked grin at my reaction, and got on her hands and knees, crawling over me with one hand on either side of my body. The neckline hung down low enough that my wide-open eyes were drawn straight down with no measurable brain activity on my part. To my disappointment, I had positioned the light without any forethought. It was above us, and Blaise's body was shrouded in shadow enough that I couldn't see anything but a vague outline.

A very nice outline though.

She pushed her face so that it was only a few centimetres from mine. "Like what you see, Gryffindor?" she asked huskily, nodding her head with a questioning expression.

I swallowed with my suddenly dry throat, as conscious as I had ever been of my heart. I could feel it thumping against my ribcage *very* fast. I nodded slowly myself. "Oh, hell yes."

She gave a soft growl of pleasure that sent a muscle spasm down my spine. From her crawling, she slowly crouched, straddling my waist. Though she was as light as a feather, she chose just the wrong place to sit. Or perhaps the right place.

Her eyes widened momentarily with realisation, before her lips twisted into a very satisfied smile. "You do indeed." She gently wiggled her hips, pushing down on me.

I groaned softly, almost whimpering. I let myself fall back, my shaking arms not able to hold me

up any longer.

Her face appeared over my own, looking down. The loose locks of hair hung down lightly tickling my cheeks and neck. I reached up and touched her cheek, then ran my fingers down the side of her neck. In the shadows, I couldn't make out the fine detail, but her skin was warm and smooth, and very enticing. "You're beautiful."

Though her expression showed her amusement, she snorted and said, "Yeah, I bet all you boys say that when you're in this position."

I smiled back. "Any boy would, so long as they were in this exact position."

Her mischievous eyes danced, and she slowly lowered her head and body, lying on me and depositing her lips onto my own.

The kiss was breathtaking, and my heart rate increased, something I wasn't sure was possible without medical attention. I was suddenly *very* aware of her body. The slightly rough material covered her incredibly soft form. How hot she felt, how good she smelled. Suddenly, I wanted her naked and next to me so very, very much.

From the change in Hermione's breathing, I was guessing she wasn't too pleased with the story. Blaise's expression indicated that she was quite happy with the way things were progressing.

"Why don't we finish the story?" I suggested.

My hands were gently trailing down Blaise's back, then down her side. Just as the texture beneath subtly changed from cloth/skin/rib to cloth/skin/breast, the lights in the room blazed into life, and we both flinched. Blaise even went so far as to cover her chest with her arms as she rolled off me, even though she was still wearing that damned nightdress. I found myself on my elbows, blinking in the sudden light.

Zab was standing in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe, his arms crossed and a questioning look on his face.

I swallowed again, and cleared my throat. "Um..."

I glanced over at Blaise, who was looking at her Great-grandfather with her lower lip between her teeth. Wisely, she stayed silent.

"Um, we..." I began, not sure what to say.

Zab's eyebrows rose slightly higher at my incompetent attempts to explain away our actions. He gave a slow blink as he shifted his attention to Blaise. "Bed. Now."

She was off my bed in a flash, and scuttled past Zab without meeting his eyes. He hardly moved, he simply tilted his head slightly to watch her disappear.

Another slow blink, and he focused back on me. "My study. Six o'clock."

I swallowed yet again, and nodded.

The lights winked out, leaving me blinking as the afterimages danced in front of my eyes. The door creaked closed, and shut firmly. A gentle blue glow indicated that Zab was not taking any chances. My door wasn't locked, but he'd know if anyone crossed through it for the rest of the night.

Not that it was necessary. I'm quite sure neither Blaise nor I were brave enough to tempt Zab's temper again.

The next day, I trudged out to Zab's stables. Not just the ordinary equine stables of the muggle world, but full-fledged magical stables. Back when it was legal, Pegasus breeding had taken place here. Wyverns had been housed here. Hell, even the odd Griffin had been tamed and trained to carry a rider.

Now, only a trio of hippogriffs were housed there. Poor specimens, when compared to a wild one like Buckbeak, since it looked as though their diet wasn't exactly spot on.

The stench of the knee-deep sludge hit me like a sackful of sand. I gagged, almost throwing up immediately. *Shovel all the dung out of the traps, Zab had instructed. No magic, just a shovel that you'll find hanging on the back of the stable doors.*

Breathing through my mouth, I looked behind the door. Two shovels were hanging there. I grabbed one and made my way over to the traps. The horribly coloured slurry beneath the mesh covers was the most hideous thing I'd ever seen. The animals' diet was definitely wrong. Using the shovel blade, I levered the cover off, then grabbed the wheelbarrow and dragged it over to the pit.

I knelt down next to the traps and sank the blade of the shovel into the muck, and lifted out a chunk.

The muck slid off the blade as though it was greased. I got maybe half a cupful into the wheelbarrow.

Slumping down in defeat, I sullenly examined the blade closely, while holding my breath of course. A telltale glimmer of magic told the story. Zab had charmed the blade.

Bastard.

I checked the other shovel too. Same thing.

Double Bastard.

I trudged back over, when the disgusting thought hit me. I could probably scoop the stuff out faster by using my hands.

Like *that* was ever going to happen.

I just shook my head, and began shovelling. After a while, I discovered one thing that was going for me. The wheelbarrow was charmed to hold a hundred times as much as a normal one. I wouldn't have to wheel it to the pit outside more than once.

It felt like a week, but was probably only an hour later when Blaise joined me. In the early morning heat, she was dressed in a singlet, shorts and a filthy expression. She wordlessly snatched the second broom from behind the door and stamped up to me.

"This is all your fault, Potter!"

After shovelling the smelliest shit in the world for an eternity, I was in no mood to be gracious. "Funny, I thought you were smarter than that."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, and she put her hands on her hips, stretching the material of her singlet across her chest.

She wasn't wearing a bra.

"Stop looking at my tits, Potter!" she snapped. "If you'd put a privacy charm on your room, we wouldn't be here!"

"I did," I forced out from between clenched teeth. I hadn't, but given our actions last year, I'm sure that even if I had, Zab would have known what was going on.

"Bollocks!" she retorted. "Now I have to shovel this shit with you."

"Cool. I really didn't want to have to do this myself."

"I should let you anyway."

I shrugged, knowing that if Zab had assigned the task, she wouldn't dare to avoid it. "Whatever. Trust a Slytherin to pass the blame."

I shouldn't have said it, and I certainly didn't mean it. But it was only with a great deal of discipline that she stopped herself from braining me with the shovel.

We spat insults back and forth for the rest of the morning while working. She let off a rather impressive stream of expletives on discovering that the shovel blade had been charmed.

Once we were halfway done, it became obvious that we couldn't use the charmed shovels to scoop up the crap while kneeling on the lip of the pit. We argued venomously about who was going to get into the pit first, but in the end, we both ended up knee deep in warm, slimy, (not to mention, slightly acidic) smelly shit.

There wasn't a great deal of room in the pit for the two of us, and all sorts of jostling and scuffling

began taking place.

Again and again, we shovelled tiny amounts out of the trap. At one point, one of the animals in the pens gave a sort of liquid fart, and a litre or so of disgusting, lumpy crap splashed into the trap.

Blaise swallowed, but looked very pale. "I'm going to be sick," she said faintly.

"Feel free," I said. "It could only make the place a little bit cleaner. On average, anyway."

She tried to smile, but couldn't control her stomach, and she vomited.

I stripped off my t-shirt, turned it inside out and held it out to her. It was sticky with sweat around the neck, but compared with anything else in the place, it was sterile. She gratefully wiped her mouth. "Thanks," she said quietly.

I nodded. "No problem. Come on, we're nearly done."

She tossed my shirt across the room, nodded, and started shovelling again.

As huge as the pit felt to my shoulder muscles, in fact it was pretty constricting, since we both were bumping and rubbing each other while working. I caught Blaise looking at my torso from out of the corner of my eye more than once, and I'm sure she caught me looking at her. With a pale, sweat-stained singlet clinging to her petite frame and no bra, it was only for a purely technical reason you could say she wasn't topless either.

That one moment of camaraderie didn't last long. We bickered and bitched at each other for most of the rest of the day, finishing our punishment late in the afternoon. As we separated to go to different bathrooms, we sent each other parting insults. I did notice Zab, however, looking mightily amused.

Yes, he was a student of adolescent behaviour. He knew just how to make sure that two people who were attracted to each other avoid the other for days.

Bastard.

Hermione giggled and snuggled deeper under my arm. "I could get to like your teacher, Harry. He sounds like a wonderful student of human nature."

Blaise snorted, and uncrossed her toned legs. Suddenly, the calculating expression I loved appeared, and she stood, took a couple of steps towards us, and sat down next to me on my right. Hermione stiffened, clutching me slightly tighter across the stomach. Blaise smirked slightly, and buried herself under my right arm, in a remarkably familiar move.

My head stayed right where it was, but my eyes darted from side to side. The expected explosion didn't occur. However, both girls were staking a claim on my body I wasn't quite sure I was ready to deal with.

Hermione spoke, almost hissing, "Harry, why don't you tell her about what happened on our last night at Hogwarts?"

I rolled my eyes. I just knew where this was going.

I wandered around the hallways with Hermione as she performed her final Head Girl duties, hunting down all the students out after curfew getting in one last snog session before heading home the next day. I was quite surprised at the sheer number of students we encountered. Most in a variety of compromising positions.

"You know, a lot of them are Slytherins."

Hermione nodded. "Professor Snape is in the hospital wing. His habit of keeping students working right up until the final period of term backfired on him this year."

"An exploding potion?"

Hermione nodded, trying to keep a smile off her face. "He's in the hospital wing, and Professor Vector was asked to keep an eye on the Slytherins tonight. But no Slytherin worth his salt would have difficulty in running circles around her."

"Too trusting?"

Hermione nodded. "Most of them figure that because the school year is over, they can't be punished with points, and since the train leaves early tomorrow morning, they can't be given detention. But the Headmaster told us to give them detentions for next year, which means that a great many Slytherins will be explaining to Professor Snape in a couple of months why they were out and about."

I winced. "Oh, nasty. So, Snape didn't resign?"

She frowned. "No. Why would he?"

I sniffed. Though it didn't surprise me that he hadn't quit, it did surprise me that Hermione didn't remember what I'd told her. "Remember? Snape said that if I could cast remote magic, he'd quit."

She almost pouted. "That's right!"

I couldn't resist that look. "Not that it affects us any more. We're both out of here tomorrow."

Her deep brown eyes flickered up and down my frame. "In that case..."

I blinked. "Are you serious?"

She stepped forward and ran a finger down my cheek. "Absolutely."

I couldn't keep a smile from forming, despite being shocked. "But what about all the rules you'll

be breaking?"

She almost smirked. "What rules?"

I frowned slightly. "You've just been assigning detentions for next year to pairs of students caught in compromising positions."

She lightly scratched the side of my neck. "You are not a student."

"Curfew?"

"Not applicable to me."

Damn, she looked sultry. "Well then, shall we find a cupboard, or did you have a more romantic spot in mind?"

She smiled, quite pleased with my compliance, and firmly took my hand. It didn't take a genius to work out where we were going, and I was looking forward to seeing the Room of Requirement change to suit Hermione's needs.

It didn't disappoint.

The fire in the fireplace was not exactly roaring, but there were a lot of glowing coals, which gave the room a dim, yet romantic setting. A wonderfully comfortable couch sat in front, while behind that, tantalizingly, sat an enormous four-poster bed.

"Not exactly a prime studying roo-," I began, before Hermione covered my lips with her own.

Without thinking, my hands began trailing lightly up and down her back. Even through her uniform, I could feel how soft her skin was. If it felt as good to her as her hands on my back felt to me, I was surprised she wasn't groaning into my mouth.

We broke our kiss, and I looked deeply into her wonderful brown eyes, now lidded with desire. Gently, we sat on the couch and resumed our exploration of each other. Slowly, our clothes began falling off.

As Hermione's bra fell to the floor, I was having some trouble breathing. She had a wonderful chest, which I just had to give an intimate examination. Three of my senses decided that her nipples were perfect; in sight, touch and taste.

Though I couldn't tell you exactly when, we ended up on the bed. The smooth, warm sensation of her skin on my own drowned out any voice in my head urging caution. As inexperienced as we were at this sort of thing, it felt perfectly natural, despite my racing heart.

Despite the nonchalant expression on Blaise's face, I could tell she was just as unhappy as Hermione had been during her recital of our adventure. Both girls each had a cheek on my chest, and were glaring at each other.

I sighed, figuring that to avoid a homicide, Hermione really should finish the story.

Hermione straddled my stomach, running her fingertips down my chest. Her expression indicated that she liked what she felt. Her hair above me was a mess, well, more of a mess than usual. She looked wild, decadent, and that simply inspired a passion in me I had no idea existed.

"Mione? Harry?"

I nearly screamed with frustration, déjà vu flooding my mind.

Hermione on the other hand squeaked in surprise, covered herself, and all but dove under the covers. In the darkness, I could just make out the silhouette of Ron at the door, peering into the room, holding onto a sheet of parchment that looked eerily familiar.

Afterwards, Ron claimed not to have seen anything; that the room was too dark to make out details. Hermione grasped that explanation with a determination to believe that I'd never seen outside of a religious nut. However, my burgeoning Legilimency skills easily told me that he wasn't being entirely truthful.

Blaise looked rather satisfied with how the adventure ended, tightening her grip of my waist and humming with contentment. "So, the third member of the Golden Trio got a gander at more than he wanted to?"

Hermione's retort was cut off by me. "Enough, both of you, please!" I tightened my hug on both of them. "Look, I told you two years ago, I need both of you. If picking one of you to be my girlfriend means the other will no longer be a friend, then I'm sorry, I'm not going to choose either of you."

Both turned their faces up to look at me, indecipherable expressions on each. I sighed deeply. This wasn't going well.

"Look. If I can't have both of you in my life, I'm not going to be happy. You'll have to deal with that yourselves."

The pair turned to face each other, still under my arms.

Blaise raised an eyebrow, a tiny smirk on her lips.

Hermione frowned slightly.

Blaise raised both eyebrows, a questioning expression on her face.

Hermione bit her lip, and shook her head slightly.

Blaise nodded slightly, her eyes boring into 'Mione's.

A look of determination appeared on Hermione, and she nodded too.

Both turned to look up at me, an identical smirk on their lips.

My confusion lasted for an instant, disappearing once both girls leaned in and kissed both sides of my neck. At least three feminine hands burrowed under my clothes at various points.

The last conscious thought on my mind was to whisper the locking security charm, preventing anyone else coming in through the fire. I sure as hell wasn't going to be interrupted *this* time.

The End.