

Suddenly, he had everything he ever wanted...but it didn't bring him happiness...or peace.

A Stranger in an Unholy Land



Jono



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Part I of the Stranger Trilogy

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During the summer before sixth year, Harry Potter is sucked into another universe by forces not of this world. Dazed and confused, Harry finds himself in a world where his parents were never murdered, where Voldemort has never fallen, and he is Voldemort's key enforcer. Harry finds himself feared and despised within the community, revered and honoured by the Death Eaters, and endowed with instincts and abilities he has never known. As Harry discovers the terrible deeds he has done, he sets about trying to rectify what he never remembers doing.

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Table of Contents

Chapter I: A Change of State	3
Chapter II: A Friend in Need is a Friend Indeed	21
Chapter III: Confessions of a Dangerous Mind	47
Chapter IV: In Order to See the Light, One Must Brave the Dark	80
Chapter V: Trust	125
Chapter VI: A Reunion...Of Sorts	165
Chapter VII: A Victim of Circumstance	204
Chapter VIII: Leopards Don't Change Their Spots	251
Chapter IX: The Last Man Standing	299
Chapter X: From the Ashes of Despair, A Hero Shall Rise	361
Chapter XI: What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger	427
Chapter XII: And the Truth Shall Set You Free	485
Chapter XIII: The Purges	553
Chapter XIV: One Man's Terrorist is Another Man's Freedom Fighter	651
Chapter XV: Who Dares Wins Pt. 1	727
Chapter XVI: Who Dares Wins Pt. 2	773
Epilogue: The Promised Land	848

A Stranger *in an* *Unholy Land*

~~~~~ Chapter I ~~~~~ **A Change of State**

*“We accept the reality with which we are presented,
it’s as simple as that,”*

~ Christof (Ed Harris) ~ The Truman Show

It was very hot and stuffy in the car. Harry had been sitting in the back seat of Uncle Vernon’s new car staring blankly out of the window for the last few hours. The average speed on the M5 was far less than seventy. There were road works all along the Bristol section of the road; it was covered in road cones. Traffic conditions were hectic to say the least, especially in the morning rush hour during which they had set off. They were now crawling along at ten miles per hour. To make matters worse, there were signs on the central reservation that informed them that a temporary speed limit of forty miles an hour was in effect.

“I would do bloody forty if I could,” huffed Uncle Vernon.

Harry had been back from school for two months. Dumbledore had not allowed him to visit the burrow, except for one afternoon. He had spent hours and hours in his room daydreaming, reminiscing over a life he could have had. Sirius had offered him a home; a chance to escape from the hellish family who were now dragging him off to a destination he had dreaded returning to since his previous and only other visit.

After many glorious weeks of ignoring him when at all possible, this morning Aunt Petunia had lowered herself to speak to him. Speaking was a bit of an overstatement. She had banged on the door to his bedroom at six-thirty in the morning, over two hours before he would normally rise, and informed him in a rather loud voice that he was to be down in the hall ready to leave in twenty minutes or he would regret it. Harry had been tempted to just roll over and see if they really would make him regret it, even though they knew that Mad-Eye Moody was watching the house. Instead, Harry had done as he was told and made his way to the shower.

Sitting there in the car, heading slowly but surely towards four days of pure hell, Harry really wished that he had just rolled over and refused to come. Instead, he had made it downstairs in the requested twenty minutes to find that they weren’t leaving until nine, which left him plenty of time to do some housework. He had chosen, out of pure spite, to use the vacuum cleaner right outside Dudley’s bedroom door. That had got Dudley up, and much to Harry’s pleasure, he was not in a good mood. Harry had seen the desire to hit him in Dudley’s eyes but fear of magic prevented Dudley from taking action. The fat oaf provided Harry with so much amusement, were it not for him being an idiot, Harry would have had nothing to cheer him up. His friend’s letters

were all the same, 'can't say much,' 'miss you,' 'don't let the Muggles get you down,' 'chin up'. Harry's time back at Privet Drive was boring, but an improvement over last summer. He was not being ordered around nearly as much. He had access to his school things though he had no work to do as he had finished the OWL course and not yet started the NEWT ones. OWLS, bugger! The results were due in a few days. He really hoped that they did not arrive while he was away. He would not imagine that the owner of his accommodation would appreciate an owl dropping by with a letter for him. He was fairly confident that he had done well, not exceptional, but OK. His only major worry was Potions. He needed O for NEWT level potions but looked unlikely to get it. Harry thought he deserved an E because he would exceed Snape's expectations by getting a single mark. He had described the effect of Polyjuice Potion accurately due to his experience of it. Harry thought he would probably get an A for Potions. He felt a deep sense of disappointment as his ideal future dripped away from him. Oh well, it seemed that that little window of hope was now closed to him as well. He didn't graduate for another two years, plenty of time to decide on a new career. Back to the problem at hand. The next four days of hell. Compared to the punishment he was now facing, a week with Yvonne seemed like heaven on earth. Mrs. Figg's house seemed like a pleasure cruise. Come to think of it, he would even settle for spending the summer with Severus Snape if it got him out of the holiday he was now on.

It was not really a holiday. Dudley had been 'advised not to return to Smelting's for sixth form'; in other words he had been kicked out, but not expelled. Schools have to keep a record of everyone they suspend and expel. Many of them ask disruptive pupils to leave so that they don't have to put a black mark on their record for having expelled a pupil. Smelting's could still tell any OFSTED inspectors, in all truth, that no one had ever been expelled. This left Dudley out on his own. Uncle Vernon would tell anyone who listened that Smelting's had gone downhill and that the new Headmaster had turned a quality establishment into a joke. Aunt Petunia would tell anyone who listened that Smelting's was too basic for her Duddykins and that they didn't understand how the mind of a genius worked.

However they explained it, it still left them with the problem of Dudley needing a new school for Sixth Form. Dudley would have liked to just not go to school, but that cut off his main source of financial income: stealing younger children's dinner money. Mugging and theft was another option but he was not clever, fit or competent enough to be a criminal. That meant he had to work. He could either get a job, or go back to school for sixth form and then University. His parents had managed to convince him to return to school; the presence of a new set of weights in the cellar, which doubled up as his weight room, may have influenced his discussion. Anyhow, with that said, they still faced the problem of finding a school for him. Harry had been sent to his room with no tea for suggesting St. Brutus' Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys. This punishment was not really punishing, it basically sent him back up to the room that he had only left seconds ago to get a glass of water after which he had planned to return to that very room anyway. Prospectuses were ordered from various colleges and Dudley flicked through them, basing his decisions largely on the attractiveness of the girls in the pictures. Eventually they short listed possibilities to a total of three.

Today they were off to visit the last one, Kelly College in Tavistock, Devon. It was a large school founded to teach sons of Naval Officers how to be gentlemen. It must have been the aristocratic nature of the school that appealed to Uncle Vernon and the blonde with the large

breasts in the photo on page six of the prospectus that appealed to Dudley. To be more precise, they were visiting the school tomorrow, but since Devon is five hours drive from Surrey depending on traffic, they had opted to come down a day early. They had a week left until Harry returned to school. This school was having an open day and the Dursleys had decided to attend. This, Harry could have lived with, but then Uncle Vernon had come up with 'a better idea'. It was not a better idea; it was the worst idea since someone suggested putting a snooze button on a smoke alarm. He had suggested that they stay with darling Aunt Marge who owned a farm nearby on which she bred dogs.

They would arrive early afternoon, spend tomorrow at the College and then another day at Marge's before returning home. Harry had pleaded all of yesterday evening to be allowed to stay at home but his aunt and uncle were having none of it.

"Absolutely not!" shouted Uncle Vernon. "I am not having you holding a party for all your freaky little friends when we are away. I know you too well, boy. We'd come home and find the whole house crawling with black cats, frogs and newt's eyes."

All this had resulted in Harry being stuck in the back seat of his uncle's car, with a fat lump of lard asking if they were nearly there yet every few seconds in his ear. Dudley had become bored after about twenty minutes. He was too scared to play his usual travelling game that involved hitting Harry and seeing who could make him cry out the loudest and then laughing when Uncle Vernon told him to shut up. He had no wish to engage Harry in conversation; not that he actually possessed the ability to raise conversation on the same intellectual level as Harry, anyway.

After five hours in the car, they had covered 250 miles, Dudley had consumed four packets of Haribo and they had stopped at three Motorway Service Stations. Harry had said a total of about four words since leaving the house. He had sat in almost perfect silence dreaming of what life would be like if he had been born someone else. *Why does it always come down to me?* he asked himself. He had never asked to be the Boy-Who-Lived; it was thrust upon him. Come to think of it, with all he had seen and done, not to mention all he had left to do, and the responsibility weighing down on him, it was a miracle that he was still sane.

They stayed on the M5 for over three hours, mainly due to the slow speed and traffic. Harry took to reading the signs and looking for interesting place names. He was so bored that it seemed interesting and it was also informative. He learned that Exeter Car Supermarket was having a sale, Digger-Land was a place where they let both children and adults drive real Diggers, tractors and JCBs off-road, and if you bought a Whopper at Burger King, you would get another one free. He also encountered some interesting place names, his favourites being Wookie's Hole, Crapstone and, much to his surprise, as they neared Exeter, he saw a sign to Ottery St. Mary.

I wonder if Ottery St. Catchpole is anywhere near here, thought Harry to himself.

They turned from the M5 onto the Duel Carriageway that was the A30. It was also called the Devon Express Way until it split into the A30 and the A38 and then the DEW followed the

A38 through Plymouth and onto Cornwall, or so Aunt Petunia told them. Uncle Vernon stayed on the A30 until they got to Okehampton as directed by Aunt Petunia who was reading from the sheet of directions which Aunt Marge had sent them in the mail along with a note requesting that Harry be left at home. It was a further half hour before they turned onto a muddy lane that led up to the farm. Higher Croft Farm said the signpost; this was the place. Uncle Vernon drove up the thin, winding road, with the brambles from the hedges on either side scraping along the car, decimating his paintwork. He pulled into the courtyard and parked the car under a tree to shield it from the sun. The three Dursleys climbed out of the car. Harry sat motionless, gazing at the house. It looked in some respects quite similar to the Burrow. It was a two-story house, with an old, and in this case, disused pigsty attached to the front wall. There was a porch outside the front door on which was set a table and four chairs. The sound of barking could be heard from around the other side of the house. It had a real farmyard feel to it. They also happened to be on top of a hill so the view was spectacular. The famous Tors of Dartmoor rose around them. Piles of rock atop huge hills surrounded them. Fields and Moorland stretched as far as the eye can see. It was a beautiful green landscape; a complete contrast from the noisy, grey, smoke infested world of Surrey suburbia, such as Little Whinging. It was quiet and tranquil with the exception of the dogs.

Harry undid his seatbelt and opened the door. He climbed out, expecting the smell of manure to instantly fill his nostrils. To his surprise, he smelt fresh air.

“Ah, the county paradise,” muttered Harry cynically.

“What was that, boy?” growled Uncle Vernon.

“Nothing,” muttered Harry.

Uncle Vernon made his way towards the front door. The sun was shining and reflecting off of the puddle on the patio. Aunt Marge must have watered her hanging baskets and missed because the unwound hose was sitting on the patio slowly secreting a steadily growing puddle. Uncle Vernon hopped over the puddle, not wanting to get his smart shoes and best suit muddy, and knocked on the door. It was then that he noticed the sign on the door.

Please use door around the back. Thank you.

Harry thought it somewhat out of character that this woman could be polite enough to say please and thank you. Still, the sign wasn't meant for him or else it would say 'Sod off and die' without even a please. Anyway, Harry followed his uncle around the side of his sister's house.

Harry's initial impressions of this place were far from what he had expected. He had expected a muddy hole fit for pigs with hundreds of little rat-like dogs barking for no good reason and driving him mad. Instead, he found a rather beautiful village with an ornate, cosy little farm. However, any hopes that Harry harboured about these few days being 'not so bad' were quickly shattered with the arrival of Aunt Marge.

“VERNON! How good to see you!” she bellowed from the middle of a pen full of dogs. She waddled to the gate of the pen, scattering dogs and, from the yelp Harry heard, it seemed clear that she had stepped on a tail or a paw of one of the dogs. Judging by the size of this woman, that had to hurt. “Petunia, so glad you could come, welcome to Mary Tavy! And here he is... my darling Neffy-Poo!” she shouted as she waddled closer. Harry saw Dudley grimace at the thought of the upcoming hug, kiss and his deeply ironic statement, “It’s wonderful to see you again, Aunt Marge.”

The three events came and went; Dudley looked nonplussed about it but didn’t react. Harry assumed that he was once again being paid to be polite. Just then, tragedy struck: Aunt Marge’s eye’s fell on Harry.

“Ah,” she mused. “The plot thickens. I assume by your presence that Yvonne was ill again?”

“Yes,” replied Aunt Petunia. “She’s back in the hospital, something about her liver.”

“Shame,” said Aunt Marge. “Still, let’s not leave you all out here. Do come in and get comfy. You, boy,” her gaze returned to Harry. “Make yourself useful and bring in your Uncle’s suitcase, and be quicker about it than you were when I last visited you.”

“Since you asked so nicely,” replied Harry sarcastically, earning him a glare from Aunt Marge and her brother. “Uncle Vernon, I need the keys to get into the boot.” His uncle thought for a second, presumably trying to decide whether he should give Harry the keys and risk him joyriding, or unlock it himself. He soon realised that the second option required effort on his part and since Harry didn’t know how to drive, nor did he have any desire to drive, he decided to give Harry the keys. He removed them from his pocket and threw them to Harry who caught them effortlessly, thanks largely to his years as a Seeker.

Harry unlocked the car and hauled the two suitcases, one for Dudley and one for his parents, as well as the small rucksack that contained Harry’s possessions, up to the house. Harry had brought a few items to amuse himself. He couldn’t bring any magical books as Uncle Vernon had inspected all that he had elected to bring. He had brought a bottle of water, a thick jumper in case it was cold, a spare pair of clothes, his wallet which was full of Muggle money as well as Galleons, and today’s copy of the *Daily Telegraph*.

Harry had once again been banned from the television this holiday. Since his hiding place beneath the window was now known about, he had no other way to listen to the news. Uncle Vernon read the *Daily Telegraph* everyday and after he discarded it, Harry would pilfer it and have a read himself. Harry also read the *Daily Prophet* on a regular basis, having taken out a subscription at the end of last term. He had paid for the next six months up front so the owls didn’t hang around, and you got a discount for a subscription like that. Much to his surprise, it seemed that Voldemort had been rather quiet. He had not attacked, there were no accounts of Dementor attacks, Lucius Malfoy and his illustrious gang were still behind bars and Dumbledore had been reinstated. Harry should be happy that no one else had died or been hurt but he wasn’t. He knew full well that this was just the quiet before the storm. Everyday he woke up with a sense

of dread at what he might read in today's *Prophet*. One morning, much to both Harry's horror and amusement, Uncle Vernon had picked up a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. What followed was a brief shouting session and Harry being threatened with the door. After Harry had reminded him, somewhat less than politely, that if he left, the house was vulnerable to an attack by Dementors. Uncle Vernon had then conceded, and sent him to his room.

Harry managed to get the suitcases up the stairs and into their appropriate rooms. He left them on the bed and returned downstairs. Aunt Marge had seated them in the lounge and had poured them all a drink of what Harry assumed was brandy. Dudley even had a glass, 'They had to teach darling Diddy-Kins to be a gentlemen'.

"Ah, all done are you, boy?" asked Aunt Marge with malice that rivalled Professor Snape.

"Yes," replied Harry. "Your keys, Uncle Vernon, and yes; the car is locked. Not that there is much danger of a sheep stealing your car."

"Silence, boy," growled Aunt Marge. "Your uncle has been kind enough to let you live in his house, eat off his table, and even had the courtesy to drive you down here today and all you can do is cheek him?"

"I was merely pointing out that the car is locked and is not going to be stolen," replied Harry with a very patronising tone. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Where are you going?" asked Aunt Petunia.

"To have a look around," replied Harry.

"Keep off my bloody flowers and don't go near the dogs!" shouted Aunt Marge as Harry left.

"Well, this is another fine mess that you've gotten yourself into," muttered Harry to himself. He wandered out of the door and through the field. He passed the dog pens and the orchard before wandering down the hill towards the fields that covered most of the Devon countryside. There were sheep in most fields, some with cows and the occasional paddock with horses. Judging by the high stonewall which rose about eight feet, the fields belonged to the farm next door. Harry climbed the tree next to the wall; the wall itself was topped with barbed wire to stop sheep climbing over, not that a sheep could jump eight feet in the air. It seemed that Marge valued her privacy. He peered over at the endless greenery, decorated with white dots that were sheep. He saw a combine harvester up on one of the hillsides and a tractor or two working in the crop fields.

The sun was warm but there was a cooling breeze. The landscape was quiet, peaceful. This was what he needed, time to be alone and think. He was perched on a thick branch of a pear tree. His legs were dangling down and he was leaning back against the trunk of the old tree. He pulled out his wand, which he had successfully managed to smuggle out of the house. He rolled

it over between his fingers. Having polished it two nights ago and not needing to use it, it was beautifully shiny. It reflected the sun's light up into his eyes. He had always considered it a tool, an object that could make things fly or change colour or move. He had never thought of a wand as a weapon before, certainly not as a device to kill with. Maybe that was part of his problem.

He remembered his duel with Bellatrix. Her sick voice echoed in his mind.

You have to want to cause pain; you have to enjoy it!

Harry had wanted to hurt her, to make her suffer the way he was suffering now, but he never enjoyed causing pain. He could never enjoy hurting someone. Not even Voldemort or Bellatrix. If he couldn't even perform the Cruciatus Curse, what hope was there that he could perform the Killing Curse? Avada Kedavra; the fake Moody had said that everyone in the room could point their wands at him and say the words and he wouldn't even get a nosebleed. If Harry couldn't even summon up hatred enough for the Cruciatus Curse, he certainly could not summon enough to end someone's life. His situation was hopeless. He couldn't even kill Voldemort, and all the while, his friends and loved ones were going to be picked off one by one. Cedric had been the first, then Sirius. How many more would die before Harry was hateful enough to be able to kill? Harry could imagine Ron and Ginny playing Quidditch with their brothers in the orchard. He could imagine Hermione on holiday in Spain where she said she was going on the train ride at the end of last year. No doubt she would come back with tales of historic witches and wizards who had done great things centuries ago. Harry wondered if he would be remembered in a hundred year's time. Would his gravestone read *Harry Potter ~ The Boy Who Failed* or would it be *Harry Potter ~ Beloved Husband, Treasured Friend, Noble Saviour?*

The problem with sitting in a tree is that, due to the shape of the branches it is hard to find a comfortable position, and when one becomes uncomfortable it is hard to change. Harry gave up fidgeting and jumped down. He meandered back up through the orchard but not towards the house. Instead, he followed the boundary of Aunt Marge's property. The farm wasn't huge but since Harry lived in suburbia, he was unaccustomed to large open spaces and the abundance of greenery. Harry came to a small stream that trickled through one of the fields. Aunt Marge did not own any sheep so the field was empty. The grass had recently been cut and the hedges looked like they had been clipped back. The hedges consisted of dry stonewalls which were covered in brambles, bracken and stinging nettles. They looked unruly and ugly all around the farm, but as Harry saw them cut back to their stalks, he realised that even the ugliest plants are favourable to the barren look of the stalks which covered the field on one side. The stream was about a metre wide and a foot deep. The banks were flat and covered in short grass. The field was sloped slightly on either side and the flowers of summer were pushing back up after the cutting for the grass. Harry found the whole place quite peaceful. Surrey was noisy and grey, yet here he found a place of natural beauty which, for the moment at least, he had all to himself. There was silence except for the trickling of the stream; the sun was warm and the sky was clear.

This was what Harry wanted; time alone to think things through. He took his top off, revealing his thin and pale chest. *I really need to do some exercise*, thought Harry to himself as he folded his t-shirt into a pillow and lay down on his back. He put his arms behind his head and

laid back. He closed his eyes and relaxed, allowing the sun's rays to warm his pale body. Harry dozed off in a few minutes.

BAAAAAAAAA! BAAAAAAAAA!

Harry awoke with a start. His quiet paradise was now noisier than Surrey. Harry sat bolt upright and looked around quickly for the cause of the commotion. The sheep in the next fields, which belonged to another farmer, were bleating loudly. Harry looked around to see what had scared them. His hand instinctively pulled his wand out from the waistband of his combats and he pulled on his shirt. The sun was still high and warm. Harry checked his watch; it was half past seven. He had probably missed dinner but he wasn't concerned with that; he wasn't even hungry. Harry looked over at the sheep; they were running madly around in what Harry thought was terror. Something was scaring the sheep. Harry cautiously got to his feet and crept over to the dry-stone wall. He cautiously poked his head over the top to see what was scaring them. It could just have been the farmer coming out with his dog but Harry too could feel something. He felt cold; he could feel something coming. He couldn't tell what it was, but he felt scared. It was a feeling similar to the feeling that you are being watched, but in addition there was the fear from the sheep as well. Something was not right.

Harry knew he shouldn't be there. There was no other human around; he should get back to the farmhouse. At least there, there were others around and he could contact someone. Harry turned and ran; he sprinted as fast as he could back up the hill towards the gate through which he had come. With every step the feeling of fear grew. Something was coming and he didn't know what. Harry was just out of the gate and onto the track back towards the farmhouse, when he heard a strange sound. It sounded like a whistle, but he couldn't tell where it was coming from. It seemed that the whole valley was making this soft whistling sound. It was a constant note, which made Harry think that it was not the wind. *That is being made by something alive*, reasoned Harry. *Something that thinks!*

Harry ran faster still, bursting up the hill towards the farmyard. With every pace, the volume and pitch of the whistle increased. Harry stopped once he was out of the gate and onto the stone floor of the farmyard. He couldn't bear the sound any more. It was now so loud that Harry couldn't hear anything else at all, not his footsteps, not the dogs; nothing. He clamped his hands over his ears and fell to his knees, trying ever so hard to block out the sound. His ears felt as though they were going to burst, he could feel the pressure of his head pounding in his ears.

AHHHHHHHHHH!

Harry screamed as the whistle became louder and louder. His ears were throbbing. Harry felt his lungs begin to tighten. He was finding it increasingly hard to breathe. His breaths were long and painful, his heart was pounding and his head was fit to burst. Suddenly it all stopped.

Harry still felt drained and his head ached. He released his ears and tried to stand, feeling weaker all the while. Harry managed to get up, but he could still feel that something was wrong. The whistling had stopped, but Harry knew that something dark was coming. He continued to

move towards the farmhouse, staggering as fast as he could. He fell over after a few paces and tried to get back up. He was just inside the courtyard.

“Need a hand, Harry?” asked a voice.

Harry looked up from his position on the stone courtyard. His blood ran cold and his limbs became numb as his scar exploded with pain. Harry clasped a hand instinctively to his scar. He looked helplessly up into a pair of unforgiving, red eyes.

“NO! You can’t be here!” shouted Harry. “You can’t!” It couldn’t be true; Dumbledore had promised him that he would be safe with the Dursleys. Dumbledore had *promised* him!

“I assure you I can, Harry,” smirked Voldemort. Harry didn’t know where he came from, but he was standing in front of him as real as anything else. Dumbledore had told him he would be safe, as long as he was staying with his Aunt. Voldemort reached out a hand and grabbed Harry’s wrist. The pain in his scar intensified as the cold bony fingers wrapped themselves around his wrist and pulled him sharply up onto his feet. Once Harry was upright and supporting himself, Voldemort released his wrist. Out of common politeness, Harry came very close to thanking Voldemort but managed to stop himself. He was still dazed and was having trouble maintaining his balance. Harry immediately reached behind him and grabbed his wand. Before he could bring it around, Voldemort grabbed him roughly around the throat with one hand and pulled the wand out of Harry’s hand with the other. The pain in Harry’s head was too much, he couldn’t hold onto the wand and his balance was wavering. Harry crumpled to the ground and stared helplessly up at the towering figure of Lord Voldemort. He just had time to acknowledge that two wands were being pointed at him before pain ripped through every cell in his body.

“*CRUCIO!*” hissed Voldemort. Harry felt like he was on fire. He had felt the curse before but he could never get used to it. The pain was so intense; he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t think. Voldemort removed the curse and stared maliciously down at Harry. “Never try to attack me, Harry. It hurts my feelings. You don’t want to hurt my feelings, Harry.”

“Do it!” croaked Harry. The pain was too much; he didn’t care anymore. He would see Sirius again; he would see his parents. Ron and Hermione would join them when Voldemort took Hogwarts. They would all be together on the other side.

“Patience is a virtue, Harry,” hissed Voldemort malevolently.

“Do it, coward!” coughed Harry.

“I do what I want, when I want,” replied Voldemort. “Are you really so eager to die?”

“You’ve won, now finish it!” shouted Harry.

“If it is any consolation, I will miss you, Harry,” sighed Voldemort, his eyes still glowing with hatred. “Our little game kept me occupied. I dare say there will be times when I will regret not having a worthy opponent.”

“I thought you thought I was nothing special.”

“Yet you escaped me several times, you duelled with me and lived. It grieves me to admit that you gave me a good run for my money. Good bye, Harry.”

“When Dumbledore kills you, remember me,” choked Harry.

“As you wish,” smirked Voldemort. “AVADA...”

“*Invertae Statim!*” Harry saw a flash of light to his right before Voldemort was launched several feet backwards. The Dark Lord landed on his back, and rolled down the hill. He rolled three times before coming to a stop. His head shot up to look at who had dared to try and hex him. Harry’s head spun around as well. Harry’s heart lifted as he recognised the figure in blue, who was standing behind him.

Albus Dumbledore had come to the rescue.

“Dumbledore!” spat Voldemort as he got to his feet and brushed himself down. “You can’t protect him from me, Albus.”

Voldemort bent down to brush the bottom of his robes off, but then quick as a flash shot back up and fired a curse at Dumbledore. The Headmaster reacted instantaneously, spinning gracefully and effortlessly out of the way of the curse.

The ball of light rocketed past him and smashed into the wall, bowing it apart and releasing the sheep in the next field. Dumbledore stood perfectly still, his eyes once more on Voldemort. He still hadn’t drawn his wand, while Voldemort had both his wand and Harry’s aimed at the Headmaster.

“Tom,” said Dumbledore coolly. “While I am impressed that you managed to get past my spells, I must warn you that we are not helpless.”

“Do you really believe that that Half-Blooded little boy could ever defeat me?”

“I have the utmost confidence in Harry,” replied the Headmaster.

“You lie!” spat Voldemort triumphantly. “You are lying to me! You do not believe he can do it, do you?” Voldemort sent another Killing Curse straight at the headmaster who effortlessly sidestepped again.

“You cannot win, Tom. Hatred can never be as powerful as love.”

“Then why is there no way to block the killing curse? Why can nothing block pure hatred?”

“A mother’s love blocked your curse. A mother’s love cost you thirteen years of your life.”

“But it never truly triumphed. In the end, darkness will always win. And now, I shall prove it. If love truly is more powerful than hatred, if Harry’s love for his friends, his late godfather, his father, his Mudblood mother and you, Dumbledore, is really stronger than my hatred, then his Shield Charm should block my curse.” He threw Harry back his wand.

“You’re insane!” spat Harry, finding his voice again.

“Even Potter knows I’m right! You both know that I am right. Neither of you will risk it!” sneered Voldemort.

Dumbledore didn’t alter his expression at all, he kept his sparkling blue eyes on Voldemort. Seconds ticked by as the three wizards stared back and forth between each other. Then Dumbledore moved. Slowly, he pulled back his cloak revealing a long silver object, which was hanging from his belt. Harry recognised it at once as the sword that had saved him in the second year. Godric Gryffindor’s sword was shining brightly from under Dumbledore’s robes.

“What are you going to do with that?” asked Voldemort with a bored tone.

Voldemort and Harry watched as Dumbledore slowly unclipped the sword from his belt and walked over to Harry. He handed it to Harry, who weakly took it.

“I can’t fight like this, sir,” croaked Harry. Dumbledore looked at him for a second before removing something else from his pocket. It was a small piece of chalk.

“Draw a circle around yourself. As long as the sword and you stay in the circle he cannot harm you.” Harry did as he was told. Dumbledore was standing between Voldemort and Harry so the Dark Lord couldn’t see what Harry was doing. Harry quickly completed the circle and Dumbledore stood aside.

“Do you expect the boy to try and stab me to death?” gloated Voldemort.

“Not at all,” replied Dumbledore. “I expect you to leave.” Voldemort stared unblinkingly at Dumbledore for a few seconds before firing another Killing Curse at Dumbledore. The Headmaster spun around with a twirl of his cloak and was gone. The curse flew harmlessly into the ground.

“Tom,” called Dumbledore from his new perch atop the wall to Harry’s right.

“Enough games,” spat Voldemort. He fired another curse at the Headmaster who jumped backwards off of the wall and landed eloquently just outside the gate. “First mistake!” hissed Voldemort in triumph. He flicked his wand and the gate in front of Dumbledore slammed shut and bolted. Harry jumped as a hazy wall of light appeared over the gate and the walls,

surrounding the field in a translucent bubble of energy. Dumbledore walked slowly up to the light and reached out with a hand. He quickly withdrew it, as if in pain.

“You see, Dumbledore,” said Voldemort slowly. “You can’t protect him. Nothing can enter here.” Harry tried to stand as Voldemort turned back to him. “And you, Harry. Did you really think that Dumbledore could protect you? Did you actually believe that you had a chance of beating me?”

“You bastard!” growled Harry.

“*CRUCIO!*” hissed Voldemort.

A wall of blue light shot up around the edge of the circle of chalk as the curse struck it. Voldemort jumped back in shock at the sight of the barrier. Harry felt the sword pulse with energy in his hands as the blue light absorbed the curse and then disappeared.

“Stuck again, are we, Tom?” came Dumbledore’s muffled voice through the bubble. The tone of amusement was unmistakable and Harry felt Voldemort’s anger pulsing through his scar. “Have you forgotten the ancient conflicts between Gryffindor and Slytherin?” asked the Headmaster.

“I know the magic!” hissed Voldemort.

“Then you also know that no spell nor person of Slytherin blood can enter the circle as long as Gryffindor’s sword and blood lie within, don’t you!” said Dumbledore coolly.

“A cute trick,” spat Voldemort. “But nothing can block the killing curse. *AVADA KEDAVRA!*”

Green light erupted from the end of Voldemort’s wand. It surged towards Harry like a rocket, straight at his chest. The blue bubble appeared again, blocking the curse. Harry felt the sword vibrate furiously as the curse struck. He felt tremendous energy surge within the sword. It grew hot; his fingers began to burn. Harry knew that he should let go, but if he did, the bubble might break and he would die. The pain grew, the whole sword was beginning to glow white. Something was happening. The whistling suddenly came back louder than ever before. Dumbledore and Voldemort both clasped their hands to their ears and fell to the ground in pain.

“What is this magic?” screamed Voldemort.

The world began to spin around Harry. He wanted to cover his ears but found he couldn’t let go of the sword. Every cell in his body felt like it was on fire. Every inch of him seared with pain. It was as bad as the Cruciatus Curse, coupled with the painful whistle that grew louder still. The world began to spin, literally; Harry was sitting almost perfectly still, but the world rotated around him. As he spun faster, the pain increased and the whistling grew louder. Faster and faster he spun and around him the light became brighter and brighter. An intense white light was

shining all around him, forcing him to close his eyes. His eyes, ears, and limbs were in agony. Suddenly there was a tremendous bang.

The world suddenly stopped spinning; the whistling stopped and the pain subsided. Harry found himself in midair, a few feet above the ground. Harry just had time to notice that he was falling before he slammed into the ground. Wherever he was, it was not in Aunt Marge's courtyard. He was in a flat field, the sun was setting and the dry-stone walls that Aunt Marge had, were replaced by barbed wire fences. Harry landed face first on the soft grass. Summoning his remaining energy, Harry managed to look up. He just saw Gryffindor's sword stop glowing white before he passed into unconsciousness.

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Harry awoke to the feeling of something nudging his legs. As he opened his eyes, the world came into focus. He had been lying face down on a patch of grass, meaning that he now had an impression of the grass imprinted onto the parts of his body that he had been lying on. He was cold but dry. Every limb ached as he tried to move. Something warm and soft was nudging against his left thigh. He rolled over to try and see what it was. As he rolled over, he came face to face with a large, brown horse. The shock of seeing the animal's face that close caused Harry to cry out for a split second before regaining himself. Aching all over, Harry managed to climb to his feet. His head ached as well, not the pain of his scar, but a dull ache that one feels after a night out on the town. Harry felt disorientated and was having a hard time maintaining his balance. He looked all around. He was standing in the middle of a field. One side of the field ended with some woods, while the other three sides were lined with a dry stonewall, topped with barbed wire. Beyond this field was another, and another. All around him were green hills, stretching for miles, some covered with bracken and gorse and others full of sheep and horses.

"Where the hell am I?" muttered Harry to himself. Images came flooding back to him. He remembered sunbathing, then Voldemort appearing, and then the pain.

It was dark; the valley was in shadow. At the bottom was a town, lit up by hundreds of lampposts. These appeared like an orange lake amidst the darkness. Harry looked down at his watch. It read 19:41. It had only been ten minutes since his encounter with Voldemort, yet the sun had set. As Harry looked at his wrist, he realised that his clothes had changed. Gone were Dudley's old clothes. He was wearing a pair of black combat trousers, held up by a thick black belt. He had a holster on each thigh, attached to his belt, one containing his wand, the other containing a strange sort of stick he had ever seen. It was about twenty inches long. It had a short metal handle on one end, the rest looked to Harry like a glow-stick that had yet to be ignited. He removed it from the holster, feeling the heavy stick in his hands. He had a sudden urge to cast a spell.

"Stupefy!" he muttered. Suddenly the glow-stick lit up with a brilliant scarlet light. The stick was holding the spell within it. Harry knew better than to touch the glowing stick, for he somehow knew, he would stun himself if he did. He removed the spell and placed the stick back in the holster. *A useful little toy*, thought Harry. He had no idea how he had known what to do with the stick. He had never seen one before, but somehow he just knew what to do. He was

wearing a thin black top, with Dragon scale armour over the top. It looked like a Muggle flak jacket, but Harry knew it was made of Dragon Scales. It was as black as the rest of his clothes. He was wearing a pair of leather gloves and, strapped across his back, was a huge sword. Harry pulled it out and looked at it. It was a Samurai sword, with a sharp curved blade that reflected the moonlight. Harry put it back in its scabbard. Attached to the back of his belt was a second wand. Somehow Harry knew that if he lost his primary wand, he had this as a fall back option. Harry had a feeling that it had saved his life before, but he had no memory of ever owning a second wand.

Harry had just woken up, in a strange place, armed to the teeth with no knowledge of how he had come to be there.

Harry realised that he was not in the same place. Whatever had happened had transported him somewhere else. He brushed himself down and stretched his arms and legs, willing the numbness to end. The aching didn't go away and Harry slowly began to limp in the direction of the wire fences. He would look a right sight if anyone saw him. He was carrying enough weapons to make the Aurors look like pacifists. He knew that when you were lost you follow one wall and eventually it will lead to a gate. As he neared the gate, he heard a distinct crack. It was not someone Apparating; it sounded like a branch braking. Harry turned to the direction from which the sound had come. He stood as still as possible and listened.

*SNAP!*

There it was again, as Harry listened it happened again and again, becoming more rapid each time. Harry realised that someone was moving quickly in the woods. Suddenly Harry heard voices.

“He went that way!” shouted a voice in the distance. Harry's first instinct was to hide, but then it occurred to him that he could ask these people where he was. He hadn't done anything wrong, they would be able to point him in the right direction. Harry stood in the field, waiting for the Muggles to come out of the wood.

A few seconds passed then two figures came bursting out of the woods. Harry was shocked to see that the figures were wearing long, black cloaks and glowing white masks.

*Death Eaters!*

Harry groggily fumbled in his holster for his wand. By the time he had withdrawn it the Death Eaters were just in front of him.

“Sir,” called the first Death Eater as he tried to regain his breath. “We've been looking for you. They have an Anti-Apparation barrier all around us. There are too many, we need to get you out of here.”

“What?” asked Harry, completely bemused by the Death Eater. If he didn't feel so weak he would have stunned them, but he was having trouble staying on his feet.

“Sir, did you hear me? We have to leave, quickly.”

“But, I...you’re...” stuttered Harry.

“Sir, my orders are to get you out of here!” said the second Death Eater firmly.

“This way, quickly,” said the first Death Eater. He took Harry’s arm and began to hurry him down the slope. “Look out!”

Harry looked up just in time to see several red spells come shooting out of the woods. They found their marks, making the Death Eaters collapse around Harry. He looked up as six figures in red robes emerged from the woods.

*Thank God,* thought Harry. *Aurors have found me.* He breathed a sigh of relief as the figures in red drew nearer.

Harry made his way towards them. He put his hands up to show that he had no wand.

“It’s alright,” he called. “I’m fine; they didn’t hurt me.” As he neared the Aurors, they ignited their wands, shining six very bright lights in Harry’s eyes. He tried to cover them with his arm. “Can you lower the lights, please!” he called.

“Identify yourself!” called one of them.

“Harry Potter,” shouted Harry.

*“Petrificus Totalus!”*

Several binding spells hit him at once. Harry felt the armour absorb most of them but one struck him in the face. He never really saw them coming. His arms snapped against his sides and he keeled slowly over, landing painfully on his back. His already thumping head started throbbing. Voldemort wasn’t close or even angry but his head was in pain. *What I wouldn’t give for a Neurofen tablet,* thought Harry.

“What the hell is going on?” he shouted.

“Silence, Potter!” growled an Auror. “Call the office, boys. We’ve finally caught the infamous Harry Potter!”

“What have I done?” asked Harry.

“Silence!” hissed the Auror. “Save your breath for your confession. You’re going to Azkaban, Potter.”

“Azkaban?” he coughed. “What have I done?”

“Don’t play that game with me,” snapped the Auror, giving Harry a hard kick to the gut. He hardly felt a thing, due to the protection of the Dragon armour.

“Frank, calm down,” said a second Auror. “He needs to be able to talk for his trial.”

“Crouch won’t give him one,” spat Frank. Frank, the name rang a bell to Harry. The moonlight was shining brightly enough for Harry to be able to see his captors. The Auror named Frank, seemed familiar, yet Harry couldn’t place a name.

“True,” said the second Auror. “But Dumbledore might; the Wizengamot can still overrule Crouch and give him a trial. Lily and James are very close to Dumbledore.” This conversation was bemusing Harry more than the Death Eaters had.

“Lily and James, as in my parents?” asked Harry. The curse was beginning to wear off and he could move his finger and hands slightly.

“Once,” sneered Frank. “Lily is too ashamed to even admit that a little shit like you ever came from her body.”

“My parents are dead,” sneered Harry. How dare they taunt him about them? How dare they trample on the memories of his parents? Even Voldemort had yet to stoop that low.

“What?” snapped the second Auror.

“They were murdered by Voldemort,” sneered Harry. “Where have you been for the past fifteen years?” This was all a sick joke. Aurors were despicable, taunting an orphan about his deceased parents. This was lower than Death Eaters; they didn’t even have a motive...unless...these must be Death Eaters!

Harry was snapped out of his trail of thought as Frank grabbed him and hoisted him roughly into the air.

“What did you say?” he growled.

“You’re pathetic! How dare you do this to me!” shouted Harry. Tears of anger began to build in his eyes.

“How dare I? You may be the Dark Lord’s number two, but you’re also pretty high on my shit-list at the moment, so tell me. What have you done with Lily and James?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Harry lowered his voice, complete confused.

“TELL ME! WHAT’VE YOU DONE TO THEM?” In his temper, Frank knocked his hood down and Harry finally recognised him, but it wasn’t possible.

“Frank Longbottom?” stuttered Harry in shock. “But you...you should be in St. Mungos!”

“I should be?” whispered Frank. “I SHOULD BE? You’re right, I should be, but I wasn’t there when your friends arrived. They killed my wife, and our unborn child. You took everything from me!”

“What about Neville?” coughed Harry through Frank’s strong and overly tight grip. The look Frank gave him scared Harry to death.

“Alright, that does it!” Frank threw him to the ground roughly and pulled out his wand. “Mr. Potter here is about to be killed resisting arrest.”

“FRANK!” The second Auror grabbed him by the arm.

“He’s not worth it!”

“Did you hear what he said?”

“Neville’s dead, Frank, and killing Potter won’t bring him back,” said the second Auror softly. He took a step past Frank and kneeled next to Harry.

“Harry,” said the Auror softly. “What did you mean when you said James and Lily were dead?”

“As in the opposite of alive,” spat Harry, his temper getting the better of him. “Voldemort came to their house and murdered them in front of me.”

“You’re lying!” said the Auror firmly, though Harry heard the doubt in his voice.

“Why would I lie about that?” asked Harry sarcastically. “It’s in every history book you’ll read. What the hell is going on? One minute I’m in a fire-fight on a farm, the next I’m being stunned by my own God-damned side. What is going on?”

“Your own side?” asked the Auror in a puzzled tone. “As in Death Eaters?”

“Do I look like a bloody Death Eater?” snapped Harry, trying to get to his feet. Instantly, he had six wands aimed at his chest.

“No,” sneered Frank. “You look like the bloody tooth fairy! I’ve had enough; gag and bag this little prick. Crouch can deal with him.”

With that, two pairs of hand grabbed him from behind. A bag came down over his head. It was made of a thick fabric that blocked out all light. Harry felt his hands being twisted behind his back.

“Wait!” he shouted. “I’m not a...” He was silenced by a kick to the stomach. Harry fell to his knees, gasping for air. His hands had been released as he fell. He ripped the bag from his head, trying to get air into his lungs. He looked up at the Aurors around him. He turned back to Frank, just in time to see a fist come out nowhere and slam into his face. White blobs appeared over his vision and he toppled to one side.

Harry tried to sit up. He moved his head enough to see the incoming spell. The jet of red light struck him in the face and then everything went black.

~~~~~ Chapter II ~~~~~  
A Friend in Need is a Friend Indeed

*“Life, it’s ever so strange, It’s so full of change,
Think that you’ve worked it out,
Then BANG, right out of the blue,
Something happens to you, to throw you off course,
and then you breakdown,
Yeah you breakdown,
Don’t you breakdown, listen to me
Because,
It’s just a ride, it’s just a ride,
no need to run, no need to hide,
It’ll take you round and round,
Sometimes you’re up, sometimes you’re down,*

~ JEM (Just a Ride)

Harry groggily opened his eyes. It took a lot of effort just to move his eyelids. He tried to sit up, but found he didn’t have the energy. Looking round as best he could, he found that he was in a hospital of sorts. He was staring straight up at a large white light, which was beaming straight down on him. There were no windows in the room, just one long large mirror on one wall. Leaning over him was a woman Harry had never seen before. She looked coldly at him, then, after a quick movement of her hands, Harry felt a needle plunge into his arm.

It didn’t hurt, but Harry felt himself become queasy. He hated needles, ever since his measles immunisation at school. They terrified him. Harry struggled not to be sick as he felt a coldness envelope his right arm. After a few seconds the needle was withdrawn and Harry unclenched his eyes. He looked around again and found that his vision was slightly blurred. This wasn’t due to his lack of glasses, since he was wearing contact lenses and could see perfectly. His vision was hazy; he felt light headed and dizzy. He managed with great effort to sit up.

“Wat...water?” coughed Harry painfully. His throat was painfully dry. The woman handed him a small beaker, which he took and drank from. Feeling a little better, but still disorientated, he placed it back on the table. He shook his head in an effort to drive away the dizziness. Looking down, his black robes and a seemingly endless supply of weapons had been removed and replaced by a pair of white trousers and nothing else. Harry was startled to find that his body had changed. Yesterday he had been scrawny and pale. Harry looked down to find that he had some muscle to him. He was by no means bulging, but he could see muscle beneath his skin rather than his ribs. He even had a six-pack, though he suspected that that was due to his skinniness rather than his muscle. He looked up at the woman who was again leaning over him. She looked about 25 years old, and had short blond hair tied up beneath her cap. She wore a white apron and was unmistakably a nurse.

“Where am I?” asked Harry. It came out as a croak; he seemed to have lost his voice.

“Don’t you recognise it?” smirked the nurse coldly. She didn’t look him in the eye, but kept on working.

“If I did, would I ask?” shot back Harry. Why does everyone have to patronise him all the time? Albeit, he preferred this to pointing and starrng, but it was still annoying. He had asked a civil question, but she had to be sarcastic. He hadn’t deserved it, had he?

“You’re in the secure wing of St Mungo’s,” she informed him, icily. “You are being checked over before your interrogation.”

“Interrogation?” Harry repeated the word back. Why was he to be interrogated? He remembered that Aurors had brought him in, but surely they would remember who he was. Surely Dumbledore would sort it out. Harry knew he shouldn’t take the Headmaster for granted, but he really hadn’t done anything. Surely after the shenanigans last year, Fudge would give him the benefit of the doubt this time.

“I’m not allowed to talk to prisoners, so shut up!” spat the nurse. She seemed really angry with him, but he didn’t know her from Adam. Had he offended her?

“Have I done something to offend you?” said Harry softly.

“Shut up!”

Harry sat on the side of his bed, his feet dangling over the edge, his head hung low. Whatever she had injected was making him very dizzy. Her bitter response washed off him as the room began to spin.

“What did you give me?” he asked, trying to shake off the dizziness.

“A sedative; we are not making the same mistakes twice.” *What mistakes? What last time?*

“Why needles?” he asked at last. He had spent more than enough time in the Hospital wing at school but he had never seen a single needle. Not even at St Mungo’s when he had gone to visit Mr. Weasley. That was the beauty of magical medicine; no needles, no evasive surgery, no cutting people open.

“Since you’re such a *celebrity*, I can’t use a wand,” sneered the nurse. “With a wand, you’d kill me before I could say Flobberworm. Still, a little dose of pain is no more than you deserve.”

Harry looked up at her, and was about to object. It was then that he noticed a scalpel in her left hand. Harry reacted in the blink of an eye with force that took even himself by surprise. He kicked off the bed, took two steps and pivoted on the spot, coming to a stop behind the nurse. He grabbed her wrist, twisted and pulled the back of her neck downwards, with his thigh in the small of her back. She was bent over backwards over his left thigh; his left hand was locked around her wrist, which he had twisted behind her back. In his right he held the scalpel up to her throat.

“What are you doing to me?” he hissed.

“You have shrapnel in you arm,” gasped the witch in terror. “Please, I have two daughters, please don’t hurt me, I was only trying to help. I was trying to remove it.” Harry looked at his arm, which was indeed topped by a large cut, in which Harry could see pieces of metal. Where had he got that? He gently released her, raising her back to a standing position. He felt a little stupid and more than a little startled. He should never have attacked a nurse, but then again, how had he attacked her? He had moved faster than he knew he could, with skill he never had. He had never learned judo or anything like that, but he had known exactly what to do. Had Voldemort taking control of him with Legimency? No, his scar wasn’t stinging. Harry didn’t know what had come over him.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “I thought you were going to stab me.”

“Tempting, Potter.” With that she picked up a small metal instrument and before Harry could react, he had a dart sticking into his stomach. She had shot him with a tranquilliser dart! The dart was about two inches long with a red tuft at the end. He wrenched it out of his stomach. He could see that the dart hollow and empty inside. Whatever drug or potion was in the dart was now flowing through his veins. Suddenly his limbs became very heavy. His legs felt weak and before he could say another word, he collapsed, bouncing off the corner of a table as he fell. Harry found himself lying on the floor, unable to move. Pain was throbbing through his ribs, which had bounced off the hard corner of the table as he had fallen.

Just then, the doors flew open and two figures came in, both in red robes.

“What happened?” asked one. “You hit the alarm!” Harry watched, unable to move as the Aurors advanced and drew wands.

“I’m fine,” growled the witch angrily. “He could have killed me and you stroll in here nearly a minute late and ask what happened? Idiots!” The Aurors seemed to pale under her wrath and Harry would have smiled if he could.

“Shall we stun him again?” asked the Auror, pointing his wand at Harry’s head.

“No,” replied the nurse, much to Harry’s relief. She took a syringe off the table and shoved it roughly into his buttock.

“Sorry about that, Mr.Potter,” she said coldly. “OK, maybe that was a lie. I enjoyed shooting you. I have just given you the antidote. You’ll be fine, just a little dizzy. That’s two lots of sedative and one simulative. You have a merry concoction inside you but it will do you no harm. You’ll be able to move in a few seconds. Bear in mind that if you try anything, I’ll shoot you again, and next time I won’t give you the antidote.”

“We’ll just be outside,” mumbled one of the Aurors, making for the door. They knew they were no longer needed. He had probably been looking forward to hexing Harry and was now making his way back to his port with his tail firmly between his legs.

They both turned and headed slowly towards the door. Before they got there, the door opened just a fraction and something small and grey rolled into the room. It was round and about two inches in diameter.

Harry looked down at it, he had never seen one before but somehow he knew what it was. Luckily he could move again.

“Get down!” he hissed, grabbing the nurse and pulling her down onto the ground. He tipped the bed over so that he and the nurse were hiding behind it. The Flash-Bang went off with enough force to send the two Aurors flying against the wall. The bed moved slightly as the force of the explosion hit it. Harry and the nurse remained unharmed, except for their ears. Harry’s ears were ringing, whether from the drugs or from the explosion he didn’t know. His hearing was faded. He squeezed his nose and blew out, hoping to pop his ears, but it made no difference. His hearing was still bugged up.

“Stay down,” Harry hissed at the nurse, who was clearly too terrified to do anything else. Harry slowly raised his head enough to see over the fallen bed. He saw two figures in red robes sprawled out in the corner. They were moving but only just. Harry could see a trail of blood oozing out of their ears. They were rolling in agony on the floor. The room was filled with smoke and debris. The glass of the cabinets, phials, bottles, and lamps had been shattered by the explosion. Glass, plastic and other rubble was strewn across the room. Harry coughed as the smoke entered his lungs. He saw four silhouettes enter the room and move silently over to the bodies. His ears were still ringing from the explosion and he couldn’t hear what was going on, just the whimpering of the nurse, who was clinging to his arm.

To his horror he saw two flashes of green light and instantly ducked down behind the bed.

“Oh Merlin!” stammered the nurse. She was hysterical. She was speaking loudly, more than enough to attract the intruders. “They killed them, they killed them!” she repeated hysterically. Tears were running down her cheeks and she was breathing very quickly.

“SHHHHH!” hissed Harry. If the intruders heard them, which he was afraid they already had, they would be dead.

“Potter?” called a voice. *Damn!* They had heard them.

“Stay here!” he whispered to the nurse, with a kind smile. “It’ll be alright.”

“POTTER!” called the intruder.

Harry stood slowly. The men were a few feet behind the bed. Harry raised his hands and slowly walked around the side of the bed. He kept his hands clearly visible, hoping that they wouldn’t curse him without cause. They had just killed two Aurors; they were murderers if not Death Eaters.

"I'm here," said Harry softly, as he moved closer to them. Both of them exchanged a look and then lowered their wands. Harry could now see them, through the dust. Each of them was wearing brightly coloured robes. The first was wearing blue robes, the second wore purple, number three wore yellow and number four wore green. Were they in disguise? Harry found their appearance quite amusing, but he didn't want to laugh and start a firefight when he was unarmed. They lowered their wands as he approached, which confused Harry even more.

"Sir, we have to leave now!" said Mr. Blue firmly. Harry dubbed them the colours of their robes. Mr. Blue rolled up his sleeve, exposing the Dark Mark. "We've come to set you free."

"You're Death Eaters! Is this Voldemort's sick joke?" spat Harry. Had Voldemort tricked Fudge into thinking he was a Death Eater? Was this his sick joke? "Did he set me up?"

"What the hell do you mean?" said Mr. Purple, before his eyes grew wide with terror. "Apologies, Sir, forgive my rudeness. I beg your pardon."

"Was this all Voldemort's idea? Making me think they're alive? Making people think I'm a Death Eater, bloody hilarious!" snapped Harry his voice oozing with sarcasm. Only he would do that. Had he got someone who looked like Frank Longbottom to tease him? Was he trying to break Harry enough for him to despair and kill himself?

"What have they done to you, sir?" asked Mr. Green. He looked genuinely concerned. His eyes shot to Harry's scar and the bleeding wound on his shoulder. He was also sporting a black eye, courtesy of whoever was pretending to be Frank Longbottom. Just then, the nurse chose to raise her head and look over the bed. She couldn't have picked a worse time. The Death Eaters saw her instantly.

"The nurse is still alive," said Mr. Purple, with an evil grin. "Shall I finish her or would you like to, sir?"

"Finish her?" repeated Harry. He didn't understand the question.

"Yes, sir!" grinned Mr. Purple, pointing his wand at the nurse. "Sorry, love! *AVADA-*"

"NO!"

Harry reacted in an instant. He grabbed Mr. Purple's wrist and pushed it aside, causing the curse to miss and strike a model skeleton in the corner, which exploded into a million pieces, scattering even more debris around the room. He brought his knee up into Mr. Purple's stomach and, from there, he extended it to kick Mr. Yellow in the chest. As Mr. Yellow was knocked off his feet, Harry brought the palm of his hand up hard into Mr. Purple's nose. Harry felt the bone break and the flow of blood over his hands. Mr. Purple collapsed in a bloody heap on the ground. Harry withdrew Mr. Purple's wand from his holster as he fell.

Mr. Green's arm grabbed hold of Harry who instantly pivoted on his foot and pushed Mr. Green's wand arm aside. Harry fired a stunner into the man's chest point-blanc and before Mr.

Green could even fall, delivered a spinning kick to the man's chest. His body slid away across the polished floor of the ward. Mr. Blue stood in shock as Harry knocked three of his comrades to the ground in less than a second.

Harry turned to face Mr. Blue, but as he did so, he noticed Mr. Yellow, still lying on the ground gasping for breath, raise his wand. Harry ducked Mr. Yellow's curse, which struck Mr. Blue in the face, killing him instantly. Harry kicked the wand out of Mr. Yellow's arm, just as Mr. Yellow's foot hit the back of his knee. Harry fell forwards, losing the grip on his stolen wand as he fell. Both he and Mr. Yellow were back on their feet in a split second.

"What the hell, sir?" spat Mr. Yellow. His eyes widened with comprehension. "You're not Potter! This is a trap! I'm gonna gut you like a fish, Auror!"

He produced a Commando knife from one pocket and lunged at Harry. Harry instinctively spun out of the way, avoiding the blade by millimetres. He brought his knee up into the man's stomach as he passed. Harry spun on the spot and delivered a spinning kick to Mr. Yellow, sending him crashing into the wall, two feet away. Mr. Yellow recovered quickly. He grabbed his wand and sent a curse zooming towards Harry. Harry dived out of the way, sliding along the polished floor. He could feel debris scraping painfully against his skin as he slid along the floor on his bare stomach. He grabbed a discarded wand and fired a stunner at Mr. Yellow. The spell hit him in the stomach and he collapsed in a heap.

Harry stood up and surveyed the damage. Mr. Purple was lying in a bloody heap on the floor. Next to him, two other Death Eaters had been stunned, and Mr. Blue had been killed by Mr. Yellow. Harry didn't have a scratch on him that he didn't already have to begin with. He had never studied martial arts, and certainly didn't know how to fight a man with a knife. When he had grabbed the wand, his first thought was to use the killing curse; it had taken a lot of self-control to use a stunner. Harry shouldn't have been able to do any of this, but somehow he had. He didn't know what came over him. It was as if instinct took over, as if he had no control over his actions at the time. *What has happened to me?*

"You can come out now," he called to the nurse.

He knelt next to the bloody form of Mr. Purple, who was now lying in a pool of blood. He looked dreadfully pale. Harry placed two fingers against his neck. Harry's heart skipped a beat as he realised the full extent of what he had done. Mr. Purple was dead. Harry had certainly never meant to kill anyone, but he had. The moves came to him, like the walking to the common room. He could do it without consciously thinking about it. He could just let his feet take him; that was how he had felt during the fight. He had defeated four Death Eaters in seconds without a wand to begin with, and without a scratch. He couldn't take his eyes off the corpse of Mr. Purple. Harry had taken a life, but he felt no guilt, no remorse or pity. He felt nothing.

Harry remembered how he felt after Sirius and Cedric had died, but now he felt nothing. *It's just shock*, reasoned Harry. *When the adrenalin wears off, I'll feel guilty.* Harry found himself wishing he were hurting, wishing that guilt would appear. He should feel something; after all he was now a murderer.

“D...D...Don’t M...M...Move!” stuttered a terrified voice, behind him. The nurse was standing behind the bed. She had her wand out, or rather one she had picked up, and was aiming it nervously at him. Her whole body was shaking, and she was hyperventilating. Harry dropped the wand he was holding and put his arms up.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said kindly. The nurse was shaking uncontrollably now. Harry took a few paces closer. He felt instinct begin to take hold. He willed himself to stay calm. He must not strike or hurt her. He could feel the desire to attack, but quickly quashed it.

“D...Don’t come any c....closer!” she stammered. “I me...mean it!”

Harry took another few paces until he was three inches from the tip of the wand.

“It’s OK,” he tried to sooth her. She took a step backward. Harry instantly, but gently pushed the wand aside, and as the nurse collapsed he caught her, letting her come to rest gently on the floor. She was still conscious, but completely panic stricken. She was going into shock.

“Look at me,” instructed Harry, clicking his fingers in front of her eyes, trying to get her attention. “Stay with me, nurse, look at me. It’s over now, calm down.” Harry had to help her. Enough people had died for one day. He needed help. “Now, is there an alarm button around here?” She nodded slightly, though her breathing became faster and more erratic. Harry saw her hand rise and point to box on the wall. Harry walked over and pressed it.

He picked up the pillow from the bed that had saved them, as he returned to the nurse, and placed it gently under her head. He didn’t know the first thing about First Aid, and was at a loss of what to do.

“Nurse,” he said softly. “What is your name?”

“Claire,” she gasped through her rapid breaths.

“Well, Claire,” he said kindly. “I think you’re just in shock. Calm down, it’s over now; no one is going to hurt you. I need you to stay awake, stay with me, Claire. Talk to me.” Her breathing became even more frantic.

“Tell me about yourself, Claire, so I know you’re still awake.”

“Nice try P...Potter!” she gasped. She was wheezing at a very fast rate and was coughing at the same time. Harry suddenly remembered that he had seen something like this before at school.

“Are you asthmatic? Do you need an inhaler?” he asked her. She nodded frantically and pointed to a bag on the side. Harry rushed over to the bag and pulled out a blue inhaler. He knelt by the nurse and gently held it to her mouth. Harry had seen them used at his old school so he knew roughly what to do. He pushed the silver cylinder down and Claire breathed sharply in. She

began to go red as she held her breath and then after a few second released it. Harry felt really lucky that he had never suffered from Asthma. It was a horrible condition.

“Again?” asked Harry. She nodded and he held it to her mouth. After another dose, her breathing began to slow down to a normal rate. “Are you alright?” he asked her softly. “Sorry about the delay, I though you were just in shock. Now you know why I have no intention of being a healer.” He tried to jest but Claire wasn’t smiling. Harry offered a hand. She gingerly took it and he pulled her into a sitting position. Harry was still kneeling beside her.

“You killed them!” she stammered, having recovered her breath. The words hit Harry hard. *I killed them!* He was a murderer; he was no better than Voldemort.

“I didn’t mean to, I just...” began Harry. He couldn’t justify it. He had taken life; there was no justifying murder. It was as simple as that.

“That’s not what I mean. They came for you, to release you, and you killed them.”

“They were Death Eaters,” said Harry softly. It didn’t justify killing, but it was true.

“But you’re...” she began. Her eyes showed a combination of shock and puzzlement.

“What am I?” asked Harry. What did everyone think he was?

“You’re...” She never got to finish the sentence.

“POTTER!” shouted a voice. “BACK UP. HANDS ON YOUR HEAD, ON YOUR KNEES.” Harry turned to see several Aurors in the doorway. Obediently, Harry stood, took a few paces backwards and then sank to his knees, placing his hands on his head.

Two Aurors rushed forwards and roughly grabbed the nurse, hauling her to her feet and bundling her out of the room. The remaining four had their wands aimed at Harry. One walked over to the six bodies in the corner. Two of them were Aurors, now lying unconscious with blood pouring out of their burst ears. Four were Death Eaters, two of which stunned, and the other two dead, one lying in a pool of his own blood. Harry watched, bracing himself for the inevitable. He saw the Auror’s face turn from caution to shock to disgust to anger.

“Merlin!” he breathed as he saw the bodies. “Stun that piece of...”

Harry never heard what he was a piece of; a stunner hit him square in his bare chest. Everything faded to blackness. He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

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“A little bit of pepper,” sang James Potter as he added pinch of ground white pepper to the saucepan. His own recipe for *Salmon a la Banana* smelt interesting to say the least. “A little bit of...” He was interrupted from his moment of culinary genius by a loud banging on the door.

*Bugger!* thought James. He didn't want his latest culinary invention to burn. He placed the saucepan on a heatproof mat to one side and closed the lid of the AGA. *If this is a salesman, I'll hex him from here to kingdom come,* thought James bitterly.

"JAMES!" called a voice. "JAMES? PRONGS? JIMBO, ARE YOU IN THERE? LILY? LILY? JAMES? OPEN UP!"

"I'll get it!" came a voice, as Rosie Potter came bounding down the stairs three at time. She could be so gentle and sweet at sometimes, and then at others like a herd of Hippogriffs. She undid the latch and opened the front door, to reveal a very worried looking Sirius Black. "Sirius!" she cried, throwing her arms around her beloved Godfather. Sirius would normally grab her and tickle her, laughing manically all the while, but today he didn't even move. He stood rigid, looking very pale as his Goddaughter hugged him. He didn't even say a word.

"Paddy," called James entering the hall, completely forgetting that he was wearing his wife's flowery apron and holding a bottle of Tabasco. Sirius, for the first time in living memory, ignored a chance to take the piss and stood staring at James. "To what do I owe the pleasure of you banging on my door like the Salvation Army drum?" Sirius didn't even answer, he just swept past Rose and before James could move swept him into a huge hug.

"I thought you were dead!" he sighed. That was the last thing that James had expected and he didn't know quite how to react.

"Dead?" he echoed in confusion, fighting the blush he felt rising to his cheeks.

"We got him, James," said Sirius softly. He looked as pale as death. He wasn't smiling and James couldn't remember seeing Sirius this serious since the time Rosie went missing. Luckily she had merely missed the bus and was walking home, but she had still scared them all half to death. Lily had been going spare and had nearly choked her daughter to death with the hug she had given her when she had finally returned. James had secretly been impressed that a seven-year-old had managed to walk eight miles on her own. "We got Harry," continued Sirius. James' heart leapt. He hadn't seen his eldest son for two years, not since...he found the memory to painful to even think about. "He said you were dead. I heard from Frank a few hours ago. He said you'd been murdered!" James was lost for words, and that was saying something, since he was famous for having the biggest mouth in the Auror division.

"You caught Harry?" came a voice. Sirius let go of his best friend as Lily Potter came into the room. Her red hair was flowing behind her as he walked. Her normally glowing eyes were shone with tears; her face was paler than usual. Her hands were clasped to her mouth and she was on the verge of tears. The very mention of his name always brought Lily to the verge of tears if not into a full-on fit. She had taken his defection harder than anyone. She believed it was all her fault, her failing as a mother. James saw hope fluttering in his beautiful wife's eyes. Her tears melted his heart. He gently embraced her, wrapping his arms around her protectively. He felt a pang of anger at his son for causing this, but quickly washed it away. He loved Harry and always would; he just hoped it didn't hurt Lily so much. James loved her as much now as he had when they had gotten married and seeing her in tears hurt him.

“Last night,” said Sirius softly, looking from Lily to James and then back again. “Frank caught him somewhere in Devon. He’s at St Mungo’s.”

“Is he OK?” gasped Lily. “Those butchers! What have they done to him?”

“He is being checked over, he had *sustained minor injuries*, to quote Frank.” Lily sat down and burst into tears. James felt another pang of anger, this time directed at Frank Longbottom. He had a violent streak that James was all too aware of. Ever since his pregnant wife had been murdered, no, before that, since his son, Neville, had been tortured to insanity, he had had violent impulses. He used to be such a nice man. Warm, friendly and a good laugh, but the loss of everything he held dear, allegedly at Harry’s hands, had turned him into a cold vicious predator. These days, he was altogether, a nasty piece of work. James had had to forcefully tear him from a suspect they had arrested. The suspect had never looked the same again. What had Frank done to his son and what did he define minor injuries as being. *If he has hurt Harry...* thought James viciously.

Harry’s betrayal had affected Lily badly. The very mention of his name was enough to send her into tears. She had had such plans for her firstborn son; they both had. He was supposed to grow up and be an Auror, a Quidditch player (that had been mainly James and Sirius’ idea, rather than Lily’s), and an Order member. But, no, he had thrown it all down the drain and thrown in his lot with Voldemort. Lily believed that it was her fault; her failure as a mother caused Harry to seek a different family, one he found with Voldemort. Every time his name appeared in the *Prophet*, every time it listed those he had killed and tortured, she felt the guilt pile up on her shoulders.

“Mum?” whispered Rose. Rose-Marie Potter was ten months younger than Harry. She would be taking her OWLs this year. She looked very much like her brother, in some ways, and very much like her mother in others. Her face was almost a carbon copy of Lily’s at that age, except for the freckles; her eyes were deep emerald, just like her mother and her brother. Her hair was jet black like her father and her brother. She was not especially short, nor very tall. She was about average for her age. James realised that both his children looked rather alike and both had their mother’s eyes. He thought that the next baby, should they elect to have one, should have red hair and his hazel eyes. He wasn’t jealous, or disappointed. He loved them both to death, but he felt like a change was called for. They weren’t planning to have another baby. Both he and Lily agreed that two was plenty. Harry had adored Rose and vice versa; until his betrayal before his fourth year, he and his sister had been inseparable. Then it had all changed. Rose was absolutely beautiful, if Lily did say so herself, and she frequently did. She was at the age when boys were becoming of interest. Lily knew this and remembered what it had felt like when she was that age. She often discussed it with James. However, fear of losing Rose the way she lost Harry had made her overly protective. Lily taught Potions at Hogwarts, and as such lived in the castle and was in a position to see her daughter every day. She tried to be impartial, but loved her too much to really punish her. Thankfully, Rose wasn’t stupid enough to take advantage of this. She had inherited her mother’s sense of level-headedness and ability to stick to the rules, more or less. She had also inherited her temperament, which had got her into trouble on occasions. She had also inherited her father’s passion for flying and resourcefulness. James liked to think, not that he’d tell Lily, that Rose had inherited his cunning and his mischievous nature. He was either

wrong or she was such a good marauder that she had never been caught. Either way, James was proud of her.

“Mum?” whispered Rosie again, putting her arm around her weeping mother. James also went to his weeping wife, laying a hand gently on her shoulder.

“If only your brother was as perfect as you,” sobbed Lily, trying to smile. She looked up at Sirius. “I want to see him.”

“Lily, I don’t think...” began Sirius.

“I WANT TO SEE MY SON!” screamed Lily, causing everyone to jump back in fright. She hadn’t lost any of her temperament and Rose was showing signs of having inherited it. Apparently at the end of last year, when Snivellus had stopped by Lily’s office after class to drop off some ingredients for her, he had gotten into an argument with her. Rose had walked in halfway through and come to her mother’s defence, given old Snivvy a piece of her mind. James didn’t know if it was true and Lily refused to talk about it, but James would have loved to have seen it. It would have made his year. Unfortunately he was out on call as an Auror. Rose was normally a quiet, sweet, kind girl, but she had a temper, just like her mother and James pitied anyone who crossed her. He knew from experience that crossing Lily Evans meant personal injury was imminent. Rosie was not naturally violent. She wasn’t aggressive, spiteful or hostile. It took a lot to get her hackles raised, but once they were...stand aside ye who wishes to live!

“Rosie,” said James softly. “Do you want to Floo to the Burrow and stay with Ginny?”

“Is that a question or a command?” she asked, showing that she really was her mother’s daughter. James couldn’t help but smile. Her emerald green eyes, the same ones he had fallen in love with all those years ago, sparkled as she looked up expectantly at her father.

“Your mother and I have to go to the Ministry,” he said softly.

“Excellent,” she said firmly. “I’m coming too.”

“Rosie,” said Lily. “This isn’t going to be...”

“Harry is my brother as well as your son. I have as much right to see him as you do!” That put Lily in her place. Both parents smiled at the stubborn look on their daughter’s face. Both wondered who she had inherited her stubbornness from. Both James and Lily had it by the bucket-load.

“She *could* come, James,” said Sirius softly. He absolutely adored Rosie and when Lily wasn’t looking would spoil her rotten. “He is contained, she wouldn’t be in any danger.”

“Sirius!” hissed James. He knew she was desperate to see her long-lost brother, but James refused to put her in harm’s way, no matter how hurt she looked or how long she gave him the

Andrex-Puppy eyes. “They say he’s mad. He’s apparently been planning to kill us all for two years!”

“Apparently, being the operative word,” retorted Sirius.

“What are you trying to say?” James hated it when Sirius tried to sound wise. It didn’t suit him. He also hated it when people spoke in riddles, which meant he found talks with Dumbledore annoying.

“All I’m saying is, we don’t know what state he’s in. Last I heard he had stunned four Death Eaters to protect a nurse he had only just met.”

“So he is off his rocker?” asked James. *Either that or it’s love at first sight.*

“I don’t know, but you know how we restrain prisoners. He’s in a class-three detention cell. Class-three, James. Complete barriers, one metre seclusion zone around the shield, no magic can be performed inside, no matter can pass through the shield. He can’t touch her, James.”

“Very well,” he sighed.

“Rosie,” he called to his daughter, who was mouthing ‘Thank You’ to her Godfather. “Get changed and be ready to leave as soon as you can.”

The young Gryffindor darted away up the stairs and could be heard clattering around upstairs. James watched her go before turning back to his best friend and best man.

“What happened, Padfoot?” asked James. He released Lily, who had stopped sobbing and was now wiping her eyes. James went back into the kitchen and put the kettle on. They all needed a cup of tea right now.

“Frank couldn’t say much, classified information and all that,” said Sirius bitterly. He was another who didn’t think much of Frank Longbottom. “All he could say was that they were on a raid in Devon. Only a handful of people know Harry is in custody. It hasn’t been released to the press until we can confirm it’s him. Apparently he was wandering around in a field. The odd thing was that when they put the body bind on him, he didn’t put up a fight and he seemed to have no clue as to what was going on.”

“Meaning what?” James was completely confused by that last statement. From what he read in the *Prophet*, his eldest son was a psychopath. How could he possibly not know what was going on? He had allegedly killed a nun, just for her cloak so he could escape from Aurors. Now he refused to put up a fight? What was going on?

“He kept saying that Frank was in St Mungo’s and that you were dead. He said you’d been murdered by Voldemort fifteen years ago.”

“He’s insane?” James’ heart sank. What had Voldemort done to him? He heard Lily start sobbing again. He quickly moved to her, pulling her to him. He felt her head resting lightly on his chest as she wept into his robes. It can’t be true. Harry isn’t insane! “It’s OK, Lil,” he whispered soothingly. If only he could truly believe it himself.

“We don’t know yet,” said Sirius slowly. “The interrogation...sorry, Lily,” Padfoot corrected himself as he realised his mistake. “Questioning hasn’t begun yet.”

“READY!” called Rose coming back into the room. She was wearing her Hogwarts cloak over a pair of black jeans and a blue and white crop-top. Before anyone moved, she had already grabbed the pot of Floo powder from the mantelpiece. “Coming?” she asked.

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“ENERVATE!”

Harry could feel consciousness slipping back over him. He was aware of the cool breeze flowing over him and the bright lights around him. He realised he was lying on his back, on something soft-ish. He opened his eyes, but instantly shut them as he was staring at a huge white light. He groaned softly and covered his eyes with his hands. Harry rolled onto his side and opened them again. Looking around, he saw that he was lying on a small bed in the middle of a large room. A circular section of the floor, measuring about four metres in diameter, was raised from the rest of the ground by six inches. Inside this circle was a bed, a small table and chair and a small screened off area that Harry assumed housed a toilet. The furniture was all chipped and didn’t look very clean. The around the circumference of the circle was a blue wall of energy. It stretched from the floor up to the ceiling, ten metres above him. The room around him was huge and dark. The ceiling within the shield was one giant white light. The rest of the room was darkness. It looked like a warehouse. It smelt damp and Harry felt cold.

“HELLO?” called Harry. He heard his word echo and realised just how big the room was and how small his space was. He suddenly felt very claustrophobic. Harry had never seen a room like this, but he knew it was a cell. What else could it be? His limbs ached and he felt disorientated once again. Since his encounter with Voldemort, he was always feeling groggy. As soon as he was starting to feel better, someone stunned him or pumped him full of sedatives. As he sat up, memories started flooding back of exactly why he had been stunned.

Harry had been right; the guilt would come later. He did feel guilty about killing that man. That man may have had a family who are now grieving like he had been for Sirius, all because of Harry. Harry wiped his face with his hands, trying to wipe the sleepiness from his head. He yawned and then sighed.

Harry stood up, and immediately fell back down. He tried again, steadying himself against the headboard of the bed. His legs felt wobbly and weak, but he managed to stay standing. There was a chill in the air and dampness all around, but not enough to cause Harry to shiver. He felt uncomfortable but not enough to merit complaining about. He also noticed he was

wearing blue trousers and a blue shirt. His sleeves were rolled up and the top button was undone. Across the front of the shirt was written a number.

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His prisoner number. The full impact of his situation hit him all at once. He was locked up and he didn't even know what for. He couldn't remember what he had been arrested for. Was it for using an unforgivable on Bellatrix? She had deserved it after all. Surely under the circumstances... Harry suddenly realised that no one could help him. He had used that curse and it was his decision. Not even Dumbledore could overrule the Minister of Magic. Harry stood still for a few seconds, trying to get his balance. His ears were ringing and his limbs ached. This was not as easy as it appeared. After a few seconds he walked up to the barrier. It was translucent blue and Harry could feel it pulsing with energy. He had to be sure. He reached out with a hand and touched the barrier. He instantly withdrew his hand in pain. He had received what felt like an electric shock, but one that hurt a good deal more than that.

"Like your new home?" came a cold voice.

"Who's there?" asked Harry. He shielded his eyes from the light above and squinted into the darkness. The light in the barrier was very bright and the darkness around it did not permit Harry to see very well. He could make out a figure moving in the gloom. Footsteps echoed around the room. Harry looked carefully around the room. It was huge with a small steel door on one side. Along one wall was a long mirror, which Harry was sure was one-way glass. Why was he always being watched?

"Who's there?" repeated Harry. The figure moved closer to Harry and into the light. As the figure stood before the barrier, the light illuminating his face, Harry's jaw dropped in shock.

"You!" stammered Harry. "You're dead!"

"You only wish I was," sneered Crouch. Bartemius Crouch, whom Harry had last seen in the forest in his fourth year before he had been murdered by his own son, was standing before him. If Harry remembered correctly, he had been killed. His son had then transfigured his body into a bone and buried it. Yet here he stood, glaring at Harry like he was an insect. The disgusted stare that he had worn in Dumbledore's Pensieve was plastered all over his face.

"I was there," stuttered Harry. "Two years ago, you escaped your house and I found you wandering in the forest. The fake Moody impostor killed you!"

"Enough of this drivel, Potter!" barked Crouch. "I'll ask the questions!" His shout echoed off the walls. Harry stood frozen in shock; he couldn't be alive. It wasn't possible. *You can't raise the dead!*

"You're not Crouch!" said Harry firmly. He had to be right. He had seen Crouch before his death. His son had confessed to the murder under the influence of Veritaserum. Then who

was this, standing here? This had to be a trick, probably a Death Eater trick. “You’re an impostor. You’re a Death Eater!”

“How dare you imply that I am a Death Eater!” barked Crouch. “My family have nothing to do with the Dark Arts.” He was doing a good impression. He was just as arrogant as Harry had seen him at the Quidditch World Cup.

“Bollocks,” said Harry. “Your son was a Death Eater before the Dementors got him!” That did it! Something snapped in the Minister.

“HOW DARE YOU!” bellowed Crouch.

“How dare I?” spat Harry, he felt his anger boil but was far from caring. This was a trick, a sick one at that and he was not going to play along. His anger was getting the better of him, but he was too upset to be able to calm himself. “You’re the impostor here. You’re the one who’s playing a sick joke. Ha ha, very funny, joke’s over. Let me out of here and we can go home.”

“Look, you wise arse,” snarled Crouch. “Here’s how it works. I ask you questions, you answer them and if you answer truthfully you may only get a life sentence rather than the kiss, if I’m in a good mood!”

“You were killed,” snarled Harry just as aggressively. “I will not be interrogated by an impostor. What kind of idiot picks a dead man for his disguise? Did you forget I was there? If you want to talk to me, you do so as yourself. Once the Polyjuice potion wears off, come back and see me. Until then, make like a tree!”

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Lily watched, hanky in hand, while her son and the Minister of Magic exchanged insults. Seeing Harry asleep on that tiny bed had melted her heart. For a second she had hoped he was innocent, that he would come back and be her baby boy again, but once he was awake, the anger and the confusion was so obvious. He was either trying to play with Crouch’s mind, or was completely barmy. Lily hated Crouch. In her opinion he was stuck up, obnoxious and arrogant. He looked at her like she was sub-human, all because her blood wasn’t pure. She had felt a glimmer of satisfaction that Crouch had become so enraged, but the anger that Harry displayed had really shaken her up. The room in which she was standing was small and dark. It was cold and plain. Along one wall was a large, long window, which opened up to Harry’s cell. To him it would appear as a mirror, but she could see him. He was locked in small circular cell, surrounded by a magical carrier in the middle of a huge room. It was cold, dirty, and damp. There was a small table in the corner of the observation room on which a glowing orb was recording all sounds made in the cell and what looked like a telescope was recording everything like a video camera. There was a small door at one end. Lily was most annoyed that there was nowhere to sit. She, Rosie and James had been force to stand. James had an arm around her, while Rosie was standing a few inches to her right. None of them spoke as they watched Harry wind up Crouch. Seeing him alive rekindled the motherly fire in Lily’s heart. She wanted to barge in there and hold him. To hold her son in her arms once more had been Lily’s deepest desire for two years.

She had to know, know what she had done to him to cause him to run away. Why? Did he resent her for her blood? Did he hate her because his childhood hadn't been happy?

She felt a hand take hold of hers. Rosie put an arm around her mother, and Lily smiled down at her. She tried to show that she was coping, but it was painfully clear from the look in Rosie's emerald eyes that she could see through her mother's charade. Just then the door flew open and Crouch strode in, face red and fuming. Lily was surprised steam was not coming out of his ears.

"Son of a..."

"Thank you!" James cut him off with a growl. "Call Lily a bitch and I'll hex you into tomorrow." He glared at Crouch who returned the gesture. James' dislike for the minister was well known to her; he mentioned it at least three times a day. Her husband worked for the man and would follow orders, but he hated Crouch and that was no secret. She remembered the first time she had visited him at the office. Crouch had come in, and when James had introduced her, Crouch had pointed out her blood and James' temper had flared.

*"With all due respect, sir," sneered James, with a tone that sacred Lily a little. She had only seen him that furious once and that was when Snape had almost raised a hand to Rosie. Lily had had to cast the Impediment Charm on both him and Harry to stop them attacking the greasy git. "Piss off. Lily may have Muggle blood, but she is still ten times the wizard you are!"*

*"Don't be insubordinate, Potter!" snapped Crouch. "You work for me, remember!"*

*"I remember," sneered James. "I may not like you, but I work for you. I will follow your orders, but that doesn't mean I have to do it with a smile on my face, unless of course, you order me to smile, sir!" Lily like the way he added the sir onto the end. It made it seem a classier insult.*

"Shut up, Potter," spat Crouch, his anger still flowing through him. Crouch's words brought Lily out of memory lane. "If you two had done a proper job raising the little shite, we wouldn't be in this mess."

Lily's own temper flared and she moved to hit Crouch, but Rosie got there first, delivering not a slap, but a firm punch to the Minister's right cheek. Crouch staggered back in shock. A red blotch appeared on his cheek where Rose had hit him. Rose stepped back and glared at the flabbergasted minister of magic. If he dared set Aurors on her, Lily would hex him into tomorrow!

"Don't you ever talk about my mum like that!" spat Rosie.

Crouch stood gaping for a few seconds. Lily was immensely proud of her daughter at this moment in time. Normally she didn't condone violence, but at this point it was definitely called for. She loved her daughter more than ever at this point.

“Minister,” said Lily silkily. “That didn’t do so well. May I have a word with him?”  
*Please, thought Lily. Let me see my son!*

“And what good could you do?” asked Crouch with a glare. He climbed back to his feet. Rosie had damaged his pride and he valued that more than life. He would never forgive her and the chances of getting him to agree were remote but maternal instinct was driving Lily crazy. She wanted her son back in her arms, where he belonged.

“I’m his mother,” said Lily firmly. “I stand a better chance of getting him to open up than you do.” Lily knew that Harry had said he wouldn’t talk to a dead man and that he thought she was dead, but she didn’t care. She wanted to see her son and that was that. *Please!* she thought.

“He thinks you’re all dead,” sneered Fudge, glaring at her. “He won’t speak to a dead person. What makes you think you could do better than I?”

“Who are you?” asked a voice. Lily turned to her husband to ask who he was talking to, but soon realised it had not been him who had spoken. It had been Harry. Looking through the window, Lily saw whom he was talking to. Rose was indeed a Marauder at heart. While Lily and Crouch had been arguing, Rose had slipped past them and gone on her own into Harry’s cell.

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Crouch is dead! I saw it! Harry knew he was right. Whoever these people were, they were not real. Nothing can raise the dead. Dumbledore had told him that. Dumbledore! He would end this ridiculous charade! Harry just had to find Dumbledore and everything would be OK. Harry felt hope bubble up inside of him. Dumbledore would sort him out. He always did. He had to talk to Dumbledore, to explain why he used the curse on Bellatrix. Dumbledore would get him out; he had to. Harry was the one in the Prophecy and if he wanted Voldemort dealt with, he would need Harry to stay out of Azkaban. But there was so much else going on and none of it made sense.

OK, thought Harry. *Let’s think.* He clearly remembered being on the farm, sunbathing by the stream and being interrupted by Voldemort. No! He had been interrupted by the whistling. What was all that about? Voldemort had appeared a few seconds later. Was the whistling him coming through the wards? But then, why did the whistling return when the killing curse hit the shield and the sword began to glow? *So many questions,* thought Harry. *Where are my answers?* The whistling had come first, and it scared the sheep as well. Then Tom and Dumbledore had appeared. Harry knew that the chalk circle and Gryffindor’s sword had saved him and that was what he must research. Dumbledore mentioned the ancient conflicts between Gryffindor and Slytherin. Again, that meant more time in the library. *Ok, supposing the sword saved me from Voldemort’s killing curse, what happened next?* White light, pain, whistling and then I must have passed out. He could remember, hitting the soft mud of a field, and then catching a glimpse of the sword before passing out. He tried to remember every detail about what had happened when he woke up. He was in a field, but not the same field. There were woods nearby and the fences were barbed wire. There were horses and no sheep, but the lie of the land had looked similar. *What am I talking about,* thought Harry. *It was a field, a large area of grass; they all look the*

same. Of course the lie of the land would look similar. So maybe the sword transported me to another place to save me. But then why is everyone acting so strange. Why did everyone think he was a Death Eater? Harry would get to that in, time. He tried to remember what had happened next. He had been woken by the horse, and he had been somewhere else. He had then...his clothes had changed. He was armed to the teeth and his clothes had changed. He was wearing armour of all things. *Dragon-scale armour. The sword, the stun-baton, the ... hang on.* How did he know what it was called? The name had just popped into his mind, He had never seen or heard of a Stun-Baton, but the name had just popped into his mind. Two wands, he had had two wands. One was his, with the core of Fawkes' Tail feather. The other was a mystery. So if the sword had moved him, that didn't explain his clothes, or the behaviour of the Death Eaters or the Aurors. The Nurse that morning had been terrified of him. *But why?* Everyone knew who he was; they all knew he had defeated Voldemort once. Why was everyone suddenly so scared and the Death Eaters so...nice. *They weren't themselves,* thought Harry. *Perhaps they were under the Imperius Curse.* Maybe someone had framed him. Made people think he was a murderer. But that didn't explain his change of clothes, nor how Mr. Crouch could still be alive. Neither did the Imperius Curse. If someone was controlling the Aurors, the Nurse, the Death Eaters, the ... *that's a lot of curses.* And to what end? That might explain the behaviour of the Death Eaters and the Aurors, but not how Crouch was still breathing. Polyjuice Potion! Crouch wasn't real. This was all a trick. They were Death Eaters. After he disappeared they must have found him and swapped his clothes. Then they play out the scene in St Mungos to confuse him and then the interrogate him to find out about the Order. It sounded a little too far-fetched and it would take time and a lot of resources. There were easier ways to find out about the Order. None of it made sense. As soon as Harry thought he had worked out part of the problem, a flaw appeared in his theory. A control curse and Polyjuice potion was his best theory, but I had more holes than Swiss cheese. Truth was that Harry didn't have a clue what has going on.

"Harry?" a voice called softly. Harry's head sprang up and he found himself face to face with a girl he had never seen before. He caught a glimpse of her flowing black hair as she approached the light. For a second he thought it was Bellatrix but realised he was mistaken. She was far too young and looked pleasant enough. The girl stepped closer, the light became more intense as she neared him, and Harry could see her features more clearly. What he saw shocked him.

"Who are you?" asked Harry, in surprise. He saw a resemblance but it wasn't possible. Anyway, why had the impostors sent a girl to talk to him? Harry saw a hurt look cross the girls face as Harry spoke. Tears began to form in her eyes, her beautiful, emerald eyes. Emerald eyes? He had seen those eyes before, every time he looked in the mirror. She had the same jet-black hair as he did, but her face was more rounded. She was beautiful, but somehow seemed very sad. She was wearing a Hogwarts cloak, with a Gryffindor badge on it. Harry felt a pang of guilt. He had never spoken to her. He didn't know her from Adam, aside from the fact that Adam was a boy's name. He was sure he knew everyone in his house but he had never seen her before. She looked about one, maybe two years younger than he was. She was either in Ginny's year or the year below, but he had never spoken to her, not seen her with Ginny. "I'm sorry," said Harry quickly, feeling guilty that she was on the verge of tears. "I didn't mean to hurt you. What's your name?" A single tear escaped the girl's eye, running slowly down her pale cheek.

“Harry, it’s me,” she whispered. “Rose. Your Rosie.” She slowly reached out with a hand. Her bare arm came gently towards him. When her hand was about a metre from the shield, it stopped. She seemed to be pressing against an invisible barrier.

“Rose?” echoed Harry, completely at a loss. She looked so much like him, but he had no idea who she was. She seemed familiar and Harry felt truly sorry for her, but he didn’t know why. She looked so sad, and her eyes held the same pain that his did. Had she recently lost a Godfather or someone close? *I bet she didn’t get him killed*, thought Harry bitterly. He felt another pang of guilt at the thought of Sirius.

“Harry, what has he done to you?” she whispered.

“Who?” asked Harry softly.

“Voldemort.” Harry noticed that she said his name without a stammer or any hesitation. She had just gone up several rungs on Harry’s ladder of respect.

“What hasn’t he done to me,” Harry said bitterly. He let out a sad laugh. *He has orphaned me, ruined my life, dogged my footsteps, set a basilisk on my friends, stolen my blood, tortured me, killed my friend, killed my godfather and generally made my life hell.* He couldn’t say this for it would compromise information on the Order if she asked him to explain. He didn’t know who she was and he had to keep the Order a secret. Harry searched for something to say, something that was true but didn’t sound like a bid for pity. Pity was just what he didn’t want. It was his pride talking but he didn’t care.

“I don’t understand,” whispered Rose taking a step closer. She was mere centimetres from the invisible barrier. Harry thought about how best to answer.

“Surely you’ve read the *Daily Prophet*,” he said carefully. She must have read something about him. The return of Voldemort had been the only story for nearly a month. She couldn’t have missed it. The battle in ‘a ministry department’ had been described in detail for the same duration. She must know something about that. She couldn’t know about losing Sirius, but hopefully she had read the article in the *Quibbler* about the graveyard.

“Yes,” said Rose. “But Mum told me they were exaggerating, blowing it out of proportion. Making you out to be something you’re not.”

“They did,” said Harry. He was relieved that she knew what he was talking about, and even more so by the fact that she had believed him. “About me being so powerful, dangerous and violent. But not about what has actually happened over the last two years. That was all real; all those events actually happened. And that stuff in the *Quibbler*, that’s real, well the stuff about me is. I can’t vouch for the rest of it, only Luna believes every article in it.”

“Luna Lovegood?”

“Yep, in Ginny’s year at Hogwarts. That would be fifth year this year. People say she’s dotty, but she’s a good girl, and her hearts in the right place. Luna, not Ginny; Ginny is as well, but she’s also perfectly sane and a good friend.”

“You know Ginny Weasley?” asked Rose, looking more sceptical than anything else. What was so unusual about that? Everyone knew he was close to the Weasleys. Most people thought that he and Ginny were an item. There was no truth in the rumour, but it had still been spread around.

“Yes, for many years now. I even stayed at the Burrow for parts of the summer for the last five years, except last year.”

“That’s impossible,” said Rose defiantly. She shook her head, an expression of finality on her face. She reminded Harry of Ginny when she was in a stubborn mood.

“Why?” What was so impossible about Harry staying with his best friend for part of the summer?

“Because I know Ginny, and I’ve been to the Burrow every summer and I haven’t seen you there,” said Rose. There was something in her voice that Harry couldn’t place. “She would have told me if you were staying there.” She seemed to be angry but she also seemed to be speaking in a tone of voice she would use in a plea.

“You are friends with Ron and Ginny?” asked Harry softly, just as sceptically as she had been.

“Yes.” Harry had heard no mention of her before. He was sure he had never seen her before and didn’t recall ever knowing a Rose. What was her surname?

“They’ve never mentioned you to me, Rose... what’s your second name?”

“Harry!” she snapped at him. He was taken back by this response and immediately started to apologise. He hadn’t meant to anger her.

“What did I say?” he asked politely.

“You should know what my second name is,” she said. “I’m your bloody *sister!*”

Harry stood frozen, that was the last thing he was expecting. He stared at her for what seemed like an eternity, gaping like a fish. He couldn’t think of a thing to say. He had no sister. His mother had died; it was impossible. But there was a resemblance. Suddenly, Harry realised how stupid he had been. She was in on this. Crouch, Frank, Rose, they must all be Death Eaters. This was emotional manipulation. Pretending he had a sister to make him let slip facts about the Order. They were trying to break him emotionally. They might even be trying to get him to tell them about the Order. She was the enemy! But he wouldn’t fall for it. He was cleverer than they were.

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?” said Harry softly, adopting a cold tone of voice. “You’re in on this. Whatever is happening, call it off! Do you really expect me to believe that my parents are alive? That I have a sister I have never met? Good likeness, but you’ll have to do better than that! They’ve been dead for fifteen years; nothing can bring them back. This whole act isn’t funny. END IT!” His anger was boiling again. He had lost all pity for the trembling girl. Tears were streaming down her face. She was a good actress, but he wouldn’t fall for it.

“Harry, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” she said between sobs. Her voice broke twice during the sentence.

“BOLLOCKS!” snapped Harry. “One minute I’m on holiday in Devon with my God-forsaken Aunt and Uncle and then Voldemort shows up and tries to kill me and now to top it all; you try to convince me my parents are still alive. I’ve been through enough pain for twenty lifetimes. I’m sick and tired of it, Rose, whoever you are, leave!”

“But...”

“LEAVE!” roared Harry.

Harry watched as the girl burst into tears and ran from the room. *She’s a good actress, I’ll give her that*, he thought bitterly. Still, he didn’t feel sorry for her. She shouldn’t have agreed to be part of all this. This one either a joke, or a Death Eater trick. She was probably a Death Eater in disguise, maybe even Bellatrix. She was messed up in the head. Her sick mind would probably enjoy such a sick thing as this. *Stupid bint!*

Harry was now leaning more to the idea that this was a Death Eater trick. They must think that if they pretend to be the Ministry, that he would let slip something about the Order. He wouldn’t fall for it; he wouldn’t betray Dumbledore. There must be an idiot in charge if they had someone dress up as Crouch. He was dead after all. They should have picked Fudge and then they’d be all right. Crouch, what idiot made that mistake. Was Goyle running the show?

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“ROSE!” Lily threw her arms around her daughter as she came back into the room, tears streaming down her face as well as her daughters. “You are so stupid, Rose!” She hugged her daughter tighter. She felt her young body shaking as she wept. How could Harry do this to the sister he had once loved so much? What had Voldemort done to poison his mind that he could be angry at something so sweet as her Rose?

“He didn’t know me,” sobbed Rose. “He didn’t remember me. He thinks you’re dead.” Lily stroked her hair as she held her daughter. She wished she had sent her to the burrow. She should be having fun with Ginny, not weeping over her deranged brother. *Oh God!* Lily couldn’t believe she had just thought that about her own son!

“Well done, Miss Potter,” came Crouch’s voice. He seemed unusually happy, giving the sadness that hung in the air. Lily and Rose were in tears, James was trying to hold back himself

and Crouch was as jovial as she had ever seen him. He was smiling from ear to ear. “You managed to extract a partial confession from him. We may have enough to give him the Kiss. Thank you very much.” He bowed to Rose, a malevolent smile on his face.

“What confession?” sobbed Rose, turning to face the Minister, tears still rolling down her soft cheeks.

Crouch grinned evilly and tapped the glowing orb on the table with his wand. Harry’s voice echoed from the box.

*“Surely you’ve read the Daily Prophet,”*

*“Yes. But Mum told me they were exaggerating, blowing it out of proportion. Making you out to be something you’re not.”*

*“They did. About me bring so powerful, dangerous and violent. But not about what has actually happened over the last two years. That was all real; all those events actually happened. And that stuff in the Quibbler, that’s real, well the stuff about me is. I can’t vouch for the rest of it, only Luna believes every article in it.”*

“Congratulations, Miss Potter,” he smirked. “Thanks to you, your wayward brother will be disposed of, permanently.”

Rose dissolved into tears, crying in earnest into her mother’s shoulder. “I didn’t mean to get him killed!” she sobbed. “I’m sorry!” Lily felt her body tense. How dare he! How dare he do this to her daughter? She started forwards, but James caught her arm. He looked as furious as she felt but he mouthed a single word to her. *Rose!*

She was still hugging her now standing mother. Rose was sobbing into her breast, muttering under her breath, between sobs. “I’m sorry.” “I didn’t mean to...” Lily felt herself calm slightly as she stroked her daughter’s hair gently and hugged her. She swayed gently, and kissed her daughter’s forehead.

“Shhh!” comforted Lily. “It’s all right. Albus won’t let him be kissed or killed. Shhh!”

“Congratulations, Potter!” Lily looked up and into the cell. Crouch was back in the room with Harry. Her boy had grown up. Lily wanted to hold him, to run to him, but she knew Crouch wouldn’t let her. He had his confession, near enough, and wouldn’t let anyone near him now. She hoped Harry would give him an earful. She wanted to see him drive the Minister crazy. *Go on, Harry*, she thought, bitterly. *Make him furious! See how red you can get him to go!*

“You again?” sneered Harry. Lily watched as he approached the shield. Crouch did the same on the outside. “I told you, I wouldn’t speak to you. I know you’re a Death Eater. I know what you’re trying to do. I’ll speak to Dumbledore and only him. Good luck finding his hair for a Polyjuice potion. A single hair wouldn’t even fit in the cauldron!” *Yes!* The very implication that Crouch had anything to do with the Dark Arts or was a Death Eater was guaranteed to get him

angry. Also the mentioning of Dumbledore. Dumbledore was ever so popular, even more so than Crouch. Crouch believed the Minister should outrank the Headmaster of Hogwarts and the Wizengamot and he was right, by logic, but many still turned to Dumbledore for help rather than Crouch. Crouch hated the implication that Dumbledore was more powerful, influential and popular than he was. Harry was winding him up well. Lily watched, expecting Crouch to turn a shade of crimson, maybe even magenta. However, she was disappointed.

“Dumbledore?” Lily saw an evil smirk appear over Crouch’s face as he smirked at Harry. “You’ll talk to Dumbledore?”

Lily watched with curiosity as Harry nodded. Lily made a note to tell Albus that Harry wanted to speak to him next time she saw him.

“We’ll go and see Dumbledore, first thing in the morning,” said Crouch, with a large grin plastered all over his face. Lily was completely bemused by Crouch’s behaviour and apparently so to was Harry. He was staring warily at Crouch who turned on his heel and marched out of the room. Lily kept her eyes firmly on Harry. He didn’t move. He stared at the door, long after Crouch was gone. He looked thoughtful, sceptical, but he also seemed a bit happier than he had before his conversation with Crouch. So he was going to speak to Dumbledore. Lily wouldn’t have to let Albus know after all. Crouch would do it.

Lily was startled as the door to the observation room opened a fraction and Crouch stuck his head in. He smirked at them all in turn before speaking.

“Your services are no longer required. Have a nice day, I trust you can show yourselves out.” With that he was gone.

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Harry hadn’t slept well that night. He had a reoccurring dream about the girl. Rose. Whenever he closed his eyes, he saw her. She was like something from a dream. A face so familiar, so comforting, yet he knew she didn’t exist. He had dreamt that it was her who had fallen through the veil, her that had been killed in the graveyard. What Harry also discovered, was that his scar wasn’t hurting. He couldn’t feel Voldemort’s emotions, presence or anything. Since his return, it had ached all the time, but since his encounter with the Dark Lord, he couldn’t remember it hurting once. *Hang on! Why did I just think of him as the Dark Lord?*

BANG!

The door slammed open and an Auror strode in. He carried a tray with a bowl and a cup on it. Harry sat up in his bed. The bright light came on, blinding him for a few seconds. He covered his eyes, trying to block out the light. He shielded his eyes and blinked a few times. He looked up at the Auror who was approaching.

“Turn around, on your knees, hands behind your head. If you move, I *will* stun you!” instructed the Auror, in a firm tone of voice. Harry did as he was told, squinting all the while.

Harry suddenly remembered that he was going to see Dumbledore this morning, the fake Crouch had promised that. He could put up with this act for a few more hours. Then he would see Dumbledore and everything would be all right again. Once Dumbledore sorted things out, he'd be able to relax again. Harry knelt, put his hand on his head and waited. The wall of blue light faded and went out. He could hear the Auror behind him and assumed he was placing the tray on the table. After a few seconds the wall of light reappeared and Harry stood back up. The bowl contained soggy Coco Pops and the cup contained warm orange juice. He also had one piece of toast, which was cold. *Delia Smith, eat your heart out*, thought Harry bitterly.

Harry was too hungry to complain. He really wanted a cup of tea. He had one at least once a day usually and would probably get a headache if he didn't. Caffeine withdrawal, he believed it was called. Still, he had to make do. He ate what was there and then sat on his bed, waiting. His shirt and trousers were far from neat, but not too bad looking. He hoped he didn't smell too much. Dumbledore probably wouldn't care and would hopefully allow Harry to use the shower.

Harry paced his cell waiting for the time to come when he would see Dumbledore. Dumbledore could make everything OK again. Dumbledore was his only hope.

At last, the door flew open and Crouch came marching in, followed by several Aurors.

"Morning. Potter," he sneered. With a flick of his wand, he lowered the barrier. One of the Aurors approached Harry slowly, cautiously.

"I won't bite," said Harry sarcastically. *Do they have to drag this out?* he thought bitterly. *Hurry up!*

"No funny stuff," the Auror said firmly and he stepped closer. Harry remained perfectly still as the Auror took both his hands and bound them behind his back. "Now walk slowly towards the door. If you make any attempt to escape we will open fire. If you have any thoughts about a Death Eater snatch, we will shoot to kill, them and you and not necessarily in that order."

"I understand," said Harry politely. "I am not trying to escape. All I want is to speak to Dumbledore." He knew they didn't believe him, but no one said anything. Crouch was grinning like the Cheshire Cat. He looked particularly pleased with himself. Harry thought his smugness matched Percy "Weatherby" Weasley to a tee.

"Follow me," said Crouch. He walked swiftly out of the room, followed by Harry. Harry had an Auror on each side of him, and two bringing up the rear. The six-man procession made its way out of the room. Harry found himself at the end of a long corridor. There were six cells on each side. The floor was lime green and the cells looked clean and cold. The walls were white and the bars were painted white. They were made of metal and glowed with a blue light. These were normal cells. He had been given a special one. All this for using an Unforgivable on a woman who deserved it? Harry suddenly felt like Hannibal Lector.

"I ate his liver with some Fava Beans, and a nice Chianti," muttered Harry to himself.

“What?” snapped an Auror.

“Nothing,” muttered Harry.

Prisoners pointed and stared as he was lead past the cells. He heard his name being muttered.

“It’s him!”

“The Harry Potter!”

That’s better. He didn’t want to appear vain, but at least they recognised him. Things were getting back to normal. They walked along the corridor; some of the inmates nodded to him, others just pointed and gasped. The Death Eaters must find this hilarious, thought Harry. They must be laughing their arses off at the Boy-Who-Lived, the only one who could defeat Voldemort being arrested. They passed through a barred gate and then through a steel door at the end of the cellblock.

The next room seemed like an office. There were many desk lined neatly up. Notice boards were dotted around the wall. There were wanted posters all over the walls. People were working all over the room. Most were in plain clothes, though some were in the red robes that Aurors wear when on the beat or where they need to be seen, such as guard duty, escort and such like. Some were in full body-armour and black ninja suits. The Auror Headquarters was buzzing with activity. Ah, thought Harry. The room was very large and filled with a lot of people. If this was a trick to get him to compromise the order, there were a lot of people involved. This was huge in scale and would Voldemort really go to all this trouble to find out about the Order? It would be so much simpler to kill him now that he had him in custody. Why the charade? It made no sense. Nothing made any sense.

All eyes turned to look at them as they entered. The procession stopped as they entered the room. Every head turned and silence fell in the room. Harry couldn’t see Moody, Kingsley or Tonks. Where were they? Instead of smiles, every Auror was glaring at him. Looking around, Harry saw that every eye was cold, every face set into a glare. Nobody moved. Harry felt very nervous at his point. He was the centre of attention and he had never liked that. He felt his face redden.

Finally, after Crouch thought he had suffered enough, the procession continued. They walked along the aisle between desks. Aurors moved to let them through. One Auror stood still until Harry was level and then moved, slamming his shoulder roughly into Harry’s.

“Excuse me,” said the Auror sarcastically after he had deliberately bumped into him.

The others just smirked. Harry looked around, searching for Kingsley, Moody and Tonks as he was lead past the Aurors. For a fraction of a second Harry thought he saw Sirius standing amid the sea of red robes. His heart had skipped a beat, but he knew it was impossible. Sirius was dead, and even if he wasn’t, he was still wanted, as Pettigrew was still at large. Sirius

wouldn't be in Auror headquarters. It was the last place he'd come if he ever escaped the veil. Harry sighed. His Godfather was gone; nothing could bring him back. He had to move on, as painful as it would be to do so.

Harry avoided all further eye contact as he was paraded through Auror headquarters and out into the Ministry of Magic's maze of corridors. Crouch led the way at a swift pace, and Harry soon found himself facing the lift. They all managed to fit inside and the lift took them down to the bottom floor.

The bell chimed and the voice announced that they were on the right floor. Crouch led them out of the lift and down the passage in front of them. The corridor was deserted, and Harry suddenly got the feeling that something was wrong. *This isn't right*. He felt a chill run down his spine. It was not Voldemort, Harry's scar was fine, but something was scaring him. Harry tried not to look at the door to the Department of Mysteries as he passed, but he couldn't help it. That was probably what made him feel so cold. That was where Sirius had died. He felt a pang of loss and guilt deep inside.

Seeing the door also reminded him of the Prophecy. If this was a Death Eater trick, he mustn't mention the prophecy or the Order. He also had to make sure it was really Dumbledore. If he mentioned the Prophecy or the order and it wasn't really Dumbledore, both the real Dumbledore and Harry would be done for. He needed a question that only Dumbledore would know the answer to. What did he and Nicolas Flamel make? The Philosopher's Stone! That would do, but to be sure, Harry thought he should add another one. You lost your taste for Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans after tasting which flavour? Vomit! That was two questions that would prove who Dumbledore really was. Only Dumbledore would know the answer to both of those questions. Hopefully.

Harry looked up and recognised the doors in front of him. They led to the Atrium. *Why would Dumbledore want to meet me here of all places?*

"I thought we were going to see Dumbledore," said Harry as they approached the Atrium doors. Why not in an office or come to Harry's cell? What was going on?

"We are," said Crouch with a vindictive grin. With that he opened the doors and strode in.

Harry forgot all about his two questions as he suddenly realised that he had been double-crossed. This wasn't a private conversation with the Headmaster of Hogwarts. This was a full-scale murder trial by the Wizengamot.

~~~~~ Chapter III ~~~~~

Confessions of a Dangerous Mind

Harry stood framed in the doorway as hundreds of camera flashes went off in his face. Tomorrow's papers would show the look of horror on his face, as he realised that his salvation was not what he had hoped for. He wanted - and needed - a private conversation with Dumbledore, not a trial in front of the whole country. How could he tell Dumbledore, in front of everyone, that the whole world was messed up? They would jeer and laugh. Dumbledore would believe him, or at least hear him out. Wouldn't he?

Beyond the flashes Harry could see hundreds, maybe thousands of faces. The audience was huge, hundreds of faces, glared at him from the pews. Such a celebrated Death Eater, as they thought him to be, must have attracted a large audience. Were these all people he had wronged? No, of course not, he hadn't wronged anyone and he certainly was not a Death Eater. This must still be part of the trick.

Are they hundreds of extras or just an illusion? wondered Harry.

Harry saw to his right, the Wizengamot, the supreme council of justice. In the centre, in a chair far more elaborate than the others, sat the Chief Warlock. He was looking sternly down at Harry without a trace of a twinkle, or even pity, in those deep blue eyes of his.

Looking along the bench, Harry could see Madam Bones, Dolores Umbridge and Lucius Malfoy. So the slippery git had managed to worm his way out of Azkaban and even onto the Wizengamot who ironically sentenced him to Azkaban just over a month ago. To Harry's surprise, Lucius Malfoy made eye contact with Harry and gave him a small smile and a nod. Not a smirk, but a smile. *I bet he's loving this*, thought Harry bitterly. *This was the Malfoy revenge: utter humiliation.*

Umbridge was glaring at him through her horrible glasses; her huge, toad-like mouth was stretched into a vindictive grin. The same one she had worn while making Harry write lines in his own blood last year. Dumbledore looked utterly cold towards him and Madam Bones looked as though she wanted to glare but was fighting to stay in control and appear impartial. The rest of the Wizengamot, whom Harry did not know were glaring down at him. Whatever they thought he had done must be pretty horrific. How could they? He was *the Harry Potter* for God's sake. After the slander campaign, he could understand a bit of wariness, even dislike, but not enough to put him on trial. He was their only hope. But they didn't know it. They didn't know about his destiny, about the prophecy. Only Dumbledore did. Why was he being so cold as well? Dumbledore was... had been his mentor. Wouldn't he even give him a chance to explain? He had done so before, why not now. Had he really changed that much? Why was everyone acting so strangely? It seemed to Harry that every eye was looking at him. Crouch took his place on the end of the front bench, behind the plaque reading,

Bartemius Crouch (Snr)
Minister of Magic.

The front bench was gently curved, like a shallow horseshoe shape. In the centre of the curve was a single chair. It was made of what looked like steel, with several clamps and manacles attached to it. On the left end of the front bench was a small dock with another chair in it. Harry recognised it as the Witness box he had once had to stand in. Even with Dumbledore's help, he had failed to convince Fudge that a Dementor had attacked him. Now he had to convince the world, including Dumbledore this time, that he was innocent without anyone to help him. And to add to his list of problems, Harry didn't even know what they were going to accuse him of.

His escort of Aurors led Harry to a large steel chair that sat before the curved bench of the Wizengamot. All eyes watched him, containing the utmost hatred as he was fastened into the chair. Polished metal bracelets about an inch thick and four inches long clamped his forearms and shins to the arms and legs of the chair respectively. A thin steel band about an inch wide wrapped around his neck, holding him upright. It didn't strangle him, but he couldn't turn to look around. Looking straight in front of him, like a horse with blinders, Harry surveyed his prosecutors. There were about twenty members of the Wizengamot. All sat along a wooden bench that was eight feet high. The wall behind them was covered in a large coat of arms, which presumably as the symbol of the Wizengamot. It was carved out of wood and mounted on the pale wall. Below it were two flags, the Union Jack and the magical flag of Great Britain. The carpet was a royal blue and the walls were pale. The room was lit very brightly around the front bench and Harry's chair, while the audience were in relative darkness.

"Burn in hell, Potter!" screamed a voice from the crowd.

This must be some sort of curse, thought Harry. It must be like an epidemic of the Imperius curse. It's making everyone act strangely, controlling their minds, making them try me. That or I'm in another dimension, which is about as likely as me kissing Snape. How could he snap them out of it? Could Voldemort really put the whole country under the curse? Could he really be that powerful?

To cast and maintain the curse on so many people, surely he couldn't be that strong. It would take immense power; power even a wizard like Voldemort could not possess without destroying himself. Maybe he had found a way to amplify his power, some ancient dark artefact that shouldn't even exist. So why had Harry himself not been affected by the curse? Maybe Harry's scar had protected him, and that is why he was unaffected. And then how could he have brought Crouch back to life? Polyjuice Potion? But why, even without Crouch, the number of people under his control was enough to dispose of Harry. This was far too elaborate for a plot to kill him. He had appeared by himself on Aunt Marge's farm. He had brought Harry to his knees and could do so again. Harry was unarmed and defenceless. He had had no protection so Voldemort didn't even bother bringing his followers. So why now go to all this trouble? Harry was still none the wiser as to what was going on. *Looks like I'll have to wait to talk to Dumbledore, thought Harry.*

"PLEASE STATE YOUR FULL NAME FOR THE RECORD!" came a woman's voice. The tone was formal but definitely lined with hatred; the sort of tone that Snape used when Dumbledore was in the room, and so had to be at least civil to Harry. Harry couldn't see who had

spoken, but the murmuring and the abuse being shouted at him from the audience suddenly stopped.

“Harry James Potter,” sighed Harry, rather bored by the proceedings. He wanted a quiet talk with Dumbledore and as such would have to wait until afterwards. Dumbledore was strong enough to resist the curse. He just needed Harry to make him realise he was under the curse. He would see Harry right, he always did. Harry didn’t trust the headmaster completely, since the events of last year. He should have been told about the prophecy. It governed his destiny; he had a right to know. Harry still resented him for it.

But at this moment in time, Harry would take a piggyback on the Grim Reaper if it got him home and back to sanity. Harry didn’t feel like he had anywhere else to turn to. He knew that the Headmaster was still the best person to turn to. If he cooperated, then the trial would be over much more quickly, he would see Dumbledore more quickly and he would be out of this mess more quickly. And if he was careful he would avoid contact with a Dementor, which was another concern of his, especially since he didn’t have his wand with him. Speaking of which, where was his wand? *They had better not snap it in half*, thought Harry bitterly. If Harry couldn’t defend himself then he was as good as dead and that meant that the rest of the world was the same.

OK, thought Harry to himself. *Tell the truth, stay calm, be patient and it will all work out. You haven’t done anything; just relax.*

Ah, but you have, said a mischievous voice in the back of his mind. *Let’s not forget what you did to Bellatrix*. Surely they didn’t know about that. Bellatrix was a convicted and self-confessed murderer, not to mention a fugitive from the law. She was not in a position to just waltz into the Ministry and file a complaint against him. Surely this many people wouldn’t be so mad at him for cursing her, not after all the suffering she had caused over the years.

“DATE OF BIRTH?” asked the voice, crisply. Again Harry could hear the cold tone of dislike in the voice.

“Thirty-first of July, nineteen eighty,” said Harry. Shouldn’t they know all this already? It was public information. *They are not going to go through every one of my details like this are they?* thought Harry, worriedly. *That’ll take forever and a day.*

“CURRENT ADDRESS?”

“Number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey,” said Harry unemotionally. *Yes, they are going to do it one by one*, realised Harry. He really wished he had had a cup of tea this morning. He would need the caffeine to stay awake. That or a heavy dose of Amphetamines. Harry remembered hearing that in Thailand, where they were legal, amphetamines were put in tea, and that kept you up for days at a time.

“Excuse me?” said Madam Bones, from the bench. “Could you repeat that, please?” *Oh, God, what’s the problem now?* Harry did as he was asked, this time with a look of puzzlement on

his face. What was the complication? Dumbledore had kept this from the *Prophet* for obvious reasons, but the Ministry of Magic and the Wizengamot would both know where he lived. After all, they had sent him a letter expelling him last year, and that found him easily enough. Harry wore a puzzled look, but not as puzzled as the one that was on Madam Bones' face. "Are you telling me that you live in Surrey?" she asked. She looked cynically down at him. Harry glanced quickly over at Dumbledore, hoping the Headmaster would give him some clue as what to do, a nod or a shake of the head at least. He got nothing but a cold yet curious stare from the Headmaster.

"Yes," replied Harry slowly. What was the problem? Dumbledore knew where he lived; he was the one who sent him there for God's sake. Would Dumbledore deny this to protect the Order? Did the Order outrank Harry? Without Harry, the Order could never achieve its goal, and Harry couldn't achieve his without the support of the Order. This was going to be interesting.

"Even though we have proof that you have been living with You-Know-Who for the last two years?" enquired Madam Bones cynically. That had been the last thing Harry was expecting. He had not been living with Voldemort and he never would. That was ridiculous to the point of being insulting. They had owled him in Surrey; they knew where he lived. What was going on?

"I haven't," protested Harry. "You must know that I live in Surrey. You owled me last year because of Umbridge's Dementors. You knew my address then, what's changed?"

"My Dementors?" asked Umbridge, her frog like face stretched into a look of amusement and confusion all at once. "What pray tell are you referring to?"

"Don't play innocent with me, Professor," snapped Harry angrily. "I've still got the scars from your Blood-Quill. You can charm your way back into Fudge's favour, but I know what really happened, and as for McGonagall, you should stay away from her, unless you want to end up being transfigured into a toilet seat."

"What are you talking about?" asked Madam Bones with an impatient glare. "For your information, Mr. Potter, the Dementors of Azkaban defect to the Dark Lord's side, your side, over two years ago. Surely you remember; it was, after all, you who stormed the island of Azkaban."

"May we please return to formalities," interrupted Dumbledore softly. Madam Bones fell silent, but kept her eyes firmly on Harry. Harry himself was at a loss. Storming Azkaban? Dementors defecting two years ago? What was she on about? "Madam Kitchener, if you would be so kind," continued Dumbledore. He must have been referring to the speaker of the house. For the voice, once again echoed around the hall.

"DO YOU DENY THAT YOU LIVE WITH YOU-KNOW-WHO?"

What were they on about? Why would he, Harry Potter, set foot in Voldemort's home, let alone live with him for two years. Sure they didn't know about the Prophecy, but they sure as hell knew that Harry and Voldemort were 'not best friends' to put it mildly. "Yes," said Harry

exasperatedly. "I told you, I live at number four, Privet Drive, Surrey, with the damned Dursleys, where he put me," said Harry firmly, pointing at the Headmaster and Chief Warlock.

"Who?" asked Madam Bones, cynically.

"Dumbledore!" said Harry, trying not to shout. Why were they being so stupid about a fact that everyone in the country knows? Dumbledore could have answered these petty questions for him and save this stupid argument. Why wasn't Dumbledore answering for him? Why hadn't he sent someone to defend Harry? Was he going to do it himself?

"I beg your pardon?" said Dumbledore softly, fixing Harry with a piercing stare that Harry normally only saw on McGonagall's face. He sat forward in his chair, surveying Harry coldly over his half-moon spectacles. Harry saw neither a twinkle, nor an ounce of kindness in the Chief Warlock's eyes. "I placed you in Surrey?" he asked.

"Yes," said Harry, trying not to sound as aggravated as he felt. "What's wrong with you? Don't you remember? After Voldemort—" there was a gasp as he mentioned the name they all feared to speak. The word set off a murmur, which went around the crowd like a wave.

"ORDER!" called Dumbledore.

"SHUT UP!" shouted Harry at the crowd. Unlike Dumbledore call, Harry's shout had the desired affect.

"MR. POTTER!" snapped Crouch. "Restrain yourself!"

"Mr. Potter," said Dumbledore softly. "Please continue."

"After He-Who-You-Lot-Are-Too-Pathetic-To-Call-By-Name murdered my parents, you sent me to the damned Dursleys because of the blood magic of my aunt and mother. You know the details of the spells better than I do."

"I'm afraid I do not know what you are talking about, Mr. Potter," said Dumbledore with an amused look on his face. The twinkle was temporarily back in his eyes. "Before we continue, I feel I should ask if you are feeling alright? Have you perhaps bumped your head recently?" A murmur of laughter in the hall, echoed around the hall, Harry felt his face go red. Why was Dumbledore teasing him? Was he that angry with Harry for wrecking his office, that he was willing to deny all knowledge of him and send him to Azkaban? No, it must be a curse. The new Imperius Curse. He would just have to grin and bare it until he could speak to Dumbledore alone.

"I'm fine," said Harry firmly. "Except for the *minor inconvenience* of everyone thinking I'm a Death Eater and..."

"Are you saying you are not?" interrupted Umbridge, she was almost laughing. Something was amusing her. She looked as though she were trying to hold back a laugh as she looked down at him.

“Yes,” said Harry as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. He managed to reframe for saying ‘Duh!’ “You were there last year; you saw...” he was pointing at Umbridge though his forearm was bound to the chair.

“I was where?” asked Umbridge, smirking at him.

“Hogwarts,” said Harry exasperatedly. Did she have memory loss as well as being under the mysterious new curse? Had Voldemort wiped the memories of every person in the country? Could he do that? Was that why no one seemed to know him? “You were teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts.”

“I assure you I was not,” retorted Umbridge. Had she forgotten or was she pretending. She’d be up on many crimes against children if she confessed. Was she really ignorant or was she trying to protect her own skin.

“Oh yeah?” snapped Harry. “Then where did I get this?” He gestured as best he could through the restraints to the back of his hand. The court scribe walked over to him and glanced at his hands.

“I must not tell lies,” he read out loud. “It was cut into his flesh.”

“Good advice, Mr. Potter as you are in a courtroom,” said Dumbledore.

“Hello?” said Harry sarcastically. “Aren’t you going to ask how I got it?”

“How did you get it?” said Umbridge in a bored tone of voice.

“You forced me to write that with a Blood-Quill,” said Harry hotly.

“Really? Not a punishment from the Dark Lord?” suggested Umbridge. “And incidentally, Blood-Quills are illegal.”

“That didn’t stop you, did it?” snapped Harry. “And do you really think that Voldemort would use a Blood-Quill when he has the Cruciatus Curse at his fingertips and believe me, that hurts more than a quill.”

“Mr. Potter,” exclaimed Umbridge. “In saying that, you’ve just confessed that you are familiar with the Dark Lord’s methods of punishment and that you’ve felt an illegal curse.”

“Of course I’ve felt it. He’s been trying to kill me for fifteen years. He’s come close several times, hence I’ve felt the curse,” said Harry hotly. “Oh, and while we’re on the subject, Professor Umbridge, why do you call him the Dark Lord? I was under the impression that only the Death Eaters called him that.”

Umbridge visibly paled under Harry’s glare. There was a stir of muttering among the crowd. Harry saw Dumbledore glance across at Umbridge before making a note on the paper in

front of him. Crouch on the other hand, wasn't convinced by Harry's accusation. He was after the big fish: Harry Potter.

"This line of questioning is serving no purpose," interrupted Crouch. "I urge the panel to being the trial."

"Quite right," said Dumbledore. "The Wizengamot is now officially in session. Case number 56093: Potter, Harry James. Council for the Prosecution: Barthemius Crouch Senior. Council for the defence... Mr. Potter I assume you are defending yourself?" Harry had expected Dumbledore to defend him. Harry now realised that Dumbledore had forsaken him as well. Whatever he now thought of Dumbledore, he had always been there and now Harry needed him more than ever. Surely he was strong enough to see through any curses. He must be. This was his choice. For some reason, Harry felt angry with the Headmaster.

"Of all the people," sneered Harry, shaking his head. "After everything we've been through, you'd actually believe that I did all those crimes? You are willing to abandon me and leave me to fend for myself before the Wizengamot? What happened to you, Dumbledore? What happened to the trusting headmaster we all knew and trusted?" Dumbledore's eyes grew wide. Harry's attack had been personal, and Dumbledore looked visibly shaken, something Harry had not seen in five years of going to the Headmaster with the most bizarre, exceptional, and unbelievable stories imaginable. Dumbledore didn't look angry, but Harry got the impression the words had dug deep. There was silence in the room. No one really knew what to say to that. It was Dumbledore who spoke next. After a few second's pause he cleared his throat.

"You are to defend yourself?"

"Seems like I'm going to have to," said Harry sarcastically, glaring at the Headmaster.

"No!" called a voice. "I am!" Harry tried to turn his head, but couldn't see who had spoken. His restraints didn't allow him to see who had spoken. He heard the sharp clicking sound of high heels behind him as a woman walked down the aisle. The clicking became closer and a murmur went up in the crowd. Harry didn't recognise the voice and couldn't see who she was, but he knew a woman was approaching. The audience could clearly see as they began murmuring amongst themselves. A chair appeared next to Harry's with a pop and small table followed suit. The sound of clicking heels softened as the woman arrived in the carpeted section around the front of the room. A figure in long black robes took a seat next to him, depositing a thick black file, bursting with parchment onto the table. Harry's blood ran cold and he knew he was doomed to Azkaban, as he stared flabbergasted at his new defence lawyer. He sat open mouthed, as she secured her long silvery hair into a tight bun, and opened the thick folder she had brought. "Narcissa Black-Malfoy QC," she introduced herself.

The murmuring in the crowd grew louder and Crouch turned a dark shade of magenta in anger.

"ORDER!" called a stern looking witch sat two places to Dumbledore's left.

“Mr. Potter, do you consent to Lady Malfoy acting as your council for the duration of this trial?” asked Dumbledore.

Lady Malfoy? Since when was Lucius Malfoy a Lord? “Why not?” said Harry, unenthusiastically. “Since you’ve done a Judas, why should I not sit in the company of the enemy? Someone out there seems to have a sense of humour.” The entire front bench and Narcissa Malfoy both glanced at Harry with a stare that clearly said, ‘Are you feeling all right?’ Dumbledore made a note on the parchment in front of him.

“What are you on about?” whispered Narcissa. Harry looked over at her, but before he could speak, she cut him off. “Never mind. Keep quiet; the Dark Lord has instructed us to get you out. Sit tight and we’ll get you out of here.” *What?* After going through the trouble and probably the pain of putting all these people under a control curse or wiping their memories or whatever he had done, Voldemort now wanted him to be released? What was going on? Was he trying to frame Harry, to make it look like he was in with the Malfoys? What’s the point? He already has the country in his grasp if this really is his curse. Why go to the trouble to frame him? Harry’s head was spinning. So many questions, so few answers. None of it made sense. What was going on?

“Why are you doing this?” whispered Harry. Would she give him an answer? It was worth a try.

“I’m under orders,” hissed Narcissa.

“What’s going on? Is this all a trick? Is it a new control curse of his?”

“What?” Narcissa looked genuinely confused by this.

“Why does everyone think I’m a Death Eater?” said Harry

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked looked more worried than confused. She gave him a look that he had seen in Mrs. Weasley’s eye many times before. Did she care about him? No, surely he must have imagined it.

“Why does no one remember what’s happened these last few years?” pressed Harry. “Why does no one remember who I am, and why is Frank Longbottom out of St Mungo’s?”

“Sorry about that,” said Narcissa. She visibly paled. “It was Rodolphus’ fault.” She added hurriedly. “He was on observation and failed to tell us he had gone out. When we arrived he was gone; we got his wife though.” Harry’s mind flashed back to when he had been arrested. Frank had said that Harry had killed his wife and unborn child, as well as tortured Neville to insanity with the Cruciatus Curse. He wanted to kill Harry, to avenge Neville. But Neville was alive and well! Harry had seen him a few weeks ago. Neville was his friend, Harry would never hurt him. He would certainly never subject him to that fate; the one that Frank himself had suffered, but for some reason was now showing no signs of having done so. None of it made sense.

“COUNCIL!” shouted Crouch, bringing Harry and Narcissa’s conversation to an abrupt end. “If you’ve quite finished, we can press on.”

“Thank you, Mr. Crouch. Madam Bones,” said Dumbledore formally. “If you would be so good as to read out the charges filed against the defendant.”

“Of Course,” replied Madam Bones. She unravelled a roll of parchment and began to read. “August 1994, Breach of the Law for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry. Subsequently 14098 further offences of this nature have been committed, the last three yesterday. Use of the Imperius Curse on fellow human being: seventeen offences, including use on Sirius Black, Ludovic Bagman, Cornelius Fudge, Bilius Weasley, Rose-Marie Potter, Peter Pettigrew, Daniel Bell and-” she stammered slightly “-Susan Bones. Use of Cruciatius Curse on fellow human being: forty-one such offences, including on Muggles in sight of Muggles, hence in breach of the Statute of Secrecy. Use of Killing Curse on fellow human beings, eleven such offences confirmed, several more reported. Mr. Potter rarely uses a wand for killing; preferring the use of a sword, exhibit 1A. First-degree murder through decapitation: thirty-four counts. Bombing of Canamarro Square in 1995, resulting in the death of fourteen people. Attack on Diagon Alley, May 1994, resulting in the deaths of 19 civilians, three Aurors and the Minister of Magic. Leading the attack on the Prison of Azkaban, resulting in the deaths of twenty-three Aurors and the release of over two hundred maximum-security prisoner’s. Setting a Dragon loose in Butlin’s Holiday Park. Impersonating an Auror. Impersonating the Minister of Magic. Taking part in the raid on the facility hereafter referred to as ‘Area C’. The kidnapping of a St Mungo’s nurse. Arson. Murder of two Aurors and two suspected Death Eaters. One count of being drunk and disorderly in a public place.” There was a pause as the full horror of Harry’s alleged crimes sank into the audience, the Wizengamot and Harry himself. He had done none of it, with one exception. Did they really believe that he of all people would do any of that?

“Quite a list, Mr. potter,” said Dumbledore coldly. “How do you plead?”

“Not guilty,” said Harry firmly.

“To all of them?” asked Umbridge.

“Not quite, your honour,” cut in Narcissa, before Harry could answer. Harry had been about to confess to cursing Bellatrix, but Narcissa had cut him off. “My client does indeed plea ‘Not Guilty’ to all crimes listed above, with the exception of one.” *How could she know about that?* thought Harry in a panic. Blood surged from his face as a chill went down his spine. He would go to Azkaban for that one alone. It had been an Unforgivable after all. But, how could she know? Bellatrix must have told her! What was she doing, if they found out he really had used the Cruciatius Curse on Bellatrix, he’s be down a Dementor’s throat before he could say ‘*Expecto Patronum*’.

“And which might that be?” sneered Crouch.

“Being drunk and disorderly in a public place,” said Narcissa. Harry hadn’t been expecting that. His eyebrows flew up and his eyes became wide. Narcissa turned to Harry. “We

thought it would make the Ministry look even more stupid if all they could pin on you was a D&D charge. Bellatrix's idea."

"Fair enough," sighed Harry. Something this moronic had to come from someone like Bellatrix. Someone who was a few balls short of a snooker set. Crouch looked outraged and stood gaping like a fish at Harry.

"Mr. Crouch," said Dumbledore formally. "Please begin."

"Certainly, your Honour," said Crouch with a grin. He was in his element here. Harry was reminded of the Penseive he had seen in his fourth year. If he was anything like how was in there, Harry would struggle to get a word in edgeways. Maybe Narcissa could swing it for him. As much as he loathed relying on her, especially after she helped kill Sirius, he knew it was the right thing to do. He had to play his cards very carefully. If she got him off then he could run to Hogwarts and speak to Dumbledore there. Harry decided it was probably better to play along and allow Narcissa to get the charges dropped. She was a QC. Queen's Council: that meant that she was one of the top lawyers in the country. Harry was actually impressed with his plan. Normally he would charge in head-first but now he was thinking. Snape would be impressed. Well surprised, impressed was a bit of an exaggeration.

"To begin with," said Crouch after melodramatically clearing his throat, "I would like to think back to the events of April 30th 1994. As Hogwarts records will show, the accused did not return to Hogwarts in September 1993 for what would have been his fourth year. Mr. Potter as good as disappeared for just over eight months. The next sighting of the defendant was on April 30th, otherwise known as Bel Tain, in the area of Lydford Gorge known as the Devil's Cauldron. Bel Tain is the time of the year when dark magic is at its most potent. Devil's Cauldron, while appearing to be nothing more than a whirlpool to most, is far more than that. Devil's Cauldron was built for the single purpose of harnessing and concentrating Dark Energy. You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters, Mr. Potter among them, amassed at the Cauldron on Bel Tain 1994. One witness to the events that unfolded is with us today. I call my first witness, Riener Attacus."

Harry tried to turn his head, but the restraints held him firmly. He thought he felt them tighten as he tried to move. They probably were magical after all. His head was already spinning. Bel Tain? He had heard Hermione mention it before he remembered. He remembered reading in History of Magic, under pressure from Hermione, that Devil's End, a small God-fearing village in Yorkshire had caverns beneath the Church, where witches of the 17th century allegedly worshipped the occult on Bel Tain. In other words, wizards and witches had a piss-up and party on the thirtieth of April every year. But that was irrelevant. On April 30th 1994, which was half way through his fourth year, he had been at Hogwarts preparing for the third task. Why couldn't anyone remember?

Harry sat, deep in thought for several minutes, trying to figure out exactly what was happening. Surely they would know that he, the Boy-Who-Lived would not practice Black Magic with Voldemort on Bel Tain, especially when plenty of witnesses could tell them he was at Hogwarts.

“MR. POTTER!” Harry was snapped out of his thoughts by Crouch screaming his name. He looked up. On the Witness box, sat an elderly wizard. He was about sixty to Harry’s eyes, and wore plain robes, which looked old and tired. That was nothing compared to the man within the clothes. His face drooped, his skin looked old and wrinkled. Every inch of him looked tired, except for his eyes. They were alive with passion, the only part of him that appeared so. He reminded Harry of Mad-Eye for a second.

“Mr. Attacus,” began Crouch. “Following your honourable discharge from the Aurors in 1975, you became a free-lance Auror, did you not?”

“A delicate way of putting it,” said the old man, his voice rough, probably from too many cigarettes. “Most would call me a Bounty Hunter or a Mercenary.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” said Crouch, looking impatient. “You were, during the event in question, undercover within the Death Eaters, were you not?”

“I was,” replied Attacus, his eyes fixed on Harry. “I felt I could be most useful as a spy. I was initiated and to this day I carry the Mark. I was however not alone. Against my better judgement, my wife Caitlin was also initiated along with me.”

“In your own words would you like to tell the court exactly what occurred between the hours of 23:50 and 00:10 on Bel Tain 1994,” asked Crouch.

“Gladly,” said Mr. Attacus. He sat up in his chair, and took a sip of orange juice from the glass next to him. Having quenched his thirst, he cleared his throat. “It was approximately five to midnight when...” Harry lost all interest in what was being said. As soon as he had drunk from the glass, Narcissa had started counting. He could hear her whispering under her breath.

“Ten...nine...eight, meet us in the lobby...seven...”

“What are you doing?” whispered Harry.

“Get to the lobby...six, that wasn’t orange juice,” hissed Narcissa with a sly sneer. “Five...four...”

“What the hell is going on?” hissed Harry. His heart began to race. He broke into a sweat and started looking frantically around.

“MR. ATTACUS!” boomed Crouch’s voice. Harry’s attention was snapped back to Crouch as the whole hall gasped. Harry followed their gaze to the witness box. Attacus was on all fours, coughing and retching. Blood was flowing freely from his eyes, nostrils and mouth. What the hell had he just drunk?

“Narcissa, what the...”

“Hold onto something,” she hissed with a firm glare. Dumbledore was on his feet, moving along the bench. Crouch was also hastily making his way towards Mr. Attacus. The audience murmured in confusion, many stood trying to get a better look. Harry had a perfect view from where he was. Mr. Attacus continued to retch uncontrollably. He was coughing and spluttering, while desperately trying to breath at the same time. As Harry watched, smoke began to pour out of Mr. Attacus’ ears. The old Auror looked like he was on fire as thick white steam spouted out of his ears.

Suddenly, Harry realised what was about to happen.

“GET DOWN!” he screamed. Dumbledore reacted instantly. The Headmaster’s instantly turned to Harry, then to Attacus. Using the same speed with which he had duelled with Voldemort last year, Dumbledore sent a banishing charm straight at Crouch, sending him sailing away from the danger. He instantly conjured a shield around himself, just as the body of Mr. Attacus exploded. Pieces of bone and flesh were sent flying in all direction, accompanied by a fine red spray. The entire witness box was coated in blood.

Suddenly the door erupted into a ball of fire. The explosion rocked the entire room, sending debris from the door sailing through the air into the audience. As shards of splintered wood rained down on the audience, a figure came flying through the fire. It was human shaped, more or less but seemed to be made of pure fire. Burning red eyes shone in its fiery head as it swooped around the room coming to a stop over the front desk. The Wizengamot instantly fled, Lucius Malfoy still maintaining an aura of cool about him, as he marched towards the exit completely unfazed by the destruction of the room.

“Heliopath!” Madam Bones addressed the new arrival, standing alone before the enraged creature. So Luna had been half right: they did exist, but it wasn’t the Ministry that used them for their private army. It was Voldemort. “Stand down!” ordered Madam Bones “That’s an order! Stand down!”

The fire demon had no intention of obeying. That was another ally of the Ministry that had defected. Voldemort now controlled the Dementors and the Heliopaths. Harry could feel the burning heat of the fire-spirit, and remembered all too well the cold of the Dementors. The creature’s eyes flashed menacingly as it sent a spout of fire straight at Madam Bones, who managed to move away just in time. The flame struck the ground where she had stood mere seconds before, reducing it to a pool of flame instantly.

Harry couldn’t do anything to help, he couldn’t even move. The Heliopath now started throwing jets of fire in random directions, setting the whole room ablaze. Harry could feel the heat on his face. It was unbearable. It felt like his blood was boiling.

“Help!” he called. “Somebody!” It was pandemonium. The audience was scrambling over each other in an attempt to reach the exits. There were bundles of people at every door, pushing and shoving, trying desperately to escape the demon’s wrath. Smoke was filling the room, making it hard to breath or even to see. Where was Narcissa? She was supposed to be helping him to escape, Coughing and spluttering, Harry tried to think.

Boom!

The enraged Heliopath sent a geyser of fire into the first row of the audience. Luckily it was empty. The explosion launched the wooden benches several metres into the air. With a tremendous crash the pews returned to earth, splintering in every direction on impact. To his horror, Harry saw a robed figure stand up, riddled in flame. He - or was it a she - stood up, frantically flapping its arms. Then figure was engulfed in flame. The screaming was sickening as the burning figure flapped and ran in all directions, trying to put the fire out.

“ROLL, YOU FOOL!” shouted Harry. “DROP AND ROLL!” The figure didn’t hear. It had been on fire for several seconds. The Heliopath roared, hovering a few feet above the flaming figure. Harry watched helplessly as the creature conjured a ball of flame in its hand, it hurled the wad of fire at the dying figure. The figure was propelled into the air, landing two feet from Harry and lying still. The fire was not out; the corpse was burning. The smoke was making him nauseous. He held his breath trying to resist the urge to throw up. The smell of burned flesh and skin was the most vile he had ever smelt. The body was the most disgusting thing he had ever laid eyes on. He shook his head, trying desperately to remain conscious. He could see movement all around him.

An Auror ran past in a panicked flurry.

“Help me!” called Harry desperately. The Auror paused, turning to face him. For a second they made eye contact. The Auror sighed and pulled out his wand, pointing it at Harry. *He’s going to set me free!* thought Harry. A wave of relief spread over him.

Bang!

The front bench exploded as the Heliopath sent a geyser of flame at it. Splintered wood and debris rained down on Harry, while the unfortunate Wizengamot member who had been using it as a shield was sent flying and slammed brutally into the wall. The Auror who was about to release Harry was also catapulted through the air. Harry watched helplessly as his only hope of escape landed amid the wreckage of the front bench. With a sickening squelch, a jagged end of a shard of wood appeared through the Auror’s back. He had been impaled as he landed. Thick, red blood oozed out from around the spike. Harry watched helplessly, feeling a combination of sickness and despair as the Auror struggles like a hooked fish for a few seconds, before finally going limp. He lay surrounded by burning debris, motionless. Through the smoke, Harry saw a familiar figure in purple robes dart over to the fallen Auror and check his pulse.

Thick black smoke filled the room, blocking out any light, save for that from the Fire Demon itself. Dumbledore was barely visible to Harry as he knelt over the fallen Auror.

Dumbledore had forsaken him, and left him to fend for himself before the Wizengamot but right now, he was Harry’s only hope.

“Professor!” called Harry, as loud as he could, considering his mouth was dry and his lungs were full of smoke. “Professor Dumbledore, please, help me!”

The Headmaster's head spun around, coming to rest on Harry. Dumbledore paused for a second before raising his wand. Harry felt his bonds retract. The neck brace slid back like a snake, while the shin and wrist bonds clicked open. Harry found himself able to move again. Despite being free, he was very weak; He could hardly breath as the thick black smoke invaded his lungs. He coughed in vain, trying to clear his airways. He pulled his arm a little way back into his sleeve and covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve in an attempt to filter out the smoke.

BANG!

The chair that had once bound him to the floor exploded under the Heliopath's wrath. The blast was so powerful it knocked Harry off his feet. Harry landed in a heap on the remains of the front bench. The remains of a chair and a soot covered plaque reading

*Albus Percival Wulfric Brain Dumbledore
Chief Warlock*

were all that cushioned his fall. Harry founding himself lying on his front, covered in soot, staring into the cold hollow eyes of the Auror who had tried to help him. He quickly clambered to his feet, amidst the wreckage. Trying to spot an exit that wasn't blocked by fire. If only he could put the fire out, then he stood a chance. As he tried to free himself from the wreckage, Harry noticed that Dumbledore has disappeared. *Thanks a lot*, thought Harry bitterly. *Really helpful.*

The Heliopath let out one final roar of rage, and sent one final jet of flame into the Coat of Arms of the Wizengamot, shattering it into hundreds of pieces. Flaming debris fell like shooting stars to the ground around Harry. He covered his head with his arms, wishing he still had his wand with him. *Whose side is this bloody creature on?* thought Harry angrily.

Having completed its business, the Heliopath, turned and swooped silently from the room, leaving Harry, covered in ash, in the middle of what used to be the grandest room in the building, but now looked like Hiroshima in 1945.

Harry managed to climb to his feet once again and struggle through the wreckage. More by feel than by sight, Harry managed to find the exit. The remains of the double doors littered the hallway, which was now deserted. The smoke was less thick out here, and Harry lowered his sleeve. He coughed a few times, to try and clear his lungs. The heat from the Atrium was unbearable. His clothes were sticking to his body due to the sweat, and he could smell singed hair, most likely his own. He was covered in soot and his clothes were torn. He wasn't bleeding or burned, but he felt like hell.

Trying to clear his head, Harry struggled to walk down the corridor towards the lift. He stepped helplessly over the two bodies of the Aurors whose job it had been to stop people getting into the Atrium. They had been unable to stop the Heliopath. He bumped into the walls after every few paces. He had gone five paces when he twisted his ankle on a piece of door. Cursing

colourfully, Harry continued on towards the lift. When he got to the lift, he pressed the button to call it.

Having recovered from the shock of nearly dying, Harry managed to stop and think. *What the hell just happened?* Harry asked himself. *Narcissa plans to break me out, and so she switches the witness' drink. That much I can understand. Then, when the Heliopath arrives she leaves me to my death. Thanks a lot, love. Dumbledore helped me. Does that mean that Dumbledore has remembered who I am? Has the curse been broken? Is everything back to normal?*

With a *PING*, the lift door slid open, bringing Harry out of his trail of thought. Harry stepped in and the doors silently slid to behind him. Tasting clean air was a relief to Harry. It wasn't fresh air, but it was better than the smell of singed flesh and fire. Harry wiped his sweaty forehead with his sleeve and pressed the button marked Lobby. At once a woman's voice filled the lift.

"Apologies visitor," said the voice, in what Harry thought was a needlessly happy voice. "Due to security reasons, all lifts have been stopped. Please use the stairs situated to the right as you leave the lift. The Ministry of Magic wishes you a prosperous day." The doors slid open as the voice vanished.

Harry felt the wave of smoky air hit him as the doors opened. He coughed instantly. *Damn!* he thought. *I'll never get out of here.* Aurors would be at the top of the stairs and he would end up back in that awful cell again. Covering his nose and mouth once more, he walked out of the lift. As the voice had instructed, he turned right. The second door on the right had a picture of some steps next to it. This must be the one. Harry cautiously pushed the door open and slipped inside.

Harry closed the door behind him and looked up. Luckily he was completely alone. He lowered his sleeve. A little smoke was pouring underneath the door but it was still clearer air than outside. Harry looked up. Before him was a spiral staircase that seemed to go on forever. The beech wood steps with bronze handrail spun upwards and away. There had to be at least a thousand steps in the staircase.

"And me without my slinky," muttered Harry bitterly, to no one in particular. Groggily, he began to climb. *When will Wizards invent a stair-lift or an escalator?* he thought as he climbed.

Harry had only climbed two floors when the voice returned, echoing throughout the corridors.

"ATTENTION! ATTENTION! THIS IS A CODE RED ALERT. THERE IS A MAXIMUM-SECURITY PRISONER LOOSE IN THE BUILDING. ALL STAFF AND GUESTS, PLEASE REPORT TO THE ENTRANCE HALL. ALL AURORS PLEASE REPORT TO LOWER LEVELS. MR. POTTER, YOU ARE COMPLETELY SURROUNDED. TURN YOURSELF IN AND YOU WILL NOT BE HARMED...THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC WISHES YOU A PLEASANT MORNING."

“Bollocks,” cursed Harry under his breath. They still thought he was a Death Eater. After what had just happened they would add attempting to escape and probably several more murders to his list of crimes. *Another trial, Azkaban, not to mention several nights in another maximum-security cell. No thanks.* Harry decided that the best course of action was to try and get out of here and go to Dumbledore himself. But Dumbledore thought that he was a murderer too. So who else could he turn to? Not the Order, not...no one. He was totally alone. Except...maybe...NO! Absolutely not! He would never resort to asking Voldemort for help. Not that Voldemort would even consider giving it. Where had that thought come from?

Whoever he turned to, he still needed to get out of the Ministry, so one problem at a time. Harry hurried up to the next floor. His lungs were full of smoke making him feel exhausted. Every step felt like a mile. As he reached the next landing, he stopped for breath. He was two floors below the entrance hall.

“Two more floors to go. Only two,” he panted out loud. Suddenly he heard a voice above him.

“Split up in teams of two. Two per floor I want that son of a bitch found!” said a commanding voice.

Aurors! Harry was trapped. He quickly darted through the door, closing it quietly behind him. He found himself at the end of a long corridor with offices on either side. The corridor was bathed with red light. Harry hurried along, passing deserted office after deserted office. The whole floor seemed completely deserted. Every office that Harry passed was empty with the doors wide open, cloaks and hats remained on hooks and chairs were either knocked over or far from the desk. Nothing was put away and the ink-bottles had no lids. The occupants must have left in a hurry. Harry couldn't see too far in the red light, but he could see that he was alone, for the moment at least. He had about twenty seconds until the Aurors arrived. He passed a door marked Gentlemen. The toilets would be the first place they looked. Harry dived into an office. It was, like the rest completely deserted. Harry then spotted the cloak that had been thrown over a chair. Quickly he removed his prisoner's shirt and donned a cloak that he found in one office. It was a little long, but was thick and would cover the prisoner's trousers he wore underneath it. He pocketed a hat as well. It might be useful if he had to pass other people. There was a click as the door opened at the far end of the corridor. Harry was trapped in the office. Bollocks! Quickly he discarded his prisoner's shirt and hid under the desk. *Oh what an original hiding place,* thought Harry bitterly as the sound of Aurors footsteps became audible. He could hear the Aurors' boots on the hard floor. Their voices echoed down the deserted hall. About as stealthy as a herd of elephants. As they came closer Harry could hear what they were saying. These had to be new recruits. They were about as professional as Voldemort was charitable.

“...and this guy was like huge, you know, looked like a bouncer at a club. And he says to me, he says ‘she's a bit of a looker on reception’. ‘too right, mate’, says I” *These morons are supposed to be our best line of defence,* thought Harry. *Jesus, we're in trouble.* Actually, it was quite fortunate for Harry, because the two Aurors were more interested in their conversation than doing a thorough search for him.

“And who was on the front desk?”

“Rachel.”

“Yeah, she is a bit of a looker. Gorgeous tits.” The footsteps were so close. They were about three feet from the door of the office in which Harry was hiding.

“That’s what he said. He goes, ‘she looks athletic. I bet she rides like a minx’” Harry heard the second Auror snort with laughter. They stopped, right outside the door. Harry could see their feet from where he was hidden. *Please don’t look in here!* he prayed silently. The Auror continued. “It gets better. I said, ‘yeah, she rides horses as a little bonus.’ He says ‘stop it mate, I’m gonna have to go to the bog and knock one out’”

Both Aurors erupted into laughter. Come on, thought Harry, impatiently. Move away. One look in the right direction would be all it would take to find him. *Please leave!* thought Harry, desperately.

“Any sign of the boy?” one asked the other as he recovered from his laughing fit. The two Aurors didn’t even bother looking, they just turned on the spot “Should we check the emergency exit to the tubes, do you reckon?” asked one Auror. Secret exit? The Tubes? If Harry could get to the Underground, he could go anywhere in London.

“Nah,” said the other. “Hardly anyone knows it exists, certainly not Potter. How do you know about it?”

“Black told me. Him and Potter know all the secret passageways.”

“Yeah, well. Let’s get some lunch,” said the first Auror. “Hey, did you see that new girl today?” To Harry’s relief, the two Aurors began to head back towards the lift. They hadn’t even looked.

“The blond one with the sparking blue eyes and glasses?”

“I wasn’t looking at her eyes, mate,” replied the first as they disappeared into the stairwell. With a click, the door closed and Harry was alone again. He released the breath he didn’t even know he had been holding. Quickly he crawled out from his hiding place and out of the office.

“Emergency exit to the tubes?” muttered Harry. So there was a secret exit on this floor. Thank God, thought Harry. The only problem was that Harry didn’t have a clue where the damn thing was. If it was anything like a secret passageway in Hogwarts he could walk right past in a thousand times and not notice it

He walked through the corridor until he reached the end. It seemed logical to him that the exit would be as far from the lifts as possible. He could be wrong, but it was as good-a-place as any to start looking. When he reached the end, he saw a door labelled,

ARCHIVES

Thankfully it was unlocked. Cautiously, Harry opened the door and slipped inside. Inside were hundreds and hundreds of filing cabinets, each full to bursting with pieces of parchment. Piles of parchment were perched on top of the cabinets. *Thank God for magic*, thought Harry. *It would take someone centuries to search through all this by hand.* The walls were parchment colour as well; at least it looked the same colour. He couldn't really tell as the red emergency lighting made it hard to tell colour.

The cabinets were about three feet high and above them, posters decorated the walls. Some were of bands, Harry recognised the Weird Sisters in one poster, waving happily to him. There were Quidditch players zooming around in them and then there were Muggle posters. Film posters covered the end wall. Whoever ran the archives was a bit of a Muggle fan. There was a poster for Jaws on one wall. Someone had tried to magically alter it so the shark would swim around. It had worked, but the shark still looked fake. Harry looked back and realised that he had walked over one hundred metres into the room. It was huge. Filing cabinets as far as the eye could see. The room was narrow, but very long indeed.

He was just turning to leave when he felt a rumble. Instinctively he put a hand on the nearest cabinet to stop himself falling, the rumbling lasted for a few seconds then passed. He knew what it was. It was the sound of a train running through the tunnels behind the wall. He was close. The door must be along the wall next to him. That narrowed it down to about two hundred metres of wall, with God knows how many pictures and posters and even if he find the right one he still needed a password to get it open. This would take forever.

The Italian Job, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, ET, Indiana Jones, the Shining, the Shawshank Redemption. There was over two hundred metres of wall-space on each side and hundreds of posters.

Suddenly the doors opened. Harry's stomach leapt to his throat as the sound of footsteps could be heard from the entrance to the Archives. The Aurors have come back! He had nowhere to hide. The filing cabinets were all side by side with no gaps. Every shelf was full, but didn't face the door so there was no room to hide. He was trapped. This time there was no escape. He was caught.

Harry could hear footsteps coming towards him. They sounded quite soft of boots, but they were definitely coming towards him. The red light only allowed him to see a few feet.

"Bloody Aurors," grumbled a voice "Drag me out into the freezing cold and after all that they couldn't even find the little brute. Should have been hung when he was first caught if you ask me, Alice."

Alice? Harry's blood ran cold. There was someone else here. He was outnumbered and he didn't even have his wand.

“Come on Alice, come here,” said the voice soothingly. *What?* thought Harry. *Why is he talking like that? Is Alice a child?*

Harry sighed with relief as he heard a faint meow. Alice was a cat! Harry sighed with relief. However, he sighed a little too loudly.

“Who’s there?” called the voice from the red shadows. “Come out, I’m armed!”

Harry didn’t even have a choice. He was unarmed. He had already heard the man’s views on what should be done to him when he was caught, so he wasn’t keen to give up, but he had no other choice. Harry walked forward, his hands in the air. As he walked, the figure of a man came into view. Harry couldn’t see his face in the dim red light, but he could see where he was and that he was aiming a wand at him.

“Well, well,” sneered the man. “In infamous Harry Potter. Hands up!”

“They are up,” said Harry coldly. He was three feet from the man now and could see him a little better.

“Don’t come any closer. I swear I’ll hex you.” He looked serious. He was about thirty years old, with dark hair and a moustache. He wore long robes but Harry couldn’t see the colour because of the red light.

“Ok. Stay calm,” said Harry gently.

“Shut up!” hissed the man. “You’re coming with me.”

Without warning the lights came back on. The red vanished and bright white light shone in the room. Everything was lit brightly and both Harry and the man blinked. Harry reacted quickly taking advantage of the confusion. He grabbed the wand arm of the man and twisted the wand loose from his grip before pushing the man away. He had disarmed the man in one move.

Harry blinked twice and aimed the wand at the man. The librarian was blinking quickly trying to regain his sight.

“You bastard!” he spat.

“Shut up and listen!” said Harry firmly. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I will if I have to. There is an exit to the tubes in this room. You are going to show it to me and open it, ok?”

“Never,” spat the man, rubbing his wrist.

Harry pointed his wand at Alice the cat. “One more time, where is the exit?” he asked.

“Behind the Great Escape poster,” sighed the man. “The password is *Open Sesame.*”

“How original,” said Harry, sarcastically. “Lead the way.” He wanted the man to do it to prove it. He wasn’t going to let him go until he saw that the password worked and that he really was free.

“What?”

“You are going to show me,” said Harry. “No offence, but I don’t trust you.”

Followed by Harry, the man lead the way to the poster, with Harry’s wand pointed at his head the entire way. Sure enough, on the left hand wall about eighty metres down was a poster of the Great Escape.

“Open Sesame,” said the man. A section of the wall swung open, revealing a short passageway.

“Thanks,” said Harry. He stepped into the passageway. “Have a nice day.” He closed the door behind him.

In front of Harry was a short corridor, about five metres in length. The walls were made of brick, which had turned a muddy brown with age. There were cracks in the mortar, but no water leaked. At the far end was a metal door, with a big sign that read.

CAUTION!
MUGGLES AHEAD
PLEASE TRANSFIGURE ALL MAGICAL ATTIRE

Harry took a breath and then pushed open the door. For a second he thought he had gotten away with it. The door opened a fraction and he saw the empty platform in front of him, with many benches and a few vending machines dotted around. There were no trains or people present. Harry managed to take one more step before he had to cover his ears.

Suddenly a siren sounded. He had set off an alarm. The sound was deafening. He clasped his hands to his ears in an effort to drown out the noise. Aurors would be arriving any minute and then he would end up in Azkaban. Quickly Harry broke into a run, he turned right and headed to the end of the platform. Once there he took cover behind a vending machine. Peering around the corner he saw two figures emerge from the door that he had. Aurors! There was no mistaking what they were, especially since they were dressed in full battle armour with stun batons. Red trousers and a jumper were covered with dragon scale breastplate, gloves and boots. Each carried a wand in one hand and a glowing Stun-Baton in the next. The short sticks were glowing red and Harry guessed that they were carrying the traditional Stunning Spell rather than anything more *potent*. Each was wearing a long red cloak, thrown back over their shoulders so that they could move more easily.

“He said Potter came down here. Spread out, find him!” ordered one. They both headed off in different direction, one of them straight towards where Harry was hiding. He was about twenty feet away. Harry still had the wand he had taken from the archivist. If all else failed he

could try and fight them. He could hear the footsteps of the nearest Auror. What was he going to do?

Suddenly he heard a rumble come from down the tunnel. Peering out from his hidey-hole, Harry could see a light coming closer down the tunnel. A train! He could escape. Harry stood perfectly still, trying not to breath. The rumble however was distant, perhaps a mile down the tunnel. The Auror was getting so much closer. Harry could hear the footsteps over the rumble of the distant train.

“She’s the dancing...hic...queen...hic...young and sweet, only... hic...seventeen...”

What the.... Harry peered out from behind the vending machine. He couldn’t believe his luck. A drunken Muggle teenager was making his way down onto the platform. He looked about Harry’s age. He was wearing a shirt and jeans. Harry guessed that he had probably been out clubbing, despite being too young. He was holding a half-empty bottle of Smirnoff Vodka. Just as he reached the bottom of the stairs, the train pulled into the station.

He paused when he reached the platform. He took one look at the two Auror, who had had the sense to extinguish and hide their stun-batons but were still dressed in red robes and armour. He looked at them for less than a second before vomiting. One Auror rushed to help, patting the poor boy on the back as he retched again.

Thanking God, Harry quickly moved to a better hiding-place nearer the track. A closed Newspaper Stand proved perfect. It was four feet from the track. Wish a whoosh, the doors to the train opened. The Aurors had noticed the arrival of the train now. Harry quickly slipped inside. He immediately ran into the toilet and locked the door. Harry waited with baited breath, hoping to feel the train begin to move. If the train was moving he was safe. He was so close. *Come on! Get a move on!* Then he would be safe, or at least safe for the moment.

Second passed, and with every one, Harry’s anxiety grew. Why weren’t they moving yet? Had the Aurors stopped the train? Wouldn’t it leave until they found him? Were they going to unlock the door? *Come on!* pleaded Harry to no one in particular. Seconds passed, dragging on and seeming like hours. Harry had broken into a cold sweat as he sat huddled in a tiny and not particularly pleasant or hygienic Water Closet.

Knock! Knock!

OH NO! They had found him. Someone had knocked on the door.

“Hello?” whispered a male voice. “Damn,” it said much louder. “We’ll have to find another one. I don’t know if I can hold on!”

Oh great, thought Harry. *Just what I need: someone fouling up the carriage when I’m trying to evade Aurors.*

“Don’t worry, sweetie,” soothed a woman’s voice. “Let’s find another one and I’ll take care of that *tension* for you” The woman broke of into a giggle.

“God, you look hot tonight, babe,” said the bloke. “Come on, let’s try the next carriage.” Harry sighed with relief as he heard the door slide and then silence. They had left the carriage. Just then there was a whoosh and the doors slid shut. Harry was knocked of his feet as the train suddenly began to move. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He unlocked the door and stepped out. Were the Aurors on board? Where were they? He kept his wand firmly in the right hand, ready to raise a shield if the need arose.

Harry was dressed in denim trousers and a denim shirt, which had been his prisoner’s clothes. He also had a long black cloak over the top of it. The tunnel was dark outside and the train was well lit so the windows acted as mirrors. His hair was sticking up in all directions. He reached up with a hand and tried to flatten it. His sweat had dried and acting as a gel held it firmly upright. He wiped the remaining soot from his face so that he looked more or less presentable and wouldn’t attract attention. He looked incredibly pale. He had hardly slept or eaten since leaving Privet Drive. He had bags under his eyes. He looked terrible.

Harry took a seat at one side of the train. He was the only person in this carriage. Harry sat down and made sure his robes covered his wand arm. He still held the wand; he just had it hidden so that no one would know. The carriage was warm and the seat was comfy, compared to the metal trial seat at least. Harry allowed himself to relax.

The magic carpet ducked lower, skimming silently over the treetops. Harry could have reached down and plucked a branch off if he felt the need. Faster and faster the carpet sped over the treetops. Ahead of them, lights could be seen in a clearing in the forest. A stately home was visible, silhouetted against the sky. The tall dark structure was barely visible against the moonless night. Behind them two more carpets each carrying four men were skimming silently behind them. They were all dressed in black and wearing plenty of armour. Harry checked that his sword was secure across his back and that both his wands were present and easily reachable. His primary wand was holly, and Phoenix feather. The brother wand to that of his Master. Truly, he did deserve to be his master’s second in command. There was no Death Eater that came close to him. He and the master were so alike. In power, their wands, their blood, thought neither would admit it and their cold desire to rid the world of the filthy Mudbloods.

He had chosen not to wear a clock tonight, as it would get in the way. The customary cloaks and masks had not been used, as they would show up against the night. Instead black balaclavas would be used. The carpet slowed and then dropped. It came to a stop two feet above the ground at the edge of the clearing. Nine Death Eaters dismounted, and the three pilots disappeared into the sky. Harry and eight others were alone. An owl hooted in the distance, the wind rustled in the trees. Ahead of them was a wire fence and to their right was a gate, guarded by two men with machine guns. Harry could see the mansion clearly. Security was quite light. There were two guards in the security house by the gate with two more on patrol. The house itself should be clear. To his right was the gatehouse, consisting of a small concrete building and a red barrier that would be raised to allow vehicles in. Two spotlights skimmed across the clearing, searching for any intruders.

“Next time it passes,” Harry whispered to his comrades. “Remember, no spells. The Ministry has too many wards around this place. Also bear in mind that the guards are Muggles. Kill if you want to, but no spells. Also watch out for their weapons. Guns are very loud they must not be allowed for fire or raise the alarm. Absolute silence from here on in.” The spotlight made one pass and then headed off back towards the south end of the fence.

“Michaelses!” hissed Harry. There was a twang as the two Michaels brothers loosed an arrow from their bows. The two guards at the gate fell silently to the ground. “Now!” whispered Harry. All nine of them surged forward, reaching the gate in five seconds. Two of them dragged the bodies into the hut, while another two donned the uniforms.

“Sir!” hissed one. Harry turned to face the man. There was a hole in the uniform where the arrow had pierced with a small circle of red around it. “Shall I fix it?”

“No spells! And wand-work and the Ministry will be down on us in seconds. No Apparation either.” hissed Harry. “It will have to do. Hopefully you won’t encounter anyone.”

Leaving two of their party posing as guards, the remaining seven crossed the courtyard. One went off to the small box on the wall marked ‘HIGH VOLTAGE’. Harry watched as he opened the box and removed a wire. The alarm was now disabled. He then opened another box and smashed it with a stone. Telephone lines were now also disabled. The Death Eater gave Harry a nod and then ran back to the guards. So far so good.

Harry and his five companions entered the Mansion. The alarm and the cameras were all dead thank to the removal of a certain wire outside. They found themselves in a magnificent entrance hall. There were Greek statues in every corner and a massive marble staircase in the middle of the room. The room was in darkness and the house was quiet. Harry checked his watch. It was 00:57.

“Three minutes ahead of schedule. Damn I’m good,” muttered Harry. “Donahue, Molotov, south end. Kent, Radcliffe, you take the north, Set timers for one fifteen. Black, you’re with me.”

Four of the figures in black disappeared into the shadows, leaving Harry and Regulus Black alone. Harry disliked Regulus, he reminded him of that pathetic Godfather of his. However, the Master had ordered him to take him, so here he was. Harry was tempted to kill him and tell everyone that he dies in action, but he wanted this to seem like an accident and having the body of a Death Eater in the rubble of the Colonel’s house wasn’t going to look good.

Harry silently tiptoed up the stairs. At the top he turned right, and stopped outside the first door. Regulus was right behind him. Harry put a finger to his lips, motioning for Regulus to stay silent. Then he pointed to the door.

Regulus nodded and silently opened the door and slipped inside. Harry then slipped through the door on the far side of the hall. The room was lit only by the light from a fish-tank. In the dimness Harry could make out the shape of a bed and a small figure curled up inside.

Harry tiptoed across to the bed and gently pulled back the cover. He pulled a roll of Duct-Tape from his pocket and tore off a piece about three inches long. In one quick movement, he slapped it across the mouth of the sleeping girl. She woke instantly and Harry heard her muffled cry through the duct-tape.

“Silence!” he hissed. “We’re going to see daddy now. Be good and you won’t get hurt.” Harry pointed his wand at her. He could see her eyes gazing at the wand. They were wide with absolute terror. He felt a rush of power. He alone had the power to choose if she lived or died. However, he had already chosen. “Get up!” instructed Harry. The petrified girl did as she was told. With Harry right behind her, she walked to the bedroom door and opened it. They emerged out into the hall where Regulus was waiting with the Colonel’s son, also with a piece of duct-tape over his mouth. The four of them silently walked along the corridor until they reached the last door on the left, the master bedroom. Inside this room was the colonel.

The four of them slipped silently inside and Harry drew his sword. Regulus also produced a blade, a large machete. Harry saw the light from a Pensieve shimmering off the walls and the blade.

“Ready?” he asked Regulus. The response was a clear nod.

Harry flipped on the lights, picked up a book and threw it hard at the two sleeping figures in the bed.

“What the...” started a gruff voice as the colonel and his wife were rudely awoken. Both sat blinking in shock at the sight of both their children duct-taped and held hostage by two figures in black armed with a samurai sword and a machete.

“Maria, Simon!” squeaked the Colonel’s wife.

“Your children are perfect safe and have not been harmed, Madam Fortescue,” said Harry politely. “Whether they remain that way is up to your husband.” It was a complete lie: none of them were leaving this room alive. Harry was enjoying himself; he loved the feeling of absolute power. He could decide who lives and who dies.

“What do you want?” growled the Colonel.

“One simple thing, Colonel,” said Harry softly. “The location of the facility code-named Artic Thunder.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about?” stuttered the colonel, his eyes never leaving his children.

“We’ll see,” said Harry coldly. “Give me the boy.” Regulus pushed the colonel’s son Simon roughly forward. Harry caught him by the scruff of the neck and raised his sword to the boy’s throat.

“NO!” screamed the colonel’s wife. Her eyes filled with tears.

“One more time, Colonel,” said Harry coldly. “Where is Artic Thunder? Your children’s lives are on the line here, colonel. I’d advise you to think very hard before answering.”

“I swear,” stammered the colonel. “I don’t know!”

Why does he have to make things so difficult? wondered Harry, impatiently. With a sharp tug of his right hand, Harry dragged the blade quickly over the throat of the young boy. The colonel and his wife screamed as a red stream of blood poured out of the gaping wound, spilling down the boy’s front. Harry felt another adrenalin rush as he watched the life, flow from the gaping wound on the boy’s neck. Harry let the body fall to the ground, staring unemotionally at the Colonel and his hysterical wife as the boy bled to death before him.

“He killed him! He killed him!” wept the Colonel’s wife. She sobbed frantically into her husbands shoulder.

“HE WAS INNOCENT, DAMN YOU!” roared the Colonel. “WHY DID YOU HAVE TO KILL HIM?”

“I didn’t have to kill him. I would have let him go if you’d answered truthfully. His death is on your head,” shot back Harry icily. “The girl,” he said to Regulus.

“No!” screamed her mother.

“Let’s try again,” said Harry icily, raising his bloodstained sword to the girl’s throat. “Colonel?”

“Devon,” said the Colonel desperately. “Please, it’s in Devon. Just north of Mary Tavy on the A386. It’s hidden beneath a South West Water purification plant. Please, just don’t hurt my daughter.”

“See how easy that was Colonel,” said Harry with a sly smile. “Your son would still be alive if you have answered earlier.” Harry threw the girl forward into the arms of her mother. “And with that thought, I must leave you.” Harry turned on his heel and left followed by Regulus.

“Time?” asked Harry.

“Eleven minutes past one,” said Regulus after consulting his watch.

“Lock them in, then move out. We have four minutes until the bombs go off.”

Regulus pulled out a blowtorch and some solder from the bag he was carrying. He ignited it and soldered the lock on the door, trapping the colonel and what was left of his family inside. They would die together.

“Let’s go!” said Harry quickly. We have three minutes to clear the area.

“Hey!”

“Hey!” Harry awoke with a start. “I said, you gotta light?” said the man. He was holding a cigarette in one hand. The train was still humming away as it sped through the tunnels.

“No, sorry,” said Harry quickly. The man sighed and moved on leaving the carriage. Harry took a deep breath. He was sweating all over. The dream it had been so real. It was almost familiar to him though. He had never seen the place before, or any of the people in it, yet it seemed familiar. The dream had been horrible, evil. It was disturbing. The boy’s lifeless body was printed so vividly on his mind. He could almost feel the boy’s trembling body in his hands.

Just then, the doors slid open and in stepped four men. They were older than him by a few years, probably University students. One wore an England Rugby shirt, another wore a chequered shirt and jeans, while the other two wore cheap tracksuits and baseball caps. The two whose head Harry could see had shaved their heads.

They spotted Harry immediately, being the only one in the carriage. A vicious sneer appeared on the Rugby player’s face, the same one Harry had seen on Dudley’s face many a time.

“Well, lookie ‘ere, lads” sneered the Neanderthal. “Little goffic boy, ‘ere.” They crossed to where Harry was sat in seconds, and stood looming over him. Harry knew he was in trouble. These were people of Dudley’s calibre and they called him Gothic, which wasn’t usually a good sign. He recalled Dudley’s triumphant tales of beating up Gothic kids.

“Bet ‘e finks ‘e’s right cool, in ‘is long black coat, and spiky hair. Marilyn Manson! Slipknot! Cool Man!” sneered the Neanderthal sarcastically, making the devil sign with his hand. He colleagues found this hilarious.

“Nice one, Gaz,” chortled one of the men in tracksuits.

“Fing is, though, mate,” hissed Gaz viciously. “Is we don’t like goffic twats like you.”

“I am not gothic,” said Harry firmly. “If I had other clothes, I’d wear them, but I’m in a bit of trouble at the moment.”

“Too right, mate,” sneered Gaz. “Hand over your wallet and maybe we’ll let you go.”

“I don’t...” Just then the door opened. The two young lovers were back. The sight of four young skinheads towering over a short little boy in a cloak made them stop in their tracks.

“PISS OFF!” shouted one of the skinheads. They didn’t need to be told twice. They were gone before the skinhead had finished speaking.

“You were saying?” sneered Gaz.

“I was saying I don’t have any money on me,” said Harry. He kept an eye on their hands. He knew this was going to turn nasty. When you live for ten years with a thug you learn the tell tale signs of when things are going to kick off. He just hoped they didn’t have knives.

“Little goffic boy has no money, well, that means e’s eiver a liar or a tramp.”

“E’s a liar!” declared the man in the shirt.

“And what do we do with liars?” sneered Gaz. He turned his back on Harry to face his comrades.

“Kick the shit outta him!” cheered the other gang members.

Gaz’s right hand instantly swung back towards Harry’s face. Big mistake! Harry’s instincts kicked in without a thought. Harry caught it instinctively with his right hand and twisted it sharply, dislocating the wrist in one movement. He rose from his seat, spinning on the spot in one movement and brought his foot up into Gaz’s back. The force of the kick slammed Gaz into the wall on the far side of the train. Harry’s instincts had taken control once more and he was on his feet and ready. The second thug attacked. Harry caught his punch and brought his foot up into the thug’s jaw, causing him to cry out in pain and fell to the floor. He had bitten his own tongue as blood was flowing through his teeth, making them appear yellow. The shirted man took the next swing, Harry ducked, causing the man’s hand to miss and strike the metal pole behind him. The thug cried out in pain and Harry grabbed him by the shoulders. He brought his knee up into the thug’s stomach forcing the air out of him. Just then a thick pair of arms, grabbed him from behind. Harry threw his head back, smacking his cranium into the nose of the thug behind him. It was the one who had bitten his won tongue. Harry’s head butt had broken his nose, leaving his face a bloody mess, yet still his arms held firm, crushing the air out of Harry.

Harry kicked off the wall, forcing the thug backwards, smashing his back into the far wall. The thug released the grip. Harry gasped for air, as he felt the thug’s hands land on his back and push him roughly towards the wall in front of them. Harry kicked off the floor, and then the wall, executing a classic, movie-style flip over the top of the thug. Harry landed gracefully behind the bewildered thug. As he turned to face Harry, he lashed out. Harry caught the punch and pushed his hand into the back of the thug’s elbow, stopping it from bending. He then pivoted, spinning the thug around and sending him headfirst into the wall. He collapsed, fading out of consciousness.

The last skinhead looked absolutely terrified, but had his hands up ready.

“If you want to go, go,” said Harry softly. The thug turned on his heal without hesitation and ran. Suddenly Harry heard a click behind him. He turned around to see Gaz back on his feet. He was holding his right hand close to him, but in his left was a flick-knife.

“Bastard!” he cried as he lunged with the knife. Harry quickly sidestepped and caught the knife arm by the wrist. He punched the inside of Gaz’s arm, causing his elbow to bend. From there he twisted the whole arm behind Gaz’s back.

Gaz cried out in pain. Harry managed to get his self-control back before he did something he really regretted. He had been ready to snap the skinhead’s neck.

“Shut up!” hissed Harry. “I have had a very trying day and you have not helped. Next time you ride the tube, leave the passengers alone because however hard you are, there is always someone out there better than you. Now I am willing to let you go, give you back your arm and relocate your wrist. It’ll cost you your shirt.”

“Piss off!” spat Gaz.

“Fine,” sighed Harry. He pushed Gaz away from him into the side of the train. Gaz turned, brandishing the knife.

“I’m gonna make you wish you’d never been born!” he snarled.

“Happened a long time ago,” snapped Harry. Gaz lunged. Harry brought his foot up. Gaz’s wrist collided with the sole of Harry’s boot. Harry spun, delivering a spinning lick to Gaz’s stomach knocking the air out of him. As Gaz curled up, clutching his stomach, Harry delivered a karate chop to the back of Gaz’s head, knocking him out instantly.

Gaz’s body crumpled to the floor. Harry checked both the adjoining carriages. Luckily no one had seen what had happened. Acting quickly, Harry bent down and managed to pull the shirt off from around Gaz. He quickly swapped it for his robes. He wasn’t built for rugby, but it fitted well enough. Normally Harry would never consider robbery, but this was an emergency. What surprised him, as it did when he had killed those Death Eaters in St Mungo’s, was that he didn’t feel bad. He felt no remorse or anything. Perhaps it was because he needed what he was taking to survive that helped him to justify his actions. *If I’ve gone this far, thought Harry, I might as well go the rest of the way. Then I could get a taxi.*

Harry rolled the unconscious body over and removed the wallet from the back pocket. Harry quickly flipped it open. Inside was a photo of a girl who bore a startling resemblance to Millicent Bullstrode, a condom, hardly useful in this situation, a membership card to Varsity’s Bar and forty-five pounds in cash. That was more like it. Harry pocketed the wallet and then lifted Gaz’s body onto a seat. Then he laid the cloak over the top of him so that he looked like he was asleep. He would probably be arrested for squatting, but that was no loss to Harry.

Two minutes later the train pulled into the next station. Harry got off and quickly made his way up the steps into the daylight. The taste of fresh air was wonderful. He hadn’t been outside since Marge’s farm. He had to squint in the bright sunlight. He was in the middle of London. Muggles were everywhere bustling about their usually business. Shoppers pushing into queues, little children demanding sweets, and shop assistants trying desperately to cope with the demand. Cafes were full to bursting and pubs were as loud as ever.

Harry ducked into the nearest Newsagents. Luckily there was no picture of him on the front pages of papers. Unluckily, there was far more troubling news. More mysterious deaths, more strange-goings-on, warnings to stay in homes. The headlines were a depressing read. Harry bought himself a bottle of coke and a large pack of Maltesers, he hadn't had anything to eat or drink since breakfast and he had done a lot since then. It seemed like days ago.

Back out in the busy street Harry decided on his best course of action. If he went to the Ministry, he would end up back in a cell. Hogwarts would probably be the same story. It was obvious that that would be where he would go. The best place was somewhere secret where Dumbledore would be. Number 12, Grimmauld Place. Harry hailed a taxi, and a black cab pulled in to the side of the road. Harry gave him the address as number 17 Grimmauld Place, since he wouldn't have heard of number 12 because of the Fidelus Charm. The driver had to look it up on his map, but they were off in seconds and heading across London, as fast as one can in London Traffic.

Harry watched through the window as Muggle went about their daily lives. They were completely oblivious to the war that was raging around them. *That is how I could have ended up,* thought Harry. *If Aunt Petunia had successfully kept the truth from me.* Was she trying to protect him? Did she really love him, or was it simply that she wanted to keep magic as far from herself as possible. If this hit the papers, that he was a murderer and a fugitive, it would please Uncle Vernon to a tee. He would have been right all these years. On the other hand, the neighbours would say that they had raised a villain in their own homes and Dudley wasn't much better and that would be so pleasant for the Dursleys.

He saw two young children in the window of Derry's department store trying on blazers and ties for the upcoming school year. They were young and incredibly excited. They had t be first years. Harry was reminded of his first trip to Diagon Alley with Hagrid. The light, the colour, the whole new world that had been laid out before him. He had been presented with a world of opportunity, a chance to wipe the slate clean and start a new life, and this is what he had made of it. Diagon Alley held fond memories for Harry. It was there he had first met Hedwig, there that he first brought his wand, that he had first heard the words, *He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named*. Voldemort was a shadow over him even back then, even before he knew what he was. Harry remembered so many good times in Diagon Alley. So many....

Harry walked through the dark, dingy passageway that was Knockturn alley. He followed in the wake of a tall figure in black robes, with a hood pulled up. The lowlifes that occupied the Alley seemed to clear a path for the ominous figure. He radiated power with his very presence. It sent a cold chill down the spines of those who saw him. Harry could see past his master, to the light at the end of the alley, to the sea of colour that was Diagon Alley.

Harry had to squint, as the Alley ended and Diagon Alley stretched out before him. Shops down both sides, as far as the eye could see doing a roaring trade. It was as busy as Harry had ever seen it. Young children were darting around, playing in the snow. A huge Christmas tree adorned with glowing lights and silvery decorations stood at the far end. Christmas carols could be heard, floating over the noise of the Christmas shopper. A big banner hung over the top of the tree.

THREE DAYS TO GO!!!

Harry could see the choir near the tree coming to the end of Good King Wenceslas. Gringott's was wide open, with everyone withdrawing money for Christmas shopping. The Goblins even had tinsel wrapped around their hats and those in uniform were not looking overly happy about it.

"Harry, my child," whispered a voice beside him. Harry turned to look at the tall figure beside him. The hood cast shadows over his face. Harry could just see two burning red eyes almost glowing in the darkness. "Remember the Cauldron, Harry. Remember Bel Tain. You are stronger than you ever thought you could be. This is your night, Harry. Make me proud."

"I will, Master," said Harry, bowing. "I will."

Harry turned to the men behind him. There were six in total. Each was dressed in black robes, thought none had their masks on yet.

"Ready?" asked Harry. Six heads nodded. "Let's rock and roll."

Harry turned and began to walk down the alley towards the Christmas tree. This is going to be so great, he thought to himself as he walked. He bumped into a girl about his age as he walked but didn't even turn to apologise. Stupid cow, he thought angrily. Probably not even pure blood. Harry walked swiftly towards the tree. The tree stood on a wooden stage that was raised five feet above the ground. There was a podium there, from which Rueban Levinson, the Minister of Magic, was answering questions from the press.

"What is your response to the claims that You-Know-Who has murdered Mr. Scrase, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?" shouted one reporter.

"At this time we are unsure of the facts," replied the Minister serenely. Stupid git, thought Harry. Scrase's home is ransacked and burned and he is missing. If course he's dead. Harry reached the foot of the steps. He looked behind him. His six accomplices had split into two groups of three. One on each side of the Alley. They were in a perfect position to surround the stage. There were only two Aurors around, one on each side of the minister. Security was a joke.

"So you are saying that he is not dead?" pressed the reporter.

"Oh, he's dead all right," said Harry loudly. The gaggle of journalists turned to face him. They eyes were full of hunger for a story. "I was there. The Dark Lord held his wand like this..." Harry took out his wand and took up a dramatic pose. "...and performed a spell, much like this one... INCENDIO!" The podium erupted into a ball of flame. The Minister of Magic was sent flying backwards by the explosion and the two Aurors were knocked of their feet. Screams went up from the crowd. All eyes turned to look as six figures in black robes and white masks started shooting curses in all directions. Men, women, children, none were spared as curses were flung in random direction.

“Evana Vatuwai!” cried Harry, blasting a hole in one Aurors’ chest over three inches in diameter. “Yushus!” hissed Harry, collapsing the lungs of the second Auror. “Paralysio,” he roared at the Minister, who was trying to crawl away. The paralysis spell hit him on the back. The minister fell helplessly to the floor, unable to move.

The Death Eaters were firing curse after curse into the crowds. It was carnage. Bodies littered the ground, while shoppers were bundling to get out. What was once a sea of colour and Christmas cheer was now a burned battleground with debris and broken displays littering the ground. Windows were shattered, displays ruined. Diagon Alley was scarcely recognisable. Newly orphaned children or mourning parents lay crying over loved ones. It was pandemonium. Harry felt a sense of pride. He had done this; he had done well. He had served his Lord well. The Master would be pleased with him. But he had one final job to do.

The reporters had been right at the front. The endless volleys of curses had cut down most of them, yet a few remained, unable to move for sheer terror, unable to believe the devastation that lay around them. Harry pointed his wand at the tree. “Incendio” he muttered. A small flame appeared at the bottom of the tree and began to grow. In seconds the entire tree was alight and burning brightly. The Alley was now deserted, everyone had left or been killed. The six Death Eaters returned to the stage.

“Hey,” called one as he approached. “We’ve got a live one!” He pointed his wand at the terrified reporter.

“Stop!” ordered Harry. “Bring him here.” He needed one of them alive.

The Death Eater paused, but obediently picked up the man and roughly pushed him up the steps onto the stage. The man tripped over his own feet and ended up on his knees before Harry.

“And you are...” said Harry coldly.

“Patrick, Patrick Fletcher, I’m just a journalist, please don’t hurt me!” the man was on the verge of tears. He was terrified beyond rational thought.

“Don’t worry, Patrick, you have my word you will not be harmed. I will let you go because I want people to know what happened here today. Take a picture of the burning tree. It will look good on the front page.” Nervously, Patrick raised his camera and took three pictures of the burning tree. “You will have an exclusive,” said Harry with a small smile. “The Prophet will pay good money for your story and you will be famous. I get the press coverage and we’re all happy. You see I want people to know exactly what happened here today. I want people to know the extent of the Dark Lord’s wrath. I want them to see the price of resistance. I want you to see what happens to those who stand in our way. So, with that in mind...” Harry turned to the Minister who lay snivelling on the ground before them. Harry raised his wand. “... AVADA KEDAVRA!”

“NO!” Harry woke with a start. He frantically looked around. He was still in the back of the taxi. He had just fallen asleep. The streets and houses of London whizzed by out the window to the sound of a beaten old stereo playing forgotten classics from decades past.

“Y’all right, kid?” asked the cabbie.

“Eh? What?” stammered Harry trying desperately to flush the image of the dying man from his mind. The dreaming had been so real, so vivid. He could almost smell the burning pine tree, the stench of death. He was covered in sweat and breathing heavily. “I said, are ya ok?” repeated the driver.

“Yeah,” said Harry quickly, “I just had a fell asleep. Bad dream.”

“Sure.”

“Yeah.” Harry didn’t want to talk. The sooner he was back at HQ, the better.

The ride lasted only another few minutes. Harry checked his watch. It was ten past twelve as the taxi turned into Grimmauld Place. Harry paid the driver and got out. The street looked just as cold and deserted as it ever had. The streetlamps cast dingy shadows over the houses and Number twelve stood in near perfect darkness, with curtains firmly drawn. Harry cautiously looked around, and then, once happy that he was alone opened the door to Number 12.

The entrance hall was in darkness Harry entered. He was surprised to find the door unlocked and the hall so dark. There was something different about the house. It seemed that all the Weasley’s efforts over the last year had been in vain. The Elf heads, and dark relics and creepy paintings once again adorned the walls. What had appeared for a few days almost homey was once again creepy. Maybe it was the fact that he associated this house with the painful memory of Sirius that clouded his judgement but Harry suddenly hated this house more than ever.

“Good afternoon, young man,” said a voice behind him.

Harry nearly jumped out of his skin in fright. He instantly spun around. He was relieved to find that it was not a person who had spoken to him, but a portrait. Mrs. Black, no longer covered by curtains, smiled kindly down at him from the picture on the wall.

“I said, good afternoon, young man,” she repeated.

“Oh,” said Harry. “Sorry, good afternoon to you Mrs. Black.” It was then that Harry realised exactly to whom he was speaking. Why wasn’t she screaming? Why was she suddenly being polite to him? Did the Imperius Curse work on portraits? Why had the house changed so much?

“They’re all in the drawing room, my dear,” said Mrs. Black in a tone of voice Harry would normally associate with Mrs. Weasley.

“Thanks,” said Harry politely. Mrs. Black and then

He bade farewell to Mrs. Black and headed for the Drawing room. The house seemed deserted and if this was the only room in use, it was most likely that the Order were in the middle of a meeting. Still this was important. Harry decided to knock. He rapped three times on the door.

Listening carefully, he heard a shuffling from inside. There was a magical squelch as the Coloportus charm was removed and the door opened about an inch. Peering out at him through the crack was a man Harry had never seen before. He was about 40 years old with greying hair. He wore glasses and seemed to be very nervous.

“Who the hell are you?” he squeaked nervously.

“Who the hell are you?” asked Harry in surprise.

“Sorry, I’m new,” said the man timidly.

A second face appeared in the crack.

“Are you insane, Steepleton?” gasped the man in surprise. “This is *the* Harry Potter.” They recognised him. The order recognised him! Things were getting back to normal! “Well don’t just stand there, Steeps, let him in. He’s had a hard day.”

“Too right,” smiled Harry as he entered. “Luckily, things have gone back to normal.”

He froze as his eyes took in the surroundings. One look around told Harry things were far from normal. Inside the room were over a hundred people in long black robes and white masks, and right at the far end, sitting in a large red armchair by the roaring fire, surrounded by his pet snake, sat Lord Voldemort.

~~~~ Chapter IV ~~~~

In Order to See the Light, One Must Brave the Dark

Albus Dumbledore stared at his reflection in the mirror. He splashed water on his face, trying to shake the worries of an old and overworked man from his features. He couldn't face the swarm of journalists looking like he felt. Why had the trial of Harry Potter shaken him up so much? The boy was a killer; he had proved it time and time again. The look of disappointment and the comment about trust had struck home with Albus. Something in the boy's eyes had pushed a button in Dumbledore.

He wanted to talk to the boy. 'Why?' was the main question on his lips. Lily and James were loving parents. What had caused Harry Potter to run off the rails? Rose-Marie was a wonderful young-lady. What had caused Harry to be any different? Why had he not turned out like his sister? Maybe Albus just didn't want to know, maybe seeing Harry had brought the memories of Tom back to the surface. It was against his principles to believe that anyone was inherently evil but this boy had something that Albus had never seen before. Such a cold, calculating killer at the age of sixteen.

What had gone wrong? Was it his fault? Had he failed to recognise the signs, as he had with another student all those years ago? Today, looking into the boy's emerald eyes, he saw despair, utter despair, not anger as he suspected, and as he had seen in the eyes of countless Death eaters, but despair. That was what filled the boy's eyes as he looked at Albus. Albus could see that Harry Potter had suffered. He seemed to be hiding a great pain. Harry had looked at him as if he were his last hope, who had just betrayed him. Albus was already thinking of Harry as Harry once more. He had hardly recognised the young boy who had run away in the man sitting in the courtroom. Whatever this Harry had been though, he had grown up fast and looked as world-weary as Albus felt.

Dumbledore dried his long beard on the towel and checked his robes. His appearance was good enough. He was not looking forward to this meeting. Crouch was immensely popular with the public, but Albus had little time for the man. He was arrogant, impulsive and completely self-obsessed. Secretly, Albus would have liked to see him brought down a peg or six.

Albus left the toilets and made his way along the corridor to the entrance hall. The statues had been freshly polished by the house elves and a long table had been erected to the right of the reception desk. There were a hundred chairs set out, most of them were full of journalists and reporters. Cameras were being set up and loaded with film. Some were even erecting tripods at the back of the audience.

For the next hour, Albus would be forced to speak out against Harry Potter, a boy for whom Dumbledore had given up all hope, until today. The pain in Harry's eyes had sparked the flame of hope in Albus' heart. Maybe, just maybe Harry could come home. It was a fool's hope, but Albus just couldn't shake the look of despair from his mind. Harry needed guidance and help, not a slandering, but that is what he was about to receive in order to fuel Crouch's public

image. Politics was an ugly business, and Albus knew it. One of the main reasons he had chosen to turn down the offer for Minister of Magic and stay at Hogwarts. He didn't have the cold nature to survive in the world of politics. As an impartial outsider, he was always welcome, but to submerge himself in a world of lies and corruption was not what he wanted.

At least that's what he told himself. Deep down Albus knew he was just as cold as any of the others. He ran the Order of the Phoenix. On his command young men and woman would go to their deaths. He played chess with hundreds of them. He had to sacrifice their lives like pawns. His conscious was far from clear. He was little better than Tom was.

He found himself questioning his logic more and more these days. Perhaps it was a sign of age, or maybe it was just getting harder, but every decision he made was lined with more doubt than the one before. He had spent two decades fighting this war. Many had lost their lives because they believed in him. But Albus was finding it increasingly hard to believe in himself. Truth be told, the cold grip of despair was growing ever close to Albus' heart.

"Ah, Albus," Barty Crouch came over to greet him. "I know be got shat on today, but keep the good fight image going. We have to make it look like Potter didn't make a fool of us." There he goes again. All he was concerned with was his image. He had no concern for the Potter boy, or even the Aurors who died in the breakout.

"Still no sign of Mr. Potter," said Albus softly, keeping the combination amusement and annoyance he felt firmly hidden beneath a cool exterior. Secretly he was happy for Harry. He would hate to see the poor boy handed over to the Dementors. He would hate to see anyone handed to those vile creatures. To be honest, Albus doubted that Harry had enough happiness in him to interest even the most starved Dementor.

"None," confessed Crouch bitterly, a vein throbbing on his temple. The Minister was wearing his emotion on his sleeves: anger. "He used the exit to the tubes. He could be in Liverpool by now." Albus almost felt relief. It was strange, he thought to himself, that he was now supporting Harry. He didn't even know if his hope had any foundation or if Harry Potter really was a cold blooded killer and the performance in the courtroom was just that: a performance. Nevertheless, Albus found himself relieved to hear that Crouch had not caught Harry. Should the boy be caught, a meeting was out of the question. Crouch would never permit it.

"The boy is very resourceful," commented Albus calmly, giving none of his feelings away. "He gets it from his father."

"You seem unconcerned," said Crouch accusingly. Albus paused, he was far from unconcerned about Harry, but he was also worried that he would fall in Crouch's clutches. It was probably fool's hope, but Albus couldn't shake the hopeless look in Harry's eyes from his mind. Lily and James deserved better and until he knew for sure, he would not give up on Harry.

"On the contrary, Barty," said Dumbledore calmly. "I am very concerned. The boy could cause a lot of trouble should he be reunited with Voldemort."

“But...” pressed Crouch. He obviously knew there was more to come.

“But I believe that we have bigger fish to fry. Harry is not stupid enough to use magic. He could be anywhere and if he is not already with Voldemort, he soon will be. You have no hope of intercepting him, not now. The boy is too clever for that. So let us focus on the bigger fish. Harry accused Dolores Umbridge of being a Death Eater.”

A bitter scowl appeared on Crouch’s face. “And?” pressed the irate Minister.

“Are you going to investigate?” asked Albus calmly. “The woman is impulsive and irrational. I for one would not put it past her to join Voldemort’s side, especially if he offered her power.”

“Albus!” said Crouch desperately. He pulled him aside, out of the way of prying ears. “If it emerged that a Death Eater infiltrated the most senior ranks of the Ministry *and* the Wizengamot, do you have any idea what kind of *shit-storm* that would create? The Ministry hangs by a thread, Albus, you know that better than anyone. Voldemort’s forces are gaining strength, advancing on all sides. People are flocking to him in droves, if not out of belief then out of plain fear. People simply don’t believe we can win. Any more confusion or scandals and the government would collapse. The public are losing faith in us. I am trying to save a nation, here, Dumbledore.”

“I know where you are coming from and you are right,” sighed Dumbledore. His tone was grave. He knew that every word the Minister had said was true, despite his colourful use of language. “All I am suggesting is that she be kept an eye on. Also be careful what information you share with her. If you can’t remove her, then put her to use. Feed her lies, let Voldemort think that we are panicking. Use her to your advantage.”

“You are beginning to sound like *Him*,” said Crouch, though he wore an approving smile on his face.

“I find myself having to make choices like *Him* more and more often,” said Dumbledore gravely. “The difference is that I care about those who my choices affect, rather than just what I can gain from them, but, enough philosophy. Madame Umbridge must not be allowed access to sensitive information.”

“You’re right,” sighed Crouch. “It will be done.” He turned and stepped out into the corridor. He started to walk towards the conference. Albus fell into step beside him. “About this conference though, I know you are close to the boy’s parents and I know he is an ex-pupil of yours, but let’s not forget what the boy has become. Whatever you feel about the boy, you must see that he is the greatest threat to this country except for Voldemort himself. We must let the public know that he is a danger, but at the same time we don’t want a panic. I trust I can rely on your honesty, and your discretion.”

“I’ll do my best, Barty,” sighed Albus, knowing all too well that he had no choice. Crouch was once again right. The boy was a potential danger. Albus just hoped that maybe, what

he had seen in the boy's eyes was what he thought it was. He took his seat in the middle of the head table. Before him the chairs were set out in rows with an aisle down the middle. At the front many cameras were positioned on tripods, journalist frantically making notes and fighting for seats nearest the front. Albus wanted to get this over and done with. Publicly shaming former pupils was not something he enjoyed. He had to look James and Lily in the eye after this. Would they understand? And as for Rose-Marie, she had adored her brother. Would he be able to look any of the Potters in the eye after today? He also felt a pressing need for a Sherbet Lemon.

“Thank you all for coming,” boomed Crouch. *Why does he insist on shouting?* wondered Albus. *It is perfectly easy to hear if you speak normally.* It was one of Crouch's many traits that Albus objected to. Beneath his quiet exterior, Albus was, at times, quite a moody person, not that he would ever let it show. Too many years of playing God with people lives and passing out judgements on people he had never met before the whole country, often with the implication that they would suffer at the hands of Dementors had turn Albus' heart cold. It was only before his pupils, the future of the Wizarding world that he appeared calm. In private, Albus was just as guilty as Tom. The difference was that Albus cared; Tom did not.

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Rose-Marie Potter sat on the picnic bench at the bottom of the garden, her feet resting on the seat. Her mother usually would tell her off for this, complaining that it was unhygienic. *No bums where we prepare and eat food, young lady!*

At the moment, Lily was in her bedroom, where she had been all day. Since they had left Harry's trial, she hadn't said a word. Once it emerged that Harry had escaped, her mother had locked herself in her parent's room and refused to come out. 'She wasn't coping to well wit the situation', was possible the understatement of the century.

Rose felt a pang of anger directed at her brother for reducing her mother to this. Did he even know how much suffering he was causing? Probably not. Why did he do it? It had been two years, but Rose was still none the wiser about why her brother had run away and run to *Him* of all people. She couldn't shake the idea that maybe it was something that she had done.

A single tear rolled down Rose's cheek as she watched a bee buzzing around the bush next to her. At least that thing had something to do. Rose was completely bored. It seemed that nothing could hold her attention. Even flying seemed to have lost its attraction. All she could think about was Harry. Seeing him again had brought back painful memories for Rose. She remembered the good times, when they were together. As close as any siblings alive. But that had all changed. It was during his third year, Rose's second, when it had all gone pear-shaped. He became so distant, so angry. Something changed in him. Then just before they should have gone back to school, Harry just disappeared. In the middle of the night, he just vanished. Rose remembered being awoken, as he mother frantically yelled his name. Sirius, Remus, Peter, all the old party had come running.

They searched everywhere; there was just no sign of him. His bed hadn't been slept in; his room seemed unchanged. All his clothes were still there. The only thing missing aside from

Harry himself was his wand. Hours became days, and the Potters became frantic. The Muggle Police and the Magical Law Enforcement officers were informed. Her father had even commandeered Auror resources to search for Harry but to no avail. Rose had been forced to go to Hogwarts. She had fought bitterly, wanting to stay and find Harry but her parents had made her go. She remembered clearly sitting in near silence all the way there, hoping against hope that perhaps Harry had made it to Hogwarts.

No such luck. Harry had disappeared. She spent the next month in a state of depression. She hardly spoke and despite her mother's sincerest efforts, her grades plummeted. She hardly ate and became desperately thin. She would hardly sleep and her concentration went right out the window. Days became weeks, weeks became months, and Harry did not show up. The ministry was already stretched, given Lord Voldemort's activities and so the search was abandoned. Harry Potter was declared *Missing, presumed dead*. Her friends tried to comfort her but their words had brought no comfort. She knew deep in her heart that Harry was still alive. It was on the fourth day of May the next year, nine months after Harry disappeared that she was proved right. Over the months, Rose had cheered up and moved on. She longed to see her brother but her grades had recovered and she became the person she had once been. At the end of April, there had begun to appear in the *Daily Prophet* news of strange Death Eater activity around Bell Lestrange. There had been a number of rumours about Voldemort taking an heir: a child whom he blessed with great honour and power. Then she opened the Daily Prophet one morning to find her brother mentioned on the front page.

All eyes turned to her as the full horror of what Harry had done came to light. The article described in detail, how Harry had murdered the Minister of Magic, how he was now a Death Eater. How her brother was a murderer. He was Voldemort's lieutenant, his second in command. The article described in graphic detail, how Harry had led six Death Eaters in an attack. He had murdered the Minister of Magic. Nineteen more had died, the tree had been burned and Diagon Alley decimated. Over three and a half million galleons worth of damage to shops alone. Her brother was number two on the Britain's Most Wanted list.

Sympathetic looks became fearful glances. Hushed whispers followed Rose that week and she spent most of her free time alone. She couldn't hold eye contact with anyone. Did they all think that she was going to murder them all? She hadn't even known he was alive. She had wished it, time and time again, but never dreamed that it would happen this way. She refused to even think that it would have been better if he was dead. Those whispers had never gone away and she was still regarded with a certain amount of fear. Every time his name was mentioned in the paper, Rose knew that for the rest of the week, no one would talk to her. No one except for her few true friends. They stuck by her. Without them, she would have gone insane many months ago.

Over the last few years, Rose had become accustomed to the continuous whispers. It was a part of who she was, whether she liked it or not. She could turn a blind eye to them, even to Malfoy's continuous insults. *Luckily that bastard isn't coming back for his sixth year*, thought Rose with a glimmer of what was almost happiness. The prick had spent most of last summer telling people how he was moving up in the world, going onto something more worthwhile, and befitting his lineage. In other words, he was joining the Death Eaters.

Rose had endured the rumours about Harry so many times she really didn't care anymore. But this time, they had caught him. Then lost him. This was a huge story. Everyone would be talking about it. Everyone with their own conspiracy theory, everyone thinking they knew why. Rose would be grilled time and time again. Why was Harry caught? Why did he run away? How many had he killed? How powerful is he? Can he really fight ten Aurors at once? Everyone wanted to hear it from her. Everyone wanted her story. Why couldn't they just back off?

It was odd, looking at him today, sitting in that chair bound solid, he didn't seem evil. He seemed...well, Rose was biased, but he could almost seem innocent. He seemed so confused. His eyes when they had talked in the cell. They seemed almost dead. There was pain in them, of that she had no doubt. She felt so sorry for him. And the stuff he had said, his parents were dead? He lived with the Dursleys? Rose had met her Aunt and Uncle only once and it was an experience she had not intention of repeating. Her Aunt looked at her as if she was an insect, her Uncle was a self-obsessed, delusional idiot. Her mother always said that Uncle Vernon was like Hyacinth Bucket, whoever she was. And as for Dudley, he was just plain revolting. The spoilt brat was sickening. Rose felt unclean as she watched the fat lump of lard eyeing her up, staring subtly at her chest until she had the sense to put her wand where it could be clearly seen. Harry had lived with them? *Not likely, he would rather die; I know I would.* Anyway, everyone knew he hadn't. He was obviously lying. Rose began to think that perhaps her brother was as mad as a balloon. She could remember the two of them with Ron, Ginny and the twins, playing together when they were younger. She could remember the twins locking Harry in the shifting cupboard. He had emerged three hours later from the chimney. A small, sad smile spread over her face as she sat and stared into space. Why? What had gone wrong? What caused Harry to leave? Rose wouldn't help but think it was something she had done.

Suddenly two hands clamped over her eyes.

"Guess who!" whispered a mischievous, yet familiar voice.

"Hagrid," replied Rose sarcastically.

"Thanks!" said Ginny in mock horror, releasing Rose from her grip. "You all right Rosie?" Rose looked at her friend. She didn't even need to say a word. Her watery eyes said it all. While Ginny looked happy and lively, Rose looked like death warmed up. She was pale, had huge bags under her eyes and her eyelids were drooping. Her bright green eyes were no longer sparkling; they looked tired and dull. Rose watched Ginny's smile fade. She didn't even have to say a word.

"Come here," said Ginny softly. Rose felt the redhead pull her into a hug. She had refused to cry in front of her mother. She needed her support now more than ever, but in front of Ginny, it all came out. Ginny was her best friend, and a friend was exactly what she needed right now. Ginny held Rose tightly to her breast. She sobbed for the first time since she had heard of Harry's capture. These last few days had brought a forgotten pain oozing to the surface. She had accepted what Harry was, and put it aside. She had built up an immunity to the continuous barrage of whispers, but seeing Harry himself had brought back memories she would rather forget. It was as if the floodgates had opened and now she couldn't stop herself. She cried into

her friend's arms. Tears came freely, rolling down her cheeks, two years of pain and a fear of what would shortly and inevitably come welled up in Rose's head. A tear for every time she sat alone, with no one brave enough to even speak to her. A tear for every time someone skirted her in the corridors. A tear for every insult she had endured. A tear for every time she had lain awake at night, hoping for the day when her brother would be returned to her. They kept coming.

Several minutes later, when the tears subsided when there were no more left to shed, Ginny released her. Rose dried her bloodshot eyes on her sleeve and tried to recollect herself.

"What are you all doing here?" she sniffed, before blowing her nose on the handkerchief Ginny offered her.

"The usual," replied Ginny with more than a hint of bitterness in her voice. She rolled her eyes. "There's an Order meeting, which means that we are stuck out here alone." *Oh great*, thought Rose. More strangers waltzing through the house, Snape darkening the doorstep, which would later have to be washed and sterilised before Rose would use it again. And she and her friends shut out, ignored and told nothing. Voldemort wouldn't care. He'd kill her just as happily as her parents. She was fifteen, old enough to be told the truth. She was just as unhappy about the situation as Ginny. Fred and George were of age, and they weren't allowed in either, because their mother wouldn't let them. Which probably meant that even when Rose was of age, she wouldn't be told anything either. Speaking of the twins...

"Alone? Where are the twins and Ron?"

"Lavender is here as well," smirked Ginny. "Which answers your second question. Actually it answers both, you don't think Fred and George would miss an opportunity like this to wind up Ronnikins would you?"

Rosie smiled, for what seemed like the first time in years. The simple gesture made her feel a whole lot better. She got to her feet, jumping down from the bench. She knew that she wasn't allowed to sit in on meetings and Mrs. Weasley barred the twins, Ron and Ginny from attending as well. Rose could remember waiting outside with Harry, flicking stones at the sheep in the next field. Normally she hated cruelty to animals, especially cute ones, which is why she had forbade Harry to ever flick a stone at a lamb. However the ram in the field, the one with the orange paint on his back was a demonic sheep. They were sure he was possessed. Probably a wizard who was cursed, or an Animagus or just a plain monster. It was a violent, evil sheep, who attacked anything that moved. They had even convinced Charlie Weasley to hit it with the Finite Incantatem charm to make sure it wasn't a wizard, but the sheep remained a sheep.

She also remembered when she and Harry had found an injured stoat in the woods next to the house. Rose had been about six at the time. After deciding it was a stoat. They had argued for three hours, since Rose had been sure it was a weasel and Harry was sure it was a stoat. After a Muggle book of their mother's had confirmed it was a stoat, and cost Rose three chocolate frogs in the process, they had kept it as a pet. They managed to keep it secret for nearly two months before they had had to go back to school. Dad had been a bit annoyed. He had pointed out that

after not seeing a single Short-Eared Fabletoe for months, the garden was now crawling with them. The Stoat, name Eric, had been a good help. They had never seen it since.

“...morrow?”

“Sorry?” said Rose, snapping out of her daydream. Ginny shook her head and grinned as she stared down at her friend.

“I said, ‘are you all packed and ready for tomorrow?’” *Tomorrow?* Rose’s confusion must have shown.

“Hogwarts,” said Ginny with a roll of the eyes. Of course, tomorrow was the first of September.

“Oh yeah, sure,” said Rose. In truth she was, her mother had forced her to this morning. It was only to distract her. Rose knew her mother was not coping well with all this.

“OWLs, this year,” sighed Ginny. “Joy to the world.”

“What did Ron get?”

“Two E’s, four A’s and two P’s,” said Ginny matter-of-factly. “Can’t be that hard if he passed.” Rose smiled.

“So are you staying here tonight?”

“Me and Ron are,” said Ginny. “The twins might, Lavender might.”

“Party on,” said Rose sarcastically.

“Look,” said Ginny softly, taking a seat beside her friend. “Are you all right? This has got to be hard on you, on all of you.”

“I...I,” stuttered Rose, unable to find the words. “I just can’t help wondering what he’s doing now.”

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Harry stepped into the room. He knew it well, for it was the room in which he had spent hours cleaning the previous year. This room however was laid out completely differently. Gone were the tables and chairs. The tapestry that Sirius had taken such great pleasure in binning hung on the far wall, unblemished save for a few scorch marks where the names of outcast family members had once been sewn. What used to be a messy yet functional room where meetings were held now seemed to serve as a large library. The walls were covered with shelves, each full with books. These were not the dusty old books Harry had had to dust last year, but a vast archive of what were clearly dark texts, superbly maintained.

The only break in the bookshelves were on the south wall where there was a large fireplace, crackling orange flames dancing within, illuminating the entire room. It was the only light source in the room and it caused the shadows to dance off the walls and golden orange to reflect off the polished wooden floor, making it look as if the floor was a pool of water. The shimmering reflection was strangely mesmerising, as were the fumes of frankincense. Before the fire was a small heath-rug on which Harry could clearly see the coiled body of a snake, Hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room was a large chandelier. It was unlit, but the glow of the fire illuminated the many crystals. It wasn't this or even the fire that drew Harry's attention, nor was it the hundreds of masked figures that filled the room. It was the hooded figure sitting in the large red armchair by the fire.

Harry had stood framed in the doorway for nearly ten seconds, taking in the surroundings before the hooded figure spoke.

"Leave us," hissed a cold high voice. Harry was unsure whether he was being told to go or not, he was frozen to the spot. He couldn't move. His mind was suddenly awash with questions. *Where is the Order? How can Riddle be here? What is going on?*

Harry stood riveted to the floor as the two hundred figures turned and moved silently towards the door, passing him but keeping their eyes straight ahead. Harry stood motionless as the procession left the room. When Harry looked back to the fireplace, there were not one but two chairs present. The second was undoubtedly for him.

What did Voldemort want? He had won; he had tricked Harry into coming here. It was just the two of them. Having said that he went to an awful lot of trouble to get him here. Maybe he could get some answers. Harry then realised something else: he felt no pain in his scar, no aching, no emotion: nothing. He couldn't even remember the last time his scar didn't ache. Headaches were so common for Harry that he rarely noticed anything except Voldemort's hatred. Maybe Voldemort was just feeling very calm at the moment.

Harry had somehow amassed enough courage to cross over to the fireplace. Nagini stirred as he approached. The snake leered, fixing Harry in her cold yellow eyes. Her forked tongue flicked out through her teeth and then slipped back inside. Satisfied she went back to snoozing.

The hooded figure that Harry could feel was Voldemort more than actually see him sat completely motionless as Harry approached. He still felt nothing in his scar as he neared the Dark Lord. Harry also realised that he could feel no emotion. Last year in the Ministry he could feel the hatred and anger pulsing in the Dark Lord but now there was nothing.

There he was calling him the *Dark Lord* again. What was wrong with him? Harry kept his hand very close to his wand. He cautiously sat in the seat facing the man who had murdered his parents. Harry's head was bubbling with emotion. Hatred, fear and anger being the most prominent. He wanted to kill, and for the first time he felt like he actually could. He felt like it was simple, achievable. He felt as if killing was nothing. *Snap out of it, Harry, control yourself.* Harry knew that there were two hundred Death Eaters outside and Voldemort inside. He was completely trapped. His only hope was to avoid a fight and just hope that Voldemort would spare

him long enough for the Order to rescue him. Come to think of it, why was Voldemort in the headquarters of the Order and where were the Order?

Voldemort's red eyes burned into Harry's green ones. The Dark Lord sat in perfect stillness, surveying Harry. Harry couldn't see his expression; the shadows from the hood covered his face. The seconds ticked by as the two enemies sat in stillness. Harry could feel the eyes watching him. He could feel the questions on the tip of his tongue. He longed to ask what was happening, but something stopped him. It wasn't so much fear as a sense of propriety.

He fixed his face into an unemotional mask and raised as much of an Occlumency shield as he could. It seemed like ages, but only a few seconds passed before one of them moved. Voldemort's bony fingers emerged from the folds of his robes. As soon as Harry saw the movement of white amidst the black folds of his robes, his grip tightened on his wand. His muscles tensed ready to move.

However, Voldemort made no move for his wand. Instead his hands rose slowly to his hood. Harry gasped out loud as the hood fell back revealing the face of Tom Riddle. *Literally*. The figure in the chair opposite Harry was not the snake-man that Harry had seen so many times before. He had a nose, almost perfectly formed. Gone were the slits, and the deformities that were the price of all the attempts for immortality. He also had hair; long black hair flowed over his ears and down his back stopping a few inches below his shoulders. He was still deathly pale, but he could pass for a pale man, were it not for one single feature. The eyes were the only things that resembled Voldemort as Harry knew him. They glowed red with sheer hatred. Never the less the difference was startling. He looked so human. At least the last time they had met the monster had worn a monster's face. Now he looked human, he was more of a person.

"Your return is as unexpected as was your capture," said Riddle, for that is how Harry now thought of him.

"I'm like a bad penny," said Harry. "I always turn up." It wasn't exactly polite, but he managed to keep any anger from his voice. He had no wish to suffer the Cruciatus Curse, but he would not give this animal the pleasure of him grovelling.

"You have a knack for survival," said Riddle thoughtfully. "Which makes me wonder, did you make a choice in Devon as well?"

"What?"

"Did you chose your own survival over the task I set you. Was my command less of a concern to you than your own life?"

"You know me better than that," said Harry firmly, feeling offended that he thought his own life was more important than his cause. Defeating the bastard sitting before him was worth his life. He would be with Sirius and his parents again. "You're always saying how predictable I am." Voldemort had exploited that flaw in his personality and Sirius had paid the ultimate price for it. Come to think of it, Harry wasn't sure what Voldemort was referring to in Devon. He had

turned up on Aunt Marge's farm. If anyone made the choice for them to meet it was Voldemort, not him. And what did he mean his command? Harry was not on his side and never would be. Had they spent the last sixteen years at loggerheads for nothing? They were enemies, what was Voldemort on about?

Oh God! Harry suddenly realised that Voldemort also thought he was a Death Eater, just like everyone else. What the hell is going on? Something was very wrong and for once, The Dark Lord wasn't behind it. Harry felt a sense of despair. Even confirming that he was behind this strange behaviour would be better than not knowing. If Voldemort *and* Dumbledore were both caught up in this, what hope did Harry have of putting an end to it? For a second, Harry thought of telling him everything. He had vast depths of knowledge, perhaps more so than Dumbledore. Maybe he could help. But then again, telling the Dark Lord that he wasn't a loyal Death Eater, that they had been enemies for years, that Voldemort had failed to kill him and that he was the one with the power to vanquish him would not go down too well. He would be dead before he finished his story. No, Dumbledore was the best option. He would be encouraged by Harry's story. And he wouldn't kill him for telling it. The trouble was getting to Dumbledore, especially without blowing his "cover".

No curse could do this. No one was powerful enough to do it. It was not a curse. What could it be? *BOLLOCKS TO IT!* Harry didn't know and he didn't care anymore. He could go insane with all the impossible ideas that were flying through his head. No answers were coming. He didn't care anymore. All he wanted to do was get back to normality. To get home. He wanted to find Dumbledore who would help him set the record straight. He would make things how they should be. In order to get to Dumbledore, Harry would have to grin and bear his time with Voldemort. When the chance came to go to Dumbledore, he would take it.

"Perhaps," said Riddle to himself. He rose slowly from his seat, the fire reflecting off his pale skin. "Whether you chose or not, is at this point, academic. What matters is that my hand has been shown. Dumbledore is a fool, but he is far from stupid. He will know what it is I seek." Harry's curiosity boiled

"And what do you seek," asked Harry before he could stop himself. He shouldn't try to extend this conversation beyond what Voldemort wanted to say, but he couldn't help himself. At least this way he could get Dumbledore some valuable information as well.

"Your curiosity will be your undoing," said Riddle coldly. Harry opened his mouth to reply 'your arrogance will be yours', but managed to stop himself. He wanted to make it out of this room alive. Voldemort thought he was a Death Eater, not his enemy. If he was polite enough to him, he would be allowed to go and then he could work out how to get to Dumbledore.

"I've heard that before," said Harry cautiously. "But you haven't answered my question."

"When the time comes that you need to know, you will be told," said Riddle returning to chair. Harry felt a glimmer of disappointment. But Riddle wasn't done. "For now, here is some food for thought: For every jinx, there is a counter jinx, for every attack there is a defence, except for the most powerful of curses. Forget about the killing curse, for a minute. For all other

magic a balance is maintained. There is an equilibrium of light and dark magic. Now the Killing Curse tips the scales, as it were, towards the dark. So where is light energy that opposes it? What is the polar opposite of death?"

"Life," answered Harry. He had a sneaking suspicion where this conversation was going but he wasn't going to give anything away.

"Life and Magic, joined as one, perhaps?" said Riddle. Harry got the distinct impression that Riddle was testing him.

"I don't know," replied Harry honestly. He kept his eyes on Riddle's hands, ready to move if his hand went to close to his wand.

"No one does," said Riddle, a bitter tone in his voice. Harry wanted to say 'Not even you?', but Riddle would not appreciate that. Voldemort continued, "But in theory there must be a tremendous source of energy somewhere, one that gives life." There is, thought Harry. He was sure he knew what Voldemort was on about, though he had to play dumb. If Voldemort found out about the door, all hope was lost.

"Necromancy?" asked Harry, feigning ignorance.

"There is no direct spell for Necromancy," said Riddle, levitating another log onto the fire without even a wand. "It is possible to cheat; to time-travel and prevent death, to reanimate a dead body into a zombie if you will. There is even a means for a dying man to possess a young body, but no spell can spontaneously give life. So what opposes the killing curse?" Maybe he wasn't talking about the door. That would not hold a shield against the killing curse. Besides, he already had one, Voldemort just happened to have gotten around it. He already knew what had happened to Harry so he could be honest. It was safer to stick to the truth. Voldemort had shown last year that he was a skilled Legimens. He could detect a lie instantly and Harry would suffer for it.

"A mother's love," said Harry softly, quoting Dumbledore. "The ancient magic surrounding self-sacrifice to save another's life."

"A powerful counter-curse, yes," sneered Riddle. "But I do not believe it would withstand the power of the Killing Curse, certainly not one as pure as my own."

"What about me?" said Harry, staring into those glaring red eyes. He hadn't been able to stop himself. "How do you explain what happened to me?" *Could it be?*

"I am not sure what you are referring to," said Riddle. *There! He had said it.* He didn't know about Harry's past. This was getting stranger. He didn't care how it was happening. He knew he had to put an end to it, quickly. "But I do know, that should, hypothetically, a mother sacrifice herself for her child, the act would grant the child protection. However I don't believe the power to be strong enough to stop the Killing Curse. Even if it did, it would not be permanent, not a shield that said child could call on at will."

“Hang on,” said Harry firmly. “You really don’t know, do you?” He was astonished that someone as powerful as Voldemort could fall victim to the strange goings on that were happening all around him.

“Know what?” said Riddle, anger burning in his eyes. Harry’s interruption had been rude, and accusing Voldemort of ignorance was not a wise move.

“Halloween, 1981?” continued Harry, not caring about politeness anymore.

“That date holds no significance for me,” said Riddle, fixing Harry with a penetrating stare. “I presume you are about to explain.”

Harry brushed back his hair, revealing his scar.

“Does this not mean anything to you?” asked Harry, a sinking feeling appearing in his stomach. He would have to get to Dumbledore. He was his only hope.

“A curse scar,” said Riddle sounding unimpressed. “Dark certainly. So the Aurors have been granted use of the illegal curses. I assume that is where you received it.”

“Wh...oh, yes,” said Harry. He knew it was stupid to argue, that would just complicate things. This may be a dream, an illusion, a trick or something else; he didn’t care, but he could still be killed, so he had to be careful. If Voldemort thought he wasn’t completely loyal, then Harry would be killed instantly. The best idea was to pretend to be loyal, to blend in and then make a run for it as soon as possible.

“Crouch is more daring than I gave him credit for,” Voldemort said thoughtfully. “I smell opportunity...” he muttered to himself.

“That or could be the irrational move of a desperate men,” said Harry softly.

“Perhaps. Either way it is inconsequential,” said Riddle. “Now, going back to my point about balancing magic. Pure hatred fuels the Killing Curse, so therefore, the opposite must be pure love.” He practically spat the word ‘love’. A source of pure love? He must be referring to the door in the Department of Mysteries.

“Which you cannot yield nor bare to touch,” said Harry softly, his mind seeing what was coming.

“Precisely,” spat Riddle, a look of pure disgust on his face. Was it jealousy that he could not wield the power? No of course not, he was merely showing contempt for love. “And Dumbledore knows this. Rumour has reached me that there is a place; somewhere where this mysterious power is at it’s purest. A secret place controlled by the Ministry. A bunker of sorts, where they keep a ‘well’ of this power under examination.” The Department of Mysteries? Surely he must know it was there. “However, despite my efforts, the location of this facility

remains a secret.” Facility, the word sparked a memory in Harry’s mind. He remembered the trial. The facility was what he was allegedly attacking when he was captured.

“Facility,” he whispered to himself. Then looking up at Riddle, “What about Devon?”

“The information Lucius obtained was not as sound as we were led to believe,” said Riddle, the anger prevalent in his voice. Harry held no doubt that Lucius would suffer, if he had not already done so for providing inaccurate information. “The bunker held nothing more than a collection of druid artefacts. Nothing substantial, according to Lestrage.”

“So what happens now?” asked Harry. “Are you still searching for this Source of Pure Love?” He was treading dangerous ground but he couldn’t control his curiosity. Also if he could find out Voldemort’s plan now, when everything was back to normal, he would know what Voldemort was up to and Dumbledore could stop it. Riddle didn’t reply immediately, and when he did, it was not even an answer.

“We have much to do, and little time. Get some rest, Harry,” said Riddle softly. “Tomorrow you will deliver a crippling blow to Dumbledore, one that will remind the world that we are still here. “

“And what might that be?”

“The Hogwarts Express.”

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“Well, well, well,” drawled a cold voice, as the department door slid open. For the last three hours, the compartment had been undisturbed except for the tea lady. Now, as they sped past the countryside of the north, the door had slid open revealing the party of Slytherins. “If it isn’t the Weasel family,” continued Malfoy, fixing his cold grey eyes on Ron.

Rose’s heart sank as she saw him. She had thought he was not returning for this year. He was always bragging about going onto the Death Eaters, but now here he was. Why couldn’t he have succeeded? Then at least he would be out of Rose’s hair.

Ron released Lavender from his embrace, and turned to face the Slytherin. “Sod off, Malfoy,” said Ron coldly.

“Are you going to make me, Weasel?” sneered Malfoy. “Got the guts?”

Rose watched the exchange angrily. Malfoy, the little prick was so arrogant. She would really love to throttle him, but her mother was never far away and Rose didn’t fancy a month of detentions with Professor Potter. What really got to Rose about the Slytherin was his attitude towards her. She would often catch him looking at her, more specifically certain areas of her anatomy. It was an insult to her feminine pride that the slippery snake kept admiring her. It was

almost as bad as his spoken manner. He didn't dare spite her, hex her or risk anything more than a gentle quip. It was not so much out of fear of McGonagall, more of fear of Harry.

It was common knowledge that Malfoy's father was a Death Eater, at least amongst the school. There was no proof and too many Death Eaters in the Ministry to have Malfoy arrested, but most of the students knew. Draco strutted around the school as if he owned the place, his circle of influence huge. People feared him, for they knew that one bad encounter and Draco would run crying to daddy. The wrath of Draco Malfoy came complete with support from the Death Eater's inner circle. Why Dumbledore tolerated him, Rose would never know. He must know; hardly anything passes the headmaster by. Why wouldn't he just kick him out? His bullying of the Weasley family was disgusting. Yet no one acted. No one would do anything. Most of the student body would never dare to pick a fight with him, and so Draco Malfoy walked all over them. Rose really wished she were a year older so that she could be in the same DADA class as him and show the arrogant git how to duel.

Malfoy stood in the door, Crabbe and Goyle on either side and to his right, trying to get closer was Pansy Parkinson. Another person for whom Rose held nothing but contempt. Arrogant bitch. Though, truth be told, watching her swoon over Malfoy, when he overtly didn't like her was quite funny. The downside was that the reason he didn't like Pansy, aside from her shocking personality and facial features of a giraffe, was that he was after Rose. Whether it was for her body, for the proximity to Harry or whether he actually liked her was a mystery.

"Ron!" hissed Lavender, grabbing his arm as the redhead started towards Malfoy.

"I can feel a Bat-Bogey coming on," whispered a voice next to her. Rose looked to her left, where Ginny was sat, watching the events unfold with her wand in her hand.

"What's the matter, Weasel," sneered Malfoy. "Why do you cower under a Mudblood's whim?" Ron snapped, hurling himself at Malfoy. Malfoy sidestepped, causing Ron to end up tackling Crabbe, who shoved him roughly into Goyle who extended his leg. Ron tripped over the leg and fell to the floor with a thud. Ginny, was on her feet before Ron even hit the floor, her wand pressed against the back of Malfoy's head.

"So the little Weasel has learned to play," smirked Malfoy. His hand shot out and grabbed Ginny's wrist. Ron tried to move, but he had Crabbe's foot on his chest, pinning him to the floor. Ginny gasped in pain as Malfoy cruelly twisted her wrist.

Something snapped in Rose. All the pain of the last few days boiled over. All the misery inside her turned to anger and before she could stop herself, she found herself on her feet with her wand aimed at Malfoy's head.

"Let her go," growled Rose, her eyes ablaze with anger at the Slytherin. She saw his sneer fade as he stared into her eyes. However his pride wouldn't let him back down too far. This just enraged Rose even more. She was close to shattering something by accidental magic, but wasn't that far gone, yet.

“And why should I?” said Malfoy, his tone softening noticeably, but he still managed to form a sneer. He released Ginny and turned to face Rose full on. “Going to run off to mummy?”

“That’s rich,” snarled Rose. She grabbed the blonde’s collar and thrust him into the side of the carriage. “One little accident with a Hippogriff, which was your fault you arrogant git and poor ‘ickle Draco runs crying to daddy who has Hagrid fired. Awwwwwww.” The blonde’s eyes widened in surprise as she forced him against the wall.

“I did not run crying to dadd...father,” said Malfoy, his voice as cold as ice. Rose would see the fury in his eyes, but felt no fear. He wouldn’t dare, not to her. He wanted in with Harry, this was not the best way to go about it. Not to mention that the way she was feeling right now, Voldemort himself should run and hide from her.

“So what do you call it?” asked Rose. “Dobbing? Grassing? Squealing? It doesn’t matter. The point is that you go crying to daddy who thinks he’s a hot-shot Death Eater, but doesn’t realise that he’s just a simple pawn to Voldemort. He doesn’t mean anything. And why aren’t you a Death Eater. You were bragging about it all last year. What’s the matter. Did you fail? Told you’re not good enough?”

“You have a sharp tongue, Potter,” sneered Malfoy, the colour drained from his face.

“So does my brother,” she snapped. There was a gasp. None of them had ever heard her speak of him before. She had been asked hundreds of times, but she never answered. Over the years, everyone had tried to get something out of her, but she had never answered, never spoken to anyone except Ginny about Harry. “And if you ever want to get close to him and join the Death Eaters you can start by leaving me alone. So bugger off and take your band of merry morons with you.”

Rose had seen his eyes flicker at the mention of Harry. The threat had done its job. With a nod to his henchmen, Malfoy retreated out of the compartment without another word. As the door slid closed there was a sigh of relief.

“Rose,” said Ron when he was back on his feet. “That was wicked.” He had a big grin plastered on his face. Finally someone had shown Malfoy where to shove it. Rose on the other hand, felt awful. She had let him get to her, she had snapped. All the emotion bubbling in her head was making her sick.

She sank onto a seat, put her head on her hands and burst into tears.

“Women,” muttered Ron, not quietly enough. He instantly received glares from every occupant of the compartment.

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Harry landed in the middle of a small clearing in the woods. The trees were short and spaced, allowing plenty of light into the wood. Red and brown leaves fluttered down from the

branches, blown by the wind. The woods were alive with noise, birds, rustling and the smell of nature. The wood seemed peaceful, a strict contrast to the men who had just appeared out of thin air.

Forty figures in black robes had just appeared by Portkey. All of them had their hoods up, and a perfectly white mask covering their face, all that is except for one. Harry looked around, taking in the sight of the them. It reminded him of the graveyard, of the attack in the Department of Mysteries. He remembered vividly the billowing black cloaks coming out of the shadows, curses flying everywhere. His mind was suddenly filled with a picture of a man falling through a veil. Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out a photograph. He had found it last night at Grimmauld Place. He had not spoken to anyone since his audience with Voldemort had ended. He merely went to the room assigned to him and had happened to find it in the drawer. It showed his father and Sirius on their graduation day at Hogwarts. Sirius looked so young, so full of life. Harry had taken it and had found himself looking at it several times in the space of hours. SIRIUS! Harry felt a rush of pain. He closed his eyes, balling his fists, trying to get a control of himself. Bellatrix, he hated her so much, she took Sirius from him. To make matters worse, she was less than five feet away from him. She would never expect an attack. Maybe he could just...*No! Harry, control yourself!*

“Harry?” said a sweet voice. His eyes snapped open, coming to rest on the speaker. The very person he was wishing a painful death on. “Are you all right?” inquired Bellatrix, removing her mask. This was not Bellatrix as Harry knew her. The effects of Azkaban did not show on the face before him. She was young and...no, Harry would not permit himself to think that she was beautiful. There was a fire in her eyes that did not exist with the Bellatrix Harry knew. Years in Azkaban had deadened her eyes, leaving glazed black orbs in a skeleton like socket. Here her skin was clear, vaguely tanned, while her heavily lidded eyes were keen and alert. She looked so alive, a stark contrast to when Harry had seen her before. But he didn’t have time to wonder how.

“Put that back on and shut up,” said Harry coldly. He held the authority so he might as well use it. Bellatrix looked taken aback, but, glaring all the while, did as she was told. Harry was sure he heard a soft snort of laughter from the direction of Lucius Malfoy. “Let’s move.”

The Death Eaters began to move along the path. The winding trail led down into the valley, at the bottom of which was a line of train tracks. *Jesus Christ*, thought Harry. His mind was racing. He was leading an attack on the Hogwarts Express. His friends were on board. Many of them would probably die today because of him. He needed to reach Dumbledore, but helping these students was his number one priority. He couldn’t order an abort, for it would blow his cover and he would be killed. He had three members of the Inner Circle with him today, Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange, and Walden MacNair. The three of them would not allow an abort. He could sense their distrust in him. Probably out of jealousy at how much the Master – *oh, I did not just think of him like that!* – trusted Harry. If he showed any sign of not being completely loyal...Harry hated to think of the consequences. What was he going to do? Harry walked along about ten feet behind the rest of the Death Eaters; keeping them in sight, but keeping his distance. He needed time to think.

The plan was sound. Fell a tree around a blind corner, with a magical incendiary device – in other words, a bomb – to disable the train. Four parties of seven would board. One group at either end, and two in the middle heading towards each end. That left twelve on the outside, to stop anyone leaving. Although aside from Harry and the three from the inner circle, the rest of the party were all new recruits, Harry knew it would be a massacre. The fresh recruits were literally being blooded today. Despite the lack of experience at torture, they would still be more than a match for the students. Not even the DA, what few there were who remained, could protect the students. The prefects were no match for the fully schooled, if inexperienced, Death Eaters. Those who resisted would be tortured; those who were not of pure blood would be killed. The train would become a killing house, no, a slaughterhouse, and there was nothing Harry could do about it.

Harry felt a feeling of sickness in his stomach. He could not do anything to stop it. He needed to get word to Dumbledore, to the Order, even to the students. Hermione, Ron, one of them would be able to do something, to dispatch an owl to Dumbledore, to mobilise the DA. But Harry couldn't reach them; he had no owl, no fireplace, no nothing. All he could do was not kill anyone himself. That wouldn't make much difference; there would still be many casualties. As Harry walked along, keeping ten feet behind the procession of Death Eaters, he saw a large Tawny owl asleep in a tree. It reminded Harry of another friend whom he sorely missed.

Hedwig, old friend, thought Harry sadly. Where are you now? Dumbledore! Help me! Please! Harry found himself almost praying that Dumbledore would help him. There was no way that Dumbledore would know. No help was coming, and Harry was no match for thirty Death Eaters. Even with the DA it would be close and the collateral damage would be very high and it was that that Harry feared the most. *Dumbledore! I need you!*

WHOOSH!

A ball of flame appeared in front of Harry, taking him by surprise. It was all he could do to keep from screaming. The ball of fire just erupted silently before him. Harry stumbled back a few paces, before regaining his balance. His hand had shot straight to his wand and it was now pointed at the fire. As Harry's eyes focused, he realised that he was not looking at a ball of fire, but at a very familiar bird.

“Fawkes?” whispered Harry. He didn't dare believe it. Could this mean that Dumbledore knew of his predicament, that he was sending help? He slowly reached out with a hand. As his fingertips touched the beautiful red plumage, Harry felt a tear of happiness well up in his eye, Fawkes was real; Dumbledore had sent help. He had remembered who Harry was. It was nearly over! “Fawkes!” was all Harry could say.

Harry quickly checked on the Death Eaters. They were getting further in front of him. Fawkes landed on Harry's forearm. Harry pulled his cloak over the top, concealing the bird from view. He jogged up to the line of Death Eaters, none of whom had looked back.

“Lucius!” called Harry. “How are we for time?”

“Two hundred metres to the tracks and we have eight minutes,” said Malfoy, turning to face Harry. The entire procession stopped and waited.

“Carry on,” ordered Harry. “You all know where you should be.”

“What about you?” asked Bellatrix.

“I have a pressing matter to attend to,” said Harry, coming up with the best excuse he could think of.

“What?” said Malfoy.

“Nature calls,” said Harry. Malfoy still looked none the wiser. “I need a piss, you moron!” snapped Harry. “I’ll catch you up, get the boys in position. MOVE!” Malfoy shot him an annoyed glance before turning and continuing along the trail.

Harry stood still as the procession started to move again, he watched them until they were fifty or so metres away from him before walking to his left into a mass of trees. There he knelt down, pulling his cloak back to allow Fawkes out. The phoenix fluttered up onto a tall root of the tree and surveyed Harry curiously. His large yellow eyes were fixed on Harry’s green ones. He saw the curiosity of the phoenix. Fawkes was ‘evaluating him’ for lack of a better word.

Still, it didn’t matter. He was here now, and Harry could contact Dumbledore. Harry couldn’t help but wonder why he had sent Fawkes and not the Order. Suddenly the headmaster’s words, echoed in Harry’s mind.

You must have shown me true loyalty, Harry. Nothing else could have called Fawkes to you.

Of course! Dumbledore didn’t know. It was Harry’s ‘prayers’ to Dumbledore that had called Fawkes to him. Harry quickly reached into his pockets. He needed to write a note to Dumbledore, but he had no parchment, quills or ink. Cursing Harry pulled out the only thing in his pocket: the photo of Sirius and Harry’s father. Harry turned it over; there was plenty of space for a message. He looked around the ground surrounding him. He needed a feather, something to make into a quill.

Fawkes, as if sensing what was needed, whistled softly and a single tail feather fell from his plumage, landing before Harry.

“Thanks,” said Harry with a smile. That meant that all he needed was ink. There was one obvious source available; the trouble was that that source was his own blood. At least that meant that Dumbledore would know it was from him.

Harry pulled out his sword and made a small incision on the end of the feather, and removed a small section of the under-core, turning the red feather into a quill. He then made a small cut on the back of his left forearm. He was going to use a finger, but he could need his

hand fully functional for the upcoming battle. He made a shallow cut and as the blood began to slowly trickle out, Harry dipped the quill into his blood and scribbled a quick message. Having finished he handed the photo to Fawkes.

“Please take this to Dumbledore,” said Harry softly. “As fast as you can. I can’t do this alone.”

Fawkes looked at Harry for a second, then cocked his head and disappeared in a ball of flames. Harry then sprinted back to the Death Eaters to take his position, feeling a little better. Somewhere inside him, there was now hope. Maybe, just maybe things would be all right.

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“You sent for me Albus,” came the voice of Lily Potter as she entered the study. Albus looked up from his notes. He still remembered when she was in her final year, the smiles as she and her classmates had graduated. He remembered her wedding, the day that she became Mrs. James Potter. He remembered the look on her face as she held baby Harry for the first time. Then he saw her now. She was pale, and had big bags under her eyes. She looked...terrible; there was no other word for it. She hardly slept, according to James, and hadn’t eaten since Harry had been captured. The Potions Mistress was a wreck.

“I did,” confirmed Albus gravely. “Lily, please have a seat. Would you care for some tea?”

“No, I’m fine thanks,” said Lily taking a seat in front of him. She looked so tired, so sad. The woes of twenty years of war had appeared on her face. A week ago she was a happy as anyone else, thought talk of Harry would send her off in tears. Now she looked like death warmed up. It was heart braking to see what had happened to her.

“I think you already know why I asked you here today,” said Albus softly. He had been dreading this conversation all day. Sending Lily on sabbatical would not go down well. She would want to work, to take her mind of the current situation. She would want to be with her daughter and she was just as stubborn as she had been when she was seventeen. *Living with James Potter, she would have to be*, thought Albus with a small smile. He could always have Severus return to his old job, only for a week. James Potter could cover Defence Against the Dark Arts. Sirius could as well if James was unavailable. Sirius had covered once before when Severus was recovering from Tom’s punishment. He had been an instant hit; if memory served and the students had loved Professor Black from the word go.

“I’m fine,” said Lily quietly. Albus could hear the defiance in her voice. He had a feeling that she already knew what he was going to say.

“My dear,” said Albus gravely. He took off his glasses and began to polish them on a small yellow cloth that he produced from a drawer. “You are far from fine. This week had taken its toll on you. No one should have to live through what you and your family have. When was the last time you slept?” he asked as he polished his spectacles.

“Last night,” said Lily without emotion. Her face was a mask of neutrality. Albus recognised it at once, having worn a similar mask for a majority of hours every day for the last twenty years.

“And how many hours did you get?” he pressed.

“I wasn’t counting.”

“James was,” said Albus. “You have hardly eaten or slept since...” he trailed off, unable to continue. Why was he getting as worked up as this, about Harry? He took a breath. “I need my staff to be at their best or as close to it as possible. Lily I am concerned for you. I want you to take this week off.”

“What?” her eyes shot up to look at his. Albus was sure this was feigned surprise. She was expecting this. The former Head Girl was as intuitive as ever.

“Severus can cover you, and Sirius or James for him. The rest would do you good,” said Albus kindly

“But...” Lily tried to protest.

She never finished the sentence. There was an explosion of fire in front of them. Fawkes materialised out of this air, and landed on the desk, scattering papers in the process.

“So you have come back,” said Albus jovially to the phoenix. He always felt better when Fawkes was around. “Your sudden disappearance was most baffling.” It was then that he noticed the contents of the Phoenix’s beak. Albus gently removed the piece of paper. It was a photograph, one showing James and Sirius on their graduation day. They both waved boisterously from the photograph.

“What is it?” asked Lily cautiously, leaning forward, trying to get a view of the photograph.

Albus turned the photograph around to show her. As he did so he caught sight of the writing on the back. It was written in red ink, no, in blood. Albus slid his spectacles back onto his nose and peered down at the lettering. A sick feeling rose in his stomach as he read.

*Professor Dumbledore,*

*Death Eaters, 40 or more, are about to attack the Hogwarts Express, in the valley between the Nott and Black Hill. Send Order backup. You have 5 minutes. Do NOT attempt to reply to this.*

*Harry Potter*

Albus stared at the name. The boy's eyes sprang into his mind. He looked so pained so sad. He was no killer, Albus had seen that the second he looked into his eyes. And then there was Fawkes. He had just disappeared. He had been summoned, but by who? Harry? Only true loyalty to the master would summon a Phoenix. Did this mean...? There was no time. He had to mobilise the Order.

"Lily," said Albus quickly. "Call James, have him mobilise the Aurors. The Hogwarts Express is about to be hit. We need every Auror we have to protect the students." She paled even further.

"I..."

"Lily, there is no time," said Albus sternly. "We have less than five minutes."

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"Rosie?" said Ginny softly. The poor girl had been crying since Malfoy left. Ginny knew that she had snapped. She had put up with so much over the last two years. It hurt Ginny to see her best friend like this. She had few memories of Harry; she hadn't seen him very often. He could pass her in the street and she wouldn't recognise him. She hadn't been allowed to go to his trial, and to be honest she was glad of it. She wouldn't like to take on an angry Heliopath. From what she had heard he had changed beyond all recognition. She had heard the stories as much as anyone else. They were so horrible. How could someone do those things? It was out of respect for Rosie that she kept all opinions to herself, but in secret, Ginny didn't want Harry anywhere near her or Rose.

The last few days had taken their toll on Rose as much as her mother. She too looked like death warmed up. Ginny had seen Professor Potter, just before they had left. She was a Professor so was on her way to Hogwarts by herself. Ginny was worried about the pair of them.

"Cheer up, Rosie," said Ron with a smile, "At least you made Malfoy bugger off." Ginny shot him a look of daggers. Ron had no sensitivity. He looked up at Ginny, a confused expression on his face. Lavender, the queen of shallowness, was holding his hand. She knew what was happening but didn't understand how deeply it affected them all. She had hardly known Harry. Stupid bint. Ginny had nothing but contempt for the girl.

"I'm all right," sobbed Rose. "Really, I just..."

SCREECH!

All of them were thrown off their feet, as the train suddenly braked. The screech was deafening. None of them could clasp their ears as they had been thrown into the front wall of the compartment as the train tried desperately to slow down. The G-forces slammed them all into the wall. Those on the seat were lucky enough to be cushioned by the seat. Ron and Lavender who had been on their feet were propelled above the seat and driven head-first into the wooden wall.

“What the...” screamed Ron.

BANG!

There was a violent jerk accompanied by a bang; the train had hit something. The shockwave passed through the train, knocking those trying to get to their feet back to the floor. Other compartments were filled with screams as their occupants were thrown around inside them. The bang was deafening as the train slammed into something on the tracks.

And then there was stillness.

The train had come to a complete stop and for a few seconds, there was perfect silence. Then the students began to move. There was crying, screaming and the vain attempts by the prefects to maintain control. And that was when it all started.

BOOM!

An explosion rocked the train, knocking those who had managed to struggle to their feet straight back to the ground.

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Harry watched helplessly as the train approached. It was a blind corner, and the driver wouldn't see the tree until it was too late. The tree had been felled and then levitated across the line. It was huge, even on its side the trunk was nearly two metres high. It would derail the train for sure. The locomotive and the first carriage, the prefects car would be decimated. The death toll would be catastrophic. Harry hoped the Dumbledore had gotten his message. He knew that the time limit was very tight but where the hell was the Order? Why hadn't the train stopped? What was Harry going to do if there was a fire fight? He had planned for the Order and Aurors to stop the train, or at least appear in force. They had to hurry or Death Eaters would manage to get aboard the train and then the casualties would pile up.

The train came hurtling around the corner, the sun shining off the polished red engine for the last time as it entered the shadow of the hills. The driver must have seen the tree, as the emergency brake was pulled. There was a terrible screech. Sparks went up from the wheels as the brakes tried desperately to stop the train. It was getting closer and it didn't need a genius to realise that the train would hit the tree. There was nothing Harry could do. He watched in horror as the train hurtled towards the barricade, carrying his friends on board. With a sickening crunch, the front of the train slammed into the tree. It moved back about ten metres, but successfully stopped the train.

The train sat in stillness. There was silence. Even the sounds of the forest had stopped. There was a cloud of thick black smoke emanating from what was left of the locomotive. The engine had completely crumpled and the boiler was spouting out thick black smoke. The cockpit may even have caught fire. The front of the prefects' carriage had also crumpled, every one of its

windows shattered. Harry, from his vantage point in the undergrowth at the side of the tracks couldn't see any movement inside.

*BOOM!*

The bomb went off, blowing the wheels clean off the axels and destroying the boiler. The red steam engine was blown to smithereens. There was no hope of getting it going again.

*God, I hope Ron, Hermione and Ginny are all right.* His thoughts immediately went to his friends. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, Neville, Seamus, Dean, Lavender, Parvati, even people he hardly spoke to. Their faces flew into his mind.

“Go?” hissed a voice. Harry knew who it was. Lucius Malfoy was lying in the undergrowth next to him, his grey eyes fixed on Harry. Harry knew he didn't have a choice. He could not stool them. They were on a mission and Harry couldn't order an abort. Lucius would know he was not who they thought he was. The trouble was that giving the order would mean that students would die. The Order hadn't come; they might not even be coming. They had failed; he had failed. Students would now die because of him. He would have killed them. It would be his fault. Harry felt sick.

“Are we good to go?” repeated Lucius firmly. “Harry!”

“Lucius,” said Harry slowly, trying to put of his decision for just a few more seconds. He had no choice. He had to give the order. If only he could buy more time. An idea then occurred to him. A cold, evil idea, that would guarantee that someone would suffer. But then again, the locomotive was so badly damaged that he doubted anyone had survived. “Take two men, check the loco for survivors.” Lucius nodded and after a bit of whispering stood up and ran to the locomotive. Harry watched, the guilt bubbling in him all the while as they climbed up the side, and entered the wreckage of the once proud scarlet steam-engine. Hopefully they wouldn't find anyone. Lucius climbed inside while his two companions stood outside.

*Slow down!* thought Harry. *Take your time. Hurry up, Dumbledore!* With every second they took searching the locomotive, the Order had a little more time to get a move on. Harry found that he was sweating with anxiety. *How long does it take to Apparate here?* wondered Harry. Then he saw movement at the locomotive. His blood ran cold.

Lucius emerged from the wreckage. However, he was not alone. Lucius was levitating someone else out with him. He removed the spell and the blood-covered Trolley-Witch crashed painfully to the ground. *Jesus! They were going to kill her or worse!*

Harry realised that the Order would never make it in time. It was up to the students to defend themselves. Harry hoped that the DA had had the initiative to form a defence. But they might not know that they were in danger. Just that there had been an accident. He had to make their presence felt. Then they would definitely start making plans. He had to give them time, time to arm themselves, to secure the first years, to mount some kind of defence. He turned to the Death Eater to his right.

“Form a line on either side of the train. Make yourselves seen, but do not attack until I give you the signal,” he ordered.

“What signal?”

“The Dark Mark,” said Harry. “Pass it on.”

The word went out and the Death Eaters sprang forward from the bushes, coming to a stop in a line a few feet from the train. Their cloaks were willowing in the wind. Their masks glowed. It was a terrifying sight, the mass of black cloaks. Harry could hear screaming coming from the train. It was a terrifying sight, this army of cloaked figures. Their appearance filled the students with fear. This was not going to be pretty.

Suddenly a scream filled the air, echoing off the hills. He turned to see the tea-lady on her knees, a Death Eater on either side. Lucius pointed his wand at the defenceless lady and muttered a single word lazily.

“*Crucio!*” the poor lady’s scream echoed off the hills. Harry felt a wave of guilt. She was being tortured because he had given the order. He had told them to search the Locomotive. He had assumed it was empty, that she was already dead, but he had been wrong. Now she was being tortured because he had been wrong. Her pain was his fault. He had to do something.

He had to stop this, but Lucius again would not allow him to just allow her to live. There was another thing to consider. For every second she was tortured, the students were mounting a defence, hopefully. Her suffering was allowing them to live. A rational transaction, but she had not chosen to suffer. That had been Harry’s choice. She was in agony because he had decided that she should be. It was the right thing to do, mathematically, exchanging one life for the survival of many more, but it was still a horrible choice to make. How does one weigh human life? Was her life really that insignificant? No, of course not. She is a person. She has feelings, she loves, she hurts; she has friends and loved one who will miss her. But, it was buying him time. Did that justify her agony?

No. Harry could not let the lady suffer, not like this, whatever the gain was. Harry rose swiftly from the bushes and walked quickly over to her and her three captors. Harry couldn’t bear to watch her suffer in this grotesque way. Malfoy had kept the curse on her for over a minute without stopping. Harry couldn’t even imagine the pain she must be feeling. He had never been hit for longer than a few seconds.

“Lucius!” said Harry. Instantly the curse stopped. The cold grey eyes watched Harry through the mask. Just then, amid her screams, the Tea-lady caught Harry’s eye and in that instant he realised that he couldn’t allow this. Harry realised that there was only one course of action left to him, only one way to end her suffering. It was the most painful choice Harry had ever had to make, the coldest thing he had ever said. How does one weight human life? Harry made his decision. He knew then and there that he would never forget it. This moment would haunt him all his life. But he knew he had no other choice. He took a breath and said the two words that would appear in his dreams until the day he died. “Finish her.” Harry closed his eyes

and sighed, shaking his head with guilt. He turned to walk away, there was no way he could watch this. He kept his face a neutral mask and kept his eyes straight ahead. Then he heard it behind him.

“*AVADA KEDAVRA!*” Followed but a scream, a whoosh and then a sickening thud as the lifeless body hit the ground.

Harry felt sick. She had died by his will. What he had done was as good as uttering the curse himself. He stopped and closed his eyes, willing the sickness to go away. He sighed. *What have I done?* He fought the tears away bitterly. *I am a murderer!* He could feel the sickness rising. It was his fault, all his fault. She had been innocent, and he had failed her. He was the only hope of defeating Voldemort, the only one who could save everyone. He had failed her and he was about to fail the rest of the school. Her eyes still filled his mind: her terrified face and the sound, the *flump* as she hit the ground. *May God have mercy on her soul.* Seconds passed. Harry took deep breaths, trying to push the feeling of utter failure from his mind. He had to concentrate or more would die. *What am I talking about?* he asked himself. *More are going to die and I can't do a God Damned thing about it.*

“The loco is secure,” said Lucius’ voice behind him. Harry turned to see Lucius. He could see white teeth through the mouth hole of the mask. The son of a bitch was smiling behind the mask! He was enjoying it. The bastard! Harry wanted to curse him, to see how he liked it, but he couldn’t and he knew it. He was trapped and he would probably have to make more choices like the one he had just made. More people may have to die by his will or his hand. His friends may well be among them. Harry felt despair coming ever closer to his heart.

“Are we good to go?” asked Lucius. “The ranks and formations are impressive, but we don’t have all day.” Harry had no more excuses. The time had come. Harry closed his eyes, hoping that his friends would make it out of this alive.

“So be it,” he said softly. He turned to the nearest Death Eater and nodded. “Give the signal.”

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“What the hell just happened?” squealed Lavender, picking herself up from the floor. Sounds of stirring were coming from other compartments. The sounds of crying and frightened whispers were coming from outside. Inside it was a mess. The window had shattered, raining down shards of glass. Rose had been cut by a few such shards. Her left arm was covered in nicks and cuts from them. That would teach her to wear a crop-top on the train. There were bodies everywhere. Thankfully they were all moving. Trunks and their contents had been upturned and spilled around the compartment. The remains of a bottle of Butterbeer was on its side on the floor, slowly dripping on the carpet.

“We crashed,” said Rose coldly. “Isn’t it obvious?” Mentally she told herself to calm down. She had had a bitch of a week, but snapping at everyone around her would not help.

“Is everyone alright?” asked Ginny, climbing to her feet and brushing herself down. She shook the fragments of glass from her hair and clothes before looking around.

“Never better,” said Ron from where he had fallen. He had a cut above his right eyebrow. A small trickle of blood was running down his face.

Just then the remains of the door slid open and a figure in Hogwarts robes stepped in, a large silver P pinned onto her robes.

“Is everyone OK in here?” asked a girl’s voice. “Is anyone injured?” Hermione Granger, boffin extraordinaire, and prefect was in the doorway. There was an air of authority about the girl. Saying that she hadn’t a hair out of place would be a lie, due to the bushiness of her hair, but she looked perfectly tidy. Anyone who saw her wouldn’t think for a second that she had just survived a train wreck.

“We’re fine,” said Ron coldly. “Go back to your books.” Ron didn’t like her, and he had no qualms about showing it. While Rose had found the girl to be a little patronising and a very private person, she had no dislike for the girl. Ron just didn’t like her because she tried to make him work and always proved she was better than him. Rose didn’t think that Granger intended to be patronising. She was probably just trying to help, but Ron didn’t want to be helped. Her rigid compliance to the rules had landed her a prefect’s badge, much to the delight of McGonagall. Rose was actually impressed that she was managing to stay calm in the situation. She was doing her job; she was calm and was checking for injuries before making the next move.

“We’re all OK,” said Rose, brushing herself down.

“What about your arm?” asked Hermione, eyeing her bleeding arm. Several shards had cut her, but none were deep and no glass was embedded in her arm. She still had full use of it.

“Had a fight with the cat,” said Rose, with a smile. It wasn’t funny, but someone had to break the nervous mood. “What happened?” She had inherited her curiosity from her parents, which one, only God knew.

“I don’t know; we crashed into something,” replied Hermione. “It just...”

Suddenly a scream filled their ears. Both girls spun around. Lavender was peering out the window. Rose felt a chill go down her spine as she noticed what she was looking at. Outside was a line of Death Eaters. There had to be at least twenty on this side. Presumably there would be another twenty on the other side. FORTY DEATH EATERS! Rose felt faint for a few seconds. This was no accident; this was an attack!

“Merlin,” breathed Ron over her shoulder.

Rose walked closer to the window and peered out. There was something happening down the far end. Two Death Eaters were holding the trolley-lady down while a third was torturing her. Rose could hear the screams. It was sickening to watch, the sheer pain that she must be feeling.

Rose knew of the Cruciatus Curse, though she had never felt it. She had felt the Imperius Curse once, though she tried to forget the experience.

“Hermione,” said Rose firmly. “The duelling club, the prefects. We are going to need their help. And lock the first years in their compartments.” The prefect stared for a few seconds, before comprehension dawned on her. She shook her head.

“This is a fight we can’t win,” said Hermione softly. “None of us are capable of duelling with killers.”

“They’ll kill us if we don’t,” said Rose stubbornly. She knew that they would attack whether the student body resisted or not. Many would die if they attacked. At least this way they had a chance of survival. “At least this way we have a chance.”

“She’s right,” said Ginny backing her up. Rose felt a wave of gratitude towards her friend. She watched Hermione with hope in her eyes. Slowly the prefect’s head sank into a nod.

“You’re right,” said Hermione. When she looked up, her face was set into a determined mask.

“Us?” asked Ron, his eyes wide with fear. “Fight them! Impossible!”

“I’m with you, Rose,” said Ginny firmly.

“No, you’re not,” said Ron firmly. “I forbid it.”

“Try and stop me,” snapped Ginny. “I am not going to sit here and watch my friends die.”

“Got the fighting spirit,” smiled Hermione. Rose could see the respect in her eyes and the stubbornness in Ginny’s.

“Runs in the family,” said Ginny.

“Mine too,” said Rose, not realising exactly what that statement implied.

“That could be a problem,” said Lavender, suddenly. She was still staring out of the window. They all peered out and Rose’s blood ran cold. Tears shot to her eyes as she recognised the figure that had just climbed out of the bushes.

“Lucius!” called Rose’s brother, as he marched towards the torture session. *Oh, Merlin! Please, no!* Rose watched intently. She had always held the hope that Harry was really innocent, that it was all a big lie, the media blowing it out of all proportion. She was about to find out. Rose watched as Harry walked up to the Death Eaters. Harry looked down at the tea lady for a few seconds, before speaking again. Despite the distance, Rose heard the words. Her heart broke as she watched her brother give the order.

“Finish her!” Rose felt sick. With the scream and thud that followed, all hope of Harry’s innocence left Rose. She collapsed back onto the seat, her head in her hands. The tears didn’t come though, what came instead frightened Rose herself. Anger. Pure anger.

Harry! How could he; how dare he! She had never given up hope on him. But he had just had that lady killed. She had never done anything to him. She had even fed him on the journeys on the past. She did not deserve to die, but die she had because of Harry. He had no right to do that. She would make him sorry. He had killed this woman, reduced Rose’s mother to a wreck and brought shame to the family. He would pay, oh, he would definitely pay. She would make sure of it. Harry Potter would wish he had never been born when Rose got her hands on him.

“Get the prefects,” she said, rising to her feet. “We are going to fight. Everyone to the middle two carriages. Lock all doors; mend all windows. Prefects will make a stand in the end carriages. If we lock all doors, they can only come at us from the ends, we have a bottleneck, at the joining of each carriage. We can fall back into the middle carriages. Hopefully that will be enough time for Dumbledore to get here.” The look on her face, the fire in her eyes, told the other not to argue. Hermione disappeared and the others all produced wands. Rose walked determinedly out into the corridor. She turned left stopping at the first compartment. It was full of first and second years.

“Stay here,” she said. “We are under attack. I’ll lock you in. Whatever happens don’t open this door!” They were too terrified to argue. They looked like rabbits in the headlights. Rose locked the door. Following her example, the other spread out. Any prefects that were found were told to join in and then the compartment was locked.

In less than a minute, all compartments were locked and the prefects were out in the corridors. The students were packed into two carriages, huddled together. Malfoy was sitting on a bench having evicted the previous occupants, who were now sat on the hard floor. He was looking very smug but made no effort to fight. He just sat, eating chocolate frogs. Rose really wanted to curse him but she had bigger fish to fry.

“What are we going to do?” asked the panicking Head Boy.

“You’re asking me?” snapped the nearest prefect.

“Shut up, all of you,” said Rose firmly. “Death Eaters are out there and they are coming in. Stop your bitching and pay attention. All doors are locked; they can only come at us from either end. Split up, half in the last carriage, half in the first. Keep shields up and use stunners. The doors are bottlenecks so we have the advantage. Fall back if it becomes too much, and then start again in the next carriage. Be careful. Hopefully we can survive long enough for Dumbledore to bring in the Aurors,

“If the Aurors are even coming,” said Malfoy matter-of-factly.

“*MORSMORDRE!*” growled a voice. There was a whoosh as the Dark Mark was shot into the sky. There was a collective gasp, whimper and sob from the students as the symbol of fear was launched into the sky above them.

“One more thing, Malfoy,” spat Rose, raising her voice so everyone else could hear. “After I’m finished with your father and my brother, I’ll be coming back for you.” With that she brought her fist up to his face, delivering a hard punch to his right cheek. With that she turned on her heel and marched back to the prefects. “Move out!”

Half the prefects followed Rose out of the door. Several stayed to keep the students calm and to keep an eye on the Slytherins. They walked through one carriage unhindered. Cautiously they opened the door and peered through. Quickly they slipped into the next carriage and headed towards the far door. They had only gotten halfway, before the door opened, revealing a lone, yet familiar figure dressed all in black.

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Harry struggled to push his murder of the Tea-Lady out of his mind as he watched the Death Eaters make for the train. Seven went to each end and fourteen towards the middle. They would board and head to the two ends in groups of seven. They would be more than a match for the students and Harry knew. *Come on, Dumbledore!* thought Harry. *What was taking so long?* He just had to come, or it would be a massacre. There were twelve Death Eaters left on the outside, six on each side making sure that none escaped. The Dark Mark hovered above the train casting an eerie green light into the shadows of the hills. Harry felt sick to his stomach. He was causing this pain, this suffering: it was his fault. He could almost feel the fear in the air. He could feel the presence of Death. Even the sun seemed to have faded.

As the Death Eaters boarded, Harry himself went to a carriage near the middle. He pulled on the door to find it locked.

“*Alohomora!*” he hissed, aiming his wand at the lock. He needed to get inside. Hopefully he could save a few lives. There was a squelch and the door unlocked. Harry gave the door a tug, but the door remained shut, despite Harry’s having used the spell. He smiled; the doors had been locked by more than magic. *Well done, Hermione,* thought Harry. It must have been her who had done it. The sacrifice of the tea-lady had not been in vain. They had used their time wisely.

“*Reducto!*” hissed Harry, blowing apart the lock and splintering the wood of the door. He pushed it open and stepped into the carriage. It was dark inside, and luckily deserted. He cautiously looked both ways. There was nothing. The carriage was silent and empty. He peered through the window of the first compartment. It was empty and locked. Hermione really had done a good job. All the students must be together, where they can be easily protected. On the other hand, one bomb and...stop it! Concentrate on the job at hand. And why was he suddenly thinking of ways he’d get onto the train and ways he’d get to the students rather than how he’d defend them?

*Click!*

Harry spun around, bringing his wand up to the ready. The sound had come from the toilet. As Harry neared, he could see that the lock on the door was set to Occupied, rather than Vacant. There was someone inside. Was someone hiding in there or was it a DA member, ready for an ambush.

“*Alohomora!*” hissed Harry quietly. There was a click and the door swung open. Harry found himself face to face with a little girl. She wore Hufflepuff robes, and had to be a first year. She was short with dark hair tied back into two plats. She had been crying and continued to sniff as she saw him. Harry could see the terror in her eyes.

“H...Harry...P...P....Potter,” she squeaked, her hand shielding her face. She recognised him, but it didn’t stop her terror. She must think he was a Death Eater too. What was...never mind! Think about it later. He had more important things on his mind at the moment. Harry looked around; there were still no Death Eaters in sight.

“Come with me,” said Harry softly. “I won’t hurt you.” The girl’s eyes were wide with terror. She made no move, except to wipe her eyes. “Look,” said Harry. “Bad men are coming and they want to hurt you. Come with me and I can protect you.” With that he grabbed her wrist and pulled her gently, yet firmly from the toilet. The girl was like a dead weight. She could hardly walk through fear. Harry had no time for this. He picked her up, carrying her with his left arm, while holding his wand with his right. Harry then turned left and hurried to the end of the carriage. He opened the door with a spell. Harry stepped through. It was then he realised he was not alone.

He looked up and came face to face with eight wands. In the light, Harry could see the faces behind them. He breathed a sigh of relief. Ron, Hermione, Lavender and Ginny were there. There was also the girl from the cell; the stupid child who had claimed to be his sister. Yeah right, he didn’t have a sister and his mother was dead so there was no way she was telling the truth.

“Am I glad to see you guys,” said Harry, failing to keep a smile from his face.

“Let her go, Harry,” shouted the girl. Rose, that was what she had said she was called.

“Let her go, or we will be forced to use force,” said Ron melodramatically. Harry noticed that Lavender gave him an admiring look, while Ginny rolled her eyes.

“Force, Ron?” replied Harry, he never did like threats. “What makes you think you could take me? Now, stop fanning around. Death Eaters are coming.” Why were they standing around arguing instead of doing what they should be doing which is preparing for the inevitable attack?

“Really?” said Ginny sarcastically.

“What’s wrong with you?” asked Harry frowning. “It’s me. Put your wands down.” None of them lowered their wands, and Harry felt his grip tighten on his.

“Nice try,” said Rose hotly.

“I’m one of you, remember?” said Harry firmly. “DA? Do our years of friendship count for nothing?”

“One of us? A student? Tell that to the tea-lady,” spat Rose. “You had her killed.” Harry sighed and looked at his feet. Her words had dug deep. He had had her killed. Her death was his fault. He was a murderer. He shook his head.

“I had to,” he said softly, trying to keep his voice level. He found himself unable to look any of them in the eyes. “I ended her suffering. They would have tortured her to insanity. I ended it for her. It brought you enough time to mount a defence.”

Just then the door behind them slid open. Lucius Malfoy swept in, followed by three Death Eaters. The other three must have been told to wait outside or something. There wasn’t really space for seven in the corridor. The four robed figures marched towards, them coming to rest a foot behind Harry who made no move to turn around. He kept his back to the Death Eaters.

“Enjoying the reunion?” sneered Malfoy. Harry could see the fear in the student’s eyes as they aimed their wands at the Death Eaters, ready for the inevitable fire-fight. Harry couldn’t allow this. They would be killed. He had to intervene, even if it risked revealing his true loyalty to Lucius Malfoy. The consequences of not acting were unthinkable. If any of his friends died...Harry couldn’t bring himself to think about it.

Harry lowered the girl to the ground, and gave her a gentle push towards Ginny. “Take her,” he said softly. The girl practically collapsed onto Ginny, who caught her with her arm. She was pushed back through the party of terrified prefects. During the distraction, Harry unfastened his cloak so that it hung over his shoulders, but nothing held it in place.

“What’s happening, Potter?” sneered Malfoy. Harry didn’t even answer.

“Run, Ginny,” said Harry softly. Their eyes met for a second; just enough time for Harry to give her a smile and a wink. Then he moved. He flung his hands upward beneath his cloak, launching it up like a curtain over the four Death Eaters, blocking their view of the students. The cloak fell over the top of them like a net, trapping them and preventing any of them from using magic, as they couldn’t see. Harry turned to face, them withdrawing his sword from his back, but bringing the scabbard with it.

“*Colloportus!*” he muttered. With a squelch, the scabbard locked onto the sword. It was now essentially a kendo stick only it was much harder than the bamboo sticks they used. Enough blood had been spilt today. Harry would not lower himself to kill again. He twirled the sword around his wrist, and got ready to fight. Ron, Rose, Ginny and Hermione stood, frozen to the spot as the most infamous Death Eater of them all did the most unexpected thing. Harry held the samurai sword ready, still inside the scabbard to prevent death.

“Run!” he hissed.

Suddenly, Malfoy broke free of the cloak, his mask having slipped aside revealing his pale face. His face contorted with rage. He raised his wand, but not quickly enough. Harry grabbed his arm as it came up and spun the sword so that the handle was at the front and he held it by the scabbard. He thrust the hard, blunt handle into Malfoy's ribs. The Death Eater roared in pain as Harry brought the sword down hard on his head. The impact of the scabbard was enough to draw blood, even though it was blunt. Malfoy crashed to the floor, holding his head.

The other three Death Eaters broke free from the cloak. Harry held the sword like a staff, horizontally across his body. He had a Death Eater to each side and one in front of him. He thrust the sword forward, bringing the edge of the scabbard into the man's nose breaking it instantly. He then thrust the end of the scabbard into the ribs of the Death Eater to his left and then the handle into the ribs of the one to his right. The move lasted no more than a second and all three groaned in pain. From there Harry swung the handle up into the cheekbone of the man to his left and then the scabbard end into the face of the man to his right. Lastly he took the sword by the handle, reverting to the more traditional use of the weapon and brought it down hard on the middleman's head. It drew blood, just as it had with Malfoy; the impact of the scabbard-covered blade was hard enough, even though the weapon was blunt. All three fell to the floor.

Suddenly, Harry realised that Lucius Malfoy was on his feet. He was running towards the far end of the carriage, making his getaway. Harry hurled the sword at the retreating Death Eater. It hit him in the small of the back, knocking him off his feet. Harry withdrew his wand and fired a single stunner at the fallen form of Lucius Malfoy. He then fired one at each of the three Death Eaters who lay at his feet, clutching bruises and groaning in pain. The whole exchange had lasted less than ten seconds.

"Wow," gasped Ron. It was all any of them could say. Now they truly did appreciate why he was the most feared Death Eater of them all.

Harry wandlessly summoned the sword back to him. Using the Alohomora charm, he unlocked the scabbard. He then placed it back over his back. It was only when it was slung over his back that he realised what he had done. He didn't know he could do it without a wand. He had never tried wandless magic before. Shrugging it off, Harry picked up his cloak and put it back on. He could worry about wandless magic later. For now he had to attend to the safety of those on board.

"When Malfoy wakes up," said Harry softly. "He'll remember that it was me that did this. You'll have to get Dumbledore to wipe his memory. I called him minutes ago. He should be here any second."

"What are you talking about?" stammered Ron, still in awe of what he had just seen. All of those present had their wand aimed at Harry. He could see the fear in their eyes. If he could take out four Death Eaters like that, they wouldn't stand a chance.

"Voldemort must never learn that I did this," said Harry impatiently. If Voldemort found out Harry would be killed.

“SURRENDER!” boomed a voice outside. “BY ORDER OF THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC, DROP YOUR WANDS AND COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP. YOU ARE SURROUNDED BY AURORS. YOU CANNOT ESCAPE! LOWER YOUR WEAPONS!”

“Thank Merlin,” sighed Lavender in a singsong voice. “We’re saved. Aurors are here.”

“Take the girl and go,” said Harry to Hermione. “The Aurors can protect you, I have other things to attend to. Don’t mention what I did here today to anyone except Dumbledore. There are too many spies in the ministry. Tell Dumbledore I want to talk to him. Trafalgar Square, beneath the empty pedestal of Nelson’s column, midday tomorrow. *Alone.*” With that, Harry turned on his heel and left, leaving a very confused and scared party of students.

He ran all the way to the end of the train. Looking outside, Harry saw that it was pandemonium. The air was thick with spells as the Death Eaters fought off the Aurors. The Aurors seemed to have the numerical advantage, but the train windows were good cover for the Death Eaters. Harry could see that both sides had already sustained heavy casualties. The ground was littered with fallen bodies, though whether they were dead or not was a mystery.

“Potter!” screamed a voice. He had been spotted. Five different hexes flew at him out of the chaos. He dived out of the train door, missing the incoming curses by millimetres. He landed hard on the ground three feet below where he had jumped from. The impact knocked the wind out of him. He looked up, gasping for breath. For a second he thought he saw Sirius duelling with Bellatrix. NO! He’s dead; it was just a hallucination. Quickly he rolled under the train, narrowly avoiding more incoming spells. Taking out both his wands, his proper one in his right hand, and his spare in his left, Harry fired two simultaneous stunners at the advancing Aurors. Two fell to the attack, the other two to Harry’s second volley.

He realised that he had just taken out four Aurors by himself, with four simple spells. He hadn’t even been scratched or come close to danger.

“*Crucio!*” Harry looked over to where the shout had come from. Walden MacNair held an Auror with bubblegum pink hair under the pain curse.

“Tonks!” gasped Harry. “*Stupefy!*” his stunner hit MacNair in the back of the head. He went rigid and keeled over, releasing Tonks from the curse. Her steaming body was moving slowly as she recovered. Harry saw her look over at where the spell had come from. Their eyes met for a second. Harry gave her a brief nod before rolling out from under the train on the far side.

As he stood up, a pair of hands grabbed hold of his arms.

“Don’t resist, Potter,” said a familiar voice. Harry froze, that voice. The Order was here as well. Harry tried to turn but the arms held him still. “I’m taking you in!”

Harry did the only thing he could think of. He stamped on the person's foot and then brought his heel up into the man's private parts. Spinning free of his grip, Harry turned to face the man. Kingsley Shacklebolt's face was contorted with pain, from Harry's attack.

"Kingsley," said Harry. He couldn't help but smile, he was so glad to see a familiar face. "Are you a sight for sore eyes? What the..."

Shacklebolt launched himself at Harry in a rugby tackle. His shoulder slammed into Harry's gut and had it not been for the armour he wore, it would have winded him. Shacklebolt rolled off of him as they landed and climbed to his feet, withdrawing his wand and aiming it at Harry. Harry caught the arm as it extended.

"What the hell are you doing, Kingsley?" asked Harry.

"You're under arrest!" growled Shacklebolt. He yanked his arm away. Harry released the arm.

"*Stupefy!*" shouted Shacklebolt. Harry dived aside, and the spell flew harmlessly into the undergrowth. He replied with a stunner of his own as he rolled. Kingsley effortlessly sidestepped the stunner and fired again at Harry. It missed by inches. Harry felt the energy as the spell shot past his ear. Harry climbed quickly to his feet and stood facing the Auror.

"What's going on?" asked Harry. "Why does the Order want me arrested?" Harry saw the look of surprise at the mention of the secret society.

"What do you mean?" asked Kingsley. He kept his eyes on Harry, never blinking. Harry's hand slid to his stun baton that was hidden because of his sideways stance. He removed it once again and ignited it. It was like a short, red lightsaber. The stick pulses with the energy of a stunning charm.

"Why does..." Harry tried to ask why Dumbledore wasted him taken down, but he never managed to finish the sentence. The Auror fired before Harry could even finish the sentence. Harry saw the stunner come zooming towards him. He allowed himself to fall backwards, keeling over. The spell shot over his head, missing his nose by inches. Harry hurled the glowing stun-baton at Shacklebolt as he fell. It caught him in the chest, sending the Auror to the floor in a shower of sparks, just as Harry hit the ground himself. His limbs ached through physical exhaustion and his breathing was heavy.

Harry summoned the baton back to him and turned around. His heart nearly missed a beat. Standing before him, aiming his wand at Harry was Remus Lupin. He looked even more tired than the last time Harry had seen him. He was dressed in the red robes of an Auror. His wand was a foot from Harry's face.

"Remus!" said Harry. He could see recognition in Remus' eyes. He held the wand on him, but Harry could see that he wasn't going to fire. There was too much kindness in the werewolf's eyes. "What's going on?" Harry shouted, stepping closer to Remus. Just then he

noticed a figure over Lupin's shoulder. A short, fat, man, with mouse-like teeth and a bald-patch. He was holding a wand and moving towards them.

"REMUS, LOOK OUT!" shouted Harry. He dived to the side, giving himself an angle of fire. "*Petrificus Totalus!*" Harry sent a full body bind flying at Peter Pettigrew as he ran towards Lupin. Wormtail was hit in the chest, his momentum causing his rigid body to keel over and land on his face.

Just then a spell hit the ground around them. Mud and dust was sent into the air, creating a cloud around them. Harry couldn't see Remus, Wormtail or anything else. He was as blind as a bat. The dust was just too thick. Suddenly, Harry felt a pair of hands grab him.

"Sir," said a voice. "We have to retreat. We've done our job. Let's go home!"

Harry just nodded. He had given his message and Wormtail was down. His job was done. Casualties should be a minimum. He had also maintained the illusion that he was a loyal Death Eater without killing an Aurors. Not a bad day's work. He could go home.

"FALL BACK!" he shouted. There were several pops as the Death Eaters left. Harry pulled a Portkey out of his pocket and tapped it with his wand. He felt a tug behind his navel, just as a freshly authorised Unforgivable Curse, fired by a precocious Auror hit the ground where he stood seconds before.

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The door slid open and in marched Rose-Marie Potter. There were still traces of tears in her eyes, plain to see to anyone who looked. There was a sadness on her face, a pained look that few had even seen before and none had ever felt an emotional burden harsh enough to wear one of their own. Without a word, she slumped onto a seat just inside the door. A section of the side of the carriage had been removed and Aurors were helping students out and checking for injuries. They had got off lightly and they all knew it. It should have been a massacre, and the only thing that stopped it was Harry. Harry? What was he doing? The confusion and pain in his eyes. Rose had seen it. However much she wanted to believe in his innocence, however much she wanted him back, Rose couldn't forget what she had seen. *Finish Her!* Rose felt sick to her stomach. The tea-lady had always been nice to her; she didn't deserve to die. *Why, Harry?* thought Rose. And then he had saved her and her friends. Why? There was no logic to it. But she had seen him, with her own eyes. He was alive and well. He seemed in perfect health, except for the hideous scar on his forehead. Mentally though, who can say? He was a psychotic killer, but when Rose had looked into his eyes. She...it was almost as if they were filled with pain and despair rather than the rage she had been expecting.

"Rose?" said a voice softly. She looked up into a pair of twinkling blue eyes. "How are you feeling?"

"Can my answer use expletives?" answered Rose sadly. She saw a half smile appear on Dumbledore's lips.

“You above all have had a very trying day. One would hope that this day will see the end of your pain.”

“But we both know that that is never going to happen,” said Rose shaking her head.

“You could be completely wrong,” said Dumbledore. Rose looked into his eyes and saw the twinkling. Deep within the large blue globes Rose could see hope. “I was not going to involve you in this,” said the Headmaster gravely. “As it is, your mother will most likely still try and curse me, but I cannot leave you out. You have been through too much and it may be time for something good to come of this.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” said Rose.

“I have already heard the tale of your encounter with Harry Potter,” said Dumbledore. “It is one of a number of strange things I have heard recently involving your bother...I think that this conversation would best be continued in my office. Your belongings will be brought along by House-Elf. Rose, please take this Portkey.”

Rose immediately felt a strange tug behind her navel and the whole world began to spin. She was on the verge of throwing up when her feet felt solid ground again. The world came into focus and she found herself in the Headmaster’s office. His desk was as cluttered as usual and to the side of the desk, was his Phoenix, Fawkes. The scarlet bird was sitting atop his perch, surveying her with his bright yellow eyes.

Sunlight poured in through the large open windows, bathing the room with light. The endless shelves of books looked ancient yet were free from dust. Many figures lay snoozing in their portraits. The many clocks around the room read twenty to four. Rose had been in the office many a time, though she usually used the door. She had never travelled by Portkey before. Floo, she used everyday, the Knight Bus and the traditional method of walking she used a lot but could not remember ever using a Portkey before. It wasn’t the most pleasant experience, but then again neither had Floo been the first time. She really wished she could Apparate.

Suddenly the fireplace erupted into green flames and out came the figure of Albus Dumbledore.

“Please sit, Rose,” said Dumbledore kindly. “I will have some tea and biscuits brought for you. Please bear with me for a few moments, I just need to summon a few friends who I think also need to hear this.

In less than a minute, a House Elf appeared carrying a tray of tea and an assortment of biscuits. While Rose sat and ate, Dumbledore marched up to a large golden disk. It was about the size of a Quaffle, except that it was flat. Embossed on the front was the figure of a phoenix. The headmaster raised his wand to the disk.

“Lily Potter,” he said firmly. “James Potter, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Alastor Moody, Peter Pettigrew, Anastasia Feather, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Severus Snape, Nymphadora Tonks, Minerva McGonagall, Rupert Jones, Zing Chi.”

Across the country, eight wizards and four witches, while going about their daily lives, suddenly felt a tingling in their wrist. Every one of them wore a wristwatch, an item completely unobtrusive, and completely different from that of the others. Even when together no one would notice the similarity of the watches for they all looked different, made to the preference of the owner. But what they did have in common was the fact that they were all made by Albus Dumbledore and right now, their primary purpose was in use. Each of them felt a vibration on their wrist and knew precisely what it meant. Each of them politely excused themselves and made their way as swiftly as possible to the Headmaster’s office at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Rose watched as within a minute, the fire burst into flame and out walked, or rather limped Mad-Eye Moody. She sat perfectly still as the rest of those who had been summoned, appeared in the fire. McGonagall, Snape and her mother come by the door since they were already in the building.

“Rose!” snapped her mother as soon as she set eyes on her. “Out, you are not allowed in meetings.”

“But...” began Rose.

“Do what your mother says,” said her father.

“Lily, my dear,” said Dumbledore firmly. “I believe that what is about to be discussed will affect Miss Potter as much as your or I.”

“Albus, you are NOT endangering my daughter, are you?” said Lily, the implied threat in her voice as clear as crystal.

“Perish the thought,” said Dumbledore, sinking into his seat. “I believe she needs to hear this, because it concerns her brother.” That did the trick. Her mother’s face changed instantly from one of anger to one of...Rose wasn’t entirely sure what it was. However, her mother fell silent and sank into a seat between her father and Godfather. Last to arrive was Snape. He shot Sirius at dirty look before taking a seat.

“Apologies for the short notice,” began Dumbledore when everyone was sat, but something has come up and I think you all need to hear this. “As you may or may not know, half an hour ago, the Hogwarts Express was ambushed by Death Eaters. The leader of the attack is confirmed as being Harry Potter; but, and this is a big but, Harry’s behaviour indicates that he also tried to prevent the attack. It is but one of several rumours of better yet ‘inconsistencies’ in Harry’s behaviour since his capture. Rose, I know this is not easy, but would you please describe exactly what happened on the train today, from the point where you left to battle the Death Eaters, until...”

“YOU DID WHAT?” shrieked Lily. Rose recoiled as her mother erupted in the seat next to her. “HAVE YOU ANY IDEA...”

“Lily,” said Dumbledore firmly, cutting the scolding short. “She did what any true Gryffindor would have done. Do not chastise her for following her instinct. If memory serves, I seem to recall another certain young witch who ignored my specific instruction to leave during the Hogsmeade Attacks of 1978, because her friend was off shopping and was unaware of the danger.”

“Entirely different situation, Albus,” said Lily blushing.

“Can we please save the family squabbling for later, and get down to business,” said Snape impatiently. “I do have other things to be getting on with.”

“I don’t suppose washing your hair would be among them,” muttered Sirius, loud enough for James and Rose to hear. Both snorted into their tea, earning odd glances from the others.

“Severus is right,” said Dumbledore loudly, bringing attention back to the group. “Miss Potter, please tell us of your encounter with your brother.”

“When he first saw him, he was...he dressed as a Death Eater but without the mask and his hood was lowered. I could see Dragon-Scale armour under his cloak. He had a sword over his back and his wand was in his hand. He was carrying a girl, a first year. I shouted to him, telling him to put her down. He seemed almost confused. He asked what we were doing. What was going on? He said he was one of us. I don’t know what he meant by that. I was angry I shouted at him about the trolley-lady. I watched them kill her. She was being tortured and Harry just gave the order to kill her. When I confronted him, he said he had to do it, to end her suffering. That no one deserves to feel that pain. Then Malfoy turned up with a couple of other, probably Crabbe and Goyle. Harry just took them out like that.” She snapped her fingers. “It took seconds and all four were on the floor without a spell fired. It was then; once they were all down that he stunned them. He then told me to tell you that you need to wipe Malfoy’s memory before he tells anyone that it was Harry who did that to them. He said that Voldemort must never know. Then he just left. He also wants to meet you, sir,” she pointed at the Headmaster. “Tomorrow at noon, beneath the empty pedestal on Nelson’s column.”

She finished speaking and looked around. There were many confused faces around.

“Harry Potter stuns his own side, protects a defenceless child and tells us to cover his tracks. What are we to think of this?” asked Dumbledore. “I am open to suggestion.”

“It’s a mind game,” said Snape instantly. Rose felt a pang of anger. He wouldn’t even hear it out. All he saw was another Potter and wouldn’t even give him the time of day. Greasy git! “That or he’s finally lost it,” added Snape. “I’ve seen first hand what he is capable of. This has scam written all over it.”

“Snape may have a point,” said Madam Feather. “He’s shown many a time how cold he can be. The boy is no fool. He would never compromise himself like that without purpose. He will undoubtedly have an ulterior motive.”

“And if he just wanted to talk to you,” said Miss Chi. “Why not just surrender to the Aurors?”

“Because he would end up in a cell again,” said Shackbolt. “Crouch would have him executed without trial for all the embarrassment he caused him. Potter knows this. But the big problem is this: Harry referred to the Order by name.” There was a collective gasp. “He asked why the Order wanted him arrested, which means he knows I am a member. If he wanted to talk to you, Albus, why not surrender to me? If he knew what the Order is, he could have surrendered to me and asked me to speak to you.”

“Maybe he doesn’t trust you,” said Rose. All eyes turned to her and she felt herself going red. “Well, what I mean is...he said there were spies in the Ministry. There might be spies in the Order.”

“He would know if there were, Potter,” sneered Snape. “He is high enough to know of most of the spies.”

“Most but not all,” said Dumbledore. “Only Tom himself knows all of them.”

“He also saved my life,” said a woman Rose had never seen before. She was younger than the rest, and had luminous pink hair. “MacNair had me, but Potter stunned him. He then winked at me and ran off.”

“He also used stunning spells,” said Dumbledore. “No Dark Curses, just stunner against the Aurors. Why this sudden aversion to killing? But let’s move on. At the trial, did you catch everything he said? He said his parents were dead, that he had no sister. He believed that they had been murdered fifteen years ago.”

“He also wanted to speak to you then,” said Rose.

“Precisely,” said Dumbledore. “Unfortunately, Crouch never informed me.”

“Son of a...” began Sirius, before being elbowed in the ribs.

“But it demonstrates continuity,” said Dumbledore. “Since his capture, he has tried to talk to me on several occasions.”

“But that doesn’t mean anything,” said Snape. “He claimed that Voldemort had been defeated, that he has lived with his aunt and uncle. Maybe his mind has just snapped. His actions on the train were not those of a rational man, not that Potters are famous for being rational. I believe he may be getting paranoid and attacking anyone who he feels poses a threat to him,

whether they are Death Eaters breaking him out of St Mungo's or Aurors trying to arrest him. Maybe he really has gone insane."

"Shut up!" said Lily harshly.

"Lily," Albus stopped her before anything else was said.

"If he's paranoid," said Rose. "Why is he only using harmless spells?"

"A good point, but there is more to consider," said Dumbledore. "As the Heliopath attacked, Harry shouted a warning to me, seconds before the witness exploded. He undoubtedly saved my life and that of Mr. Crouch. Also, every hostage he took in his escape was released unharmed. Every spell he has used has been a stunner. When I looked into his eyes, I saw not the hatred and rage I had expected, but pain, almost despair. The boy is highly capable and highly lethal, but I believe that inside him there is a great battle going on. Some great pain drives him. I believe that I should meet with him. Whatever you believe the only one who can answer these questions is Harry himself."

There was a pause as everyone assimilated the information.

"What makes you think he won't kill you on sight?" asked Snape. "This could be an elaborate hoax to get you alone. We have seen the Dark Lord use long and slow schemes such as this before. He's a master manipulator. If Potter is there, there will be a high chance that he'll have ranking Death Eaters there. They will try to take you in."

"Or at least try to?" asked Shackbolt.

"Irrelevant," said Snape. "Whether he could or not wouldn't matter. The Dark Lord's power has grown. He believes himself to be the Headmaster's superior. He is arrogant enough to try it. Potter would be the ideal pawn because of your emotional attachment to him. What makes you think this isn't treachery?"

"Because of the final piece of the puzzle," said Dumbledore. "Phoenixes are remarkable creatures. Harry sent a letter to me today, warning of the attack. It arrived five minutes before the train was attacked. You may think this was a distraction or part of another plan, but bare this in mind. He sent it by way of Fawkes. Fawkes came to him, and the only one who can summon a Phoenix is its master, or someone completely loyal to said master. Harry summoned Fawkes. He could not have done that if he had any ill intent towards me."

"So what does all this mean?" asked Lupin. "Is Harry a new person? Is he defecting, or is this one big wind up?"

"All questions I shall put to Harry," said Dumbledore. "I believe we have no choice but to meet him. Any objections, thought, suggestions?"

“But Trafalgar Square is so crowded,” said Shacklebolt. “It will be impossible to cover you.”

“Exactly Harry’s intention,” said Dumbledore. “It is crowded so that no one will use Magic. It will be easy to disappear. He can walk around without being spotted and if he senses any of you around he can disappear.”

“You want to go without protection?” asked Mad-Eye.

“There is a high chance of someone magical being there, just out of chance,” said Remus. “What if some innocent passer by went to the prophet and said that Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter had been seen together. It would destroy trust in both of you.”

“An impostor?” suggested Anastasia.

“Harry would see through it,” said Dumbledore. “He is also no fool. He will most likely check for magical forms of surveillance. He has escaped them himself very proficiently for years, he will know if I am ‘wired’ I believe the term is - Magically at least,” he added as an afterthought.

“We have to do something,” said James.

“So we do,” said Dumbledore. “This is what I had in mind.”

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Nelson’s column stood high and proud in the midday sun. Pigeons sat all over the marble structure while tourists and other Muggle bustled about below. The sky was clear and the sun warm. It was a peaceful day, save for the hustle and bustle that was central London. Far beneath Nelson himself, the square was alive with activity. Pigeons scattered as pedestrians walked through the square coming to land again before the old ladies who sprinkled bread over the floor. There are four pillars surrounding the base of the column. Three of them held statues of lions; one was bare. The original builders had run out of funding before it’s completion. For years the National Trust and other National Heritage agencies had wanted to put something on the pedestal, but nothing had ever come of it. Famous artists had submitted suggestions; all of them had been turned down. Harry always wondered why they didn’t just dig out the original designs and complete it how it was originally intended.

Harry stood inside a Newsagent to the east of the square. He had picked up a magazine called White Dwarf, though he wasn’t reading it, just looking as if he was, while keeping a careful eye on the space beneath the empty pedestal. He checked his watch, 11:57. Dumbledore would be on time. The trouble was that his escort, and Harry knew he could have one, would be here as well.

Harry didn’t know why everyone was acting strangely, and he didn’t care anymore. Something was up and everyone was acting strangely. He didn’t trust anyone. Albus

Dumbledore was the most powerful wizard of the century. If anyone could sort it out it would be him but Harry didn't trust anyone anymore. He would have to watch Dumbledore very carefully. His mind had finally snapped. After all the pain and suffering of his school life, the murder of the tea-lady had finally topped it. Harry found himself not caring anymore. Upon his return the previous day he had been congratulated. Those who had survived the attack had been marked and then they had dined. The Dark Lord had kept himself to himself. He had watched a Muggle being tortured as he returned yesterday, but found no pity left in him. He mind filled only with the image of the tea-lady's eyes. He was alone in this. A Stranger in an Unholy Land and no one was going to help him. Dumbledore was his only hope of getting home, but he wasn't going to give away anything. He cared about one thing and one thing only, getting home.

He didn't know how he suddenly came into possession of all these powers and abilities, and he didn't give a rat's arse. All he knew was that he had them and he would use them however he had to get home, whatever the cost. He had to get things back to normal for he was the only one who could, the only one who remembered how it should be. He had excused himself from Grimmauld Place, telling people that he was going out for the day. He'd be back whenever he felt like it.

There! It was midday and a figure in a grey business suit, with a long white beard was standing beneath the pedestal. Harry put the magazine back and walked out without buying anything, much to the annoyance of the shopkeeper. Harry pulled out his omnioculars. Putting them to his eyes and zooming in, Harry watched the square from the bus stop outside the shop. It was glass so he could see through it. He surveyed the crowds, looking for anyone loitering, looking attentive or dressed abnormally. Aurors could never pass themselves off as Muggles. Harry didn't know precisely what he was looking for, but he knew that he would know when he saw it.

There! By the fountain. A man in a business suit, holding a briefcase was standing, looking around. He seemed far too serious and attentive to be a tourist. He was looking for something. The briefcase was tucked under his arm, rather than carrying it by his handle. That made it heavier and it was not what someone waiting for his accomplice would do. He was standing, which someone waiting would not, not if there was an empty bench a few feet to his right. Harry quickly pulled the hood of the hooded jumper he was wearing up around his head. He was wearing trainers, sports shorts and a hooded top. He looked like a jogger, though he had his wand tucked into the waistband of his shorts.

Harry pocketed the omnioculars and jogged over towards the fountain. The Auror was next to the edge, looking around the crowds. Harry jogged around the left of the round fountain and over to the man. He stopped next to him, leaning over, his hand on his knees. Pretending he was getting his breath.

"Excuse me," Harry panted to the man. "Have you..." He trailed off. As the Auror leaned in closer trying to hear, Harry poked his wand into the man's gut. "*Stupefy!*" he whispered. The man's body went limp in his arms. Harry sat him on the edge of the fountain, leaning the unconscious body of the Auror against the statue on the edge. It looked as if he was sitting from a distance and asleep from close up. Hopefully, no one would intervene. It was then that Harry

noticed the earpiece. A Walkman style earphone was in his left ear. Harry opened his jacket and pulled the wire. Out came a black walky-talky with a, earpiece and a mic on a wire. Harry quickly inserted it into his own ear, attached the mic to his jumper and put the radio in his pocket.

*Alpha One in position by the buses. Negative contact,* crackled a voice, in the radio. Harry glanced over at the busses. The Auror was wearing an orange Hawaiian shirt and blue shorts with flip-flops.

*Alpha Two in position in the café,* came another voice. *No sign of Potter.* There was a pause.

*Alpha Three respond,* said a voice. Harry recognised the distinctive growl. *Alpha Three respond,* growled Moody down the radio. Harry took a breath.

“Alpha Three in position by the fountain,” he said making his voice much deeper. “Still no sign of him.”

*“Keep your eyes open,”*

There were two more, plus Dumbledore and Moody was somewhere around. Harry didn't know where. He did have a radio, but that was only so much use. Harry suddenly had an idea. Between the pedestals, there is a recess, an area with limited visibility. He had a Portkey in his pocket. He had had a Death Eater make it for him. It would take them to the park on Magnolia Crescent, somewhere where Harry knew well. Harry took a deep breath it was now or never. He was thirty metres from Dumbledore. That was about a four or five seconds sprint. Harry took another deep breath and prepared himself for action.

He pulled the microphone to his mouth.

“I see him!” he whispered, keeping his voice deep. “He...bugger, he's spotted me. He's making for the ice cream stall. Cut him off! All units, go, go, go,” Harry watched as six men started moving swiftly towards the Ice Cream shack on the north exit. Harry himself broke into a run straight to where Dumbledore was standing. Harry grabbed his arm roughly as he passed, swinging him around like a clumsy dance, bringing both of them into the shielded recess.

“I said alone,” said Harry angrily, lowering his hood.

“Would you have come alone, had I asked to meet you?” asked Dumbledore calmly. “What do you want to talk to me about?”

“Not here,” snapped Harry angrily, reaching for the Portkey in his pocket.

“You're right,” said Dumbledore gravely. “Not here. Forgive me, Harry.” Harry then realised that the Headmaster's eyes were not looking at him, but over his shoulder. Harry realised too late that he was been caught. Suddenly he felt two sharp impacts on his arm. Two

things had pierced his skin. They were like spikes. He turned around to see two metal sticks in his arms. Two wires came from the ends of them to a small back box held by a man in a suit. Harry recognised it instantly.

“Bollocks!” was all he had time to say. Hundreds of volts of electricity surged through his body, and the image of the man faded into darkness.

Harry was unconscious before he hit the ground.

## ~~~~ Chapter V ~~~~ Trust

*“Men are not prisoners of fate  
only prisoners of their own minds”*

*~ Franklin D. Roosevelt*

“Sam, come here!” called Margaret. “Honestly, that dog!” she said to her friend Barbara as they potted through Trafalgar Square. The mutt in question, a Jack Russell named Sam, was charging head long into a crowd of pigeons, scattering them in all directions, much to the annoyance of passers-by as they had to duck to avoid the flock. Sam, on the other hand, was having the time of his life, happily yapping away at the pigeons as they flew out of his reach.

“Oh, he is a one,” smiled Barbara as she sank onto a bench. “One reason I never got a dog. I don’t have the energy to keep up with one at my age.”

“Linford Christie couldn’t keep up with Sam,” muttered Margaret, taking a seat beside her friend and removing the cup of coffee she had just bought from its paper bag. She removed the lid and sipped the hot liquid. Next to her saw see that Barbara had done the same.

“Love the hair, by the way,” ventured Margaret. Conversation with Babs had been hard since her husband Gordon had passed away last week. She seemed so distant, which was why Maggie had invited her out today, to try and take her mind off everything. Babs made the smallest of gestures with her eyebrows as she sipped her coffee. She was never one for needless conversation.

Margaret looked around, seeking inspiration; something to talk about, something to try and cheer Babs up, just a little. It was then that she caught sight of an old man standing beneath the empty pedestal of Nelson’s Column. He wore a grey business suit but he looked so... un-business-like. He had a long white beard that flowed down his chest, reaching to his belt. He had long white hair and wore a pair of half-moon spectacles.

“Some people,” said Maggie to herself before turning to Barbara. “I mean, look at that man.” The two women looked over to the man who stood motionless beneath the pedestal. “That hair should be made illegal.”

The elderly gentlemen in question stood perfectly still; apparently oblivious to the fact that he was being watched. The ladies watched as the man took a pocket watch from his inside pocket and checked it. He looked pensive for a few seconds before putting it away.

“I wonder if...” began Barbara.

Suddenly the crowd of pigeons before the ladies took to the sky, scattering in all directions. One clumsy bird even knocked Maggie’s scalding coffee into her lap. She was instantly on her feet, trying to brush the boiling liquid off of her skirt, and trying to get the now

boiling material away from her skin. She vaguely remembered reading about a woman in America who had deliberately spilt coffee on herself, which had scalded her, and then sued McDonalds for making coffee too hot. Stupid woman.

“SAM!” shouted Maggie. That dog was becoming a nuisance. She would have to put him back on the lead, but it was not the dog that had scattered the pigeons. As the mass of feathers reached the sky, the ladies saw that the disturbance had been caused not by the dog, but by a jogger. The young man was dressed in a grey hooded jumper and blue jogging shorts with white trainers. The hood was pulled up, obscuring his face. Completely unaware of the annoyance he had caused, the young jogger continued over past the fountain.

Maggie let him go and started to dab up the coffee with a handkerchief, helped by Babs. Satisfied with the condition of herself, Maggie looked up. The bearded man was still there, and again was checking his pocket watch. It was almost as if he was waiting for something. Margaret was just about to say something when suddenly the jogger reappeared, the same one who had passed them just now, causing her to spill her coffee.

She watched in horror as the jogger crashed violently into the old man, taking his arm in his hand and spinning him around. They twirled full circle before the jogger forced the old man up against the wall. He was pointing something at the old man's throat. She couldn't see what it was but she could guess: a knife. The jogger's hood was still up, and Margaret couldn't see the young man's face. This was clearly a mugging, *in broad daylight!*

'Police!' was the first thought to go through Margaret's head. This was a mugging. Where was the Old Bill? There should always be a copper on duty. *This country is going to the dogs!* Margaret watched helplessly as the jogger said something to the old man.

It was then that two young men wearing identical black suits and sunglasses appeared from around the pedestal. They had been behind the column and were now approaching the alcove. The jogger had his back to the approaching men, so he didn't detect their approach. He suddenly realised they were there, but it was too late. One of the men was holding what looked like a large remote control for a television. Maggie watched as two cords shot out of the box and hit the jogger. There was a second's pause, then the jogger went rigid and collapsed.

A wave of gasps went up from those near enough to see what was happening. The commotion was enough to get the attention of passers by. The two men in suits and the elderly man quickly darted to the fallen form of the jogger. Six more including one with a nasty limp, eye-patch and a crutch appeared through the gathering crowd. Margaret couldn't see what was happening as all the bodies blocked her view.

They all produced wallets from their inside pockets, bearing the insignia of the Metropolitan Police Department.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” called the limping man. “Do not be alarmed, we are police officers. There is nothing to see here. Please move along!”

Despite the policeman's orders, the crowd did not disperse. Everyone was trying to catch a glimpse of the fallen jogger. It was quite exciting, after all. How many real-life police sting operations does a normal person see? Through the mass of bodies, Maggie could see that the four men were tending to the fallen jogger. The man's hood had fallen back as he had fallen. He looked no more than sixteen, seventeen; still a child. He had raven black hair that stuck up in all directions.

Suddenly there was a loud blast of a horn beside them, making Margaret jump out of her skin. Barbara, who was also watching the proceedings with interest, knocked her coffee over in surprise. It landed harmlessly on the ground, Babs hardly noticed.

Two large, black Jeeps with tinted windows were making their way in convoy through the crowd, towards the commotion. The driver was moving slowly, blowing the horn every few seconds. The rapidly growing crowd parted to allow the Jeep through. When it stopped, two more men got out with a stretcher. They were both dressed identically to the other men in suits. One looked tired and had a little grey hair starting to show. He quickly pulled a stretcher out of the back and was joined by another man with long black hair. They carried the stretcher to unconscious figure. They quickly loaded the jogger onto the stretcher and put him into the back of the Jeep without a word. The other men stood beside the stretcher, shielding it from view. With the door closed the remaining men climbed into one of the two Jeeps and the convoy made its way through the crowd and off into the busy London traffic.

"Well there's something you don't see everyday," said Barbara.

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The lifeless body crashed to the ground with a thump. The tall figure in black hooded robes stepped over the body without a second thought and sank into the armchair by the fire. The figure rested his elbow on the arm of the chair and his hand on his chin. His brow was furrowed in thought. Not even a round of torture could distract him at the moment. Even the feeling of absolute power that comes just before you end a life could not make the feeling go away.

"Something vexes thee?" hissed a voice from the floor.

"Indeed, Nagini," hissed back the figure.

"The boy?"

"You are as perceptive as you are deadly," hissed back the Dark Lord. The snake was one hundred percent right. There had been something about the boy as they had talked yesterday. Nothing Voldemort did, not even the purging of an unworthy Mudblood, could take his mind off what he had seen the night before.

Upon his return, Harry had been...different. Distant wasn't the right word, but unfocussed was not entirely right either. There was the usual determination, but it was mixed with something else. Despair. And it was this despair that concerned Voldemort. Had that curse

to the head fried Harry's brain? That was a curse scar and it had hit him right on the forehead. The scar looked quite nasty. Had it damaged his brain? Had the boy had an epiphany? All Voldemort knew was that that was not the same Harry that had left him a week ago. What had gone wrong? That one mission could have won the war for him. His prize would make Hogwarts vulnerable and with Hogwarts levelled to the ground, nothing could stop him. Harry had never failed before and he had gone through tighter security than that before.

Something had happened to Harry. And then, once he was in custody, his behaviour was described as erratic and confused. It had not taken much to acquire the manuscript of the trial. Voldemort had read it over and over. Harry was either being very clever or...*or what?* He claimed that Voldemort had been defeated. *A blasphemy in itself*, mused Voldemort. Then he claimed his parents were murdered. Voldemort had worked his magic well. The boy thought of him as a father; the Potters were as good as dead to him. He had even put his sister under the Imperius Curse a year back, though she was unaware of it. But *literally* dead? And if he believed they were merely dead to him, as the expression goes, why had he claimed that Voldemort himself had killed them? The Potters were Dumbledore's allies; they were inconvenient and the husband was a good Auror, responsible for numerous of Voldemort's pawns residing in Azkaban. But Voldemort did not consider them inconvenient enough to warrant his personal attention.

So why the apparent madness? With his advanced years, and his experience of bending the mentally deranged to his will, even Voldemort could not see the logic in Harry's moves. The apparent insanity could have been a bluff in order to get him off, but surely he knew that Lady Malfoy would have a back up plan. Surely he would know that Voldemort would never allow the infamous Harry Potter to go to Azkaban.

But that could be overlooked. Harry always had his own fail-safes. What bothered Voldemort more than the trial was their conversation last night. There was fear in his eyes, as well as defiance and it was that that concerned Voldemort. Harry was holding something back. Not an outright lie, but a lie of omission. The boy had even raised a somewhat flimsy Occlumency shield. What was he hiding? He did not push at the time because he needed Harry to be at his best to attack the Hogwarts Express. He needed to show the world that Harry Potter was back in action. It would show the country that even the most high profile arrest ever did nothing to stop him. They had arrested his highest-ranking Death Eater and yet they had gained nothing. In fact they had made it worse for themselves.

The Hogwarts Express would be seen as revenge for the capture of Harry Potter, a purely political move. He gained nothing from it. The cost/benefit ratio of the attack had been very low: it had cost nothing to get forty new recruits, some who he knew had lied about their blood and were not pure, but he had still given them masks and set them to work. What was gained was terror. The Dark Lord had big plans, but he needed a constant barrage of small attacks to keep the public in his grip of fear. The impure rabble had done their job: at present hundreds of owls were bound for Hogwarts, parents desperate to see if their children had made it there alive. The statement had been made. Those of impure blood who had survived then provided entertainment for those of pure blood. It had cost so little and the benefit was huge. The Prophet would play it

down. But other papers that were not so politically ruled would ask the question: could Crouch cope? It all took attention away from the primary target.

The problem was Dumbledore. As much as Voldemort loathed admitting it, the old man was wise, if somewhat sentimental. He would know the meaning of the attack. Arrangements would already be in place.

But back to Harry. Voldemort was concerned by what he had seen. Harry had declined to take part in the torture- not unusual in itself, but combined with what he had seen, with Lucius' usual bickering and claims that Harry was less loyal than himself. It all added up to there being something different about Harry, but what? The boy had kept to himself all night and had gone out that morning. Voldemort didn't know when he would be back, and he didn't care. He had more important things to do. He knew that next time he saw Harry he would have to interrogate him, but it was not important enough to justify summoning him right now. He had bigger fish to fry. Still, he could not shake the worried feeling. Ignorance was a new experience for the Dark Lord and he didn't think much of it.

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Rose walked slowly down to the entrance hall, wrapped up tightly in her school cloak. Harry was coming! She didn't dare believe it. Could it truly be real? She hoped that Dumbledore was right, that something had changed in Harry. She could imagine it now; she would have her brother back. Two years of agony would be washed away instantly with Harry at her side. She watched from the archway, as the Ravenclaw Quidditch team darted around the pitch. She could only see them when they flew especially high as the stand got in the way. *Chang's obviously an eager beaver this year*, she mused to herself.

It had been a strange weekend. Firstly there had been an attack. She was amazed that they had survived, and yet, her conscience was weighted heavily by the deaths of those whom she alone had sent to try and fight the Death Eaters. What had she been thinking? Obviously students were no match for Death Eaters. She should have seen that they were going to get hurt. Her weekend had become even stranger as she had waited yesterday evening for the carriages to arrive. After her very first Order meeting, she had gone to meet Ginny. As the carriages had arrived, Rose was amazed to see that the carriages were no longer horseless. However, they weren't pulled by horses either. What the creatures were, Rose did not know. They were horse-shaped but decaying. They were...disgusting. She would have to ask a professor about them at some point. Ginny had been able to see them as well, and Luna claimed that they had always been there. Right now she had had one thought on her mind: Harry.

Those students who were uninjured had arrived in carriages, as per tradition. Those unable to walk or carry on the journey had been sent by Portkey to the hospital wing from the site of the crash. Madam Pomfrey and Rose's mother were being run off their feet with all the injured. Those prefects who had accompanied Rose had been all right, thanks to Harry. The other end of the train had not been so lucky. From what Rose could discern, they had been ambushed. Four were confirmed dead and another fifteen in the hospital, plus some nasty knocks from the

crash itself. Four dead: Rose had told them to go and they had. Their deaths were on her head. If she had kept her mouth shut those four would still be alive.

“Rosie?” whispered a voice behind her. She didn’t even have to turn around; she knew who it was. “Thinking about those who have passed on?” the voice asked.

“Yeah,” muttered Rose, turning to face her godfather. There was no hint of a smile on his face. She was used to seeing him jovial and full of energy. Now he looked old and tired. He had been one of the Aurors that had flocked to the crash-site to fight. She assumed that Dumbledore had called another meeting for tonight. She couldn’t think why Sirius would otherwise be there. He was sporting a gash on his cheek courtesy of his deranged cousin. It was covered in a white patch but Rose could see a red line where the blood was beginning to soak through. This was after twenty-four hours. It must have been a curse of some sort. “It’s my fault they’re dead,” muttered Rose.

“What?” said Sirius, fixing her with a piercing stare.

“I told them to fight, I sent them to their deaths,” confessed Rose. She kicked a stone irritably. It bounced out of the hall and down the steps into the courtyard. “If I had kept my mouth shut, they’d still be alive...”

“And many more would be dead,” interrupted Sirius. “Rose, what you did today saved lives. We’re all sorry that four were lost but many more would have died if you hadn’t acted.”

“I guess, but...” sighed Rose.

“But it still doesn’t change the fact that there are four families grieving the loss of their son or daughter today,” finished Sirius. “That is part of why you and your friends are kept out of the Order. Sometimes we have to make such choices. None of us like doing it, but it must be done and it does weigh on our consciences, but we can’t let him win, Rose.”

“I guess,” muttered Rose. There was undisputable wisdom in his words, but it didn’t take the guilt away. Their faces would never leave her. She felt a certain respect for Dumbledore. He must surely have done this before, he surely must have had people die following his commands. He must carry around so much guilt. “So who were they?”

“All prefects. Two Ravenclaws, one Gryffindor and a Slytherin,” replied Sirius.

“A Gryffindor prefect?” asked Rose. “Who?”

“Adrian Westmoor,” said Sirius gravely.

“Merlin,” sighed Rose. He was in most of her classes. He was a nice boy, who hadn’t deserved to die, but had on account of her. “I knew him well.”

“There will be a minute’s silence, funerals and the parents will visit. But I have a feeling that there is more that is bothering you.”

“Harry,” said Rose plainly. There was no use skirting the issue. Dumbledore was bringing him in. It was the main thing on everyone’s mind at the moment. “Do you think Dumbledore is right?”

“He’s a brilliant man, and I want to believe him,” said Sirius carefully.

“But...” pressed Rose.

“I just don’t know. I’ve seen the aftermath of what’s been done. Don’t get me wrong; I hope he’s right. I just don’t want to count my chickens before they’ve hatched.”

“So why didn’t you go with Dumbledore?”

“I need to be here; as much as I would love to go, my place is here, or so Dumbledore says,” said Sirius, sounding a little bitter. “This could go very...”

Sirius froze. He glanced down at his watch. After a short pause, he looked directly into Rose’s eyes.

“He’s here.”

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The black Jeep pulled up to the entrance of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The ride had taken a mere five minutes, thanks to a little bit of Magic. They had pulled into an alleyway where no one could see them, shortly after leaving Trafalgar Square. The Jeeps incorporated the same spells that worked on a Ministry car, so they could zip through the traffic. Once out of the sight of any nosy Muggles, the Jeep had been transported, along with its cargo, to the gates of Hogwarts. The whole Jeep was, for all intents and purposes, turned into a Portkey. It was a tremendous piece of wand work, and only Albus would have been able to do it.

The Jeep appeared out of thin air at the Gates to Hogwarts. It was nearly twenty past twelve and the sun was high in the sky. Because of yesterday’s attack on the train, today’s and tomorrow’s classes had been cancelled. Albus could see the Quidditch team practising on the pitch. This was highly dangerous and he knew it. He had double-crossed the boy and who knows what he might be capable of. Albus just hoped that what he had read in the boy’s eyes was accurate. If he was wrong, he had just prodded the proverbial sleeping dragon. He also had to bear in mind that Harry could not be seen. News spreads fast in a school and word would make its way back to either the Ministry or to Tom if Harry was seen.

With a flick of his wand, Albus opened the gates and tapped Remus on the shoulder. Lupin then let the clutch up and the Jeep surged forward up the hill. Its tinted windows prevented any students who might be around or who look out of the window at the wrong moment from

seeing the precious cargo. Albus was sitting in the back of the first Jeep, next to the unconscious form of Harry Potter. Remus was driving, with Severus in the front and Diggory to his right. The second Jeep had been returned to the Ministry so that the charms could be removed before the car was returned to the dealer from which it had been borrowed. As Hogwarts loomed closer, Albus began to wonder, not for the first time, if those sturdy walls really could withstand a full-scale assault by Tom's forces. As intimidating as they looked, Albus still had his doubts. He also knew that an attack was inevitable. Sooner or later, Tom would come.

The car skidded to a halt before the double-doors that led into the entrance hall. Dumbledore climbed out, along with Cedric and Severus. Remus remained inside the car. Albus looked around, checking to see if they were being watched. This was lunacy, but he had no choice. They had to get Harry inside before he woke up. He was not stunned magically, so there was no telling how long he would be unconscious.

Up ahead Albus could see Sirius and Rose-Marie. He realised he should have sent a message ahead asking that she be kept away from Harry. It was too late now. The girl had a right to know, but her timing was inconvenient. Albus sighed to himself.

"WOW!" said a voice. All of them spun around to see a group of second year Ravenclaws approaching from the front of the Jeep. "What's that for, sir?" asked one of them. They all stared appreciatively at the huge Jeep in front of them. Albus slammed the boot shut, with Harry still inside, stopping anyone catching a glimpse of him.

"Muggle Studies," said Dumbledore quickly. He had seen Severus open his mouth and he didn't want any snide comment making it seem like something secretive was going on. His way would make them lose interest in the Jeep, and it's cargo.

"Any chance of a drive?" said one. "I've always wanted to have a go."

"Do you hold a driver's licence, Mr. Crockford?" queried Dumbledore with a laugh.

"Not as such," said the boy. He stood for a few seconds, before the whole party turned around and headed back into the school. Breathing a sigh of relief, Albus threw the invisibility cloak over the stretch and levitated it out of the Jeep. He then began to walk up to the school. Rose-Marie and Sirius were still standing in the entrance. Albus passed by them in silence, and to his annoyance, they fell into step beside the stretcher.

Albus knew that the Hospital Wing would be crowded after the attack on the train. Twelve students were currently at St Mungo's, but a further eight were in the Hospital Wing with less serious injuries. They would be too curious and would peek around any barrier he erected. Still, Albus had another plan.

They laid him down on the bed. With a flick of his wand, Albus transfigured his jogging shorts into a pair of Hospital issue pyjama trousers and vanished his hoody and t-shirt.

"He looks almost peaceful," said Rose softly.

“That he does,” said Albus softly. She was right, the boy was unconscious, but his face wasn’t twisted in a way that made him appear angry, scared or anything like that. He seemed peaceful. Albus watched as Rose gently brushed his hair from his forehead, revealing a curious scar.

Albus knew at once it was a Curse scar. He had no idea which curse or how he had gotten it, but it appeared quite nasty. Rose had tears in her eyes as she gently stroked his hair. The boy was relaxed but Albus could tell that there was power in that body. His muscular form and collection of scars showed that he really had been through the wars. However, it was the scar on his forehead that interested Albus the most.

“Are you going to wake him?” asked Rose impatiently.

“I’m afraid not,” said Albus kindly. He knew she didn’t want to hear this and was unsurprised to see a glare on her face. “He was not stunned nor was any magic used on him. We used an electric stun gun, or Tazer to subdue him. It would be unwise to wake him magically. His body still needs to sort itself out after the effects of the Tazer.”

“But...”

“Rose,” said Dumbledore kindly. “I know this is hard, but I must talk to him first. I cannot allow you near him until I know more. I must know why he is here and that it is safe for you before I allow you near him.” The poor girl looked sadly up at him. She must know he was right but she wasn’t happy. She finally had seen her brother again. He was so close, but Albus couldn’t let her see him. Not yet. She was so near, but yet so far from having Harry back.

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*The night was still and silent. Not a creature was moving except for the figure in a black hooded cloak. He had appeared in a flash out of thin air. The figure looked around cautiously, before throwing a coat hanger to the ground and heading towards the house. The quaint cottage was surrounded by a large lawn and flowerbed, and bordered by an ivy-covered stone wall. There were trees in the garden, which the children of the house had once climbed. The moonlight cast shadows over the garden and the whole lane.*

*Harry walked slowly down the lane, his footsteps making no sound thanks to his soft-soled trainers. The lane was not tarmac but gravel that had set in mud, making it solid, but with many loose stones. His hooded cloak kept him warm enough; the trouble was it ruined his peripheral vision. He was like a horse with blinders, but he couldn’t afford to be recognised, not that there was anybody around, but one could never be too careful. The moonlight would make it easy for him to be seen.*

*He walked silently up to the gate. There was a silver plaque attached to it. It read,*

GODRIC’S HOLLOW

*Harry paused for a second. He looked both ways down the lane and, satisfied that he was alone, he hopped over the gate. He knew all too well that it squeaked and that the occupants would know instantly if it were opened. Harry hadn't been back here in more than a year. Looking up at the warm and cosy house, Harry felt a pang of regret; no...he wouldn't let himself think like that. He was a Death Eater and proud to be one.*

*Putting such thoughts aside, Harry crept up to the front door. There were no lights on inside. The curtains were drawn and the house was quiet. Perfect.*

*"Alohomora!" he whispered, pointing his wand at the lock. There was a soft click and Harry opened the door and stepped in. The hallway was dark as he shut the door. To his surprise he found that his picture was still on the wall. The fools actually believed he would return.*

*Don't hold your breath, thought Harry with a smirk. Looking around Harry saw himself and Rosie waving back from countless pictures. There was the smell of cooking on the air. They had had curry for dinner. He could still smell the spices on the air. The house was warm, cosy and inviting. There was a family atmosphere, yet he could almost taste the air of sadness about the house. This was his test, his ultimate test. He was confronted by the temptations of his former life. He would not fail; he was truly loyal to the Dark Lord. The pithy temptations would not sway him, would not alter his purpose. He had no wish to return to his purposeless life amongst Mudbloods and scum. That mundane existence held no appeal to Harry. **There is only power and those too weak to seek it. I am not weak!***

*Harry cast a cleaning charm over his shoes to stop him leaving footprints. He crept forward, up the stairs, carefully avoiding the two that squeaked. At the top of the stairs he turned left and opened the first door on the left. It was his old room, and nothing had been changed. The room looked exactly as it had the last time he had been there, except for the fact that it had been tidied. He scoffed that he had ever lived like this. Shaking his head, he retreated out of the door.*

*Directly opposite was Rose's room and it was here that Harry had business tonight. He silently slipped into her room. A figure was asleep on the bed, curled up in a foetal position, wrapped in a red duvet. He could see her long black hair on the pillow. She seemed to be sleeping soundly, with a small smile etched on her face.*

*Happy, are we? thought Harry. Was she smiling now that he was gone? It didn't really matter. The room itself had hardly changed. A half full glass of orange juice was on her bedside table and a bowl containing a pool of melted ice cream was on the floor beside her bed. Harry picked up the bowl and placed it on her desk on the far side of the room. The room was silent, except for the faint breaths of the sleeping girl. Harry felt like Dracula, creeping into a young virgin's room in the dead of night, to perform dark deeds. He remembered watching horror films when he was younger. Harry gently sat on the end of the bed next to his sleeping sister and brushed her hair from her face. She looked like his mother, except for her raven coloured hair.*

*She looked so peaceful, so serene. For a second, Harry wondered what life had been like for her since he had become such a public figure. How was she treated at Hogwarts? He quickly*

*quashed the thought. She didn't need or merit his pity. Slowly he took out his wand, ready for business. This was not a social trip, after all.*

*He leaned over her head, his nose centimetres from her cheek. She must be able feel his breath on her skin. Ever so gently he leaned down and kissed her softly on the cheek. "Sleep now, my little angel," he whispered. "Tomorrow, you have work to do. Imperio!" A blue glow came over Rose for a second as the curse took effect. Harry smiled to himself, how weak the minds of the righteous are. He then whispered into her sleeping ear the instructions sent down by the Dark Lord himself.*

*Finished, he then placed a teddy bear, one that he knew to be her favourite, under her arm and slipped silently out of the room. He turned and went swiftly down the stairs.*

*As he came to the bottom, Harry found himself no longer in Godric's Hollow, but somewhere else entirely. The room was an office of sorts. There was a desk and chair at the far end of the room, with its back to a large floor to ceiling window. The entire far wall was a window, through which the London skyline could be seen. They were about six to ten floors up and were looking directly over the river. He could see the Houses of Parliament in the distance and barges sailing up and down the Thames. The building obviously had layers and was much wider at the bottom. He could see the roof of the lower floors stretching out before him. Harry turned back to inspect the office itself.*

*The office was obviously Muggle. There were filing cabinets along one wall, with large landscapes framed above them. There was a coffee maker on a table in the corner and a pair of sofas around a coffee table to his left. The floor was wooden with a zebra skin rug on the middle. Harry crossed to the window. The lights from many other buildings twinkled in the evening sun. The sky was a dark blue but the sun had not yet set.*

*"What are you doing in my office?" snarled a voice.*

*"Not a very polite way to greet your employer," said Harry coldly as he turned to face the man. He was at least fifty and was short and balding. He was wearing a suit without the jacket and his armpits were drenched in sweat. The man was obviously unfit or very nervous.*

*"You again!" spat the man. "I'm calling security."*

*"That would be a waste of time," said Harry calmly. "It is very hard to answer a telephone when one's hand has been cut off."*

*"You murdered them?" gasped the man, visibly paling.*

*"Not me personally," said Harry calmly. "But they will not be joining us."*

*"You'll never get away with this," growled the man. "We have video cameras. They'll see your face, they'll find you."*

*“Do you mean this tape?” asked Harry, removing the cassette from within his robes. “Your cameras are not recording, your security are incapacitated. You belong to me now, Mr. McGowan.”*

*“Look, I fulfilled my end of the bargain,” snarled the man. “The deal is over.”*

*“Indeed you did,” said Harry. “With a perfect degree of success. With that in mind, we have one more...request.”*

*“Request?”*

*“Precisely,” said Harry. “You see you are not the only man in government who knows of our kind. There is one man in particular who interests me.”*

*“And you want me to do what.”*

*“The man in question is a Colonel. We know much about him. We know he was born in Suffolk, he attended University College London and then joined the army. He has done two tours with the SAS and at present is in charge of a highly classified and very shady operation codenamed Artic Thunder.”*

*“Fascinating,” said the man. “How does this involve me?”*

*“To protect the Colonel, he is in hiding,” said Harry. “He is using an old MI6 safe-house, and you work for MI6. I want to know which one. Surely you can find out which one.”*

*“What do you want with him?” asked the man.*

*“Information about his little experiment,” said Harry. “Now do we have a deal or not?”*

*“And why should I help you?”*

*“Because if you refuse, I’ll visit your family,” said Harry icily. He saw a flash of fear flick over the man’s face.*

*“Come on,” pleaded the man, “Don’t involve the family. They have nothing to do with this, leave them out.”*

*“Are you trying to play on my sensitive side?” asked Harry.*

*“Even you must have a family!*

*Even you must have a family!*

***EVEN YOU MUST HAVE A FAMILY!”***

Argh! Harry was suddenly awake in the bed. He was dripping with a cold sweat and his glasses and top had been removed. He was wearing a pair of hospital issue pyjama trousers and nothing else. The sheets were pulled up to his neck. Every muscle in his body ached and he felt ill. His head was throbbing, though not from Voldemort's anger. He could recognise that instantly. This was just a plain old headache, if somewhat severe. He felt like he was going to be sick and as he sat there covered in sweat, he found himself shivering. He was in what appeared to be the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts. All the other beds were empty and the door to Madam Pomfrey's office was shut. The sun was shining through the windows, and reflecting off the polished floor. The smell of potions and ointments lingered on the air.

"Good morning, Harry," said a kindly voice. "You've had a rough couple of days." Harry found himself looking up into a pair of twinkling blue eyes. They were twinkling! Dumbledore hadn't forsaken him. Wait a minute! He had just woken up in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts, Dumbledore didn't hate him anymore, and he felt like death warmed up. It had been a dream! He must have been in a coma; that was why he hadn't been able to wake up! That is why the pinches and the pain from the fights hadn't woken him; he was in a coma, not asleep. When Voldemort's Killing Curse had hit the Chalk Circle, it must have almost killed him and put him in a coma. It had all been one long Nightmare! People didn't hate him! He was home!

"Thank God," smiled Harry weakly. "I thought I was never going to wake up." Harry tried to sit, but he felt his limbs aching as he moved. He still felt really sick and the weight of the sheets and blackest on his stomach was not helping. *I hate comas*, thought Harry bitterly. Was this what it is like to wake from one? "What happened, Professor?" he asked softly. "The last thing I remember was you coming to rescue me on Aunt Marge's farm and then that chalk circle trick of yours saved me and then everything went weird."

"Weird?" echoed the Headmaster, a kind smile etched on his features. How Harry had missed that smile. He had been so resentful of the Headmaster after their conversation last year, but all was now forgiven. He was so glad to see the old man again.

"I was having this weird nightmare," said Harry. "It was horrible. Everyone thought I was a Death Eater, a murderer. You and the Wizengamot even tried me and probably would have sent me Azkaban if...and this is the even weirder part... if Voldemort hadn't sent Narcissa Malfoy to defend me and a Heliopath to get me out and...it was really weird. People believed Voldemort had never fallen, and instead of the Boy-Who-Lived, I was his second in command. For a time, I actually thought it was real, I thought I'd never get home, I thought...I don't know. I almost believed that my parents were alive and everything." Harry let out a short laugh.

"That's quite a story, Harry," said the Headmaster.

"I know," smiled Harry weakly. "The world just turned upside down and then I wake up back here in a bed. It had to be a dream. I should have realised it earlier. I should have realised that that place was so bizarre when a Heliopath appeared. Luna told me that the Ministry had an army of them; that was why they feared the DA so much because it might rival theirs. You know how paranoid Minister Fudge can be. Anyway, Luna claimed there was an army, and Hermione insisted they didn't exist. She's the more...academically able of the two and so when Luna was

proved right I should have realised that that place was just a weird dream. I was half expecting a Crumple Horned Snorkak to appear at any moment,” joked Harry. Dumbledore smiled softly, though Harry had a feeling he didn’t understand the joke.

“Harry,” said the Headmaster gravely. “Could you describe the event you spoke of with the Chalk Circle?” *Why would he want that?* thought Harry. *He was there.*

“I could,” said Harry softly. “But you were there. You saw what happened.” Harry saw something odd cross the Headmaster’s face, a look that he couldn’t read.

“I was,” he said carefully. “But sometimes if one alters one’s perspective, one gets a completely different picture of what is going on.”

“Some things never change. You still speak in riddles,” smiled Harry.

“Voldemort appeared and then you did. You gave me the sword and chalk. I drew the circle and he couldn’t touch me. His Killing Curse hit and I ended up in the field...no! I ended up in a coma until I awoke here. I was trying to get back here to ask you how I could get home, but I’ve woken up now so we can forget that. Any chance of a cup of tea?”

“I’ll have some brought up,” said Dumbledore softly. “Could you tell me about your scar.”

“I...” Harry froze mid-sentence. Something was wrong! Dumbledore would never ask about the scar, he was the one who always told Harry about it. This Dumbledore was not his Dumbledore. But hope was sparkling in his eyes. *OH GOD! NO!* He was still in the ‘weird place’. Everyone still thought he was a Death Eater; everyone still wanted him dead. *GOD DAMN IT!*

The memories came flooding back. He had been double-crossed; the images of his ambush flashed across his mind. These feelings of sickness were not because of his coma; it was the results of having hundreds, maybe thousands, of volts surge through your body. The arseholes had used a Tazer on him. That was why he felt sick. He had been stupid to confuse it for sleep-induced sickness. Dumbledore had betrayed him! How dare he!

Harry threw the covers off him and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He wore only a pair of hospital pyjama trousers. He was just about getting used to seeing his changed body. The first time he had noticed the muscles and the six-pack he had been shocked. Now as he sat topless on the bed, he found it wasn’t a surprise. The memories of the last week were now as vivid as ever. The image of the dying Tea-Lady stuck in his mind. Her eyes would haunt his dreams until the day he died. Why did everyone think he was a Death Eater? He looked down at his left forearm. There was no Dark Mark; he was not Voldemort’s servant. He was the only one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord.

Suddenly Harry was aware of an odd feeling in his head. It was very subtle, not even irritating. It was just there. It felt almost familiar...*Legilimency!* Quickly Harry raised as much of

a shield as he could, with the pitiful training he had received. *Empty my mind!* Dumbledore must have realised he'd been detected. Immediately the feeling was gone.

"I remember everything," said Harry softly, his tone was icy. He suddenly looked up fixing the Headmaster with an icy glare worthy of McGonagall. "You've got guts coming in here after that," snarled Harry. "I said alone, I said I only wanted to talk and you set Mad-Eye and your bloody Order on me." The Headmaster sighed, knowing full well that the pretence was up. He had taken a risk in trying to fool Harry, and it had not worked. Harry felt angry, couldn't he take him on faith? Dumbledore was famous for it. He was famous for giving second chances, Hagrid for example, Malfoy, why not Harry.

"We would have been overheard, I was making sure this meeting was private" replied the Dumbledore.

"A pathetic excuse," snapped Harry. "I had a Portkey for that purpose. Don't lie to me. You wanted me taken down. You were willing to condemn me to Azkaban in the trial; I saw your eyes, and now you want me handed over again."

Dumbledore slowly sat down on the end of the bed, two feet from Harry. Harry couldn't see a wand, but it didn't matter. He didn't stand a chance against Dumbledore. The Headmaster was not going to attack him; it was not in his nature. He felt so angry with the man sitting next to him, yet despite the fact that they were on opposite sides, he didn't feel in anyway threatened.

"I apologise, Harry," said Dumbledore gravely. "It was not my intention to deceive you. Remember I did not say anything to you; you jumped to your own conclusions when you woke up." Harry knew this was true, he had assumed he was in a coma. Dumbledore hadn't lied to him, he had just stayed silent and let Harry make his own mistakes. "You are also mistaken about something else," continued Dumbledore. "I do not want to hand you to the Dementors. Minister Crouch, does not know this meeting is taking place. I assume you wish to keep it that way."

"No one but the two of us were supposed to know, and the girl I sent the message with," said Harry. "Thanks to you, at least a dozen people must know. I know you can't un-ring a bell, but at least make sure what is said goes no further."

"Out of the question," said Dumbledore, to Harry's surprise. "I will not broadcast this meeting but there are a select few who need to know."

"The Order," sighed Harry. "McGonagall, Snape, Moody, Kingsley, Remus...I got Pettigrew by the way...Tonks and those lot."

"Amongst others," agreed Dumbledore. "And Miss Tonks sends her thanks for saving her life. I feel quite odd talking to you like this, Harry. You seem wise beyond your years, yet there is nothing but pain and despair in your eyes. I was expecting a raging anger."

"Like Riddle. Sorry to disappoint you."

“Not at all, I am most pleased,” smiled Dumbledore. “I am also impressed that you know of Tom’s origins.”

“I know enough,” said Harry. “I know that he is a Half-Blood, just like me. Oh, the irony.”

“I must confess, Harry,” said Dumbledore reverting to his grave tone. “I had given up all hope of your redemption...”

“I don’t need to be redeemed,” said Harry defensively. He had not done anything, and he was not coming crawling back! “I am not what you think I am, I am not a murderer!”

“Please, let me finish. I had given up all hope until I saw you at the trial. Minister Crouch did not pass on your request for an audience to me. Had I known, I would have given you the benefit of the doubt, mainly out of respect to your family.”

“I have no family,” said Harry, cutting him off. His parents were dead and the least Dumbledore could do would be to let them rest in peace. Using their names would not get Harry to tell him what he didn’t need to know. “Riddle saw to that.”

“You may have to elaborate on that, Harry, but please let me finish,” said Dumbledore softly. There was that phrase again, ‘let me finish’. It was fast becoming irritating.

“I would have given you an audience, as I would almost anyone who requested it.”

“Even Tom?”

“Even he,” said Dumbledore. “It is against my principles to believe that anyone is inherently evil. Tom Riddle was a perfectly likeable young man when he first came to Hogwarts, when he first learned of the new world that had been laid out before him.”

“But by the seventh year, he was angry and evil enough to open the Chamber of Secrets and set the basilisk on Moaning Myrtle,” finished Harry. “Are you asking me if I’ve turned?”

“Not entirely, Harry, I can see from your eyes that you are not fuelled by anger and hatred,” said Dumbledore with a small smile. “The eyes can tell so much about a person. I am also surprised at your depth of knowledge. Not many people know the legend of the Chamber of Secrets and even less know that the attacks of fifty years ago were thought to be from Slytherin’s monster. Only one person knows who opened it, the culprit himself. And you believe it to be Tom? I suspected it myself but there was never any proof.”

“Trust me, it was him,” said Harry. He didn’t want to get into that story. This Dumbledore wouldn’t even remember it. “But we have gone seriously off topic.”

“True. My point was, and don’t get angry, just hear me out. My point was that you have committed some of the worst atrocities in this war. The name Harry Potter is synonymous with

terrorist attacks. Your calling card is a large scale attack with massive destruction of property and loss of life. Harry Potter was fuelled by anger, I have seen him once before and he was. You are not. We have done a blood test, and you are indeed Harry James Potter. So, what has changed in you?" It was a fair question. The dreams he had been having, still seemed so real, so vivid. Harry had a sneaking suspicion now that he knew what a bastard the Harry they thought him to be actually was, that they were memories of that other Harry. But then how could they be? How could he have someone else's memory? It is the control curse trying to break through? He knew for a fact that he hadn't done those things. If they were more than dreams, if even half of it was true, Dumbledore had every right not to trust him.

"Harry Potter is dead," said Harry, wording his answer very carefully. He didn't want to give too much away. "I'm all that's left."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the headmaster. "Are you saying that you are not Harry Potter?"

"Oh, I'm Harry all right," he replied. If he were to get Dumbledore's help, then he would need to give him some information to work with. "I don't know what happened in Devon, but when I woke up, I was a new man, literally."

"What do you mean?" repeated Dumbledore patiently.

"I mean that two days ago I woke up in the middle of a field in Devon armed to the teeth and hunted by those I once called friend, and I have no memory of anything they are accusing me of."

"Are you saying your memory has been stolen?" asked Dumbledore, wearing a curious look that bordered on disappointment. This conversation was going nowhere. He was not getting anything useful out of it and he was in danger of telling Dumbledore more than was necessary. Until he knew exactly what was happening and exactly why the Dumbledore was different, he didn't trust anyone. He wasn't going to tell him anything that was not necessary until he knew for a fact who he was dealing with.

"Quid Pro Quo," said Harry. He remembered hearing the phrase before. This way he could get some information back. It involved an exchange of information, and Harry had no idea what Dumbledore would ask. He also knew that any lie would instantly be detected. This could go wrong but it was the best strategy he had.

"As you wish, Harry," sighed the Headmaster, removing his spectacles and polishing them on his robes. It was then that a thought occurred to Harry. His contact lenses, the ones Aunt Petunia had begrudgingly bought him over the holidays should have been replaced the day before. Harry reached up with a hand, and summoned them to him. What surprised him was that nothing happened. He was no longer wearing them. He was not wearing any form of lens yet he could see perfectly. How had that happened? How were his eyes suddenly cured? That thought had to be put on hold as Dumbledore was now ready to answer his question.

Dumbledore placed his spectacles back on his nose and looked Harry dead in the eye. “What do you want to know?”

“I want to know if there is a spell or curse or something like that that could theoretically act like an Imperius Curse over a large number of people. Let’s say the entire country, that would change their memories and make them act differently.” *Brilliant, Potter, very subtle*, thought Harry to himself. That had given the game away. He should have thought about his question more carefully. Unsurprisingly Dumbledore gave him a calculating look, clearly assessing if it was wise to tell Harry. After all, if he thought Harry was a Death Eater, he could wreak a lot of havoc with that curse; as much as Harry was, ironically, experiencing at the moment.

“Why would you want to know that?” asked Dumbledore.

“It’s not your turn for a question yet,” snapped Harry. *Come on; answer me*, thought Harry. A simple yes or no could shed new light on what was happening to them all. “Answer the question.”

“Not that I know of,” said Dumbledore. “There may be such a spell, but I am unaware of it. To my knowledge the only way to get control out of large numbers of people is to give a potion to them. But as with the Imperius Curse it can be fought and the more powerful wizards and witches would resist and find the antidote. You couldn’t govern a country like that. Also it would not alter their memory.” He clearly suspected that Harry had asked the question because he was looking to perform such a spell. Although he had no intention of it, he couldn’t blame Dumbledore for his suspicions. In his position, Harry would think the same. He did actually admire the Headmaster, because although he clearly suspected ill intentions, he had told Harry that he could infect people with potion. He had shown a certain amount of trust in Harry.

“I see. And your question is...”

“Why did you run away?” asked the Headmaster. Harry’s head shot up and looked Dumbledore in the eyes. It was the last question he had expected. “What was so bad about life with your family that you ran away and joined Tom?” What was he talking about? Life with his family...did he mean the Dursleys? He hadn’t run away, it had been an accident: it was the chalk circle that had sent him away. He had not done it on purpose. At the trial they had claimed he had run away before his fourth year. There was no use speculating and if he asked, he would get the same response he had given the Headmaster when he asked a question out of turn. He had no idea why the chalk circle had sent him somewhere else. He had to answer, and answer honestly.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head and closing his eyes. As soon as he did it he realised it was a mistake. He hadn’t looked Dumbledore in the eye. It looked even to the untrained eye like a lie.

“Harry, I answered your question truthfully...” sighed Dumbledore. He had clearly detected that Harry was holding something back.

“So did I,” interrupted Harry before he could finish. “I don’t remember a thing before I woke up on the farm and found that everything was back to front. I don’t know why I was arrested. I don’t know why people are scared of me. I don’t know why Voldemort thinks I’m a Death Eater. He killed my parents, everyone knows that but for some reason everyone thinks I’ve joined him.”

“Harry, I am…” began Dumbledore, but again he cut the Headmaster off.

“A Legilimens, I know,” said Harry looking the old man in the eye. “Look at me, I am not lying. I don’t remember any of what I am supposed to have done.”

“You are amnesic?” asked Dumbledore.

“It’s not me, it’s everyone else,” said Harry exasperatedly. This was it, the main point. Would Dumbledore believe him? “I am just a little stressed because everyone is acting strangely. I’ve spent my life since I was eleven fighting Voldemort and now everyone seems to think I’m his loyal terrier. All of a sudden, I have horrific dreams, which seem so real. Voldemort now looks almost human, I apparently have a sister, and Mr. Crouch is still alive when I saw him killed. You’ll have to excuse me if I am a little tightly wound.” There: he had listed what was wrong, would Dumbledore at least hear him out?

“Were it not for the truth I see in your eyes, I would dismiss you as a lunatic,” said Dumbledore gravely. “Harry, you seem to be highly stressed, confused and angry.”

“Really?” said Harry sarcastically. Couldn’t he say something a little more useful? Dumbledore ignored him.

“But you are not lying, or at least you are telling me what you believe to be the truth. You keep mentioning a farm, I am assuming this is near where Mr. Longbottom picked you up.” Did this mean he was going to hear him out?

“My aunt’s farm,” answered Harry. “It’s near a village called Mary Tavy.”

“You mentioned a chalk circle earlier and a duel with Voldemort. I don’t presume to know what has happened to you. Perhaps you’d better tell me.”

“Tell you what? How it was before, or what happened between you and Voldemort on the farm or what?”

“What do you feel I need to know?” said Dumbledore calmly. This just seemed to make Harry feel even more exasperated.

“Just that the entire world is suddenly back to front.”

“How can I help you if you hide behind a veil of secrecy, Harry?” pressed Dumbledore.

“Fine,” said Harry. “There was I, sunbathing on the farm, minding my own business. I wanted to be alone. I was not coping with Sirius’ death very well. I still feel that it was my fault and I just wanted to be alone. Next thing I know, the animals were panicking and bleating and running around like headless chickens. I could feel something was coming so I ran back towards the farm. Next thing there’s this whistling. It was so loud that I collapsed. And Voldemort appeared, and then you did. You duelled with him and then you gave me Gryffindor’s sword. You said that as long as I stayed in the circle, no Slytherin magic could enter. It sort of worked; the Cruciatius Curse just bounced right off. Then he tried the Killing Curse. When it hit the shield there was this whistling again, a bright light and pain; I felt like I was being stabbed all over, worse than even the Cruciatius Curse and then I landed in a field. It was night time and I just passed out. Next thing I know, I am being arrested for being a Death Eater. Me, a Death Eater, honestly.”

“I assume there is some irony there,” said Dumbledore.

“Boy Who Lived,” muttered Harry. He didn’t want to explain, it would take far too long.

“Excuse me?” asked Dumbledore

“Yes, there’s some irony in it,” said Harry. He rubbed his stomach. He was still shivering, though the sweat had dried, and the feeling of sickness was still there. He felt awful and very cold.

“Are you all right, Harry?”

“Fine, there’s nothing quite like getting zapped by a Tazer, it’s an invigorating experience, I suggest you try it,” he snapped sarcastically. He still couldn’t get over that. Why did he ever think it was necessary to do it? He had asked to meet in a public place surrounded by Muggles where he couldn’t do Magic. Surely that was a sign that he didn’t want trouble?

Dumbledore calmly picked up a clean white shirt from the draw beneath his bed and handed it to Harry who put it on. Not feeling much warmer, he didn’t even bother to button it up.

“So what do you think happened to me?” he asked. “I mean to you...oh, you know what I mean?”

“I can’t say,” said Dumbledore. His brow was furrowed in thought.

“Come on,” said Harry desperately. “You’re the most powerful wizard in centuries and it’s only you and Voldemort who are clever enough to help me put an end to this. Frankly I don’t fancy telling Voldemort that I am not loyal and that I am the only one who can defeat him. You are my only hope.”

Harry saw Dumbledore’s eyes flicker as Harry mentioned his destiny. Dumbledore thought for a few seconds before speaking again. “Let’s go through this slowly,” he said. “You said you were sunbathing, so I imagine it was daytime?”

“Around one or two in the afternoon,” confirmed Harry, couldn’t he make this a little quicker?

“And then you said it was dark when you appeared in the field?” continued Dumbledore.

“Yes.”

“So I imagine some time must have passed from the time the Killing Curse hit and the time you awoke in the field?”

“I didn’t wake up. I was conscious the entire time. The Curse hit, there was light, pain and a whistling and then I hit the ground hard. I was conscious for a few seconds, long enough to register that I was in a field and that it was dark. I saw the sword stop glowing before I passed out. From my point of view, it was half a minute, no more from when the curse hit until I hit the ground,” said Harry.

“If the shield stopped the Killing Curse, it must be very powerful,” said Dumbledore thoughtfully. “No one has ever survived the Killing Curse...” Harry couldn’t help himself; he snorted a laugh. Dumbledore gave him a quizzical look.

Trying to keep the grin off his face, Harry answered, “More irony.” Thankfully, Dumbledore didn’t press.

“So we have a tremendous amount of energy in one place at one time. Then we have some ‘missing time’. That’s one thing to consider. It’s good to go through things slowly, you can pick up on things that a quick glance might miss. And now you say that people are acting strangely.”

“It’s more than that,” began Harry. “It’s...everything. I mean Crouch is back from the dead. My parents are allegedly alive and they’re the most famous deaths in history, give or take. And then there is Voldemort. He is so different. I mean when he got his body back, the potions and everything he used changed him. He looked like a sort of snake monster. He had no nose, just slits, and no hair. He was a monster and he wore a monster’s face. Now he has none of it. He looks almost human, except for those eyes. And everyone thinks he’s never fallen.”

“But you believe he has,” said Dumbledore.

“I know he has. It was me that did it. Well, my mother mainly,” said Harry. “I’ve met him many times and he’s tried to kill me so often but he doesn’t remember it. I seem to be the only one who does.”

“Perhaps it is all in your mind,” said Dumbledore thoughtfully. *No, it evidently isn’t you idiot!* thought Harry. He was not stupid, he had not dreamt up his entire life.

“Meaning what? You think I’m insane?” he asked the Headmaster icily.

“I mean, that you are the only one who has any memories of Tom falling, not even Tom himself,” said Dumbledore. “It may be you that has changed, rather than the rest of us. Perhaps it is your mind that is under some control or some sort of curse. It is entirely possible that while you were at St Mungo’s someone altered your memories. I have heard of this being done in the USSR and the Far East. It was used during the Cold War. They removed many memories and replaced them with ones of pain and suffering. They make it seem that the ‘patient’, though to be fair, they are more like victims, think they are on the edge of a breakdown. They make it seem as though one single person has ruined their lives. They implant false memories, to turn a loyal supporter into the ultimate assassin.” Harry listened carefully, but with every word he felt more and more sure that this was wrong. His memories were real and he had the scars to prove it.

“You think Crouch butchered my mind to get me to kill Riddle?” said Harry slowly. Harry rolled up his sleeve, revealing his muscular arms. He still wasn’t used to seeing himself like this. He had been scrawny until three days ago and now he was well toned. He didn’t need glasses or contacts anymore. His body had changed. Unless he was mistaken, his hair felt a little shorter as well. He rolled the sleeves up to his shoulder. He would show Dumbledore the scar left by Wormtail’s dagger, when his blood was stolen. Madam Pomfrey had done a hell of a job, but the scar was still visible for all to see. He would show Dumbledore the scars he had collected from five years of fight Voldemort.

But he was in for a shock. The scar was gone; so were all his other scars. He had others though. There were more on his arms but he couldn’t remember where he had got them.

“The scar is gone,” said Harry softly. “It was right here. Wormtail’s dagger cut me when Voldemort stole my blood. I had a huge scar; it was there three days ago. I don’t even know where I got all these.” He gestured to his new scars.

“I believe Mr. Longbottom would like to take credit for that one,” Dumbledore gestured to a scar on near Harry’s collarbone. “Apparently it went straight through. You have an exit wound on your back. You see, Harry, this is what I mean. I can account for these scars, you cannot. The ones that you remember are not there. It is as if you have this world in your head, but no physical evidence to back it up. This is consistent with the Mind Butchers scenario.”

“My memories are real!” snapped Harry. “I have not lived sixteen years in a dream-world.” It couldn’t be true. His life was not a lie; it was real. He was real. He was not a Death Eater.

“Can you be sure?” said Dumbledore.

Harry suddenly had an idea. “How would I know that you don’t eat Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans because you ate a vomit flavoured one when you were young? I also know that you and Nicolas Flamel invented the Philosopher’s Stone, which is now in Vault 713 of Gringotts. Or perhaps you can tell me how I could possibly know that you never get sent socks for Christmas, only books.” Dumbledore looked visibly startled by Harry’s outburst. “Where would the Mind Butchers get those memories from?” The Headmaster didn’t say anything for a few moments. After which, he smiled.

“On the bright side,” said Dumbledore carefully, “We can discount another theory.”

“Let’s make the next one a little more feasible, shall we,” said Harry, growing impatient. “The truth would be good.”

“As you wish, let’s move on. The scar on your head; am I right in thinking that is no normal scar?”

Harry smiled at the question. For some reason he found it amusing, since he would never ever be asked that question under normal circumstances.

“It’s a Curse scar,” said Harry. “It also symbolises a psychic link between Voldemort and myself, though for some reason it doesn’t seem to be working at the moment.”

“How did you get it?” inquired the Headmaster.

“Voldemort used the Killing Curse on me,” said Harry plainly. Dumbledore had clearly not been expecting that.

“I see no lie, but…” said the Headmaster slowly.

“Surviving it is not an everyday occurrence,” finished Harry. “I know. It forged a link between us. I can feel his presence, his emotions and sometimes I can see things through his eyes. Or at least I used to be able to.”

“Legilimency?” suggested Dumbledore.

“He used it on me, I can’t do it. You had Snape teach, or at least try to teach me Occlumency. It didn’t go too well. Though I could tell that you were snooping around in my mind when you came in here earlier.”

“What did you mean you used to be able to?” asked Dumbledore, avoiding the accusation. Harry let it go; it didn’t matter.

“I mean when I saw Voldemort two days ago, I couldn’t sense anything. It’s like the link is broken or something. Don’t get me wrong; it’s a relief. I don’t like having a migraine every time he loses his temper, but I don’t like strange things happening. I’d rather know why it has stopped.”

“A Mark like that is not merely physical,” said Dumbledore thoughtfully. “It is imprinted on your soul, so to speak. Take the Dark Mark for instance. If you remove a Death Eater’s arm, the Mark appears elsewhere. It is printed on the soul of the Death Eater, just as that scar is on yours.”

“Meaning what?” said Harry. The headmaster was speaking in riddles.

“I may be completely wrong, but let us stick to what we know. I believe it was Sherlock Holmes who said ‘*If you eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.*’ We know that you remember growing up in a different life, one in which Voldemort was defeated and since you said he appeared three days ago I assume he rose again, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And everyone else, remembers growing up in a world where he never fell.” Harry couldn’t see where this was going. He wished Dumbledore would make his point.

“Himself included, yes,” said Harry. “At first I thought he had everyone in the country under a control curse and memory charms.”

“Hence your first question to me,” said Dumbledore. “It makes sense now. Anyhow, assuming that neither of us are lying or mistaken, it would seem that you grew up in a different place, a different world. Are you aware that a line has one dimension, a square has two and a cube has three?”

“3D shapes,” said Harry. “Yes, we did them in primary school.”

“Are you also aware that there are more than three dimensions?”

“I go to Hogwarts, not the National Institute of Quantum Physics,” said Harry. Why couldn’t Dumbledore get to the point?

“I will take that as a no. The fourth dimension is *time*. I do not believe that ventures into this situation, except that you lost a few hours. However, the fifth dimension, *space*, is much more relevant. I believe you have moved through space. Sideways in time, as it were.” There was an uncomfortable pause as Harry let the words sink in.

“You have gone right over my head,” he said slowly. “Are you saying that I am in a parallel universe?” How could that be true? Inter-dimensional travel was something out of Doctor Who, not reality. Was Dumbledore winding him up? He had betrayed him and led to him being stunned by a Tazer. In hindsight, it had been naïve to assume he would come unarmed and alone, it was a fool’s hope and foolishly, Harry had trusted it. In Dumbledore’s shoes, he would have done the same. So did that mean he trusted the Headmaster? He honestly didn’t know anymore. All he knew was that he couldn’t really be from another universe...could he?

“It is one possibility,” said the Headmaster.

“But it’s impossible,” protested Harry.

“It is improbable, but as Mr. Holmes once said, it is invariably true,” said Dumbledore. “It would be very naïve indeed to assume we have already discovered every spell. No one knows the full extent of magic. Just because it has never happened before, does not mean that it is

impossible. Before the Wright Brothers in the early twentieth century, Muggles knew for a fact that flight was impossible. Now Jumbo Jets are a taken for granted. You are here now, in a world similar yet very different from your own.”

“But...” stammered Harry. It couldn’t be true! How would he get home? There must be some mistake. “There has to be another possible explanation.”

“Do you have a better explanation?”

“A mind control curse...”

“That can raise the dead and give you a sister who was never alive?”

“I...”

“There might be another explanation that seems to fit,” said Dumbledore. “Think for long enough and you may find one, but that does not make this one invalid. You remember a different world and have grown up in one. Now you are here with everything different, yet we all feel the same. It would be consistent with my theory. It could also be possible to be living in an altered timeline. Someone could have journeyed back and changed something.”

“But time travel is...”

“About as likely to happen as someone moving between universes,” finished Dumbledore. “But you were protected, you retained your knowledge of how it was before. Unless you travelled in time yourself, you would not remember that, you would remember growing up in this world, which it is clear that you do not. I think we can discount that theory.” Harry knew something about that. He experiences with the Time Turner at the end of his third year had taught him that only those who travel remember how the world was before. So it was true? Was he really in a different world? But there were still things that didn’t fit.

“But if I have crossed into an alternate universe, then why do I not have my body?”

“Excuse me?”

Harry opened his shirt, revealing a muscular torso. If he had been transported to another universe, then why was he suddenly muscular? How had his body changed? “Three days ago I was a scrawny little thing. I weighed eight stone. Now I look like...this. And I am not wearing glasses. I was wearing contact lenses when I was on the farm. I have the thirty days ones and I’ve been wearing them for so long I don’t even feel them. It was only just now that I noticed I am not wearing them at all, but I can still see perfectly. My hair is a little shorter than before, not exceptionally so, but it definitely is. My scars are gone...with one exception.”

“And that one exception is what makes me believe that you truly have crossed worlds. The mark is imprinted on your soul, not your body, just like the Dark Mark; and I know for a fact that Harry Potter bears the Mark, and an associate of mine saw you receive it, yet now your arm

is bare. The soul of Harry Potter does not reside in that body, but when I performed a DNA test to positively identify you, I found that that is in fact his body.” So Harry’s soul was in the other Harry’s body. He was in that murderer’s body.

“This is his body, not mine,” said Harry. “I don’t want it. I don’t even know him but I hate the little...I’ve been having these dreams, I think they’re memories of his. I see them in my sleep. That and I seem to have his instincts, his...I don’t know. I can fight. I was a pretty good duellist before, I was even teaching a club of sorts, but I’ve never had any martial arts training or anything like that. But I can wield a sword like Errol Flynn. I can punch and kick like Jackie Chan. I scare myself. At St Mungo’s when I got a wand, and I was fighting those Death Eaters, my instincts were telling me to kill. It was hard to stop myself. And when I did, when I hit that man, I never meant to kill him, it was an accident, but...I felt nothing. No remorse, or anything. The Tea Lady on the other hand. I...I had to do something...I ended her suffering...”

“You made a difficult decision and it allowed the prefects enough time to mount a defence. That doesn’t make the decision easier or make the guilt go away but it is true. I know something about that.”

“I can imagine,” sighed Harry. “So anyway...” There was an uncomfortable pause.

Suddenly a terrifying thought occurred to Harry. “Now that I’m here in his body, does that mean that he’s in mine, back home?” asked Harry. If the Dumbledore back home met the other Harry and put any form of trust in him, he would go straight to Voldemort. Voldemort would probably kill the other Harry but what if he managed to convince Voldemort, just as Harry himself was convincing Dumbledore now? What if the other Harry had joined the Voldemort that Harry knew? His world would surely fall, as its only hope of freedom was stuck in another world. What if...Harry didn’t even want to imagine it.

“I could not say,” said Dumbledore. “You are the first inter-dimensional traveller I have ever met.”

“So he could be? My world could be up the creek because the only one who can defeat the Dark Lord is now replaced by a loyal Death Eater who, from what I gather, is nearly as bad as Riddle himself. Jesus, I have to get back.” Harry leapt to his feet and started looking for something to wear. Dumbledore, on the other hand, remained still. He sat on the edge of the bed, calmly watching Harry.

“We do not know that he is there,” he said. “For all we know he could be dead.”

“So you believe me? You believe that I’m not the cold blooded killer that everyone thinks I am?”

“You have not told me any outright lies,” said Dumbledore. “There have been many lies of omission. I know you are holding something back, but that is understandable. What convinced me was the fact that you summoned Fawkes. You could not have done if you were not loyal to me; for this reason I think I can trust you. You may not want to share details of your other life

with me. What I do know is that you honestly are not a Death Eater. The Dark Mark cannot be removed and yet you do not bear it. Instead you bear a mark that symbolizes hope. You have survived the Killing Curse and I can see in your eyes that you still fight on.”

“Who else will?” muttered Harry.

“Exactly,” said Dumbledore with a smile. “Who else will? But we have you now. You are highly capable and highly motivated. You could swing this war for us thanks to your abilities, your knowledge and the sheer notion that Voldemort’s number one has defected.” Harry felt a flush of anger at this statement.

“Two things; one, I am not defecting since I was never on his side. Two, I don’t remember what I...he...Harry Potter did. I only have dreams, which I believe are his memories. And lastly I will not be your puppet. Where I come from, you used me for the last year without giving a damn about me. You kept things from me, things I needed to know and the closest thing to a parent I have ever known died. I will not let you mess me around.”

“I could apologise for what my counterpart has done, Harry,” said Dumbledore, his tone grave. “But you would only think I was patronizing you. I am not he; just as you are not the Harry I know. That is what can give hope back to a dying nation. We have to get the word out.” He could not deny the truth in the Headmaster’s words. He was asking Dumbledore to believe that he was not the Harry who had wronged him; the least Harry could do was to stop treating him like the Headmaster that had wronged him. But he was taking no chances. He would not allow the same things to happen in both worlds.

“I will not let you use me,” said Harry hotly. “I am not your little soldier. We’ve been through this before. You stick me out in the lime-light and make me Voldemort’s number one target. You use me like a pawn, and those around me start dying. Cedric Diggory was killed for no reason other than he happened to touch the Portkey with me. And then there’s me. I become a public figure and then everyone forgets about the real me. Trust me, I know. Everyone sees this legend, this warrior, the fall of the Dark Lord. None of them know anything about me. And then if I succeed, you all forget about me because I am redundant. My purpose is done and then there is no one left who knows or wants me around.”

“Are you always so pessimistic?”

“PESSIMISTIC! This is how I live! This is what happens to me. Everywhere I go, people point and stare at the Downfall of the Dark Lord. At the one who defeated him, not at me. Not at who I am but at what I am. I’m sick of it. All I have ever wanted is to have my family back. To grow old and die surrounded by those I love and who love me. I can’t go anywhere in the Wizarding world without someone knowing me. I got all my schoolbooks free one year because the shopkeeper recognised me. No one seems to know or care that I would give it all up in a second for a chance to live with my parents. Don’t you dare talk to me about what people think of you! Don’t you dare claim that you have my best interest at heart! I saw your eyes in the trial. You looked at me like a criminal, like I was nothing, but now I am useful, your eyes are twinkling.” He felt the anger boiling within him, like it had in the Head’s office last term. His

attitude of not telling Dumbledore anything that wasn't strictly necessary had gone right out the window. Harry didn't care anymore. Dumbledore had believed him, but even this Dumbledore was using him. Was it really that hard to understand that he was a person, that he had feelings?

"Harry, I have no knowledge of your past," said Dumbledore calmly. "You know things I don't and vice versa. At least let us work together. Together we can prevent the mistakes of the past. I won't make mistakes if you are there to point them out. That is why we have to fight together."

"Don't count your chickens yet, Professor!" said Harry. "I am not getting involved. I did what I had to do to get to you. Now that I know what is going on, or at least your interpretation, I need you to help me get home."

"Harry, you have just told me that what you want more than anything else is a life with your parents," said Dumbledore. "That is now within your grasp, in this world." Harry knew that Dumbledore was trying to convince him to stay in this world, to be the hero once again. This world, however, was not his. He didn't belong here.

"I know what you are going to ask and the answer is no," said Harry. "I'm sorry, but I don't belong here. I have a war to fight. It is my destiny to fight, to suffer. I am not happy about it, but it is a fact. They need me; I have to get home. I have friends that care about me. I have school to go to, friends who will miss me, who need me. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, hell, I'll even be glad to see Snape again." He could see the disappointment in Dumbledore's eyes.

"Harry, I do not know the magic that brought you here, let alone how to get you back. Before you get angry, I promise I will help you; I will try to find a way, but it will take time. You will have to stay here for a while." What? No, he had to get home now. After the duel, his Dumbledore would have taken Harry back to Hogwarts. The other Harry was probably already in the midst of the Order. Who knows what he could have told Voldemort. His world could be falling apart. He had to get back, and get back now.

"How long?" asked Harry desperately.

"I would not like to guess," said Dumbledore calmly. For some reason, his calmness irritated Harry. He wasn't concerned with getting Harry home. He had a new hero and that was more important than Harry's own struggle. Dumbledore didn't care about Harry's world, so why should Harry care about his? No. He would not fight. He had made the right decision. But how long would he have to sit twiddling his thumbs?

"What? Days, weeks?" pressed Harry.

Dumbledore suddenly looked his age. The old man sighed and, wearing a grave expression, he looked Harry in the eye. "You may be the first one to cross world in the history of this world. There may be no resources available to research that type of travel."

“I’M STUCK HERE?” Harry thundered. No, it couldn’t be true. Dumbledore never fails. It just didn’t happen. There has to be a way. *For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.* There must be some way, some spell that would take him home. It occurred to Harry that maybe this wasn’t true. Maybe he could get home, but Dumbledore was lying to keep him in this world, to use him for his own ends. The mistrust was back with a vengeance. “You’d better not be lying. I told you I am not getting involved. When you find something, you tell me, instantly. You don’t keep me around to do your dirty work for you.”

“Is my counterpart so bad that you mistrust me so deeply?” asked Dumbledore sadly.

“We had a difference of opinion last year,” snapped Harry, his anger bubbling inside him. “But that doesn’t matter. Can you get me home or not?”

“Harry...”

“Don’t tell me that you will try! That’s not good enough. While I’m here, he could be in my world. My friends could all be dead because they trusted someone they thought was me! He could potentially cripple the Order in my world; millions could die, so I don’t want to hear ‘I’ll try’ ...”

Dumbledore sighed. There was a second’s pause before he rose and walked to the end of the bed. “I will do my very best, Harry. I promise you I will look and should I find anything, you will be the first to know. But have no illusions, I can make you no promises. For now I must get back to my office. I have much work to do. This has been very informative, Harry. Get some sleep, you’ll feel better in the morning. I will have the House Elves bring up some clothes, tea and food. In the meantime, if you want to do some research, you might find this of interest.” Harry watched as he reached down and opened a filing cabinet that Harry was positive had not been there a few seconds ago. He opened it and removed a beige envelope filled with papers. Where had that filing cabinet come from? He was sure it hadn’t been there when he had woken up. How long had they been chatting? He checked his watch. It read 22:05. Ten o’clock? But the sun was still shining outside.

Suddenly Harry understood how a filing cabinet could appear and how the sun could shine at night. They occurred because Dumbledore wanted it to. “We’re in the Room of Requirement,” said Harry. It wasn’t a question.

“You are very perceptive. A good likeness to our hospital wing, is it not?” said Dumbledore handing him the file. Harry took it and read the cover. A shiver went down his spine as he read.

*MINISTRY OF MAGIC*

*DEPARTMENT OF MAGICAL LAW ENFORCEMENT*

*POTTER, Harry J*

***CLASSIFIED: FOR AUROR EYES ONLY***

“It is not a pleasant read,” said Dumbledore. “But you will need to know it if you are to stay here. You know how the Room of Requirement works. Customise it how you will. I cannot let you leave tonight. I will return tomorrow after breakfast. Good night, Harry.”

With that he headed towards the door.

Harry couldn't move. He just stared down at the title. Had those dreams really been memories? Had he done those terrible things? He could still feel the colonel's son in his hand, smell the burning Christmas Tree and the phrase 'even you must have a family' from his most recent dream was still echoing through his head. As curious as Harry was, he didn't want to read on. He didn't want to know what his counterpart had done. Dumbledore had mentioned massive casualties; the trial had mentioned beheadings. This Harry Potter was a sick man. Harry was scared to open the file, knowing all too well what he would find inside.

“One more thing, Harry,” said Dumbledore, as he reached the door. “You mentioned that when you landed, you just had time to see Gryffindor's sword stop glowing before you passed out.” Harry nodded. “Where is that sword now?”

“I...” Harry was at a loss. He hadn't had it when he had woken up. He had his Katana, but not Gryffindor's sword. He hadn't picked it up; come to think of it, he was fairly sure it wasn't there when he had awoken. “I don't know,” he said. “I think it must be where they found me, but I don't recall seeing it when I woke up.”

“I shall send someone to pick it up,” said Dumbledore. With that he strode out of the room. Harry could feel the blend of emotions welling up in him. He was relieved that he had found Dumbledore, but at the same time he was disappointed and scared by what he had heard. He found himself feeling homesick, as well as a sense of despair as he might be trapped here forever. He was almost mourning his friends. If the other Harry was in their world, they could all be dead. Harry made a silent pact with himself. He would find a way home. One way or another, Harry was going to get home. Finally, Harry had amassed enough courage to open the file. With a heavy heart he flipped the file open and began to read.

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Four students had died in the attack on the train. Rose had made them go and fight. She was responsible for their deaths. Rose hardly ate a thing during the feast; her guilt was eating her alive. She picked at her food, staring into space. Those four students were dead because of her. There had been undeniable truth in Sirius' words, but they brought no comfort. Rose now had some idea how the Headmaster felt; he had sent people to their deaths time and time again in the Order. Their deaths must weigh heavily on Dumbledore.

She sat with the Weasleys and Lavender at the far end of the Gryffindor table. She had begged Dumbledore to let her wake Harry, but his answer had been the same. Her mother had then ordered her to leave. She knew full well that her mother would then have begged

Dumbledore herself, just as Rose had been doing. She could see the logic of the Headmaster's moves, but she didn't like it. She wanted to be with Harry. Instead she had gone back to Gryffindor tower and now, four hours later, was eating in the Great Hall with her friends. As expected, the continuous barrage of rumours and whispers was following her around. More than just the present group had seen the demise of the Tea-Lady; every one of them had seen Harry give the order to kill. It had finally come home to them. For years he had been a name in the *Prophet*, but it was always happening to someone else. Now they had seen him; now people they knew were dead and they had seen first-hand the terror he was capable of. There was a new level of fear to his name. He was fast becoming referred to as *Him* around the school. That was only one step short of *You-Know-Who* and then Rose really would flip her lid.

Then there was Rose herself. She was being treated slightly differently. She still got the stares that were part of being the sister to a mass murderer. She had always been regarded with a sort of fear due to her brother, and she still resented him for it. But now she had a chance to speak to him about it to find out the question she had asked herself so many times over the years: why? What had caused him to run away, why did he become a murderer and was it her fault? But in the last twenty-four hours she had noticed a slight change amongst some students, mainly prefects. She had received an occasional 'thank you' from younger students, a few nods from prefects who had fought. She seemed to command a little respect now. Having overtly stood up to the Death Eaters, having duelled her brother, or so the game of Chinese whispers had led many to believe, many now thought of her with respect as well as fear.

Malfoy had been his usual unbearable self. The stuck-up prick was completely unfazed by the attack, and his arrogance was starting to get to Rose again. She had only bumped into him once and that had been as she was leaving her mother's living quarters, which were attached to the Potions office. She had been to see her mother and was on her way back up to Gryffindor Tower. As she passed the Defence rooms, she saw Malfoy come out with the Defence Master. As head of Slytherin House, Snape favoured the Slytherins overtly. He finished talking to Malfoy and swept off. It was then that Malfoy had caught sight of Rose.

"Well if it isn't our resident action hero," Malfoy had sneered. Rose remembered thinking that since no one was around and Crabbe and Goyle were nowhere in sight, she could take Malfoy. She hadn't because firstly, Harry was coming back soon and secondly, she had a feeling that as soon as a spell was fired, Snape would return and give her a month of detentions before term had even started.

"Go away, Malfoy," Rose had sighed, as she sidestepped the Slytherin. The blonde mirrored her movement, blocking her path.

"What's the matter, Half-Blood?" growled. "You can't walk away from this. Harry will be back, and you'll be sorry, just like all those Mudbloods that died today."

"You clearly have nothing going on in your pointless little life if all you can do is mock people who have lost theirs," snapped Rose. How could he say something like that? Does the man, no the boy, have no conscience? She shot him a glare.

“Angry, are we?” smirked Malfoy. “I suppose it is hardest on you; after all, you convinced the Mudbloods to fight, you...”

That was as far as he got, as Professor Potter came around the corner at that particular moment, just as Rose’s wand came flying out of her pocket. Malfoy already had his in hand behind his robes.

Just as they levelled their wands at each other, a voice cried, “*EXPELLIARMUS!*”

Both Malfoy and Rose’s wands flew out of their hands and soared towards the Potions Mistress. Lily Potter stood in the corridor looking tired, but livid.

“Both of you back to your common rooms, NOW!” she barked. With a flick of her wand, she hurled Malfoy’s wand back at him, and the Slytherin turned and, after shooting Rose one last glare, disappeared down the corridor. Her mother hadn’t been that mad; it was just for show. She let Rose off like Snape would Malfoy, but at least had the honour to make it appear that Rose was in trouble, unlike Snape, who let Malfoy get away with murder.

That was two hours ago; now she was sitting at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, picking at her food, while Ron and Seamus discussed Quidditch. One of the fallen students had a brother in Ravenclaw who was now shooting glares over at Rose. It was clear to see that he hated her. She wasn’t surprised; she deserved it. If only she had kept her mouth shut. *But then more would be dead*, said the voice of rationality in her head. It was right, but her conscience was far from clear.

“Something wrong?” asked Ron during dinner, his mouth full of Cumberland sausage.

“I’m fine,” said Rose, dismissively as she half-heartedly skewered a potato on her fork. It was an obvious lie; she didn’t even bother to hide it.

“And my name is Severus Snape,” whispered Ginny, bringing a small smile to Rose’s lips. She knew better than to say it so Ron could hear. The prefect in question went back to his meal. “Rose, this isn’t healthy,” continued Ginny. “Do you want to talk about it?” She appreciated Ginny’s gesture, she really did. She had kept it all bottled up for so long, and yet now she had a reason to speak, she just didn’t know where to start. So much had happened in the last few days. But none of it mattered. All that mattered was Harry. Rose trusted Ginny completely.

“Can you keep a secret?” whispered Rose with a sigh.

“Of course,” said Ginny.

Rose took a deep breath, preparing to take the plunge. “Harry is here, in the building.”

“He’s what!” hissed Ginny, her eyes wide. “They caught him again?”

No, thought Rose. She was taking this all wrong! She hadn't been in the meeting. She didn't understand. Harry was...what, a better person now? Rose didn't know what he really was. She hoped in her heart that he was coming back, but on reflection, she had nothing to prove that. He wanted to talk to Dumbledore and he had called Fawkes; that was all she knew. She had created this hope that he was coming home and had convinced herself that that was the case, in hindsight, she really didn't know. Maybe Ginny was right; maybe she should be more scared than she was, but no, Harry was here. He was coming home; he had to be, he just had to.

"No," said Rose, with a small smile. "Dumbledore...it's fantastic...I'll tell you after dinner."

They finished quickly and Dumbledore gave his notices. It was a sombre occasion as he told the school of the four deaths and how brave the prefects had been. Thankfully, he didn't mention Rose, she had enough to deal with as it was. Anyway, half the school knew what she had done anyway. She could tell by his tone of voice that Dumbledore was feeling distracted as well. The notices lasted no more than a minute and then the school broke up and headed back to their common rooms to catch up on what everyone had done over the summer, and more importantly, to discuss what had happened on the train. *And what a story I have to tell*, thought Rose, not that she actually would say a thing.

Rose pulled Ginny to one side, just out of the Great Hall. Once they were sure they were out of range of any snoopers, Rose turned to Ginny. This was it; she had to convince her best friend.

"You saw what he did on the train," began Rose. The images of the battle instantly swept into her mind. A few seconds and four Death Eaters were just...it had been scary to watch.

"I know, it was amazing," said Ginny. "He just -" Rose cut her off.

"Protected a young girl, and fought four Death Eaters to protect us," said Rose. "Why would Voldemort's - get a grip, Gin - second in command care more about us than his henchmen?" Rose was slightly irritated that Ginny wouldn't say Voldemort's name, but she let it slip. This was about Harry, not her.

"I don't -" began Ginny, but again, Rose cut her off.

"Dumbledore called me to his office yesterday, right after the attack, for an Order meeting," said Rose. *Oops*, thought Rose. She should have told Ginny sooner. She saw a look of annoyance spread over Ginny's face, but thankfully, Ginny let her annoyance go.

"You were in a meeting?" asked Ginny in disbelief. She looked impressed; not even Fred and George were allowed in meetings, and they were of age.

"Yeah, only the one, because it was about Harry," replied Rose impatiently. "Look, Dumbledore said that there was something different about Harry, that he had changed. He had summoned Fawkes to him; you know, Dumbledore's phoenix, and he could only do that if he

didn't want to kill Dumbledore, or something like that, I don't quite understand. Anyway, it all means that he isn't evil." Rose knew she was babbling, but she didn't care. She was full of hope. Harry was back and she couldn't keep a smile from her face. She knew it was wrong to get her hopes up, but she couldn't help it.

"Rose, I don't mean to be nasty, but look what he did to the witch who runs the sweets trolley," said Ginny carefully, ever aware of Rose's fragile mental state. Rose felt like a lead weight had landed on her shoulders. He had done that; there was no denying it. But now, she could find out why.

"OK," sighed Rose. "He did do that, we all saw him, but Dumbledore says that Harry has changed, that there is something new about him. Harry kept trying to talk to him. And that's why he's here. He..."

"Might be coming back," finished Ginny. Yes! She understood! Rose felt like hugging her, but Ginny didn't look happy, like Rose expected. What was wrong? "Rose...do you think that perhaps you're...I don't know, I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"It's OK, Gin," said Rose. She suddenly had an idea. "I know it'll be OK. In fact, let's go."

"Go where?" asked Ginny.

"Dumbledore's office," said Rose, a smile plastered all over her face. With that she took hold of Ginny's hand and headed up the stairs towards the gargoyles. She was moving so fast, Ginny was almost being dragged along. It seemed like ages to Rose, but finally they arrived. The stone monsters were already aside when they arrived and so the girls marched straight up to the door and knocked.

After a second, the door opened a few inches, revealing a young woman. Rose recognised her as the one who had been in the Order meeting earlier. She had pink hair and was dressed as an Auror.

"Who is it, Nymphadora?" came the Headmaster's voice from inside. *Nymphadora, what a name*, thought Rose.

"Professor, it's Rose and Ginny," called Rose. There was a pause filled with hushed whispers from inside and then the Headmaster appeared at the door. He slipped out of the office and closed the door behind him. The three of them were alone on the staircase.

"Rose," said the Headmaster gravely. "You should not be here."

"He's still my brother," said Rose defiantly. She could see the look of disappointment in his eyes, but she didn't care. *Harry, think about Harry!* "What has changed since yesterday's meeting?" asked Rose. "What are you planning to do to him?"

“I should have known you would come,” said Dumbledore; he shook his head, but he was smiling. “You have your father’s curiosity, and your mothers stubbornness. I had planned to notify just the inner circle of the Order at first, but I don’t suppose he would mind Ginny knowing. If memory serves, he called Ginny a friend.”

“What do you mean, sir?” asked Ginny, voicing what Rose was wondering herself.

“I’ll explain inside.” He beckoned them to follow him.

“GINNY!” cried a voice the second they crossed the threshold.

“ROSE!” came another shout.

The girls came face to face with Molly Weasley and Lily Potter. “What do you think you are doing?” screamed Molly.

“Molly,” said Dumbledore firmly, “This affects them as much as it does anyone here, in fact probably more so than most.”

“How does this possibly involve Ginny?” snapped Mrs. Weasley. Rose had seen her angry with the twins before, but never at anyone else, certainly not an adult, and definitely not Dumbledore. Still, she thought she was protecting her daughter; she could be forgiven. Thankfully, Rose had never been on the receiving end of her wrath.

“It you will just let me explain,” said Dumbledore calmly. He quickly conjured two chairs for the two new arrivals before taking his seat behind his desk. While he did this, Rose took the opportunity to look around the room. She knew most of the Order members who were present. Sitting opposite her were her parents; then on her father’s left were Sirius, Remus and Peter. To his right sat Ginny’s parents. Next to Arthur Weasley were the teachers, Snape, McGonagall and Flamel. Lastly to Rose’s right there were the Aurors Mad-Eye, Kingsley, Frank Longbottom and next to her sat the woman with the pink hair, named Nymphadora.

An expectant, yet respectful silence fell over the room as Dumbledore was now seated. He took a deep breath, as if amassing the courage to begin the meeting. Finally, he unfolded his hands and began to speak.

“I know there have been rumours flying around about Harry Potter’s mental state and the reasons behind his recent actions,” said Dumbledore slowly. “What I am about to tell you does not go beyond this room. Harry Potter has indeed come back to Hogwarts.”

There was a gasp amongst the adults. Rose could see that her mother had gone deathly pale and was on the edge of tears. Her father sat stony faced. They had known they were going to try and catch him, but to hear that he was here now was still a shock. There was silence, Dumbledore allowed the words to sink in.

“I spoke with Mr. Potter less than an hour ago,” began Dumbledore calmly. “And what I have learned is highly unusual, so please have patience and let me explain. There is no easy way to say this, so I am just going to *‘take the plunge’* as it were. This Harry is not the same Harry that we have been hunting for the last two years.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” spat Frank Longbottom. “He’s had an epiphany and seen the error of his ways. It’s a trick, Albus. We all know what that little bastard is capable of.” Rose’s mother looked like she wanted to strangle Frank then and there, but managed to stay calm and silent.

“If that were the case I would assume it were a trick as well,” said the Headmaster patiently. Rose was anxious that he get to the point. This seemed to be taking forever. “No, Frank, the truth is even more unbelievable,” continued the Headmaster. “This Harry appears to have come from another world.”

There was utter silence in the room. Not a person moved. Rose was completely at a loss. What could he possibly mean? Another world, as in, he was an alien? It was mad. Or another universe perhaps, but that’s impossible.

“Come again, Albus,” said Sirius, looking as confused as Rose felt. “He’s from another...”

“A parallel universe,” said Dumbledore. “I know this is a little hard to accept, but it appears to be the truth. I spent an hour with the boy and between us this is the best solution we can come up with for our current situation. He was definitely not lying to me. He remembers a completely different world than us. That explains his apparent confusion and why he didn’t know why he was being arrested.”

“Can you be sure?” growled Moody. “Sounds like a load of codswallop to me. It isn’t even possible, and he put two of my Aurors in St Mungo’s during his escape, and two in the morgue, and that was lucky. That Heliopath could have killed a lot more.”

“We are not one hundred percent sure,” said Dumbledore. He turned to face Professor Flamel. “Nicolas is the expert in that area. In time, he should speak to Harry, but for the time being, let it be known that the boy did not lie to me. He honestly does remember a completely different world - a world where he never became a Death Eater. As to your point about his aggression, Alastor, the boy is confused and we have all treated him like a murderer when he is innocent. That would cause anyone’s patience to waver.”

“That boy is not innocent,” growled Frank. “He killed my entire family.”

“Our Harry did,” replied Dumbledore. “Do not hate this Harry for something someone else did.”

“But how could this happen, Albus?” asked McGonagall.

“Exactly how he managed to tear the fabric of space and time is uncertain,” said Dumbledore. “It seems to have happened during a three way duel. Myself and Harry were, according to him, fighting Voldemort and he was hit by the Killing Curse. I gave him some ancient protection involving the use of Gryffindor’s sword and somehow, he was accidentally thrust sideways in time. This is quite vague, but in time we hope to learn exactly how this was achieved. It also appears that he has retained all of our Harry’s abilities and instincts.”

“So he’s just as bad as he was before,” said Frank. “He’s still...” Frank wasn’t letting this go; Rose couldn’t blame him. The man had lost everyone he held dear due to Harry. But could it be true? Was this Harry from another world? So it wasn’t her Harry? Rose didn’t know how she should be feeling. Harry was good, he was rejoining them, but it wasn’t her Harry. She felt so confused, so excited, so disappointed. She was a mass of emotion.

“On the contrary,” smiled Dumbledore. “This is the most extraordinary part. In his world, Harry is the one destined to vanquish the Dark Lord.” He paused to let his words sink in. Harry? Kill Voldemort? Rose’s head was spinning. “Again, I do not know all the facts, but Harry has had a very different life, one in which I sent him to live with his aunt and uncle.”

“Petunia?” gasped Lily. “Why in heaven would...” Rose nearly retched at the thought of living with Dudley Dursley. Memories of that fat oaf pinching her behind on the one and only time she had visited them filled her mind. Fortunately she managed to not be physically sick. She had then taken to wearing her wand where it could easily be seen. That had stopped the fat oaf touching her.

“I did not want to press too hard in our first conversation,” said Dumbledore. “My counterpart in his universe seems to have wronged Harry quite spectacularly; he is sitting on an awful lot of anger. I do not think it wise to take my questioning too far until I can build up a little trust. He is not the most open person. I believe he has had a very hard life.”

“Like what?” asked Sirius. His jovial personality seemed to have evaporated. He looked serious and it was clear that he was feeling as confused as Rose was. Sirius was family after all, in practice if not by blood.

“If you were the number one target of Voldemort, your life wouldn’t be so simple,” said Professor Flamel. “I imagine the boy would have survived many attacks, and there is a high probability that those he cares about will have been caught in the crossfire. We have seen how vicious Voldemort can be to any of us, and we don’t pose as much of a threat to him as this boy claims to. If he is telling the truth, and I would like to think that Albus is a good enough Legilimens to know that he is, then this boy will have endured things as painful as any of us.” Rose’s heart went out to Harry. Had he really suffered like that? Had others died on account of him? Rose could relate to that after the attack on the train. They had so much in common. She felt so sorry for Harry.

“Correct, Nicolas,” said Dumbledore. “Reading between the lines, Harry is a target and those around him have already suffered on his account. He mentioned two fatalities just because the person in question happened to be standing next to him.” The senselessness of it, the idea that

it could happen at any time for no reason, was hard to understand for Rose and it sent a chill down her spine. People died just for standing around him. People would avoid him like the plague. She knew how that felt. He must have been so lonely. That was yet another thing that they had so much in common. There was a pause as the horror of these words set in. Even Snape looked slightly shaken. After a few seconds, it was Mad-Eye that spoke.

“Is he willing to fight?”

“Moody!” snapped Lily. “He is not...going to go off fighting. I have lost him once, I will not lose him again.” Rose felt the same way. She couldn’t lose Harry again. She was already thinking of this Harry as her own. It didn’t matter. They were so alike, and she missed him so much. He wasn’t evil. He was like she remembered Harry. He really was back. As sad as she was for him, she felt like a dream had come true, that he really was back. It was as though a great weight had lifted from her shoulders.

“That may not be up to you, Lily,” said Dumbledore, with an expression Rose couldn’t read. “But take comfort from the fact that he is very reluctant to get involved. He says that this is not his war. He wants to go home.”

“But...” protested Lily. Home, no, he couldn’t leave. Rose couldn’t believe it. He had to stay. He had a home here; he should stay. He couldn’t leave her again!

“If you are concerned about seeing him,” said Dumbledore. “None of us know how to get him home at present. He will be here for some time. By that I mean here, in this world. Obviously with his current legal status, he cannot stay where he is.”

“I want to see him,” said Lily. Rose felt the same way; she had to see him. He was her brother. She had a right to see him.

“That would be inadvisable,” said Dumbledore. Rose felt a flush of anger. He had to let her see him! It wasn’t fair! “He needs to warm up.” What? Rose didn’t understand. Neither did her mother.

“Warm up?” asked Lily.

“Lily, James,” said Dumbledore gravely. “As hard as you are finding this, remember that Harry is also finding it hard as well. He said he went to live with his Aunt, which he wouldn’t do unless...”

“Unless we were dead,” finished James.

“In which case, I would take him,” said Sirius.

“Unless you were dead too,” said Snape, his eyes portraying a glimmer of happiness at the idea.

“Remus?” offered Rose.

“Again, unknown,” said Dumbledore. “He also stated that and I quote, ‘the closest thing to a parent I have ever known’ was killed. He has clearly been alone much of his life. I don’t think it would be a good idea to expose him to you, especially if in his mind you are dead; at least, at first. You must allow his mind time to adapt.”

“But...” protested Lily.

“He’s right, Lil,” said James, putting an arm around his wife. Rose knew her father agreed with her mother. He wanted to see him, but he knew that Dumbledore wasn’t going to be swayed. He was obviously having as hard a time at the moment as Rose and her mother, but he didn’t show his pain and that gave Lily and Rose strength. Rose admired him for it, but at the same time knew that his bottling pain up was not healthy. Her father continued, “I want to see him too, but that kind of shock could...”

“What do you suggest?” asked McGonagall. “Whoever you send first must be able to defend themselves. But should anyone take a wand into the same room as him?”

“Minerva,” said Dumbledore. “You still think of him as the boy you once taught. This is someone else entirely.”

“So,” said McGonagall. “Who then?”

“A teacher,” suggested Peter. “Someone he knows. But obviously not Lily because she’s his mother but...Severus?”

“I believe,” said Dumbledore with a small smile on his face. “That the mistrust between the names of Snape and Potter are just as strong in his world. He only mentioned Severus once, and I got the impression that there are conflicts in his past.”

“Good boy,” muttered Sirius.

“My suggestion,” said Dumbledore. “Would be, with their parents’ permission, to send our youngest companions.”

All eyes turned to Rose and Ginny. One could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed. Rose’s stomach flipped at the words. Her? She would get to see Harry? Her heart skipped a beat. She couldn’t believe it. Now that she was going to, she almost felt scared.

“Us?” stammered Ginny, looking nervous.

“Indeed, my dear,” said Dumbledore kindly. “He mentioned that you and he were friends in his world, and as for Miss Potter, he has already met her. It is the next level up from Ginny, to use the steps analogy. First he sees a friend, then someone who doesn’t exist, then someone who should be dead by his reckoning. Do you see what I mean?”

“OK,” said Rose, before her parents could contradict her. She was so desperate to see him.

“Hang on,” said Arthur Weasley, speaking for the first time. “I’m not entirely happy about putting Ginny in the same room as him. What if you are wrong and by some feat he has tricked you? What if you are wrong and he is the same person who destroyed Diagon Alley? How can we be sure that your, no offence, Albus, but what if your affection for him is clouding your judgement?”

“A valid question,” said Dumbledore. “I cannot be one hundred percent sure, but having talked to him, I believe what I have said to be true. I believe that we really do have a living miracle in our custody. Of course as a parent, you have every right to stop Ginny going anywhere near him.”

“I’m in,” said Rose.

“Rose!”

“I’m going, Mum,” said Rose defiantly.

“Me too,” said Ginny. If she was doing this only for her sake, Rose didn’t know. But she appreciated it. Both of their mothers stared at them for a few seconds before sighing and nodding to Dumbledore.

“So be it,” said Dumbledore. “If you will excuse us, we have more to discuss, if you would like to make your way to the Room of Requirement. To make you feel safer,” he handed each of them a sickle. “These are Portkeys that will bring you back here if you feel threatened. Bear in mind, though, that he is not who you think he is. Give him a chance.”

“Now?” gasped Ginny. Dumbledore nodded.

It was a five-minute walk to the seventh floor. The door was already there, signalling that the room was in use. They stood outside in silence for a few seconds, summoning the courage to open the door. Neither of them knew what they might find inside. Rose was scared that this was a trick, not because she might die, but because Harry might not be coming back. She could only guess how Ginny felt. The girls looked at each other and took a breath. Rose reached out and twisted the handle.

Inside the room was large, yet cosy. It looked similar to the Gryffindor common room. There was a large four-poster bed to one side, the kind that were in the dormitories. A fire was burning in the fireplace to her left, which cast an orange glow around the room. There was a sofa and coffee table by the fire. The room was mostly dark, lit only by the fire. It was nice, but a bit creepy. It was then that she saw something moving in the shadows, and a voice spoke.

“I guess this means you really are my sister.”

~~~~~ Chapter VI ~~~~~ A Reunion...Of Sorts

*“Trojans, do not trust the horse!
Whatever it is, I fear the Greeks,
even when they bring gifts*

~ Virgil

“So I guess this means you really are my sister.”

Harry watched Ginny spin on the spot at the sound of his voice. Rose, who had spotted his movement, was already looking in his direction. The room was similar to the dormitories in Gryffindor Tower; was awash with red, which did not reflect much of the fire’s light. Shadows filled every corner and Harry was sure that neither of the girls could see him clearly. The flickering flames lit half of their faces, while keeping the other in shadow. Harry could see that his ‘sister’ did bare a fair resemblance to himself. She had her mother’s eyes, *his* mother’s eyes. Her face was more rounded than his, but just as pale. Her hair was as dark as his own, but where as his was as scruffy as could be, Rose’s hair was perfectly straightened and flowed over her shoulders. She was wearing jeans, and a black woolen jumper, with the sleeves rolled, or rather pushed up above her elbows. This was Rose Potter, his sister.

It seemed odd to Harry. For as long as he could remember, he had dreamed of a proper family. A mother who loved him, a father who would show him the world, which, since he had turned eleven, had been changed to ‘a father who would teach him to fly’, and maybe even a sibling or two. A family was all he had ever wanted, and according to the Mirror of Erised, it was the deepest desire of his heart. Now he was faced with exactly that. His sister was standing ten feet in front of him, and he didn’t know how to feel.

This was his sister, but he didn’t know her; he had no memory of her or having any family. She wasn’t even from his world. As much as he had tried to deny it, he had accepted Dumbledore’s explanation; he was in another world. God only knew if he would ever get back home. But then did he even want to? As soon as Dumbledore had said it, he knew he had to. His world needed him; no one else could defeat Voldemort. He knew that he had to go, no matter what this world could offer him.

But that was all before the two girls had entered his room. He couldn’t fight it. She was family, his family. He had dreamed about her, not her personally, but about a brother and a sister for years and now here she was. It was a dream-come-true. For a few minutes, all the worries of war, Prophecies, and Voldemort vanished.

“Harry?” asked Rose, her voice breaking on the single word. He could see her eye, the one that was not in shadow, glistening with tears in the firelight.

“You were expecting someone else?” said Harry, failing to keep a smile from his lips. Rose moved faster than Harry had ever seen; she darted towards him and threw her arms around him. She hit him with the force of runaway train, and nearly sent them both toppling over. Her

arms were wrapped tightly around his ribs, her head resting on his chest. He could feel her trembling and hear the quiet sobs as she wept into his chest. Harry did the only thing that seemed to make sense; he wrapped his arms protectively around her, holding her close to him.

He didn't know what else to do. He had never had any experience with situations like these. The closest he had come was when Hermione had given him a hug. Cho had been completely different, as she was...well, one should never, ever think of one's sister in the way that he had once thought of Cho. That was just wrong.

He swayed slightly, trying to comfort Rose. He wanted desperately to say something, but he couldn't find the words. The whole sensation was so new. In his arms was someone who loved him. He had a family. He knew she was crying on his account and he wanted to comfort her, to protect her. But he couldn't think of anything to say. He liked to think he was somewhat more sensitive than Ron, though at this point in time, he might as well be Ron for all the emotional support he was giving Rose.

"Shhhh," he whispered, lightly kissing her forehead. "It's OK, I'm here."

He felt Rose's grip tighten on him. He allowed his head to gently rest against hers, his cheek against her forehead. Over her shoulder he could see Ginny; the youngest Weasley looked so different than the last time he had seen her. Her hair was shorter, and tied back in a ponytail, which reached to just below the collar of the pink polo shirt she wore. Harry could see her watching the scene with a combination of interest, but he could see from her body language that she was uneasy with the situation. He saw a flash of fear cross over her face as Harry's eyes caught hers. She quickly looked away then back.

Harry gently pried Rose's arms loose from his waist and held her upright. She had shed all the tears she could. Her eyes still glistened in the firelight.

"I missed you," she confessed, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. Harry didn't know what to say. He was going to reply that he had missed her too, but she was from another world. He had never known her. Anything else was just rude or would hurt her; he could say something like, 'no you didn't, you missed your brother and that is not me,' or 'I'm sorry, but I can't say the same. I don't know you.'" He stood gaping for a second before deciding on a reply.

"I've dreamed of a sister since I was a year old, but I never dreamed I'd ever meet you" he whispered back. He placed his hand gently over hers, stroking her knuckles lightly with his thumb. "I even rehearsed what I would say to her if I ever did meet her. Now that I'm here, I'm speechless." It wasn't a lie. Lying alone, locked in a tiny cupboard in the middle of Surrey, Harry had dreamed of a sister, and what he would say to her. The situation was so emotionally charged that he found he couldn't think. All wit left him and his mind seemed blank.

"Is it true?" asked Rose. "Are you from another world?" Harry sighed. He knew that this was not what they should be talking about. His answer would invariably send her off into tears. But he couldn't lie. His head sank slowly into a nod.

“But that’s a story for another day,” he said, trying to comfort her.

Rose sank onto the four-poster bed, kicked off her shoes and sat cross-legged on the bed. Harry was dressed in black trousers with a dark blue shirt on top. He had altered the Room of Requirement into a bedroom of sorts, which had included a full wardrobe. He had to be careful not to leave, as anything the Room conjured would disappear if he left. In the case of clothes, that could leave him in quite an embarrassing situation. His eyes turned back to Ginny who still stood by the fire. Harry slowly started walking towards her. He saw her recoil slightly as he stepped into the light. Her eyes shot immediately to his scar, even though it wasn’t famous in this world.

“Good evening, Ginny,” said Harry softly.

“Hi,” said Ginny quickly. Her eyes were wide, just as they had been when he had fought Malfoy on the train.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” said Harry reassuringly. “I’m not who you think I am.”

“And the trolley witch?” asked Ginny. Harry cringed, the image of the dying witch instantly flooding his mind.

“GINNY!” snapped Rose.

“No, it’s OK,” said Harry. He knew he would have to answer to this eventually, and probably many times over to everyone he met. He wanted a chance to explain himself. Did Ginny not realise that that had been the hardest choice he had ever had to make? Did she think he had enjoyed it? If he had been able to do anything else, he would have done. It was a last resort, and he had to live with that. It was his fault and it would haunt him until the day he died. “I know you don’t like what I did,” he began. “Believe me I like it even less. Have you ever felt the Cruciatus Curse, Ginny? It’s awful. Imagine, if you will, a thousand red-hot poker blades stabbing you all over your body; picture your skin on fire, as boiling acid pumps through your veins. Multiply that by one thousand and you have some vague idea of what the Cruciatus Curse feels like. What’s more is that if the Curse is maintained for long enough, it damages the brain. I couldn’t allow the poor witch to suffer anymore.”

“So you killed her?” replied Ginny. She clearly wasn’t convinced.

“You were not prepared for an attack. I had to buy you enough time to mount one,” said Harry. “It was a horrible decision to have to make, but I made it in the hope of saving you. I couldn’t just tell them to let her go; they’d kill her, and then me, and then you. It was the hardest choice I have ever had to make, and I have to live with its consequences. I’m impressed by what you did manage, by the way. Was it the DA?”

“DA?” asked Ginny. “I don’t know what you mean. It was Rosie who took charge.” Harry glanced over at Rose who was sitting on the bed. He saw her smile faintly. Harry nodded to her.

“Impressive,” Harry acknowledged her. “To buy you time, I told Malfoy to check the locomotive. It was crumpled and I made the mistake of believing everyone had died. When they brought her out, I realised just how costly a mistake I had made. Where I come from, I’ve clashed with Death Eaters often enough to know that she was not getting out of it alive unless the Aurors came. I had sent a message to Dumbledore minutes before. I had a choice, allow her to suffer, or allow many of you to die. I made that choice. But once she was being tortured, I found that I could not let her suffer anymore. I did the most merciful thing I could think of. Don’t get me wrong, I hate myself for it and her face is going to haunt me for the rest of my life. Just like the Death Eater I killed at St Mungo’s.”

“Two,” interrupted Ginny. Harry grimaced. More deaths on his account, and she blamed him for them.

“One was me, the other was friendly fire and I didn’t even mean to kill the one I did,” said Harry. “I know this is strange for you. It sure as hell is for me. I’m not asking you to instantly trust me. I know what your Harry has done. I’ve spent the last half hour reading my file. I just want you to know that I am not him. All I ask is that you don’t judge me, that you give me a chance to prove to you that I really am a different person.” As the words left his mouth, he realised how strange it must sound, and in fact how corny. It was the sort of rubbish an awful screenwriter would write for a low-budget science fiction B-Movie, but the situation was so strange that it could have been taken from such a film.

“What’s your world like, Harry?” asked Rose from the bed. Harry knew that sooner or later he would have to explain what had happened to him, what his childhood had been like. On reflection he had accomplished so much in his last five years that he could talk for hours. And then there was his childhood. Hundreds of uneventful days, spent locked in the cupboard under the stairs, denied any human contact save for the hammering on the door by Dudley as he passed on his way from the kitchen to the lounge, pausing just long enough for the smell of whatever he had just been cooked to waft into the cupboard, making Harry even more hungry. Harry couldn’t help but wonder what life had been like for Rose and what his life could have been like were it not for Sibyl Trelawney and her stupid Prophecy. So many people believed that Prophecies held no value, why could Voldemort not have thought the same, why could he not have just dismissed the notion and left the Potters alone? Then he would have a family, just like he had now.

“That’s a story for another day,” said Harry, skirting the question. “It doesn’t really matter. According to Dumbledore I might be stuck here.”

“Is that a bad thing?” asked Rose, her eyes lighting up at the notion. Harry knew he had to get back and telling her this was not what she wanted to hear. But there was no use lying to her, but then again, did he *really* have to go back?

“Two minutes ago I would have answered yes without any hesitation,” admitted Harry. “Now, I’m not so sure.” He sank slowly into an armchair by the fire and crossed his arms. “I feel like this is all a dream and that I am going to wake up any second. It’s like a fantasy, everything I want is here, but I know that I am going to have to go back to the real world at the end of it.”

“Why?” asked Rose. “Why not stay? You said it yourself, everything you want in here.” It was a very good point.

“My world needs me.”

“We need you too, Harry,” she was almost begging.

“To kill Voldemort?” snapped Harry, feeling angry. “That’s all everyone ever wants.” He hadn’t meant to get angry, but that was one of his sensitive points. Dumbledore had used him in his world and Harry had a nasty feeling he would try it again in this world. He regretted it instantly; he knew he shouldn’t take his misfortune out on Rose, and tried to calm himself.

“No, Harry,” said Rose. “Because we love you.” Harry looked up into her eyes. No one had ever said that to him. He had no clue what love was. To him it was a made up word. It might as well be something that happened to other people. To Harry, love was a complete mystery, one he could embrace as a concept, but nothing more. He wouldn’t recognise love if it fell on his head.

“Harry, say something,” said Rose. Her eyes glistened with tears.

“I know nothing of family,” said Harry at last. “I don’t...”

“Then for Christ’s sake, Harry, stay,” said Rose. “Let me show you what you’re missing.”

“How?” He had no idea what she meant. Harry had dined with the Weasleys, he considered himself part of their family, and he knew Molly felt the same. Was this going to be the same? Part of him desperately wanted to find out, and part of him was too scared to move.

“Come and meet Mum,” Rose beckoned him. “They’re both in Dumbledore’s office, and the whole school is asleep. No one would see. Come on.” His parents were in Dumbledore’s office. That would probably mean they were being told about Harry’s situation. Rose obviously knew and so did Ginny. So if Ginny knew, probably more than his immediate family would know by now.

“The Order meeting?” asked Harry, putting two and two together.

“They’re all there,” confirmed Ginny. “But Dumbledore said you shouldn’t meet your parents yet.”

“Dumbledore doesn’t own me,” said Harry firmly. He actually agreed with Dumbledore’s suggestion, but in his present mindset he was irrationally rebelling against the Headmaster. After last year, Harry wanted to instantly discount anything the old man said, or maybe he just wanted to prove Dumbledore wrong; he didn’t really know. Dumbledore had been wrong last year, very wrong, and although he had apologised, he had justified it to himself. Harry wanted him to know he had made a mistake and accept it. The trouble was that Dumbledore was nearly perfect, and Harry clearly wasn’t anywhere close, which seemed to bug him at the moment.

“Harry,” said Ginny firmly. “I know this is hard for you. If it’s anything like what it is for Rosie, then you’ll be on the edge of a breakdown. I’ve watched her for nearly two years. Her biggest problem is that she refuses to share her pain.” She shot a look at Rose, who opened her mouth to object. “Don’t interrupt, Marie, you know this is true.” She turned back to Harry. “She thinks that she can handle it herself. You seem to feel the same way. I don’t know what Dumbledore has done to you in your world, but you need to trust his judgement. We *are* trying to help you.” Harry smiled. That show of strength was the first resemblance that this girl had shown to the Ginny he knew.

“Two things, Gin,” said Harry taking a seat on the sofa. “Firstly, who is Marie?” Ginny’s face instantly broke into a grin, while Rose looked rather put out.

“Rosie’s full name is Rose-Marie,” explained Ginny, trying not to laugh. “She doesn’t like being called Rose-Marie and especially not just Marie. I only call her that if it is something really important, or if I’m really angry with her.”

“Ah,” said Harry making a mental note to call her Marie from time to time. “And secondly, you are right. I don’t let people see how much I hurt. But let me tell you a little story. In my world there is a Prophecy. I apparently am the only one who can defeat Voldemort. In your world, the Prophecy doesn’t seem to exist. You are losing this war by the look of it. Now here I am, one who can defeat him. Do you really think that Dumbledore would let me go? Do you really think he cares about my well-being? No, he cares about one thing, and one thing only: that I can end this war for him, for you, nothing more.”

“Give him more credit than that, Harry,” said Ginny clearly getting frustrated. “He cares for us, he really does. He’s a good man, and the only one You-Know-Who ever feared. Trust him, he hasn’t lead us astray before.” Harry was about to tell her exactly how wrong she was in a not very polite manner, but he realised that she would not have experienced or even witnessed his isolation last year. She didn’t know about how the Headmaster had kept him and Sirius under house arrest.

“I once believed that,” said Harry, managing to keep his frustration in check. “Up until last June, I would have followed him through the fires of hell if he had asked. But then I found that for fifteen years, he had kept my destiny from me. He had let me wander from one near-death experience to the next, without telling me why I have no parents, why I have to live in fear for my life and those around me. He never even told me why I was so important, why my life meant more than those who I cared about, who lost theirs. It took the death of... someone close to me, to get him to tell me the truth. In that instance, I realised that I would always be a tool to him. He let me suffer inhumanely just to preserve me so I could end this war for him. The Dumbledore you know has even more reason than he did to want to use me. You have to admit there is a lot of cause for him to try and manipulate me into working for him. I won’t be a tool, Ginny, I am human, which is why I won’t let him bully me from pillar to post.”

“You can’t do this alone,” said Ginny. Her initial fear of him had vanished and she stepped closer. “None of us can.”

“Do what?” said Harry. “Kill Voldemort? See, there you go, assuming that I will kill him for you. Assuming that I will just *‘do my job’*. I am *not* getting involved. This is not my fight.”

“What if Rose was killed?” asked Ginny.

“That’s a bit harsh,” protested Harry.

“Answer the question,” said Ginny. “What if your family was targeted and you could prevent their deaths. Would you fight?”

“This is not my fight,” said Harry firmly. “I have my own war to fight. I can’t take responsibility for both.”

“Destiny chooses us, not the other way around,” said Ginny. She was beginning to sound like Dumbledore. The notion that she might be Dumbledore with Polyjuice potion passed through Harry’s mind but he quickly dismissed it. He found himself wondering about using Polyjuice Potion to assume the appearance of a member of the opposite sex. Harry found himself thinking about how hard it must be to walk in high-heals. The idea of wearing a skirt did not appeal either. Robes he could cope with, but not a skirt. He decided to break the trail of thought there, before it reached its logical and rather risqué conclusion. He also made another mental note, never to use Polyjuice Potion to become female. He wondered for a second what he had been thinking about before. Ginny was staring at him, apparently waiting for an answer. He suddenly remembered what they had been talking about, and his answer had not changed. He would not fight.

“Very philosophical,” said Harry sarcastically. There was wisdom in her words, but she was wrong. It was not his fight. He couldn’t get involved. What if he was killed here? He could never get home. *But you might not make it home anyway*, said a voice in his head. Harry quickly dismissed the thought. He might not be able to get home, but then again he might. In hope of that, he would not foolishly risk his life here. “I can’t, Ginny. I know where you are coming from, but I can’t.”

“So you’re going to sit here, twiddling your thumbs until Dumbledore finds a way for you to go home?” asked Ginny, a note of sarcasm in her voice. “That could take months. What are you going to do? Can someone in your position go to classes?”

“I don’t know, Gin,” said Harry.

“Harry,” interrupted Rose. “Let’s go and meet Mum.” Harry was grateful for the change of subject, but the prospect of meeting his mother was so terrifying he found himself wanting to avoid that as well. He didn’t know why he felt this way, but he felt like he didn’t actually want to meet her, not yet anyway. It was the standard male mindset; anything one was uncomfortable with, one put off for as long as possible.

“Rose, it’s nearly two in the morning,” said Harry, inventing an excuse. “I have had a very long day, I imagine that you all have too. Let’s leave it for tomorrow.”

“But...” protested Rose.

“He’s right, Rose,” interrupted Ginny, coming to Harry’s rescue.

“Rose, look I will meet them in time,” said Harry kindly. “But I have a lot to think about. I have had a very trying weekend. I just found out that I am in another world. I can’t take much more at the moment. Tomorrow, we can discuss whatever you want.” Rose opened her mouth to protest but quickly closed it, she realised that it was hopeless. She stood and slipped back into her trainers. She tucked the untied laces into the shoes and then hugged Harry.

“Tomorrow,” she whispered, as she hugged him. Harry kissed her lightly on the forehead.

“Tomorrow,” said Harry.

She released him and after drying her eyes, she walked towards the door. “G’night,” she said as she reached it.

“Good night,” replied Harry. Ginny followed Rose towards the door, stopping as she passed Harry.

“Harry, I don’t know what is happening to you, but I don’t want to see her hurt again. Remember it is not just you who is struggling with this.” With that she marched out of the room, leaving Harry with a lot to think about.

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Harry was awoken the next morning by the smell of scrambled eggs wafting up his nostrils. He sat up in bed, the world around him coming into focus. Next to his bed was a tray, containing a plate of scrambled egg on toast, a glass of orange juice and a pot of tea, there was also a rolled up copy of the *Daily Prophet*. Harry had not heard anyone come or go. He assumed it had been a House Elf who had delivered his breakfast. Harry’s first reaction was to reach for his glasses, before realising that a, he didn’t have any, and b, he didn’t need them. On reflection, this was the first morning on which he hadn’t woken up and instantly thought it had all been a dream. When he had woken today, he had instantly known where he was and why he was there. He was surprised at this. Maybe he was beginning to accept it. He sat up in bed and rested the tray across his lap. He began to tuck into his breakfast, and opened the *Prophet*.

On the front page showed a large picture of Harry Potter. Harry stared at the boy in the picture. His eyes were cold; despite the black and white print, Harry could see that his counterpart’s eyes were dull and emotionless. He had no scar on his forehead, or any hint of a smile. Harry realised just how different he was from this boy. They really were chalk and cheese. The other Harry stared out from the picture. At first, Harry thought that it was a still photo, but it wasn’t. The picture was moving, but Harry Potter was in no mood to wave from the picture. He glared out from newspaper, fixing the reader with a piercing glare that would reduce lesser men to tears.

“If you are in my world,” said Harry to the picture. “You’d better pray that you are gone when I get back, because if we ever meet, only one of us will walk away.” This boy was Harry’s main concern at the moment. After last year, Dumbledore would want to include Harry in Order operations to try and win back his trust. If he thought that the other Harry was him, and there was no reason why he shouldn’t, then he would be handing Voldemort key information. The Order would be hunted down one by one as Voldemort’s reign of terror grew and grew. There was no one in his world with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord. Voldemort would take power, completely unchallenged.

Harry had read the Auror file on Harry Potter. This was a very disturbed little boy. He had committed his first murder at the age of fourteen. That murder had been the Minister of Magic. The report and newspaper article described the events in which Harry Potter had lead six men and destroyed Diagon Alley. They had burned the Christmas tree, murdered the Minister and many more besides. The article was detailed enough to enable even the simple minded to paint a clear picture of what had happened. The trouble was that Harry already had a mental picture. He remembered one of his dreams vividly. He could still smell the burning pine tree; still hear the screams as he close his eyes at night. With every line he read, new memories came to the surface.

As Harry was eating, he noticed a cardboard box sitting on the table opposite his bed. Once he had finished, he decided to investigate. Upon closer examination, he found it to be full of his belongings, or rather the other Harry’s belongings he had been wearing upon his arrest. Harry opened the box, using his breakfast knife to cut the tape with which it was sealed, and peered inside. On top, there was a chest plate of armour, made from Dragon Hide. Dragon Scales were amongst the hardest substances known to wizards, this was heavy-duty armour and obviously very expensive. He had been wearing it when he awoke in the field. It had a scratch across the front of it, presumably from some form of blade, but was otherwise in perfect condition. Harry had a feeling it had saved his life before, but he didn’t want to remember the circumstances under which it had happened. Next he pulled out a bundle of fabric. It consisted of a pair of black combat trousers, and a long-sleeved black t-shirt. He pulled out a pair of boots, leather gloves and a set of straps and holsters. Underneath all this were the more controversial items. Two wands, one he recognised as his own, and the other he had never seen before, but he felt a clear sense of Déjà vu. The other Harry obviously used it. He somehow knew that it belonged in a holster behind his back, just in case. There was also commando knife, a stun baton and lastly a Katana.

Harry removed the sword from its scabbard. The blade was infinitely sharp, and gleamed in the artificial sunlight that bathed the Room of Requirement. Looking at the beautiful, but deadly, weapon, Harry couldn’t help but wonder how many innocent lives it had claimed.

It was half past eight when Dumbledore returned. He had brought Madam Pomfrey to conduct a medical examination. Dumbledore then left while Madam Pomfrey set to work. The procedure took about thirty minutes. She then left to write up her notes and Harry once again found himself alone.

At half past nine, the door once again opened. Harry immediately dived behind the bed. The last thing he needed was to be seen by a student who was skiving off a lesson, or coming up here for a cigarette. To his relief, Harry saw Albus Dumbledore come through the door, followed by a man Harry had never seen before.

“Good Morning, Harry,” said Dumbledore, politely. The two old men watched in amusement as Harry picked himself up off the floor. “I trust you slept well?”

“Near enough,” muttered Harry. He sat on the edge of the bed, trying to keep his face neutral. He knew Dumbledore was a Legilimens, and that he had no hope of being able to lie, but he didn’t want to give too much away, yet.

“I would ask if the room was not your liking, but given the function of this particular room, it would seem a pointless question,” said Dumbledore. “I trust your belongings were delivered to you? They were confiscated upon your arrest. I had Mr. Shacklebolt bring them over. He also wants to meet with you.”

“Aren’t I the popular one,” muttered Harry.

“An interesting toy, you have there,” commented the man who accompanied Dumbledore, pointing at the dormant Stun-Baton, which lay on the table. He was old, far older than even Dumbledore. He looked like Santa Claus, right down to the red robes he wore, except that his beard was much longer, so long, in fact, that it rivalled Dumbledore’s.

“And you are...?” asked Harry. He didn’t mean it to sound as rude as it did, but he had to know to whom he was talking.

“Harry, this is Professor Nicolas Flamel,” said Dumbledore, introducing his accomplice. Harry recognised the name instantly, having spent a good few hours in the library looking for it, under the watch of Hermione.

“A pleasure to finally meet you,” said Harry politely, shaking the old man’s hand. “And how is your wife?”

“Perenelle is as healthy as can be,” said Flamel politely.

“As well as a six hundred and sixty three year old can be,” said Harry, attempting humour.

“Touché,” smiled the alchemist. “I was saying, your Stun-Baton, it is highly modified, is it not?”

“Sorry,” said Harry. “I don’t know. I’ve never even seen one before. I wouldn’t know if it has or hasn’t. When I arrived, I just somehow knew what it was and what to do.”

“Right,” said Flamel, hiding his disappointment. Harry didn’t know how it was modified, but it was probably an impressive piece of spell-work if Flamel was so interested in it.

Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Professor Flamel and myself are here to discern...”

“Whether I am useful to you, and whether I can be convinced to fight,” interrupted Harry. He knew what they were trying to do and he would not be fooled by it. Dumbledore could dress it up in as much verbal diarrhoea as he wanted, but point was always the same, and Harry’s answer would always be the same: he would not fight. He had always fought, for five years he had done nothing but fight. Fate owed him a little time off and this is what this ‘holiday’ was: time off.

“We are here to determine the differences between your world and ours,” Dumbledore corrected Harry. “This is aimed at making your stay a little more comfortable. During our conversation yesterday, you hid behind a veil of secrecy. We have to know who you are, if not, how can we ever trust you.”

“Of course,” said Harry, feigning a smile. Dumbledore and Flamel took seats on a sofa that appeared out of thin air.

“So do words and thoughts often come to you?” inquired Dumbledore. He was presumably referring to what Harry said about just somehow knowing how to use a Stun-Baton.

“Not really,” said Harry. “It’s just that since I’ve been here, I can just...I just know things. I’ve never used a sword before, but I can wield one like Errol Flynn. I’ve never even seen a Stun-Baton before, or even heard of one, but here I am using one. It just comes to me. I think they are your Harry’s instincts.”

“It seems like a fair statement,” said Flamel, thoughtfully. “From what Albus tells me, your transition between worlds was not done in any conventional way.”

“Conventional way? As in it has happened before, I can get home?” asked Harry, hope rising in his heart.

“I mean you did not use any artefact, and you assumed the body of someone else,” said Flamel. Harry’s heart sank. Flamel seemed to sense what Harry was thinking and gave Harry a sad nod. “You see, you told Albus that you are now far more muscular than before and your hair has changed. I gather that you have, pardon the expression, possessed our Harry’s body. The conventional way would be to travel in your own body by some unknown way. Had you done that, you would have kept your own body and we would have two Harry’s in this world. As it is, we have one. One part of this session is to discover where the old one is.”

“In my world?” said Harry. With every passing second, he was more sure that that was where the evil Harry had got to.

“I can’t deny that that’s one possibility,” began Flamel, but Harry cut him off.

“That is why I have to go, why I can’t fight your war for you. I’m needed back home.”

“Harry, no one is asking you to do anything,” said Dumbledore kindly.

“Yet!” snapped Harry. His anger had been ever so close to the surface recently. He managed to regain control quickly and luckily, Dumbledore changed the subject.

“Our conversation yesterday raised some interesting question,” he said “We need some answers, so we know how best to proceed. From what Severus - I assume you know about his situation” - Harry nodded - “ From what he tells us, you will be missed if you do not return to Voldemort within forty-eight hours from the time you left. That means that in twenty-six and a half hours, he will be looking for you. We need to know who you are before we decide what to do. How do we handle your defection, how do we reintroduce you to our society? We can’t very well tell that that you are a new person, or that you’ve seen the error of your ways. The truth is unthinkable. We need to decide how to act, and to do that, we need more information.”

“I see,” said Harry. He had a fair point, but there were things that Harry did not want to share, not yet at least. “I reserve the right not to answer.”

“As you wish,” said Flamel. “But remember, Mr. Potter, we *are* here to help you.”

“Famous words,” said Harry sadly. “I’ve heard many times them before, usually right before I’m asked to do something I *really* don’t want to do.”

“May we begin?” asked Flamel. Harry nodded. “You referred to the Order by name. Does it serve the same purpose here as it does in your world?”

“I haven’t seen it here,” said Harry. “But if it is a resistance group, run by Dumbledore, then yes. Key members include McGonagall, Snape, Shacklebolt, Lupin, Tonks, Arabella Figg and...” Harry trailed off, he had been about to say Sirius, but he choked on the words.

“It would seem so, Nicolas,” said Dumbledore. “Here we have a few more, whom you will meet in due course. Most significantly, for you at least, your parents, godfather and Mr. Pettigrew.”

“Wormtail!” Harry’s head snapped up. “Arrest him!”

“What?” asked Dumbledore.

“That little rat is a Death Eater,” said Harry.

“He is one of your parents’ closest friends,” said Dumbledore.

“He sold them out to Voldemort,” snapped Harry. “That little prick is the reason...” he managed to stop himself before he told Dumbledore something that he wanted to keep to himself for the moment. He took a deep breath and tried to calm down. He was trying to do that a lot

lately. It was a stressful situation, granted, but he felt that he had been angry a lot lately. He had to try and sort that out. “Trust me. You’re a Legilimens, arrest and confront the lying little bastard!”

“Let’s move on, Albus,” said Flamel. “We should follow up this accusation, but for now, let us continue. There are the Aurors, Shackbolt, you mentioned, Frank Longbottom is another.”

“What is my history with him,” asked Harry. He remembered that his last encounter with said Auror nearly ended with Frank killing him and saying that he had died resisting arrest. “He seemed pretty mad when he caught me. He said Neville was...”

“Frank has had a difficult year,” said Dumbledore, removing his spectacles and polishing them on his robes. He replaced them on his nose before he continued. “Firstly, there was his eldest son, Neville. We do not know if it was you yourself or if it was done on your command, but Neville was subjected to the Cruciatus Curse repeatedly. Prolonged exposure to the curse can result in...”

“Insanity,” finished Harry. The image of Neville screaming in pain flowed into his mind. Harry didn’t know if it was the incident the Department of Mysteries while LeStrange convinced Harry to hand over the Prophecy, or if it was one of the other Harry’s horrific memories.

“More of the old Harry’s knowledge?” asked Flamel. Harry shook his head.

“I wish,” muttered Harry. Then, to his audience, he said, “Where I come from, it was Frank and Alice who were tortured. After Voldemort fell, Bellatrix LeStrange and her friends caught them. They thought they knew where Voldemort had gone. They tortured them to insanity. I met them once at St Mungo’s while visiting Arthur Weasley. But Neville...Neville is my friend. I’ve known him for five years. He put his life on the line to save me, last year. I would never hurt him.”

“Frank will find it hard to adapt,” said Dumbledore solemnly. “I think it best if you avoid him at first.” Harry nodded. He didn’t want another encounter with the enraged Auror.

“You just mentioned the fall of Voldemort,” said Flamel. “Would you like to explain?” Harry paused. There were certain details he didn’t want to share. He would be meeting his family later; he didn’t want them to judge him by sympathy. All his life he had been judged by the events of the past, events he didn’t even remember. This was his chance to get away from that, even if it was only for a little while.

“I don’t want to say too much,” said Harry carefully. “Let’s just say that Voldemort came for me. He tried to use the Killing Curse but my mother had given me protection. The curse rebounded, almost killing him and leaving me with nothing but a scar.”

“What kind of protection?” pressed Dumbledore. He was hungry for details that Harry didn’t want to give. Harry knew he couldn’t lie and felt more and more like he was backed into a corner. His palms were sweaty, but he wasn’t lying.

“The kind only a mother can give,” said Harry, hoping no one would press further.

“Why did Voldemort not die?” asked Flamel. Harry paused. He didn’t know. The curse rebounded, but it was *his* curse, the most powerful Killing Curse on the planet. It only held that status as Dumbledore was too noble to use such a spell. Voldemort was powerful enough to kill; he had proved it time and time again. None who had felt the curse had survived. Why had Voldemort himself not died when it had hit him? At the re-birth party he had mentioned that he had taken, *‘steps along the road to immortality’*; Harry wondered what they were.

“I don’t know,” said Harry.

“Why did he want to kill you?” asked Flamel. He had hit the nail on the head. “You said he had been after you for fifteen years, and he came for you himself rather than send a follower; that doesn’t often happen. You must be a worthy opponent to merit his personal attention. If my arithmetic is correct, that would mean he deemed you to be a personal threat at the age of one.”

“There was a Prophecy,” said Harry. He had decided that in this case, truth was the best policy. It would eventually out, and Harry saw no reason for keeping it a secret. He was already incredibly valuable to the Order, but he needed Dumbledore’s trust to do anything. The best way was through the truth and through the Prophecy. He began to quote, “The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord shall be born as the seventh month dies, born to those who have thrice defied him. And the Dark Lord shall take him, and mark him his equal. But he shall have power the Dark Lord knows not. One must die at the hands of the other, for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord shall be born as the seventh month dies.”

Silence had fallen over the room. Four eyes regarded Harry with awe. Part of him was glad he had shared the Prophecy; they say that a problem shared is a problem halved. Part of him regretted it; he had given them a way to end their war, he had made himself irresistible to them.

“That Prophecy was made sixteen years ago,” said Harry. “To protect me, you sent me to live with the Dursleys. You never told me about that Prophecy. I wandered from one near death experience to the next, and you still didn’t tell me. Once Voldemort returned and tried to acquire it, you still didn’t tell me, and the closest thing I have ever had to family was killed. I know what you’re thinking. I know that I could conceivably end this war for you, but I can’t get involved. That Prophecy has ruined my life. I doubt it even applies in this world, only in mine.”

“And Voldemort knows of this Prophecy?” asked Dumbledore, looking thoughtful. Harry could almost see the cogs whirring in his head.

“In my universe, yes, or at least half of it,” said Harry. “His spy was discovered halfway through. He knew that I had the power to destroy him, and that I’d be born on the thirty-first of

July. He came for me based on that information and unwittingly marked me his equal when he failed to kill me.” Harry gestured to his scar.

“He might know it here as well,” said Dumbledore thoughtfully. “What if we never heard it, but he did.”

“Would he not just kill Harry?” pointed out Flamel.

“True,” conceded Dumbledore. “I was thinking that maybe that was why he took Harry. But then again, why wait thirteen years to recruit him. Why not kill him instantly; what would he have to gain by recruiting the one who can kill him? Surely death is more logical.”

“I *am* still here,” interrupted Harry. He was annoyed that they were discussing his death so frankly in front of him.

“Apologies, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “You must know better than anyone the implications of this Prophecy. We will need to make certain that the Prophecy was not made in this world. If it was and we are unaware of it, it would be...inconvenient.”

“If it was,” said Harry, “it is safe to assume that Riddle doesn’t know it either. He wouldn’t take the risk that I might grow to oppose him. He would see to it that I died. That was why he came for me, even with the protection. Were it not for my mother, he would have succeeded. I see no reason he would not do the same thing here.”

“Recruitment...” began Flamel.

“Would not solve it indefinitely,” said Harry, “as there is a chance of defection. And if he wanted to make sure I would never oppose him, why did he give me all the power and training he did? I read what he allegedly has done to me. That turned me into a monster, but a powerful monster that could possibly threaten his power. What he gave me made it more likely that I could oppose him. There is of course one more fact I didn’t mention. From the records, there were two possible male Wizards born on the thirty-first of July to parents who had escaped Voldemort three times. The second was Neville Longbottom. In this world, Voldemort could have tracked me down through the records and chosen to recruit me at the age of thirteen. Unlikely, but he could have. If he did, then why not recruit Neville, or kill him?”

“I mean no offence, Harry, but he had you do it,” said Flamel.

“Last year, though,” said Harry. “If he was planning on recruiting me, but killing Neville, why not kill him when he was one, and save himself the hassle. Perhaps he tried to recruit Neville and he refused so he sent me after him. But according to my record, I was sent after Neville to prove to Frank what would happen if he didn’t release a few captive Death Eaters, not to punish Neville himself.”

“He has a point, Nicolas,” said Dumbledore gravely. “As a matter of principle, I feel that although it is almost certain it does not, we should still investigate and make absolutely certain that the Prophecy does not exist.”

“I agree,” said Harry. “So what happens now?”

“There are a lot of people who need to see you, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Your parents for one.”

Harry knew this. For years he had dreamed of having a family, but now that he did, now that he was so close, he found himself almost wishing that he didn't. What would he say to them? What would they think of him? He remembered Lupin once telling him that his parents gave their lives to save his, he should not repay them by putting himself needlessly at risk. That had been his third year, after the episode with Snape and the Marauder's map. Those simple words had hurt Harry more than Snape's barrage of insults of five years. But now, three years later, Harry still had not heeded those words. Again and again, he had risked his life, and now Sirius had lost his. That was yet another person who had given their life to save his and he still hadn't learned his lesson. Would they blame him for it, scold him for it? All he had ever wanted was to make them proud, but he knew that he didn't? He had treated his friends disgracefully last year. He was now a killer as well. He would disgust them. Harry's lack of enthusiasm must have showed.

“That doesn't appeal to you?” asked Dumbledore, softly.

“I..I'm just worried that I'll disappoint them,” said Harry. “They gave their lives so that I could live.”

“And you feel that that is a debt you can never repay, that they'll hold mistakes against you,” finished Dumbledore. Harry nodded “I can't pretend that I know how that feels. I have never conversed with the dead, except our resident ghosts. But surely you know that they are your family, and your family will love you no matter what. Surely you know that?”

“I don't know what it is to be loved,” said Harry sadly.

“Your Aunt and Uncle must love you,” said Dumbledore. “I would not...”

“Wouldn't you?” said Harry, with a dry smile. He laughed softly at the irony. “To protect your saviour, you sent me there. You admitted to me that you knew I would suffer. They hate Magic. They thought if they could keep me downtrodden enough, they could crush the magic out of me. Until I met Ron on the Hogwarts Express when I was eleven, I had never had a friend. I lived in the cupboard under the stairs, for God's sake. I had my first Birthday present when I was thirteen. It wasn't until my third year that I had anyone I could even vaguely call a parent. He died on account of me last June.”

“You have suffered beyond what I would permit,” said Dumbledore. “My counterpart seems to have been blinded by his goal. But trust me, Harry: your parents love you, and always will, you just have to let them.”

Harry rested his head on his hands. He could feel tears coming, but fought them back. *Maybe I should tell them everything*, he thought, *maybe if I appear weak enough they'll get off my back*. Swiftly, he dismissed the idea. He knew they were right, but it was all such a new experience for him. Self-doubt filled his mind.

“How did it go with your sister and Miss Weasley?” asked Flamel. “I assume you knew Miss Weasley before you...”

“Fine, I think,” answered Harry. “Ginny has changed, but that is to be expected. In this world, she never knew thirteen years of peace, she never...” He paused. He had been about to mention her crush on him, but that would be presumptuous. If it got back to her, she would think that he expected her to like him and...it was a complication that he needed to avoid. She was as good as a sister to him...but now he had a real sister, Ginny was...step-sister was the closest analogy he could think of; or a distant cousin perhaps, distant, but still family.

“As for Rose or Rosie...what should I call her?” asked Harry.

“I believe she goes by Rose, most of the time,” said Dumbledore. “Except when she has done something she should not have, in which case your mother uses her full name, Rose-Marie,” he added with a smile.

“She seems nice enough,” said Harry. “More trusting that I would be in her shoes. Then again, I haven't been dragged through such an emotional nightmare as she has. It's understandable that she be a little delicate.”

“Too trusting,” commented Flamel, amusement written on his face. “If anything I would say she is the opposite. She bottles everything up inside, refusing to trust anyone. A lot like someone else I have recently met,” he shot Harry a glance, making it obvious he was talking about him. “Ginny, her closest friend, knows more than anyone, but there are still things that Rose hides. She refuses to let people see her bleed, as the expression goes.”

“She seemed to trust me from the off,” said Harry.

“She wants you back very badly,” said Dumbledore. “For her, this is a dream come true; it is for all your family. She wants it so much she will throw caution to the wind.”

“It's what I've always wanted, but then why do I feel so nervous. Part of me wishes that I was back home, even if I had to lose them.”

“It is only natural that you would feel a little apprehensive,” said Flamel comfortingly. “All I can suggest is that you be yourself; let them choose. One more thing, give them a chance.”

“Thanks,” said Harry. He did actually mean it. He did feel a little better for having had this conversation.

“Oh, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “I sent my man to the farm where you were found. He found no sword.”

“I don’t have it,” said Harry. He hadn’t picked it up, but it definitely had arrived with him. “So where is it?”

“We will, of course, continue to look,” said Dumbledore. “I felt you should know.” Harry nodded his appreciation.

The two professors left after their conversation. Harry was to be introduced to his parents during lunch that day. Shortly after Dumbledore left, Harry had the House Elf assigned to guard him go to Diagon Alley, more specifically, Milton’s Muggle Marketplace to pick up a set of clothes. Meeting his parents for the first time dressed as an assassin or as a patient wasn’t right. Also he couldn’t leave the Room of Requirement in the clothes he currently wore, as they would disappear as he left. That would be embarrassing to say the least.

The House Elf returned after five minutes, with some simple clothes; a pair of trainers, jeans, underwear and a shirt. All were black. He didn’t feel at all colourful at the moment. The Gold had come from the account of one, Robert Steven Randellson. Mr. Randellson was a phantom, a man who only existed on parchment. His account was a slush fund for Death Eaters, where their ‘loot’ was kept for when it was needed. After all, a terror campaign was not cheap. Harry wondered where they got their robes from. He initially thought of Voldemort walking into a tailor’s and asking for two hundred pairs of robes and masks (one size fits all), before realising that they were easily conjured. Being raised by Muggles, he was often slow to realise what, to a wizard, was perfectly obvious. The account, however, was one of the more useful things Harry remembered. It was technically stealing, but as Harry reasoned, if he didn’t spend it, it would be used to buy things that hurt people.

Dressed in his new clothes, there was nothing Harry could do but to wait. Seconds felt like hours, and hours like months as he waited. In a room with infinite possibilities, Harry Potter could not think of a single thing to do.

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“Come,” hissed a voice of pure ice. The voice was lined with anger at the interruption. Lord Voldemort was sitting in a large red armchair by the fireplace to the left of the room. The curtains were drawn, blocking out all light from outside. In the grate, the dying embers cast little light into the room. It was almost perfectly dark inside, the light from the grate just enough to pick out the coiled snake at his feet and the empty crystal glass that sat on the arm of the chair. The Dark Lord was thinking, or at least he had been, until the interruption. Someone would pay for breaking his trail of thought.

A bright light suddenly shone in the room as the door opened and the light from the hall gushed in. Had the Dark Lord been facing the door he would have been blinded, and that would not have improved his anger with the newcomer. As it was, he was facing away from the door. He knew for a fact that only one who bore that Dark Mark could enter the room, so he was safe, not that anyone would dare to attack him. Come to think of it, he had given explicit orders that he was not to be disturbed. Many Death Eaters were still at Grimmauld Place, or back with their families among society, waiting patiently, or impatiently in some cases, for his call. He had been alone in the mansion, until now.

Lord Voldemort sat perfectly still as the Death Eater came closer, knelt and kissed the hem of his robes.

“You said I was to come to you before noon today,” said the Death Eater calmly. The Dark Lord recognised the voice instantly as one of his more usefully placed contacts. On reflection, he had told the Auror to come to him at noon today when they had met last week. In light of Harry’s recent actions, he had forgotten all about it, not that he would admit it. Lord Voldemort was becoming increasingly concerned about the boy. He still could not come up with a logical reason for the boy’s actions. The boy made no sense. In the last few days, everything he did was so unlike him. The more research he did, the more he realised that by all accounts, Harry’s behaviour was different. Allegedly he had claimed that he could defeat Lord Voldemort. There was no one who could defeat him and everyone knew it. If there was such a man, it was certainly not a sixteen-year-old boy. Harry was good, his raw power was phenomenal, not too far behind Voldemort’s own, but he still had a lot to learn. Until Voldemort knew exactly what was going on, he would not rest easy.

“Master?”

“Patience, is a virtue,” snapped the Dark Lord. “I will speak to you if and when I am ready, or perhaps you feel that your convenience is of more important than mine?” He withdrew his wand and pointed it at the Death Eater.

“No, never, Master,” said the Death Eater quickly. One did not need to be a Legilimens to tell that the man was scared. “I was just concerned.”

“Touching,” said Lord Voldemort rising from the chair and lowering his hood. “So you believe that I am incapable of looking after myself, do you?”

“I...” that was as far as he got.

“*Crucio!*” muttered Voldemort lazily. He held the curse for a mere ten seconds, nothing compared to any normal session. At the moment, torture seemed to have lost its appeal. He had things to think about and he wanted to get back to them. “Now we have cleared up a few ground rules, what have you to say?”

The Death Eater rose slowly and shakily to his feet.

“Four days ago, the night when Harry Potter was captured, my team was dispatched to Devon. We weren’t told much, just that a facility of some importance was under attack and that we were to defend it.”

“I know this,” said the Dark Lord impatiently. He debated whether to kill the Auror. He had interrupted him, and he was not providing anything useful.

“But listen, Master,” said the Death Eater quickly. Voldemort cut him off.

“I am, and I am waiting for you to get to the point. So if I were you, I would make it a *very* good one,” said Voldemort icily. His tone was clear; if he didn’t like what he was about to hear, the Death Eater would not leave this room alive.

“I managed to stop my Team Leader from killing the b...Potter on the spot. While they were binding him, I noticed what Potter had dropped.” From within his robes, the Auror produced a long, jewel encrusted sword. He held it horizontally in both hands for his master to see. “At first I thought nothing of it,” he continued. “But then I read what is engraved on the blade.” The dying embers cast little light into the room. The Dark Lord bowed his head to read the ornate lettering on the blade.

GODRIC GRYFFINDOR

For some unknown reason, a chill went down Voldemort’s spine. This could be *very* bad. “You are certain, *absolutely certain*, that Harry had this; it was *him* who dropped it, not one of you?” The man seemed to detect that he was onto a winner here and that his chances of surviving the meeting had just exceeded ninety nine point nine percent. He may be made to pay for his arrogance later, but for now, the Dark Lord wanted answers.

“Positive, M’Lord,” said the Auror. “None of my team carries weapons like this. The only one who was even in that house at school is my team leader, Longbottom.” The name was familiar—Harry had had dealings with Longbottom in the past.

“Potter’s *friend*?”

“The same,” smirked the Auror. “He holds a lot of hatred for Potter, and he is a good Auror. It is a duel I would not mind seeing. Anyhow, he would not carry the sword. Since there was no one else, it must have been Potter’s.” Voldemort’s mind was going at the speed of light. That sword had been buried along with its owner over nine hundred years ago somewhere beneath Hogwarts. How could Harry have come into possession of it? How could Harry possibly wield it, even if he did? According to history, Gryffindor’s sword could only be wielded by... *Oh, no.*

“You have done well,” said Voldemort slowly. “In time you will be rewarded, but we have to act very quickly and very quietly.”

“There is more, Master,” said the Death Eater. “Dumbledore had high influence in the Ministry. There are some who are obviously in very close league with him. Potter, Black, Shackbolt, Tonks, Dawlish to name a few. During the attack on the Hogwarts Express, we got a message in the fireplace from Dumbledore. He knew that the train was about to be attacked a few minutes before it even happened. I believe someone tipped him off.”

“Evidently,” said Voldemort impatiently.

“The following morning, while we were still processing the captured Death Eaters—I have Malfoy’s location should you wish to free him. We didn’t get Black, I assume she made it back safely. Anyhow, I noticed that five of Dumbledore’s associates left within five minutes of each other and arrived back two hours later within five minutes of each other with no explanation. They left at around eleven thirty. He didn’t use the more noticeable ones, Potter, Black, and the others. They were at Hogwarts at the time. Apparently Dawlish granted them time off to visit his wife and daughter. Anyhow, I knew they were all close to Dumbledore and that since they all left at the same time and came back in the same manner wearing such similar attire, I was positive that they were doing Dumbledore a favour. I noticed that upon their returns they wore Muggle clothing. As I passed their desks, I caught a brief glimpse at a receipt for the rental of two black Jeeps. I know a little about Muggles and I know that they are a form of vehicle.

“Now at the time I didn’t think it was too significant. I made a mental note to inform you at this meeting, but I had nothing concrete. The next thing happened by luck. Malfoy’s son has been feeding him information from inside Hogwarts. He sent an owl to his father, which obviously ended up at the Ministry. Luckily I managed to intercept it. It seems that yesterday at around quarter past twelve, two Black Jeeps drove up to Hogwarts. Young Malfoy didn’t see what was in it, but he said Dumbledore was there and he seemed pretty secretive. I would not think that Dumbledore himself would go on any mission, this had to be something special.”

“And he had no idea about the contents of the Jeeps?” asked the Dark Lord.

“None. He said, they pulled up, Dumbledore got out, along with several men he had never seen before, and Professor Severus Snape.”

“I see,” said Voldemort thoughtfully.

“What would you have me do?” asked the man. “I could find out the location of the hire company. I could scour the local rags. I might get lucky.”

Voldemort nodded. “Do so, but don’t make it seem obvious. Anything you find is to come to me. You are to make no aggressive moves of any kind, you must not be compromised, the penalty for which will be severe. You will receive further instructions in the usual manner. Be swift, my friend. Time is against us.”

The Auror bowed, turned and swiftly felt the room. Voldemort stood still for a moment, replaying the conversation in his head. He had a lot to do, and to start with, he needed to speak to another well-placed Death Eater.

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“Mum, I’m fine,” said Rose as Lily fussed over. “He’s not bloomin’ royalty. He’s not going to care what I’m wearing.”

Over the course of the morning, Rose had noticed her mother becoming increasingly agitated. She couldn’t sit still. Rose had had a wonderfully nightmare-free night’s sleep that night, for what seemed like the first time in weeks. Ever since Harry had been caught, her dreams had been plagued with death and destruction. Seeing Harry last night was...she couldn’t describe it if she tried. He was perfectly polite; he was not the killer that filled the *Prophet*. She had been right. Harry had come back and he was better than ever.

All the insults, the stares, the rumours that had plagued her footsteps for two years didn’t mean anything anymore. She knew full well that she couldn’t tell anyone, as much as she would like to. People could say whatever they liked, it didn’t matter, because she knew. Harry was back and they were going to be a family again. She had heard something about destiny and fighting Voldemort, but Harry wasn’t going to fight. He was going to stay with her. She would convince him to stay. Once he met their mother and father, he would stay and things would be just like they once were. A few days from now, Dumbledore would find a way to re-introduce Harry. All charges would be dropped and Harry could come back to school. They would be like any other family on the light side.

That was Rose’s dream, her fantasy, which hour by hour was coming closer and closer to being a reality, or so Rose believed. Ginny had been a little doubtful, and she had every right to be. Rose would see where she was coming from. Ginny was just trying to protect her, and Rose appreciated her concern, but she had been wrong. *Harry was back!*

At the moment, Rose was trying to convince her mother that she didn’t need to brush her hair and put on dress robes. She had met Harry the night before, her mother had not. Rose didn’t know what her mother was expecting, but she seemed to be making sure everything was perfect. According to her father, Lily had come close to hitting Dumbledore when he told her that she would have to wait to the morning to see Harry. Rose felt a little bit awkward, as she had already seen him. Lily had reluctantly agreed and the meeting was set for noon, during the lunch break.

Rose checked her watch.

“It’s time.” Technically, it wasn’t; they still had four minutes, but she could just claim that her watch was fast. Her impatience was rivalled only by that of her mother. Her father, on seventy-two hour leave from the Aurors was also present, but was making an effort to appear calm, if only for Lily’s sake.

They left the Potions office and headed towards the staircase at the end of the hall. There was, in fact, a shortcut behind one of the paintings along the corridor, but neither Rose nor her father was going to point it out. Lily Potter was a Professor after all. She climbed the staircase and headed along another passage. Rose wanted to run ahead. Having met Harry already, she felt almost like a tour guide; she wanted to demonstrate her knowledge of him, but couldn't find a reason to start a conversation. As they turned right, they each noticed that the gargoyles were parted, revealing the staircase to the Headmaster's office.

"Hang on," muttered her mother irritably. "I'd better check in, make sure he hasn't invented another excuse to keep us apart."

Rose followed her parents up the staircase to the study. As she entered the office, she noticed that there was a small ceramic bowl full of silvery liquid on the desk. Dumbledore had his wand out. *Was it some form of potion?* wondered Rose. In front of the Headmaster's desk, sat Professors McGonagall, Flamel and Snape.

"Ah, all ready for your big reunion, I see," greeted the Headmaster jovially. "I spoke to him again this morning along with Nicolas. He is most anxious to meet you. As you can see, you have caught us in the middle of something. He is in the Room of Requirement. Your charming daughter shall be able to get you in."

"Though your husband has far greater knowledge of that which he shouldn't, thanks to his lawlessness in his youth," added Snape, shooting a look of daggers at Rose's father.

"Professor Snape," her father acknowledged him. "How go your classes?"

"Why?"

"Some graduates are lacking in certain areas, namely defence," smirked James. "Any advice you may need on how to teach defence, don't hesitate to ask."

"The day that that happens," shot back Snape, rising to his feet. "Will be the day I..." he froze, inhaling sharply and grasping his left forearm, his brow furrowed in pain. Rose was well aware of the Defence Instructor's past and knew what it meant, though she could never let on that she did. She would suffer from Snape, and her father from Dumbledore and her mother, for having told her.

Snape's moment of pain lasted only a few seconds. He sighed and stood up straight. For a second, Rose felt sorry for the Defence master. There was something in his eyes that she had never seen before: it was fear. But also, there was stubbornness, a refusal to back down. She knew where he had to go and what would likely happen to him. She knew that she could never live as Snape did, but that didn't stop her from disliking him.

"Headmaster," he said quietly. Dumbledore nodded gravely, as Snape crossed the room.

“Good luck, Severus,” said her father as he passed. No joke was intended. Her father was a professional and as much as he disliked Severus Snape, he respected him for what he did. He would never make a joke at the sacrifice that Snape made for the Order.

“Well,” said Dumbledore after Snape had left. “I believe you have a reunion to attend.” All three nodded, and departed leaving the Headmaster, Flamel and McGonagall alone.

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Click!

The two balls collided with the echoless clink of ceramics. Having found nothing to occupy himself with, Harry had begun to experiment with the Room of Requirement. He had changed it several times already that morning. At present it contained a pool table on which he was demonstrating his fairly poor skills at pool. Obviously he didn't know the rules and had no one to play with, so he was absently trying to pot balls.

He remembered Ginny saying the night before that he couldn't possibly stay here for weeks alone with nothing to do. At the time, he had shrugged it off, but now he knew what she had meant. He had been waiting for nearly two hours. The game of pool was not really interesting and between every shot he paused to look at the clock. The problem was that because of the way the room worked, the clock showed what time he wanted it to, namely twelve o'clock. He was so agitated that he couldn't relax enough for the clock to work properly, if he relaxed it would tell the time properly, like it had been all night. However, he was so desperate for the clock to reach midday that it had. Luckily his cheap wristwatch worked perfectly. It was almost time: four minutes to go.

He was dressed in his newly purchased clothes, and had been pacing for hours. With every minute that passed he became more agitated. The questions that had plagued his mind earlier came rushing back. What would they think of him? What if he revolted them? He had killed a man in St Mungo's; there was no escaping that. Would they reject him? What would he do then? Harry tried to calm himself. He sipped at some water, but nothing took away the nerves. Three minutes to go. His hands were moist with sweat and he was finding it hard to grip the cue properly, making his game impossible. He put down the cue, and the table and balls melted into nothing.

He walked to the window, wandering who was out and about. He stared for nearly ten seconds before realising that it was a false window. He was in the middle of the building; it would have no window. This was false and would show him whatever he wanted to see. Harry kicked the wall in annoyance. He checked his watch: two minutes to go!

They say that having everything you want won't make you happy. Up until then, Harry had assumed that was a fable to try and stop people being so greedy. He knew that film stars had so much money they could have anything they wanted and lived good lives. At this moment in time though, Harry realised that he could have anything he wanted in this room, but he wouldn't be happy. He couldn't fill two hours with all the possibilities of this room. He couldn't bear to be

stuck here for another few weeks while Dumbledore half-heartedly tried to get him home and whole-heartedly tried to get him to fight.

He also wondered about Flamel. He had only heard stories before, but the man seemed wise. He had been Dumbledore's friend for years and had the wisdom of centuries. Harry wondered that he taught. It must be Defence reasoned Harry, that's the only job that keeps going and there are large shortages of staff for the jinxed job. Except Snape of course, but Dumbledore would never give him the job. Harry felt a glimmer of satisfaction knowing that. He couldn't bear it if his best and most useful subject was taught by that creep. Potions on the other hand, he didn't like, or think that an Auror would need. McGonagall had told him otherwise and he knew it was a requirement. He still didn't see the point personally, but wasn't going to argue. Snape was a git and that was the main reason he disliked Potions. He wondered if he had been taught by a better teacher, would his ability be better? But then again, were all Potions master's so nasty?

Suddenly Harry was jolted from his thoughts.

Knock! Knock!

It was time. Harry turned slowly, to see the three figures in the doorway.

Harry's voice disappeared in an instant. His stomach made a sharp trip north, ending up in his throat. In the doorway stood James and Lily Potter. Lily...his mother was more beautiful than he dared imagine. Her red hair billowed in the draft; her brilliant emerald eyes sparkled with tears as she stared at him. Her eyes were red, the obvious aftermath of tears, and in her hand was a tissue. She wore long black robes, with red hemming which stopped half an inch of the ground. She looked pale and tired, but her eyes sparkled.

"Harry?" was all she managed to say. Before he could respond, the room changed. It shrank, which caused Harry to be instantly shifted to within two feet in front of her. The next thing he was aware of was a pair of arms being thrown around him, as his mother pulled him into a tight hug.

The sensation was entirely new. The closest he had come was when Molly Weasley had hugged him. He had in a way always thought of her as a surrogate mother. She gave him a small insight into what it felt like to have a family and there was no doubt in his mind that the Burrow was the place in which he felt most at home. But that was wrong. Now he had a mother, a real one. He had seen her in the Mirror of Erised, heard her screams when Dementors came too close, and seen her in his dreams time and time again, but now she was real. Harry wrapped his arms around her, holding her as tightly as she held him. He was home, for the first time in his life, Harry Potter felt what love was. For the first time, he was no longer an outsider looking in, as he was at the Burrow; he was part of a family, a family who loved him.

"Mum?" he croaked, finding his voice at last, a simultaneously unleashing a watershed that had been building up since the night Sirius had...Harry still couldn't say it. All the pain, guilt and anguish flooded out of him, as he sobbed onto his mother's shoulder. All that mattered were the three people in the room with him.

“I’ve missed you so much,” wept Lily, joining Harry in the sea of emotions. Tears rolled down both their cheeks, dripping onto the other’s robes. Fifteen years of pain for Harry, two for Lily came out at once.

Looking over her shoulder, his vision hazy with tears, Harry saw his father. Their eyes locked. Harry had been told time and time again that he looked like his father, only with his mother’s eyes. He could see it now; there was a definite resemblance to himself in the man in the doorway. He wore glasses, just as Harry used to, his hair was a mess, just as Harry’s was, though it was longer. His eyes were a deep blue, which also sparkled with tears. Harry could see that he was trying to remain strong, to be a pillar, to help his family get through.

To his side, stood Rose. Harry dragged his eyes, away from his father to look at his sister. She had a glow on her face. It was a sort of lopsided smile that made her thoughts clear. People often said that he wore his emotions on his sleeves, but that was nothing compared to Rose. It was written all over her. She was positively glowing with relief and happiness. She gave Harry a brief nod.

He released his mother from the tight grip in which he had held her for what had seemed like an age. How much time had passed, Harry would never know. He approached the figure of James Potter who stood, leaning against the doorframe. Although he was trying to keep his composure, his emotion showed. Harry did not need to be a Legilimens to be able to see that. They stood for a second, looking into the other’s eyes. Harry didn’t know who moved first, if it was he or...his father, but before either of them knew it, they were locked in a firm embrace. Harry did not know the extent to which his family had suffered in this world, nor did he want to, having read Harry Potter’s criminal record. They clearly had though, and it was showing now. The Auror failed to keep his emotions in check. Harry could feel his father shaking slightly as he wept.

It was a very surreal moment for Harry. Embracing two people who had been dead for fifteen years was not exactly common practice. He was reminded continuously of the Mirror of Erised. His photo album, the only visual representation of his parents he owned, had depicted a warm, loving environment, one Harry had longed to be part of ever since he had seen the photo. The album itself was, at present, in his top draw at Number Four Privet Drive, but that didn’t matter. Harry had something better than a photo: he had the real thing. But were they real? They were from another world. *Stop It!* At the end of the day, did it matter? He had a family, those who loved him, those he had dreamed about for fifteen years. His heart was awash with emotion; he couldn’t make sense of it. Tears came feely now, for all of them.

Harry noticed that while he was engaged with his parents, his sister had slipped past them into the room. Harry had been so enthralled that he hadn’t even noticed the room change. The room was large again, the bed and sofas were gone, and only the fireplace remained from *his* room. In the middle was an oval shaped wooden table, covered in a brilliant white tablecloth. Crystal glasses and silver cutlery were perfectly arranged for four people, with an ornately folded silk napkin in the middle of each table setting.

“What’s this all about?” said Harry, trying to keep his voice steady as he released his father.

“Consider it a ‘Welcome Home’ banquet,” said Rose, failing to keep the smile off her face. A quick glance either side revealed that both his parents, though their eyes were still watering, still wore broad smiles. “Mum kind of figured that prison food wasn’t up to scratch.”

“Touché,” muttered Harry. He couldn’t tell if she was teasing him or if she was being serious. It didn’t really matter. It would take a lot more than that to offend Harry.

“It’ll be the best roast you’ve ever had,” said Rose, gesturing Harry to place at the table. “Mainly, because Dad didn’t cook it.” Harry glanced across to see his father feigning outrage.

“Best ever?” echoed Harry. “No great achievement considering that it would be the only one I’ve ever had, except of course for Hogwarts Sunday Lunches and Christmas.”

“Petunia can’t cook?” queried Lily, taking a seat to his left. Harry paused for a minute. If she knew about the Dursleys, how much else did she know? His youth was not a topic of conversation suitable for the dinner table. Also, he wanted to keep some things secret. It wasn’t right to tell them too much. He didn’t want a sympathy vote, but also he didn’t want them worrying about him.

“I wouldn’t know,” said Harry, his eyes downcast. He managed to keep the bitterness out of his voice, but couldn’t look his parents in the eye. “I suppose she’d have to be, given the size of Dudley.” Harry was worried about the direction this conversation was taking. Much more and he would get on to the subject of his youth and that was what he wanted to avoid. Telling his parents that he couldn’t tell them for every question they asked would get awkward. It was better to avoid the subject entirely. Luckily, he was spared from elaborating by the arrival of four House Elves wearing the customary tea towels. Harry was about to ask the nearest one if Dobby was around, but then he remembered that in this world he had never set Dobby free. Dobby, if he was still alive, was still Draco Malfoy’s personal punch bag. Harry grimaced at the thought. Luckily his expression went unnoticed.

The House Elf nearest him picked up Harry’s napkin, unfolded it and spread it across his lap. Harry sat motionless, completely unsure of what to do. The closest he had come to this was at Uncle Vernon’s golf club social the year before Harry had gone to Hogwarts. Vernon’s employer owned the club and his wife had invited the entire family to the meal. She had insisted that Harry should come. It had all gone well until Dudley had pushed Harry down the stairs, resulting in him crashing into the Guest of Honour, the Lord Mayor’s wife, spilling red wine all over her new lilac dress. The Dursleys’ had been livid at the embarrassment he had caused. Harry tried to keep the blank look of his face as the Elf spread the napkin and then put a bowl of soup down in front of him.

“Thanks,” said Harry to the Elf. He was about to pick up his soup spoon when he noticed that the other three were staring at him. He had no idea what was wrong, but he felt the blood

flow to his cheeks. His mother looked surprised, James looked curious and Rose looked like she was trying not to laugh.

“What did I do?” he asked.

“In your world, do you regularly thank House Elves?” inquired James.

“If you want Hermione to shut up, you do,” said Harry with a grin. It then occurred to him that they had never had to endure the SPEW idea. Noticing their blank looks, Harry continued. “Never mind, it’s one of those in-jokes. Joking aside though, no, well I don’t know. Is it such a wrong thing to do? This is the first time they have ever directly waited on me. I mean Dobby...I set him free and he kind of idolises me but...okay, now I feel stupid.” All three of the Potters chuckled at Harry’s expense. He was blushing and he knew it. Rose was trying to hide her laughter by bowing her head over her soup.

Harry decided to hold his comeback. He had a feeling that anything he said would dig him even deeper than he already was. He felt awkward. He couldn’t talk about his life, Voldemort, and having had no contact with them before, he couldn’t think of a single thing to say. Rose and James had already started, so to avoid further conversation, Harry picked up his spoon and dipped it into his soup.

“Do you play Quidditch?” inquired James as Harry took his first mouthful of soup. He tried not to cough as the hot liquid burned his throat. He took a sip of water before answering.

He was grateful that the conversation was about something less serious that he was expecting. He didn’t know if they had been told not to quiz him or if his discomfort showed, but the conversation over dinner stayed clear from politics, Harry’s past or Voldemort. It was a remarkably civilised affair, which Harry surprisingly found that he was enjoying. As soon as they had mentioned a meal, his heart had sunk. He knew that sooner or later he would have to face his past, but he was determined to put it off as long as possible. The topics of conversation ranged from Quidditch to OWLs to girls.

It was the last topic that Harry found most embarrassing to talk about. Quidditch was easy enough, though he managed to resist re-enacting his favourite moments. OWLs were brushed over as he told them that he hadn’t had his results yet. Harry was shocked to discover that his mother taught Potions at Hogwarts. *Maybe I’ll do all right in this world*, thought Harry. It wasn’t because he was expecting favouritism, just that as long as Snape wasn’t breathing down his neck he might just do okay. It also begged the question of what Snape was doing. Dumbledore mentioned that he was a spy, so where was the old fart?

“Severus is still here,” his mother informed him. “He teaches Defence...” Harry choked into the goblet he was drinking from. He coughed as he tried to wipe the spilt drink from his chin.

“Defence?” he coughed. “Dumbledore let him teach Defence?”

“Something we need to know about Snape?” asked James. Was he hoping Harry would say that in his world Snape was a Death Eater?

“Not really,” said Harry. “The slimy git-” he noticed his mother giving him a disapproving look “- was once a Death Eater but is now a spy for the Order. We don’t get on at all, but Dumbledore trusts him. He compromised Remus’ condition to the whole damn school and Dumbledore did nothing. He’s really...I’m rambling, but never mind. He teaches potions where I come from.” He had stopped using the phrase ‘in my world’. It made him sound alien, and it wasn’t nice to say; ‘where I come from’ flowed better and invited fewer questions. “He’s been after the Dark Arts job for years but never gets it. I think Dumbledore doesn’t want to put him near the temptations of that subject.”

“Sounds fair enough,” said Rose. “So who’s teaching Defence? Flamel?”

“I don’t know where Flamel is, or if he is even still alive. The Philosopher’s Stone was destroyed in my first year.” Lily and James shot him a surprised glance when he mentioned the stone. It was obviously sensitive information. Something even he was not supposed to know.

“The Philosopher’s what?” asked Rose.

“Ask me no questions, I’ll tell you no lies,” said Harry in response. Their parents clearly didn’t want him to tell her, so he skirted the issue. “It’s a bit hush-hush. Back home, the Dark Arts job is said to be jinxed. Since I came to Hogwarts we’ve had five. First was Quirrell. He was a nervous wreck, but he knew what he was doing. The minor inconvenience of having Voldemort possessing him was a bit of a downside. He was killed at the end of my first year.” The other three gasped, clearly amazed that he could talk so casually about something so dangerous. Harry shrugged it off, it was in the past.

“Next came Gilderoy Lockhart,” he continued. Rose and Lily’s face reacted instantly, a smile appearing on each of their faces. James rolled his eyes. Harry decided to get them back for teasing him earlier. “Don’t get your hopes up. He’s a fraud. A failed Obliviator, who found real heroes, wiped their memories and took credit for their work. He obliterated himself at the end of my second year.”

“But his books,” interrupted Rose. Harry couldn’t keep the smile of his face.

“Are sexed up accounts he received from the wizards who actually banished that banshee and fought that werewolf and did all that other stuff,” he explained. “He gets their stories, wipes their memories, adds embellishments to the tale and writes the books. Could you really take a man seriously whose dream is to market his own brand of hair care potions?”

James snorted into his wine. Lily and Rose shot him a disapproving glare before turning to Harry.

“You’re sure?” asked Lily.

“Well, when he obliviated himself, his wand backfired. He was trying to wipe my memories after I...discovered he was a fake.”

James looked like Christmas had come early, Lily and Rose looked more sober. Harry realised that he had probably crushed one of their dreams, but he didn't really care. It was better to do it this way than meet Lockhart and be disappointed. When he had had that misfortune, he had lost every bone in his left arm.

“Anyhow,” said Harry. “Where was I? Third year. An old friend, Remus Lupin took the job. He was fantastic until Snape opened his mouth to the entire hall. Parents wouldn't want a werewolf teaching their children so he was forced to resign, or rather he did so before Dumbledore was forced to force him to.”

“Prejudiced little...” began James, but stopped under a glare from his wife. “Remus is harmless. I assume you know about Wolfsbane?” Harry nodded.

“You don't need to lecture me,” said Harry. “I'm all for him returning. He's a good man. Sadly, public opinion can't see through it. He was the best we had. The first two were useless. Fourth year was a Death Eater using Polyjuice Potion to pose as Mad-Eye Moody. Next came Dolores Umbridge. She was willing to use the Cruciatius Curse on me and Hermione because she thought we knew where Dumbledore was hiding.”

“She was going to...” stammered Lily. “Is it not illegal in your world?”

“It is, but it didn't stop her. She sent Dementors after me in the summer. She wouldn't let a technicality like the law stop her.”

“You mentioned a Blood Quill at the trial,” said James thoughtfully.

“Another of her little toys,” said Harry, absently rubbing the back of his hand. His father's eyes picked up on the movement and were fixed on his hand. Luckily the ladies did not see it. “Look, I know we have a lot to catch up on, but can we leave it there. This tale is quite gory and not suitable for the dinner table. Can we pick this up later?” The three nodded silently.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” asked Rose boldly. Harry felt the blood rushing to his cheeks again. Rose's eyes widened, a grin appearing on her face, at Harry's reaction. “You do! Come on, who is it? You said you're a Gryffindor, right? Lavender? Parvati? Maybe a year older, Bell perhaps, or Lucas? Not Granger, surely. Tell us, who is it?” She had put two and two together and come up with seventeen. He had no girlfriend, but he was blushing enough to make anyone think he had. Why was he always so touchy about this subject?

“Rose-Marie,” said her mother firmly. “Do not pressure your brother. He can answer if and when he feels comfortable.” Harry appreciated her help, but felt better to answer.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” said Harry, trying not to grin. “I do not have a girlfriend.”

“An eligible bachelor like you?” pressed Rose, trying not to laugh. “Not found the right one, yet?” James snorted into his wine again. Harry was beetroot red and could feel himself burning up. James and Rose found it hilarious, his mother seemed to be trying to be annoyed with them, but found herself joining in.

“Glad I amuse you so much,” said Harry. “So what about you, Mademoiselle? Is there a dreamy hunk in your life? Do you want to tell me?” It was Rose’s turn to blush.

“Do you care?” she challenged him.

“Not as such,” conceded Harry. “It’s your life. I’ve seen the anguish Ron causes Ginny by trying to protect her. I’d like to think I have the courtesy to let you make up your own mind. Who you chose is not my affair, unless he hurts you...or unless it’s Malfoy.”

Rose looked disgusted and feigned being sick into her bowl of ice cream.

“I’d rather sha...” she trailed off under the glare of her mother. Now it was Rose blushing while Harry sat smugly smirking at her discomfort.

“Roses are red,” began Harry, looking directly at the blushing girl. She instantly shot him a semi-serious glare. “Violets are blue,” he continued. “Revenge is sweet, and so are you.”

“You’ve been practicing that, haven’t you,” she said, attempting a comeback.

“No, it’s spontaneous,” said Harry. “It’s called wit.”

“Kids,” interrupted Lily, though she was still smiling. “Less of the bickering.”

“Apologies, Professor,” said Rose, again semi-seriously.

RING! RING! Harry’s ears rang as the bell sounded.

“Damn,” muttered Lily. “That’s the end of lunch. Rosie, I believe you have Minerva’s class to attend.”

“Can’t I...?” began rose.

“No!” said both of her parents instantly. His mother continued, “Harry, I trust you are not going anywhere?”

“Well I hear that Fiji is nice this time of year,” replied Harry, draining the last of his drink. Lily gave him an unimpressed glance so he continued. “No, I won’t be going anywhere.”

“I’ll be back tonight,” said Lily, marching Rose towards the door. “I know this is boring for you, but try to amuse yourself.”

Harry nodded as his parents left. As the door closed, he felt a wave of relief. Why did he feel relieved? It wasn't as though he had gotten away with anything. He hadn't pulled the wool over their eyes or anything. Harry left the table and sat back down on the sofa. Instantly, several House Elves appeared to clear away the dirty dessert bowls and the rest of the cutlery. Harry took the opportunity to ask for a large pot of tea.

As he sat sipping his tea, the conversation they had just had played over in his mind. He went over what he had found out. Snape taught Defence and his mother Potions. He wondered what Flamel taught and made a mental note to ask his mother later. A smile appeared on his face at that thought. *I'll see my mother later.* It seemed so obvious now. He knew he would see her later, and suddenly it didn't seem so unusual. It seemed like years ago that he had been an orphan. If it were not for the fact that the other Harry, the evil Harry might be in his world, and that he had a Prophecy to fulfill, Harry would have been more than happy to settle down and live here. *I might retire here,* thought Harry to himself. *If I make it back alive.*

He knew it was not healthy to think so negatively, but he couldn't help it. His future was uncertain. He needed to get back and he didn't know if Dumbledore was even going to help. He had to get back; he just had to. As much as he loved being here, as much as he wanted to stay, he knew he couldn't. He had everything he ever wanted here, but he had to let it go. Fate had chosen him to suffer and now he was being made to suffer more intensely than ever before. Presenting him with a dream and then ripping it cruelly away. But staying was not an option. During the meal he had forgotten about trying to get back. All that had matter had been the present; the meal and the family. His world had gone right out the window. Harry was worried that if he kept seeing his parents like this, he would give up on getting home entirely. Maybe that was Dumbledore's plan. No, he wasn't that cruel. Harry considered making sure he kept his distance from his parents to make their parting of way easier when the time came. But he knew deep down it wasn't going to happen. He had planned to be cautious during this meal but had then blabbed royally about almost anything they asked. Not that he hadn't enjoyed it, he had, immensely so, once he had gotten over the uncomfortable shock of meeting two people who had died to protect him, and one who had never existed. The fact of the matter was that he loved being here, that the last hour had given him hope that maybe his life wasn't all about pain and misery, but he knew that at the end of the day, he would have to pass it all up and go back to suffering. *Damn that prophecy!*

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Dinner that evening was much as lunch had been. House Elves brought food to the Room of Requirement, where the Potters dined. Harry made it through another meal without revealing too much. He reminded himself again, or rather the voice of reason in his head reminded him, that he would have to face his past sooner or later, but his typical male mindset, of putting everything off until later, kicked in once again. The talk was mainly about Quidditch, which to Harry's delight was Rose's pastime too, this meant that she wasn't trying to constantly change the subject back to Harry, as she enjoyed Quidditch.

As it turned out, James and Rose were big fans of the Holyhead Harpies. All was going well until Harry was asked who he supported. His first reaction was to reply that he supported

the Chudley Cannons, out of respect for Ron. But then again, did he really? He had only been to the World Cup match; that was it, aside from Hogwarts games. He told them that he didn't really follow the game, outside of Hogwarts, but that he played for Gryffindor and that he had been to the World Cup game.

James and Rose were green with envy when he mentioned that he had been in the top box. Apparently, the game had occurred in both worlds and had finished with the same result. Harry decided to rub it in further by telling them that Victor Krum had briefly come to Hogwarts for most of that year and that they were friends, but rivals. He didn't tell them why Krum was there, or what he was a rival in, and definitely not the events in the third task, but it didn't matter. They assumed he was talking about Quidditch and for the time being, he was willing to leave it there. The look on Rose's face when he mentioned that Hermione had gone to the ball with Krum, was fantastic.

After dinner, they all took seats around the fire. To Harry's relief, James pulled out a copy of the *Evening Prophet*, while Lily produced a stack of parchment, presumably essays to mark. He had been worried that having finished dinner, his interrogation would begin. Luckily, it was not so. Maybe they were waiting for him to tell them when he was ready. Harry challenged Rose to a game of pool. After complaining that she had never played before, Harry pointed out that he hadn't either. They managed to get a game going. It would have been amusing to watch for both of them had little to no talent for the game, but neither could think of anything to do.

"What are you doing, Lil?" asked James, folding the *Prophet*.

"Marking fifth year essays," muttered Lily, chewing the end of a quill. "I think I should suggest to Professor Dumbledore that English be taught at Hogwarts. The spelling in this lot is atrocious."

"But technically it wouldn't make a difference," pointed out James. "Let's face it, a Bezoar and Veritaserum are not in the dictionary. Gullible was, but it has been taken out."

"Really?" Rose asked. Harry and James both snorted a laugh, and even Lily managed to smile. Rose immediately went bright red and missed her shot spectacularly.

"Two shots to me," said Harry, not bothering to hide his grin.

"Well, Mister Perfect," his mother teased him. "What are the effects of Polyjuice Potion?" Harry had been worried that she was going to ask a harder question. Telling Snape he didn't know in his first year was embarrassing, but in front of his family, to his mother? It would be worse. Luckily, this particular question was a godsend. His answer wasn't quoted from the textbook, nor was it literature, but it got the message across, more or less. Lily gave him a small smile and went back to her marking. Harry was sure he heard Rose mutter the word 'smart-arse' as he bent down to take his next shot.

A strategically timed cough from Rose caused Harry to miss the yellow he was aiming at entirely and pot the black, causing Harry to instantly lose, despite being two balls ahead of Rose.

“I think I’m coming down with something,” said Rose innocently. Harry put the cue down and went back to the sofa. His father had discarded the *Evening Prophet* so Harry picked it up. A chill ran down his spine as he read the headline.

### ***39 DEAD AS THE DARK LORD ATTACKS CONCERT***

“Jesus!” breathed Harry.

“Shocking isn’t it,” asked his father, glancing over at him.

“Thirty-nine dead, a further seventy injured, fourteen of which are in a critical condition,” read Harry, skimming over the text. It had happened during a concert by a Muggle artist, Madonna. The star was unharmed but many in the crowd were not so lucky. Witnesses report over fifty figures in black cloaks and white masks. Voldemort had just murdered forty Muggles. Why? What good had killing music fans done? None, he had simply done it to enforce the wave of fear, maybe even because he was bored. It brought him no advantage tactically; it was just for fun. The bastard! “What’s being done about it?”

“What can be?” asked his father. “The Aurors are stretched as it is. That’s the third attack since August began.” It was only the fourth of September. Three attacks, no, three massacres, in just over a month.

“Are they always this often?” asked Harry, a nauseous feeling taking over his head.

“Usually, more so,” said the Auror. “Normally they are smaller but often. Three large ones in a month is unusual. Albus believes it is the quiet before the storm.” Harry didn’t know why, but he somehow knew he was right. Voldemort was planning something, something big.

“What is Crouch going to do, how is he going to stop Voldemort?” asked Harry. His father sighed.

“Honestly, I don’t think anyone can stop him,” said James solemnly.

It was as if the mists suddenly cleared. For the first time since his arrival, Harry was thinking clearly. He now saw beyond his own selfish intent. Inaction is the same as opposing what is being done. In doing nothing, he was helping Voldemort. He was the only one who could defeat him, and that was what this world needed. Dumbledore had said that he couldn’t escape his destiny and he had been right. He had crossed the boundaries of space and still the Prophecy ruled his life. Those damn words would follow him around until his death, which he hoped would not be in this world. He couldn’t fight it; if he put it off, more and more would die and every one of those deaths would weigh heavily on his shoulders. He had to do something.

“I can,” said Harry firmly. His mind was made up. It had taken forty deaths for him to see the light, and no one was going to change his opinion. It was nearly ten o’clock at night; every student should be asleep. Harry didn’t honestly care if he was seen. He marched to door.

“Harry, where are you going?” asked Lily, looking up from her marking.

“I’m going to show the world that Riddle isn’t as tough as he claims,” said Harry firmly. He grabbed the box containing his wand and sword off the table as he passed and strode out of the door, ignoring the calls from his family. He marched with pace and intent, directly to Dumbledore’s office. He knew he shouldn’t be somewhere where he would be so easily seen, but he didn’t care. Thirty-nine lives had strengthened his resolve beyond anything anyone could say.

The gargoyle was open, saving him the inconvenience of reeling off sweet names. He didn’t even bother to knock; the pleasantries seemed inconsequential compared to what he was about to do. He was breaking a promise to himself, and risking his life and in turn the lives of everyone in his world, but that didn’t matter to Harry. He couldn’t stand by while others died. Dumbledore had known it, Harry had been too proud to see it.

He barged into the office, unwittingly interrupting a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix. Presumably they were being briefed on Harry’s situation. A brief glance told Harry that it was almost all of the entire inner circle. Tonks, Kingsley and Frank Longbottom sat to his left. On either side of the Headmaster’s desk were McGonagall and Flamel, then Lupin, then... Harry froze. Instantly tears came back to his eyes. Sitting next to Nicolas Flamel, looking perfectly healthy was Sirius Black.

Instantly, nine wands were pointed at Harry, but he hardly noticed. *Sirius was alive!* He looked... perfect. His hair was long, just as it had been last Christmas. He wore the robes of an Auror, just as James had when he had arrived. Sirius was alive! The thought echoed time and time again through Harry’s head. At a gesture from Dumbledore, the Order members lowered their wands, all that is, except Frank Longbottom. Harry saw it in his peripheral vision, but didn’t react. It didn’t matter; all that mattered was Sirius. Harry stood transfixed, staring into those bog round eyes, no longer bearing the dull vacancy that comes with twelve years of Azkaban.

“Sirius,” Harry choked, finding the single word hard to utter.

Sirius sat, staring back, a bewildered look on his face. On reflection, Harry realised that there was no good reason Sirius wouldn’t be alive here. Dumbledore had even mentioned him, not by name, but he had mentioned him in their talk that morning. He had been a fool not to expect this. Expect it, he should have done, but nothing could prepare him for it. Emotion filled his heart. It took enormous restraint and a prompt from Dumbledore to get him back on track.

“Can I help you, Harry,” asked Dumbledore.

“Send me back in,” said Harry, fixing the Headmaster with a stare. He noticed that Longbottom’s wand was still aimed at him, but made no move.

“I thought you wished to remain inactive,” said Dumbledore, though Harry could see that there was triumph in his eyes.

“That was before forty people died for the sole purpose of amusing Riddle,” said Harry. “You can’t stop him, I can.”

“Bullshit,” interrupted Longbottom.

“Professor Flamel, is there any reason to believe that the Prophecy would not apply here? It was made in my world, but does that mean it only applies there? We are talking about the same Dark Lord. Granted, he is not as powerful as my one, but he’s still Tom Riddle,” said Harry.

Flamel glanced at Dumbledore. He thought for a few seconds before answering.

“It is possibly?” he replied. “Prophecies are so vague. It could have meant in this world the whole time and not your own. We may never know. Prophecies and the whole art of Divination are very vague.”

“So I might be able to stop him,” reasoned Harry. “Look, even if I can’t feed him cyanide, I could still...Snape’s good, but he isn’t that high up. I have his ear and his right hand. Imagine what I could give you. I know I have no experience of this, but if I am compromised, you still have Snape.”

“Are you sure this isn’t a rash decision, Harry?” asked Flamel.

“Perhaps, but I can’t sit by while he knocks off forty at a time for no reason other than he’s bored,” said Harry.

“And your parents?”

“They’ll understand,” he replied. He hoped he was right. They had suffered enough on his account. He was interrupted by the arrival of those he was now discussing. The remaining three Potters came charging into the office.

“What’s happening?” demanded Lily.

“It seems your son has had a change of heart,” said Dumbledore coolly, not taking his eyes off Harry.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning,” said Harry, “That I am going back in.”

“You’re what?” she gasped. Looks of horror occupied the faces of his family.

“I’ve got to go back to him,” said Harry.

“No!” said Lily, tears coming back to her eyes. “I can’t lose you again.”

“You won’t,” said Harry. “But I do have to go. I don’t have a choice.”

“You do!” she interrupted. “Stay with us.”

“I can’t. As soon as he realises I’m not coming back, he’ll assume the worst. If word gets out I’ve *turned*, as it were, morale will rise. To crush it, he’ll kill hundreds. Someone has to fight him. Every time he attacks, you pull back. You are backed into a corner. The line must be drawn here; no further!”

“But why you?”

“Because I am the only one who can,” said Harry. “It’s not what I want, but it’s what I’m stuck with. I can’t stay. He’ll hunt us down, one by one. We can’t hide, not from him, and even if we could, I can’t live in fear. We wouldn’t be living; we’d be surviving. Could you live in fear, looking over your shoulder every second of every day, fearing for your family?”

“No,” said Lily sadly. “You’re right.”

“You could conceivably hide,” said McGonagall calmly. “I do believe there is a certain spell in which...”

“The Fidelius Charm,” interrupted Harry. “It didn’t work the last time.”

“What last time?” inquired Flamel.

“The last time they were betrayed,” said Harry, his impatience and anger allowing him to let slip what he had never meant to. “Voldemort found us, and it doesn’t take a genius to work out what happened next.” He realised he’d gone further than was wise. He stopped abruptly, taking a deep breath and trying to calm himself. After a pause he said, “The only way we can ever be free is after he’s...gone. I am the only one who can kill him. Please, let me do my job.” He had never really thought of it as his job, more his destiny. To him it was something he would eventually have to do, but hadn’t given it much thought. He had been too wrapped up with Sirius and trying to survive that he had never really thought about it. *‘Being his job,’* was just a figure of speech, but when he thought about it, it was startlingly accurate. It was his job, his obligation. Try as he might, he could never escape it, today had proved it.

“There is no hope of changing your mind, is there?” said Dumbledore. “Harry, you are either incredibly brave, or incredibly foolish to attempt this.”

“I think it’s a little of both,” said Harry. “Snape would say it is the latter.”

“I assume in your world, that you and Severus have personal issues,” said Dumbledore. “Some things never change. Harry, I am going to be honest. You are a very useful ally; we both know that I would like to have you on my side. However, this is not what I had in mind. There is too much danger for you.”

“Those people died for no reason, and we know for a fact that more will die if I don’t do this,” said Harry. “I have to do something.”

“Very honourable of you,” commented Dumbledore. “I can see that I am not going to be able to deter you.”

“No chance.”

“Then let me give you advice,” said Dumbledore. “Don’t go looking for information. Take what comes to you, but don’t dig. Don’t make it seem you are looking into things. You are too valuable to throw away your life.” It was a cold thing to say. Harry picked up on it instantly. Dumbledore was once again thinking of him as a tool, but it didn’t matter to him at the moment. He was a tool; he had just decided it was his job. They were two different perspectives on the same concept. Harry had to do it, he was born to do it, there was no use arguing about how someone phrased it.

“Albus,” snapped his mother. “Can’t you...” Harry interrupted her before she could finish.

“It’s no use, Mum,” he said. He paused for a second. He had never used the word before, not like this at least. It felt odd calling her that. He shook it off; this was not the time for sentiments. “I have to go, I *am* going. I know this is hard, but please don’t try and stop me.”

“He’s right, Lily,” said Dumbledore. “His mind is made up, and not you, me, or anyone else is going to discourage him. We both know he is very powerful, resourceful, and the best, no, the *only* man for the job. If I am right, if the Prophecy Harry spoke of is right, I believe we are witnessing the turn of the tide.”

Lily looked from Harry to Dumbledore to her husband and daughter, no doubt looking for support. In her heart of hearts, she knew it was pointless. She knew Harry had to go. It was written on her face. She gaped a few times, before finally finding a voice. “Good luck,” she squeaked, enveloping him in a tight hug. “Hurry back.” Harry could feel he shaking against him, and he knew he had once again brought her to tears.

“I will,” said Harry. “One way or another, I’ll be back.”

“Good luck,” said Albus softly.

“Thanks,” muttered Harry. “I’ll need it. Do me a favour though.”

“What?”

“If anything happens to me...”

“Harry...” interrupted his father. His mother was clearly sobbing now.

“Please, keep my family safe. They’ve suffered enough on my account.”

All Dumbledore could do was nod. “You can do that yourself when you come back.”

“I can,” agreed Harry, though he was far from certain that he would, but for his parents’ sake, he added, “and I will.”

He let go of Lily, and after a quick glance around at nine bemused faces, he stepped into the fire and was gone.

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It was a cruel twist of fate that he moved so quickly. Another few seconds and he would have spared himself a lot of pain and trouble. Not two seconds after Harry disappeared from the fireplace in Dumbledore’s office, the door burst open and in charged a figure dressed all in black, his hood lowered and a glowing white mask hanging loosely below his neck.

“HEADMASTER!” All eyes turned to see Severus Snape who stood panting in the door, his forehead dripping with sweat, obviously from a long run. “Stop him!” panted the Defence Master.

“Severus...I,” began Dumbledore.

“The Dark Lord knows he’s turned!” panted Snape, cutting off the Headmaster. “Potter is walking into a trap!”

WARNING!
THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS GRAPHIC VIOLENCE
AND ONE USE OF STRONG LANGUAGE.
IF YOU ARE EASILY OFFENDED OR UNDER 15,
PLEASE DO NOT READ ON!

~~~~~ Chapter VII ~~~~~
A Victim of Circumstance

*“A prisoner of war is a man who tries to kill you, fails,
and then asks you not to kill him.”*
~ Winston Churchill

“So good to see you again, old friend,” said a cold voice as Severus Snape stepped into the room. He was dressed in the customary black robes with his mask in place. He didn’t need to keep his face neutral, as the mask covered it and the Dark Lord would use Legilimency to determine how he was feeling anyway. This neutral mask seemed to have become his natural expression over the years. Pushing the thought aside, he stepped into the room and quietly closed the door behind him. A chandelier hung from the ceiling in the centre of the room, directly above a large, oval-shaped wooden table. The light was bright, but not uncomfortably so. Severus approached the Dark Lord, walking the last few steps on his hands and knees, and kissed the hem of his robes. He stood and removed the mask.

“You sent for me, Master?” said Severus, his voice level. He betrayed no sign of emotion, and stood perfectly still, waiting for the Dark Lord to respond.

“Indeed I did,” said the Dark Lord, turning to face Severus. He had his hood lowered; his eyes were almost glowing with hatred. “Rumour has reached me of a rather *covert* operation recently carried out by Dumbledore’s band of Mudbloods.”

A chill ran down his spine at the words. Severus instantly knew that this was bad. They had been seen somewhere along the way, or someone had opened their mouth. The question was, how much did the Dark Lord know? Did he know Severus was involved, or was he just checking his suspicions?

“You seem unsurprised,” noted the Dark Lord. Severus never showed his surprise if he could help it, so this wasn’t unusual. He must know that Severus had been there. But how much more did he know? There was a high danger of messing up here, and if he did, he would not be leaving the room alive.

“Indeed I am,” replied Severus. He knew that lies would be foolish. Skilled as he was at Occlumency, he did not wish to push his luck and run the risk of faltering. He had to tread carefully. If he offered too much information, Voldemort would learn more than he should and the Order would be compromised. If he held back, he would know that Severus was lying and he would be killed.

“Good,” said the Dark Lord, a smile appearing on his lips. Severus managed to hide his relief. “I was hoping you would not lie to me. Lord Voldemort knows when he is being lied to. You wouldn’t dare lie to me, would you, Severus?”

His arrogance will be his downfall, thought Severus as he stared at him.

“Never,” replied the spy.

The Dark Lord’s smile dissolved in a few seconds and he walked towards the fireplace. Two large red armchairs were set up, and Severus could see Nagini coiled up on the hearth.

“Take a seat,” ordered the Dark Lord, gesturing to the seat opposite the one he was now sitting in. Severus cautiously crossed to the seat, maintaining the neutral appearance he had so precisely crafted over the years. He sank into the chair, crossed his legs, and looked across at the Dark Lord. “Now,” began the Dark Lord. “As a Hogwarts professor, you must be aware that the Hogwarts Express was ambushed three days ago. What you will also be aware of is that the next day at approximately half past eleven, several of the old man’s associates within the Auror Division disappeared within five minutes of each other and returned the same way, all dressed in Muggle clothing. Could this be a coincidence?”

“Unlikely,” replied Snape. He managed to maintain a cool exterior, but inside his head was spinning. The Dark Lord was hinting that he knew it was not a coincidence so saying ‘it might be’ was foolish, especially when Severus was known to be a sceptic and known not to believe in coincidences. Did the Dark Lord know of Potter’s ‘defection’? Personally, Snape didn’t believe Potter had changed, having witnessed his deeds up close and personal. Severus would just as soon garrotte the boy as speak to him, but he had faith in Dumbledore’s decisions.

Those foolish Aurors have no common sense! How could they allow themselves to be seen like that? Leave together, return together and dressed alike? What kind of amateurs were they? Potter had said they were lacking in certain skills just before Severus had left. They were, but it was not Defence skills, it was common sense and Operational Procedures, which the Auror Trainers should teach, not Hogwarts teachers. He made a mental note to give Potter a piece of his mind if he got out of the room alive.

But that was a worry for another time. At present he had to keep his mind on the situation at hand, lest his Occlumency slip and he would never see the light of another day. There was no point in worry about what has already happened, but it did put him on the spot. He was going to have to give away more than he would like. He could just break cover and not tell the Dark Lord a thing. Severus was prepared for that.

He had made a mistake in his youth and become a Death Eater. Many had died and suffered as a result, and his conscience was far from clear. He could never repay what he had taken from people; all he could do was try to stop it happening to others. He looked upon it as repaying his debt to society, thought the debt was greater than he could ever hope to repay. Every Cruciatius Curse he endured was his price of redemption, in his eyes. He deserved to suffer for what he had done, and in order to put it right he would give his life for the cause. Even if he

did break cover, the Dark Lord would almost certainly be able to get the information from him by excessive Legilimency and prolonged exposure to the Cruciatus Curse, and Severus' death would accomplish nothing. He would be lost as a spy and the Order's main source of information would be gone. No, tactically, it made more sense to stay alive and functional, even if it meant giving the Dark Lord a little more than he should. *Compromise today; pick up the pieces tomorrow.* The price of losing an inner-circle source was too high compared to the little information about Harry bloody Potter.

"That is why you are such a good Death Eater," said the Dark Lord. Praise from him was almost unheard of. The shock of those words almost caused Severus' mask of neutrality to slip, but he regained his composure quickly. The Dark Lord continued. "You think; such a simple thing to do, but so many lack the ability to think, especially laterally. Bellatrix, Antonin, Walden – when it comes to violence and brute force they are at the top of their game; give them a puzzle and it is like teaching Kneazles to play Chess."

"Thank you, Master," said Snape, bowing his head. The Dark Lord's words were an ego-booster for Severus. Potter and Black always tried to show him up, but just because he didn't run around, wand blazing, blowing up everything in sight, didn't mean he was not twice the wizard they were. It was a pity the only one to recognise his talents, aside from Dumbledore and Flamel, was the very person he was working towards killing. *How ironic*, he thought. Then again, the Dark Lord was so sparse with praise, that Severus couldn't help but feel that the Dark Lord was suspicious of him.

"Where others see coincidence, we see preconception," continued the Dark Lord. "Dumbledore's little helpers were obviously on some kind of errand. The same loyal Death Eater also acquired from one of them, a receipt for the hiring of two large, black automobiles. Another foolish, but very eager, young source has informed me that two such automobiles arrived at Hogwarts. There were several occupants. Do you know who they might be, Severus?"

"One of them was myself," said Snape. The Dark Lord evidently knew what had happened. This was a test of loyalty. Severus knew he must pass this both for his own sake, as well as the Order's, and not in that order. Not giving up Potter was not vital to the cause; the boy didn't matter. But, Severus decided that, out of respect for Dumbledore, he would hold it as long as possible, but if push came to shove, he would give up the boy.

"My young friend confirmed this," said the Dark Lord. "You did well not to lie to me, Severus. I know what a skilled Occlumens you are. Now, please give me the names of the others in the convoy."

Severus paused for a second. The Dark Lord had mentioned another source who noticed them leave. He could obviously get the names elsewhere. There was no point in lying. On reflection, the contact must have been an Auror. The Dark Lord said the tout saw them leave and return to the Auror Division. The Aurors were compromised. Severus was torn between a glimmer of satisfaction that Potter's army was not as perfect as he claimed and the shock that the Light side has so many leaks in high places. Had the Order itself been penetrated?

Severus took a deep breath and began to reel off the names. He started with his car and then moved on to the other. The only change he made was swapping himself with Hestia Jones. This meant he had not been in Dumbledore's car and would not have seen its contents. He hoped this excuse was sufficient to fool the Dark Lord into thinking Severus was ignorant. If not, he ran the risk of contradicting himself and giving the game away, so to speak. As Severus was ever more aware, this was no game.

The Dark Lord sat motionless, committing each name to memory. He never needed to write things down. Severus admired his photographic memory.

"And where were these automobiles taken?" inquired the Dark Lord.

How much did he know? If he lied and the Dark Lord knew it, he would be killed. Occlumency was all well and good, but if Severus told him something he knew to be a lie, the Dark Lord would know he was being lied to. He would also know that since he didn't detect it, it had most likely happened before. Everything would have to be changed and the Order's information would be useless. Through excessive torture and Legilimency, the Dark Lord would find out everything about the Order. Severus had no choice but to tell the truth. .

"Trafalgar Square," said Severus.

"And what happened there?"

"I was in the second car, I was not present. All I saw when my car arrived was a box being loaded into the first car and then the Aurors climbed into mine. One car headed to Hogwarts, the other to the Ministry to return the Aurors to their stations."

"I see," said the Dark Lord. "But if you were in the second car, which did not bear the box, you must have gone to the Ministry to return the Aurors, since I know the box arrived at Hogwarts. My question is, why did my source say that you arrived in the car at Hogwarts, when you just told me that you were in the second car which went to the Ministry? One of you must be lying."

Severus could have kicked himself. He had let the lie slip by contradicting himself. Luckily, through years of practice, he managed to maintain his mental and physical composure. He thought up a lie and he thought it up quick. He just hoped the Dark Lord didn't punish him for not telling the whole truth immediately.

"Because, Master," he began. "I told you what happened at Trafalgar Square. Whatever was in the box was loaded into the first car. My car picked up the Aurors. We drove off to an alleyway, out of sight of Muggles. Here we swapped cars. The Aurors took the second car to the Ministry. Myself, the werewolf, and Dumbledore took the first car back to the school."

"So you saw the box?" pressed the Dark Lord. Severus was unsure whether his lie was accepted or not. He was scared. He had slipped and was kicking himself for it. He had never

slipped so foolishly before. What had gotten into him? He hoped he had managed to keep his Occlumency shield strong and undetectable. If not, he would never see the light of another day.

“I saw the box, but not what was in it,” said Severus.

“I see, and where was the box taken?”

“Dumbledore took it once we reached the school,” said Severus. “I was ordered to return to my quarters.”

“How big was the box?”

“About one and a half to two metres long, half a metre high and wide,” said Severus. If he said it was something small, the Dark Lord would wonder why a Jeep was needed. But then again, he would probably wonder why Dumbledore did not just shrink the box? If Potter had been in a coffin and not on a stretcher, it could not have been shrunk as he was still inside. If Dumbledore tried to shrink a box with a living creature inside, the creature would be crushed. It was simple logic. It seemed obvious to Severus that the Dark Lord would know that there was something or someone alive in it. Hopefully, it was one of those things that are seemingly obvious to those who know it, but is really hard to guess if you didn't know.

The Dark Lord sat looking pensive for a moment. Severus was certain he was thinking along the lines he had just been. The question was whether or not he knew Severus had not told him the entire truth. At length, the Dark Lord moved. “Roll up your sleeve, and replace your mask,” instructed the Dark Lord.

Severus cringed, knowing all too well the pain that was to come. He did as he was instructed and the Dark Lord extended a long bony finger to the Dark Mark. Severus managed not to cry out in pain as the Mark burned and turned from red to black. He hissed as it stung him.

The Dark Lord reclined in his chair, keeping his eyes on Severus, who rubbed his sore mark for a few seconds before pulling his sleeve back down. They sat in tense silence for nearly five minutes before the door opened and a figure in black robes entered the room. Was this the source that the Dark Lord had mentioned? Severus couldn't think of anyone else the Dark Lord would call. He watched, motionless, as the figure approached on hands and knees and kissed the hem of the Dark Lord's robes.

“You called, Master?” said the Death Eater. The voice was male and, if Severus had to guess, he would say the man was a few years post-Hogwarts, aged twenty-four at the most.

“Indeed,” said the Dark Lord. “Conjure yourself a seat.” There was a pause while the Death Eater did as he was told. When he was seated, he glanced at both Severus and the Dark Lord. After a few seconds, the Dark Lord spoke again. “Did you find anything in the local press?”

“I did, Master” said the Death Eater, producing a newspaper from within his robes. Severus felt a chill go down his spine. What had he found out? If this source had discovered anything concrete, Severus might be compromised. The Aurors had allowed themselves to be seen leaving and returning. What else had they let slip? *Fools!* Severus cautiously moved his hand towards his wand as the source continued to speak. “There was a kidnapping, in broad daylight. The offenders left in two black Jeeps.”

“Trafalgar Square?” asked the Dark Lord.

The Death Eater made a poor job of hiding his surprise. “You know, Master?” he asked.

That was a mistake, thought Snape. You should never question the Master’s knowledge. He took a very dim view of people thinking he was ignorant.

“Of course,” hissed Voldemort, his anger obvious, but controlled. “Now read the article in question.”

“At midday yesterday, in broad daylight, a teenager was kidnapped by an unknown group of men posing as policemen in the middle of Trafalgar Square,” read the Death Eater. “The Square was packed as usual yesterday, but before Big Ben had even stopped ringing, violence erupted in the square. A teenager was stunned with a Tazer before being carted off by a group of men who identified themselves to the gathering crowd of people as policemen.

“The Metropolitan Police Department, Scotland Yard and the Security Service, commonly known as MI5, have all denied responsibility for the abduction. The identities of the teenager, the perpetrators and indeed the motives behind the abduction are still unknown. Scotland Yard are carrying out an investigation. Witness reports vary, but what is known is that a young man, described as being short and muscular with dark hair, was carried off in two black, government-style Jeeps by eight to twelve men in suits. One witness, Margaret Bustock, gave the Daily Telegraph the following statement.

“My friend Barbara and I had stopped for coffee, when we saw this jogger. I thought nothing of it at first. Then I saw this old man. He had a long beard and glasses. The jogger ran straight into him. It was awful, I think it was a mugging. He held the old man at knife-point. Then these men in suits came out of nowhere. The jogger collapsed and they carted him off in a convoy of two huge great black cars.’

“While the identities of those involved is still unknown, many theories are circulating. Amongst them, the most prominent is gang violence and, while the traditional government-conspiracy theories are circulating on the internet, there is also speculation about the involvement of the Provisional IRA. It is also worth noting that...”

“Enough,” said the Dark Lord, cutting him off.

Severus’ head was spinning. An old man with a long white beard and glasses, a teenager with dark hair; the Dark Lord would have no trouble piecing it together.

He turned to the Death Eater, who had replaced the newspaper within the folds his robes. He obviously thought he was onto a winner with the Dark Lord. Severus knew that sooner or later, that man would pay. He just hoped he was alive to see it.

“You may leave. Say nothing to anyone. You will receive further instructions in the normal manner.” The Death Eater rose and, after vanishing his chair, bowed and left. “Now, I know what was in the box” he said softly. “Harry, Harry, Harry. It is unwise to betray Lord Voldemort.” He sat still for several minutes in perfect silence, clearly thinking. The only movement he made was the drumming of his fingers on the arm of the chair. At length, he appeared to come to a decision. “Severus, return to Hogwarts. See if you can discover where Potter is concealed. I want his head on a spike.”

Severus stood and bowed. He almost ran to the door. As he turned to close it behind him, he saw the Dark Lord throw a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace, and a head appear amidst the flames. He couldn’t see who it was and his instincts for survival prevented him from risking trying to catch a glimpse. He shut the door. He had survived without blowing his cover, but he still had a big problem: the Dark Lord knew too much. He Apparated to Hogsmeade and began the run to the castle. He had to hurry he had to warn Dumbledore.

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Harry stepped out of the fire at Grimmauld Place. He found himself in the living room, which was full of Death Eaters. Harry guessed that he must have interrupted a meeting of some sort, as the Death Eaters were all gathered around the table in the centre of the room. Some of them were sitting, those in the inner circle, mainly, and around them was a ring of standing Death Eaters, thirty in total. At the head of the table, Bellatrix Black sat in a chair, with a few sheets of parchment and a map rolled out in front of her. She must have been chairing the meeting.

“Welcome back,” she said matter-of-factly as Harry entered. Silence had fallen over the room as he had entered. *Must be my exalted presence*, thought Harry. Bellatrix continued, “Where have you been?” Luckily, Harry was not completely stupid. He had expected a question such as this and had spent the journey from the Room of Requirement to Dumbledore’s office thinking up a lie.

“At the Ministry,” said Harry as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I had to pick up a few things.” He was holding his sword in one hand and the box of his possessions was under the other arm. He gestured to both in turn. His excuse seemed to satisfy Bellatrix who nodded and turned back to the meeting. *Was breaking into the Ministry so common that no one bats an eyelid when it happens?* wondered Harry.

“As you know, the Tubes stretch for miles in each direction,” continued Bellatrix, addressing the crowd. “We know that the Ministry of Magic has an emergency exit to the tubes, here.” She pointed to the map. Harry recognised it as being a map of the London Underground. “You are to keep a three-mile distance from here at all times. From what we know, the monk disappeared into Paddington at ten, and reappeared again at two thirty, and we know he cannot Apparate. Average foot speed over uneven ground and, in this case, in the dark, is four miles an hour. If it is a round trip that means he took, at most, two hours and fifteen minutes. That gives you a search radius of nine miles in every direction from Paddington Station. If you find the monastery, you call for back up – you don’t get creative, you call for backup. We move out at ten tomorrow. Muggle torches will be used, as we can’t use the wand light and use other spells at the same time. We will deploy via Portkeys to the station itself, on platform two, the deepest platform they have, and split up from there. You already know your teams and which lines to search. That’s all you need to know. Any questions? No? Okay, ten o’clock tomorrow morning. I’ll be around at nine. Until then, get some sleep. We cannot allow you to leave, as you might be caught. Good night, gentlemen.”

The meeting was adjourned and the Death Eaters began to depart. As the crowd moved towards the doors, Bellatrix began to fold away the map and parchment that lay before her. Harry, who had stood by through the meeting taking mental notes, approached the table.

“Can I help you?” asked Bellatrix; she looked as though she was annoyed but was making her best effort to be polite.

“Not really,” said Harry. “I’m just...” he didn’t really know what to say. *What a brilliant spy I am*, thought Harry. *I can’t even talk normally to people.*

“Just what?” pressed Bellatrix.

“Thinking,” said Harry. Bellatrix gave him an impatient look, so he had to continue. He had never been a good liar, and right now he was proving it. He wondered if Snape had first started out like this.

“About what?” asked Bellatrix, sitting down, and fixing him with a piercing gaze. *Does she know?* thought Harry. *No, of course not. There is no reason why she should suspect me.* Harry felt a hot flush as she stared at him. He hoped he appeared calm, because inside he was very, very nervous. Lying had never been his strong point.

“My head is all messed up,” said Harry. It was best to stick close to the truth. All good lies have elements of the truth in them. It also meant that if he got into difficulty he had something to reference a lie to. “Whatever they did to me hasn’t gone away. My memory is blurry at best. I don’t even know why Longbottom is so mad at me.”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” said Bellatrix, smirking at him. “But you bloody well deserve that.”

“What did I do?” asked Harry. “I can’t remember ever doing it.”

“They must have hit you hard,” said Bellatrix, with something Harry could almost accept as sympathy. “They might have even tried Legilimency and accidentally fried your brain.” He knew this wasn’t true, but it was better to let her speculate, as long as she never came close to the truth. There wasn’t much danger of that. It had taken him days to work out what had happened, and he had known that the world had appeared to change. She did not.

“Fascinating,” said Harry impatiently. “But that doesn’t answer my question.”

“When we needed some captives freed, it was decided to ‘convince’ an Auror to set them free. We needed an inside man. Longbottom was selected because of his rank. You kidnapped his son from under his nose in the middle of Diagon Alley in broad daylight. Two days later, he was returned to his house, having been beaten, broken and having had his brain turned to mush by continuous use of the Cruciatus Curse.” Harry remembered seeing what remained of Frank and Alice Longbottom in St Mungo’s and, most of all, the effect it had had on their son. He had done that? He felt sick. Neville was his friend. The other Harry was plain evil. Harry found himself not wanting to know anything about him. Everything he had found out, he wanted to forget.

“Did I actually cast the curse?” asked Harry, looking Bellatrix directly in the eye. He was disgusted to see a sickening smile spread over her face.

“Once or twice,” said Bellatrix, laughing softly. She had confirmed what he had been dreading. It had been him. “It took nearly forty-five minutes. I think everyone had a go, to be fair. Harry, are you sure you’re all right? If you’re having trouble remembering, the Dark Lord might be able to help.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Use the Cruciatus Curse until my mind breaks any memory charms I might have. No thanks. I think it will pass in time.”

“It had better,” said Bellatrix. “I don’t want to be anywhere near you if you’re misfiring. You see, the Dark Lord has said that if you are back in time, you are to come with us tomorrow. He said your knowledge of Muggles will be very valuable. That and he wants someone there to keep the new lads in line.”

“I see,” said Harry. So he would be going into the Tubes. He made a mental note that if he was able to get a message to the Order, he must point out that he would be there, so they had to watch their curses. “Well, if that is what he has commanded, then that is what we must do, right?”

“Right,” said Bellatrix, nodding. “Now if you’ll excuse, me. I have work to do.”

“Of course,” said Harry. She piled up all the papers on the table. She withdrew her wand and pointed it at the papers. With a few well-chosen words, the papers burst into flame. Satisfied that the papers were destroyed, she walked towards the door. Harry followed her out of the room, and as she went into the kitchen, he climbed the stairs. He went straight into the room that had been his the last time he had spent the night here. The room hadn’t changed. He guessed it must

always be his personal room. The bed was made and the room tidy. There was an owl in its cage on the dresser. Harry immediately crossed to the desk and grabbed some parchment and a quill. He had better send a message off ASAP to give the Order time to prepare. Having an owl in here was a godsend.

*Dear Professor Dumbledore,*

*Bellatrix ~~Lestrage~~ Black is going to lead a mission into the London Underground tomorrow at 10am. They're looking for a Monastery of some sort. I will be there, so tell the Order to watch who they hex. We will appear on platform 2 at 10. We will be within nine miles of Paddington Station. Take whatever action you deem necessary.*

*H*

He quickly attached it to the leg of the owl and took it to the window. Just as he released the owl, the door swung open to reveal a Death Eater with his hood down. Harry recognised him as the man who had asked who he was when he had first come here. Steepleton was his name, as Harry recalled.

“Don’t you ever knock?” growled Harry, trying to recover from nearly being caught red handed.

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” muttered the Death Eater in a strange accent. He clearly wasn’t and was being, in Harry’s opinion, rather disrespectful. Did he not know who Harry was, or rather who he was pretending to be? He hadn’t recognised him on his first arrival. “Who was the owl to? We aren’t allowed to send owls,” continued the Death Eater.

“Do you know who I am?” asked Harry, drawing his wand. He had no intention of actually hurting the man, but he had to be kept from sticking his nose into Harry’s business. That and Harry had to keep up the impression that he was the other Harry.

“Harry Potter,” said Steepleton. “So...”

Harry almost laughed. He was so used to being recognised one way or another that it seemed almost amusing that this man didn’t know. “You’re not from around here, are you, Steepleton?” asked Harry, taking another step closer.

“South Africa,” said the man. His accent showed he wasn’t British, but Harry couldn’t place it.

“Well,” said Harry. “Just so you know... *Wingardium Leviosa!*” With a flick of Harry’s wand, the man was lifted two feet into the air. With another flick, the man’s arms were wrenched out to the side. He looked like he had been crucified in midair on an invisible cross. With a wish of his wand, Harry sent the man higher, until his head smacked into the ceiling and then brought him back down, to about two feet above the floor. The man’s face changed from pain to shock to terror. “As I was saying,” continued Harry, fixing his face into a smirk. “In this country, I am

kind of important. I sit on his right hand, meaning that you mess with me, you mess with the Master, got it?"

"G...got it," stuttered the terrified Death Eater. Harry didn't really like doing this, but he had to. He had worse things on his conscience: the trolley witch, for example. Compared to that, this seemed a trifling matter. Having as good as killed the trolley witch, Harry's sense of right and wrong was somewhat off. In the old days, he would never have done what he was doing now. He realised just how much he had changed.

"I killed the Minister of Magic when I was fourteen," Harry informed him, trying to keep his voice level as the image came to the front of his mind. "I'm not telling you this to impress you, merely to warn you that if you question me again, you'll be dead before you realise you've made a mistake, understand?"

"Yes," pleaded the Death Eater. His eyes were wide with fear.

"Good," said Harry. He released the spell and Steepleton was lowered to the ground. "Now we have the ground rules sorted, what did you want when you came here?" The Death Eater flexed his arms a few times before answering. When he did, his voice was soft and respectful.

"Oh, Mrs. Malfoy told me to ask you if you wanted dinner up here or if you would be eating with the rest of us, M'Lord," said Steepleton.

"No need to M'Lord me," said Harry. "Nice and casual, just don't cheek me, all right?" The Death eater nodded; he still looked scared; probably hoping his mistake didn't merit a dose of the Cruciatus Curse. "And yes, I will be eating up here this evening, thanks."

Oddly enough, when his meal was delivered ten minutes later, it was not by Steepleton, but by another Death Eater. Harry ate alone that night, looking through some of the books that he found in his room. It was scary what one wizard could do to another. One spell turned a man inside out. Harry could scarcely imagine a nastier way to die. He had to give up after five pages as he felt he would be sick if he read much more. He hoped his owl made it to Dumbledore. He hoped they could find this monastery first. Harry had no idea what it was about, who these monks were or why Voldemort wanted them. All he knew was that if Riddle was after them, the Order had to get their first. If they were good and Riddle wanted them dead they had to be protected. If they were bad, harsher methods were needed. Nearly thirty people knew of this mission; it hadn't necessarily been Harry had informed Dumbledore. The Order could act without compromising his position.

Mid-way through the evening, it occurred to Harry, that if he was going to be this close to Voldemort, he had better practice his Occlumency. Before he went to bed, he spent over half an hour trying to clear his mind. Due to Snape's poor training he had no idea what he was aiming for, but he did his best. On reflection, he would stand little chance against Voldemort. He should have waited and practiced with Dumbledore, but he didn't have the time. Voldemort would have

deemed him missing if he hadn't returned when he did. It had to be this way; it was far from ideal, but Harry didn't have a choice.

Harry was awoken the next morning by a banging on his door at nine o'clock. He opened his eyes and glanced around. Bellatrix's head was poking around the door. Harry's first reaction in his groggy, half-awake state was to throw a Stunner at her, but luckily for him, he couldn't find his wand. That meant he couldn't compromise himself by using a spell.

"We're leaving in an hour," announced Bellatrix. "You'd better shake a leg." At first, Harry wasn't sure what she meant. He was about to ask, when the memory of the meeting came back. *The Tubes, the monastery*; He was going on a mission today.

"Yeah, 'k," said Harry, rolling out of bed and heading for his en-suite bathroom. He was fairly sure that this room had not had an en-suite when he had been here last Christmas, but he let that thought go. Today he was going out into the field with the Death Eaters. He was expecting an Auror confrontation. He needed to aid the Aurors without giving himself away, to them as well as the Death Eaters, as the Ministry was crawling with spies.

He emerged fifteen minutes later, having showered, shaved and feeling far more awake. He caught a look at himself in the mirror, with just a towel around his waist. It occurred to him just how much he had changed. He remembered seeing a frightened little boy in the mirror. That boy was gone now. The monster that stared back was all that remained. Harry was far from proud of who he had become. He was a killer, a fighter. He really had not had a childhood, had he? Most teenage boys dream of being an action hero when they grow up, just like the men in the movies. Harry would give anything to be Mr. Normal. Bullets for breakfast, death for dinner; it was overrated. Harry pushed the thought aside. This was no time to wallow in self-pity. He had to concentrate, today more than ever.

He dressed in the clothes that he had been captured in: a pair of combat trousers, boots and a skin-tight, long-sleeved t-shirt, which were all in the box that Dumbledore had returned to him. They were all black and made him look like an assassin, even without the weapons to complete the image. He pulled the Dragon Scale armour out of the box and strapped it across his chest. He picked up the leg holster and clipped it to his belt and thigh. He secured both wands, one in the thigh holster and the spare in the back of his belt. He clipped the sword onto his left hip and tucked the stun-baton into its holster in his right thigh, next to his primary wand. Lastly he slipped on a pair of black leather gloves and wrapped a long black cloak around his shoulders, attaching it at the front. He decided not to go with the hood today. Another glance at the mirror told him what he had feared: he truly did look like a killer. No trace of the boy who had lived in a cupboard for ten years remained in the man in the mirror. He was a machine, designed and built for one purpose: killing.

He checked his watch. It was twenty-five to ten. He turned the light off and walked down the stairs to the kitchen. He began to make himself a cup of tea. As it was brewing, he checked the cupboards. There was a pack of chocolate in one cupboard. He pocketed one bar, thinking that he would need the sugar. Once he had removed the teabag, he added milk and sugar and sat at the kitchen table sipping it, thinking to himself. He was lost in a daydream in seconds. He

didn't even notice that he was not alone in the room, until a small hand tugged at his trousers by his knees. He nearly jumped out of his skin at the contact.

"Would Master Harry Potter like some breakfast" said a voice.

"No thanks, Kreacher," said Harry absently. It was another two seconds before he realised what he had just said. *Kreacher!* Harry jumped up from his seat, his sword jumping out of the scabbard into his hand. He swung it at the surprised House Elf, only just managing to stop it before it reached his neck. Harry pressed the blade against Kreacher's neck, but not hard enough to cut him. He glared down at the House Elf. This creature was the reason he had no Godfather. This treacherous little bastard had sold him out. Nothing would thrill him more than to kill Kreacher, but he couldn't. Was it the other Harry's instincts that urged him to kill, or was it his own? He hated Kreacher with every ounce of his being, but he couldn't kill him. He remembered that it was Kreacher's ambition to be decapitated, and he wouldn't grant him his wish.

"Master wishes to cut Kreacher's head off?" asked the Elf, looking almost hopeful.

"Just get away from me, Kreacher," growled Harry. He picked up his cup and walked out of the kitchen and into what used to be the living room, but was now the meeting room. Bellatrix was inside, demonstrating to the Death Eaters how a Muggle torch worked. Harry picked one up. It was one of the big Mag-Lites that policemen used. They were about a foot long, and cast a very bright light. It was also rather heavy, and could cause serious damage if it hit you. Harry declined when someone offered him one. He had his Stun-Baton, in which he could store the Lumos charm.

"You all know what to do," said Bellatrix, when everyone had a torch and they seemed set. Everyone nodded. There were about thirty in total. Some seemed to be very nervous. He assumed they were the new recruits. Some seemed more confident, and had probably done this kind of work before. Harry noticed that he was receiving a lot of glances. He shrugged off the uncomfortable feeling. He had never liked people staring at him. He was here to scare them into co-operation, so was it really surprising that they shot him glances every few seconds?

Shortly before ten o'clock, Bellatrix handed out Portkeys to the Death Eaters. Harry's one was an empty can of Tango. She then went on to hand one to Antonin Dolohov. Harry remembered him from the Department of Mysteries. He noticed Dolohov exchanged a nod and a wink with Bellatrix before attaching his mask. Harry wondered for a second if there was something going on between them, or what that wink could have been about. She wasn't married in this world, so a fling with Dolohov was not out of the question. He watched the second hand moving ever closer to the hour on the clock on the wall. With one final check, they were ready. Harry looked back up at the clock. Five...four...three...two...one...Harry felt a sharp tug behind his navel as the Portkey activated.

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Paddington Station is amongst the busiest stations on the Tube network. Thousands of people depart and arrive back there each day. A train arrives, on average, every eight minutes. To say it was hard to clear was an understatement. Kingsley Shacklebolt had had to pull a lot of strings to do as much as he had. The ticket offices were told to stop selling tickets six hours ago, telling people they were full. Every other station was stopped from selling tickets to Paddington. This minimized the number of people on the platform. Those with pre-ordered tickets couldn't be stopped. It made sense that the Death Eaters would have someone watching and would know if the Aurors closed the station. They had to have a plausible excuse. A computer failure in the booking system was good enough. Most wizards wouldn't recognise a computer if it landed on their heads, let alone understand how it worked, or in this case had stopped doing so.

Kingsley stood on the platform, wearing a Manchester United football shirt and a pair of jeans. He wore a pair of white trainers and a baseball cap, which bore the Budweiser logo. He was one of the few Aurors who could actually pass for a Muggle, one of the things he was most proud of. He checked his watch; it was almost ten. He glanced over at the man wearing a Metallica t-shirt and had a chain dangling from the belt that held up his black jeans. He wore a full-length leather trench coat over the top. Kingsley smiled inwardly at the sight of Dawlish dressed as a heavy metal fan. Still, at least he looked convincing as a Muggle, which is more than he could say for some of those present. He glanced over at one Auror who wore a pair of purple bell-bottoms, a white dinner shirt and a bow tie.

Kingsley had his wand tucked into the loopholes in his jeans, which were designed for a belt. As he leaned against the walls outside the toilets, he kept glancing around. Muggles came and went, stopped at the newsagent in the station and then went about their business. He hoped that none of them got caught in the crossfire, but that was hoping for a lot. Years of war had taught him one thing: collateral damage was inevitable. The best he could do was minimize it.

Dumbledore had sent in the information, the time and location of the attack. It seemed that Harry Potter was as good as his word. Kingsley wouldn't trust the boy until he spoke to him, but if he averted this attack, it would create a lot of leeway with Kingsley. What worried him was the fact that Snape had claimed the Dark Lord knew he had turned. Potter's message had arrived an hour after he had left. It was very soon. Had Harry got a message off before he was caught? There was a lingering doubt in the back of the Auror's mind, but he shrugged it off. He had to keep his mind on the here and the now. Other Aurors were searching for the boy, his father and godfather most of all, but Kingsley and Dawlish were assigned to the station. He had to keep his mind on the problem at hand. He may be wrong, but better safe than sorry. If they did not act, hundreds would die today. He was doing the right thing; that, he honestly believed.

Beep! Beep!

The alarm on his watch went off. It was fifteen seconds to ten o'clock. Kingsley slipped a hand under his shirt, reaching for his wand. His fingers wrapped around the wood, and he tensed his muscles, ready for action. Five...four...Dawlish was looking ready and attentive...three...everyone else looked ok, they were in position...two...it was now or never...one!

Suddenly there was a flash of light as a Portkey appeared out of thin air. Attached to it was not a person, but a box. It was the size of a shoebox, but made of black plastic. There was a small digital clock on the top of the box, which Kingsley could see read 00:05.

He stepped closer, and looked carefully at the box. 00:04.

“Oh, Hell,” said Kingsley to himself. “BOMB! EVERYONE DOWN!” He threw himself at the mother and children nearest him. It was almost a rugby tackle. As he crashed into them, he brought all three crashing to the ground. “*Fuero Retardo!*” he shouted, holding up his wand, just as the bomb detonated. His shield popped up just in time. It was like looking through a window at a fire. The whole room was engulfed in one huge fireball, and the bomb destroyed London’s busiest station. The mother screamed, as did her children, but Kingsley held them down. He had to concentrate on his shield. The bang was deafening and pieces of concrete fell from the ceiling all around them.

The platform was in ruins, and there was no sign of the Death Eaters. It had been a trap; Harry Potter had set them up!

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Harry’s feet touched down on the ground once more. His first reaction was to ignite his stun baton with the Lumos spell. The baton retained the spell, giving out a brilliant white light, far superior to that of any torch or wand. He could also do other spells with his wand at the same time. He held it high and looked around. He was standing on a balcony of sorts. Above him, a very steep steel staircase went up to another level, while a similar flight was visible near a hole in the floor, which would take him down a level. All around him, thick metal pipes ran along the walls. It was a very dark, wet and gloomy place, but it was all made of metal. He was on a steel balcony. He could see through the mesh-like floor to the level below. He noticed that there was a constant whirring noise. He figured that it must be a generator of some sort, or maybe some form of machinery. Bellatrix and the others ignited their torches. He did notice that there were now only ten with him, rather than thirty.

“I thought we were heading for Paddington Station,” said Harry. He noticed that his voice echoed eerily around the room.

“This is Paddington,” said Bellatrix. “It’s a maintenance shaft. It goes from street level down into the tubes, without crossing the platform. Do you think I am stupid enough to have us appear in the middle of a platform packed with Muggles?”

“Fair enough,” said Harry. He was fairly sure she had said that they would appear on platform two, but she had obviously changed her mind. It was her mission, not Harry’s, so she didn’t need to clear every change with him. He was just along for the ride. To be honest, he was still in doubt. Something was nagging at the back of his mind. He was positive he could smell salt. It was the same acidic smell that he had smelt when Uncle Vernon had dragged them to a lighthouse to escape the Hogwarts letters. Maybe it was the stagnant water that leaked from the huge pipes.

“Where to?” whispered Harry.

“Down and left,” whispered Bellatrix. She went first, and Harry followed. She gestured for the rest to split up. They bowed and all went off in various directions, leaving Harry and Bellatrix alone. Harry followed her along one passage. As they got to the end, they found themselves faced with a T-junction. Harry looked both ways, shining his light down both corridors. He had an uncomfortable feeling that they were being watched, or that something was wrong. Dumbledore had told him to trust his instincts and right now, he knew something was wrong. He could see nothing. Bellatrix seemed unfazed. She didn’t even seem nervous. She led the way down. After ten paces, Harry froze. The humming noise became far louder. Whatever machinery it was, was now on full power. It made Harry jump. He tried to calm himself and focus, but he couldn’t shake the uncomfortable feeling in the back of his mind.

“What the hell was that?” he whispered.

“I don’t know,” said Bellatrix. “Come on. Check down here.” Bellatrix seemed to know exactly where she was going. They continued down the passage until they came to another T-junction. Neither way looked particularly promising. Harry held up his light to get a better view. Harry was about to suggest one direction for no particular reason, when he noticed something. He could smell tobacco on the air. He glanced down the corridor, his eyes coming to rest on a smoking cigarette butt. It was on the floor a few metres down the corridor, and was still gently smoking. It had been dropped, not put out. Someone else was here, or had been very recently but did not want to be seen. When they heard them approach, they must have run. Why would they run, unless they weren’t friendly?

“Bellatrix,” hissed Harry, withdrawing his wand.

“What?” she whispered back, looking at him with a curious stare. He tiptoed to the butt and picked it up. “What is it?” she whispered.

“We are not alone,” said Harry. Bellatrix, glanced at the butt and then withdrew her wand. “Something’s wrong,” said Harry.

“I think you’re right,” she said. “Let’s split up. You take that way, I’ll go this way.”

“What am I looking for?”

“A large metal door with K–A–Π–И–T–A–H written above it,” said Bellatrix. “You’re right, someone is here and they knew we were coming. Fall back.”

“With what written above it?”

“Kay, ay, a pi symbol, a backward en, tee, ay, atch,” she repeated, looking annoyed. Harry memorised the characters. They didn’t seem English. He wondered why there would be strange characters written on doors in the London Underground. Maybe it was the language of the monks.

“Can’t you Apparate out?” said Harry. Bellatrix stood still for a moment before looking up at him.

“I can’t! Harry; go, find the door. It’s out best way out. I’ll look down here.”

She disappeared down one passage without giving Harry time to argue. He thought they should not split up. If anyone was here, they would stand a better chance together. Not having a choice, Harry took the other direction. He noticed that the walls, floor and ceiling were all metal. It occurred to him that he had not seen any concrete since he had arrived. What kind of station, underground station, was not made of concrete? Something wasn’t right; he knew that. He crept along the passage. At the end was a door. In the middle was a red cross in a white square. The First Aid Station. Harry opened the door and stepped in. It was dark inside. He glanced around and was about to leave when movement caught his eye.

He spun around and raised the light. He was sure he had seen movement, over by the trolley in the corner. He could see all sorts of instruments on the trolley, from scalpels to scissors. *Why would a simple First Aid station in a work area have operation tools?* wondered Harry. He crept closer, and lowered himself to his knees so he could see onto the under shelf of the trolley.

“MEIOW”

A huge cat sprang at him as his head came into view. Harry fell backwards, but managed not to cry out loud as the fur-ball jumped onto his chest. As he fell he lost his grip on the stun baton. It fell from his hand and slide along the floor, until it hit the side with a clang that seemed to reverberate through the entire room and beyond. The cat tried to sink its claws into the armour, but couldn’t penetrate. The cat slid off him and disappeared out of the door. Harry’s heart was pounding and he had broken into a cold sweat. That damned cat had scared the hell out of him. He had also noticed that when the baton had hit the wall, the clang had echoed throughout the entire room and corridor outside. That wasn’t normal for a tunnel, was it? He stood back up and took a second to steady himself. He was about to shout, to test the mysterious echo, but he didn’t want to give himself away. He didn’t know who was out there, but he was sure it was not Aurors. Picking up and re-igniting the stun baton, he walked back towards the door.

“Achoo”

Harry spun back around. That had been a sneeze, he was certain. He aimed his wand back into the room. He glanced around, looking for a place to hide. Someone was here, but where the hell were they? His eyes fell on a wardrobe of sorts. It looked like Snape’s potion’s store. Harry walked towards it and with a flick of his wand the doors burst open. He kept his wand aimed at the wardrobe. He flicked his wand and the clothes parted, revealing the source of the sneeze. Inside was a young girl. She was ten years old, possibly younger. She wore a white night gown, and had obviously been crying. Her eyes were red and looked sore, while her hair was matted and a mess. She was leaning against one side, her hands hugging her knees. She looked deathly pale and absolutely terrified.

“Hey,” said Harry kindly. He knelt by the cabinet and extended a hand towards the girl. “Come on.” The girl stared at the hand for a few seconds. She was too scared to move. “I won’t hurt you,” said Harry smiling kindly at her. “What’s your name?”

The girl looked at him for a few seconds before taking the hand. He helped her out of the cabinet and up onto the operating table. He pulled the chocolate out of his pocket that he had stashed in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. He opened it and offered it to her. Her eyes grew wide at the sight of chocolate. She extended a hand quickly towards it. She was so pale, Harry wondered when the last time she had eaten had been.

“You can have it,” said Harry refusing to give it to her “if you tell me your name.”

“Rhiannon,” whispered the girl. Harry smiled and gave her the chocolate. She instantly bit off a chunk and chewed it almost frantically. Harry crossed to the sink and poured her a drink in a beaker he found next to the sink. He handed it to her and watched her drink. It occurred to him that she was not English. She had pronounced her name Rye–ya–non, with y sounds. He also wondered why a girl would be hiding in a cupboard in a maintenance shaft at the station. Was she one of the monks? No, monks are supposed to be chaste; they can’t have daughters. So who was she? He hoped her English was good enough that he could get some answers.

After she had calmed down a little, Harry decided the time had come to find out what was going on.

“Rhiannon, sweetie,” said Harry softly. “Are your mummy and daddy here?”

“Nyet.” She shook her head. She seemed to be fighting back tears. Her eyes were red. She had clearly been crying.

“Where is everyone?” continued Harry. “Where are all the grown-ups?”

“They took them,” said Rhiannon, trembling once more. Her accent was not too strong and her English excellent, to Harry’s relief. “The ghosts, they took them!”

“Ghosts?” said Harry. “What ghosts?”

“They came last night,” said the girl. “They came aboard at Portsmouth.”

“Aboard? Portsmouth?” What was she on about? What had Portsmouth got to do with the London Underground?

“The ship,” said Rhiannon.

“What ship?”

“This ship.”

It was as if the mist suddenly cleared. That was why everything was metal, why his voice echoed, why the baton had clanged as it hit the wall, and why he could smell salt. They weren't anywhere near the London Underground. Bellatrix had lied to him. This *was* a trap, but not for them, for him. *Idiot*, he should have realised this instantly. They were supposed to have gone to the platform. He should have realised instantly that this was a trap. There never even was a monastery! The foreign characters above the door he was looking for and Rhiannon's accent made sense now. He had been so stupid! What was wrong with him? But if they knew about his defection, then why go through the charade...he had told the Order to go to the platform...*oh no!* The Order had walked into a trap. Thirty Death Eaters had left Grimmauld Place, but only ten had arrived on the ship. Twenty Death Eaters could have gone to the station. They had even left an owl out for him to send the message. That had been so convenient that he should have realised something was wrong! The Order would be slaughtered and the survivors would think that Harry had set them up. He had been so stupid to come back. He should have stayed at Hogwarts and let Voldemort know outright that he had turned. This adventure had turned out to be a catastrophe!

What's more was that ten Death Eaters plus Bellatrix were also onboard. He had to get off the ship. The whirring, which had gotten louder, must be the engine. He was on a very low deck and it was a calm day so he couldn't feel the rocking of the ship. They were moving so he couldn't Apparate even if he knew how. He didn't know how to make a Portkey. That meant he needed to get to a lifeboat.

"These ghosts," said Harry. "Were they all black with white faces?" He used his hands to demonstrate what he meant as he talked.

The girl nodded. "Da."

The Death Eaters had come last night and prepared the ship. She had said the Death Eaters had taken the grown-ups. She wouldn't be here unless her parents were. It was safe to assume that she was now an orphan. He had to get her out of here, but that was easier said than done. For all he knew, the passages could be full of booby-traps. This was going to be near impossible. He needed all the help he could get.

He opened the drawers in the cabinets, looking for something useful. He knew that all radios would have been destroyed. He found a few blades, scalpels and such like. There were syringes and numerous bottles and pills. He picked out two scalpels and taped them to his forearm, and rolled his sleeve back down over the top of them. He then wrapped a crepe-bandage around the stun baton, reducing its glow so it would not give them away. There was nothing else of any use.

"Okay, Rhiannon," said Harry. "My name is Harry. I am going to get you out of here, but you have to help me. The ghosts are still out there, so I need you to be extra quiet, okay? Do not make a sound, okay?" The girl nodded, and swallowed the last of the chocolate. "Ready."

He took her hand and slowly led her out of the room. He was not going to head back the way he had come; Bellatrix might be there waiting. *The treacherous bitch*. For a few minutes, he had actually trusted her. *Idiot! No use crying over spilt milk! Focus on the problem at hand!* The

words came to him as if it was a lesson he had learned long ago. More of the other Harry's instincts, he assumed.

They crept along the passage as silently as they could. The dim light from the baton was enough to see by, but hopefully wouldn't lead the Death Eaters to them. As he crept along the passage, on the side was a sign with some strange letters on it, and then below a translation, E-Deck. He had passed signs like it before, but had never bothered to read them. Deck, he would have instantly guessed if he had been intelligent enough to read.

As they crept along the corridor, Harry saw a light ahead. It was a torch beam. Someone was coming along a passage that would join the one that they were now on. Harry immediately ducked into the nearest door, dragging Rhiannon after him. If he had had more time, he might have stopped to read the sign on the door. КАПИТАН. As it was, he did not, and what he found inside the Captain's cabin came as a great shock to him.

Sitting in a chair at the far end of the cabin, staring at Harry with a look that could reduce grown men to tears, sat Lord Voldemort. To his right stood Bellatrix Black, a smirk fixed on her face. On either side were four Death Eaters, and the last two appeared at the door behind them. They were surrounded.

"Harry, welcome back," said Voldemort, rising slowly from his chair. "How was school?" Harry knew instantly that he knew. There was no way to lie his way out of this one. Voldemort was a Legilimens anyway and would know instantly if he lied. The Dark Lord took another step towards him. "And you brought me the last of the crew, how convenient." Harry felt Rhiannon trembling against his leg, her hand cold and sweaty in his, her face buried in his cloak. Did she understand what Voldemort was saying? Judging by her reaction, yes. As Voldemort approached, Harry quickly glanced around the room. He was out numbered twelve to one. The room was fully furnished with a bed, desk, armchair, sofa, and numerous paintings on the wall. The floor was covered in a red carpet. There were two porthole windows through which the morning sun shone.

Voldemort stopped two paces from Harry. He felt a chill run down his spine. The whole room seemed to become cold as Voldemort approached. His eyes burned with hatred as he looked Harry up and down. His unforgiving red eyes burned into Harry's before rising up to look at his scar. He stood motionless for several seconds before staring right into Harry's eyes. It felt as though they were burning straight through to his soul. Voldemort was a Legilimens so it was probably right. Harry tried to clear his mind. He knew that if Voldemort used a wand he couldn't hide anything. Coming back had been a stupid idea. He had acted rashly...again. It was a decision like this that had led Sirius to his death, and would probably result in his own. Voldemort would find out the truth about where Harry came from. Harry had failed, and this world would fall and then Harry's own would follow. *Why did I ever come back?*

*Stop wallowing in self-pity and think of a way to get out of here!*

"Did you honestly think you could get away with it?" said Voldemort, his voice like ice. Harry didn't reply; he stood staring into Voldemort's eyes defiantly. If he had to go down, he

wouldn't give Voldemort the pleasure of cooperating. The egotistical son of a bitch would want him to admit that he had failed, to destroy his ego before he killed Harry. Voldemort stood motionless, staring right back into Harry's eyes. "Take his weapons," said the Dark Lord, turning and walking back to his chair.

The two Death Eaters behind him both moved forward. Harry waited for them to touch him before he moved. As he felt a hand land on his wrist, he brought his foot up as hard as he could, kicking one Death Eater between the legs. He brought his elbow up into the other's nose, breaking it immediately.

"*CRUCIO!*" screamed Bellatrix. Harry grabbed the second Death Eater who had tried to disarm him and pulled him into the path of the curse. The man screamed and collapsed, leaving the door open. Harry picked up Rhiannon and bolted out of the door, narrowly avoiding another Cruciatus Curse. He bolted along the corridor and up the stairs at the end, crashing through the thick iron door onto the deck. He was blinded by the bright morning sun; it stung his eyes as he emerged from the darkness. He stood blinking in the sun for a second before he heard a shout behind him.

"*CRUCIO!*" Harry ducked the spell and, releasing Rhiannon, he slammed the door shut. He spun the wheel that locked the watertight door, sealing the Death Eaters inside. He removed his sword, scabbard and all, and thrust it through the wheel and under the hook. This way, the door could not be opened. With his eyes still protesting at the brightness, Harry picked up the trembling Rhiannon and ran to the stern of the ship. Looking over the back, he could see Portsmouth Harbour. The old sailing ship HMS Warrior stood proud on the shore, tourists walking all over it. The huge PO and Brittany Ferries were in port, holidaymakers walking all over the decks and cars flowing into the ship's garage levels. The water was a murky grey as always, but it was a beautiful day with a gentle sea breeze sweeping the coast. They were almost at the harbour walls. Small pleasure boats and yachts were moored to jetties along the edge of the shoreline. They extended all along the side of the harbour. The nearest was fifty metres away. Harry looked around and spotted the large orange lifeboats. It then occurred to him that he couldn't sail, nor did he know how to launch the boat. He was trapped. He could jump, but wouldn't the propeller suck him in? He didn't know what would happen. He had never had swimming lessons, and his experiences during the Triwizard Tournament had put him off swimming.

"Can you swim?" asked Harry.

"Da, of course," said Rhiannon, trembling. Harry couldn't help but grin. She spoke of it as if everyone could. At least she could swim to safety. Just then, the barrier next to them exploded. Harry's head whipped around. The Death Eaters had managed to get on deck, probably by a different door. Harry ducked behind a lifeboat, pulling Rhiannon down with him.

"Okay, Rhiannon, listen carefully. I am going to transport you to the shore, or as near as I can. I need you to swim to the shore, climb out and get to a phone. Dial six, two, four, four, two. Whoever answers, ask to speak to Kingsley Shacklebolt. Tell him and only him Harry Potter sent you. Tell him the ship's name and that we're in Portsmouth harbour. Okay?"

“Six, two, four, four, two. Kingsley Shacklebolt, emergency. Harry Potter, ship’s name. Portsmouth,” she repeated. Harry was grateful that her English was so good.

“That’s it,” said Harry. “He will ask about the ghosts. Tell him the truth, okay?”

“Okay.” she nodded.

“Okay, this will feel really strange, just take a deep breath and I will launch you of the side, ready?” She nodded and took a deep breath.

“Da Svidanya.”

Harry didn’t know what that meant but nodded. He assumed it meant see you later, or thanks, something like that. He pointed his wand at the girl and concentrated.

“*Wingardium Leviosa!*” The girl immediately flew twenty feet in the air and zoomed off towards the harbour. Harry guided her with his wand. He dropped her a few metres from the jetty. With a huge splash she hit the water. He watched anxiously for her head to reappear. It did after a few seconds and she climbed up onto the jetty. Harry fired a few spells over his shoulder to slow down the Death Eaters. He watched Rhiannon sprint along the jetty towards the harbour. He lost her in the sea of tourists. At least the Death Eaters wouldn’t be able to see her.

Suddenly, one appeared around the side of the lifeboat. A blasting curse hit the deck where Harry had been crouched a second before. Harry’s hand flew up his sleeve and clasped a scalpel. With a flick of his wrist, he threw the blade at the Death Eater. It stuck into his chest on the right side. The Death Eater screamed in pain as blood began to flow down his robes. He gasped for air. Harry assumed the blade had collapsed his lung. Harry pulled out his wand to stun the man when a pair of hands clasped around him. Harry threw his head back, bringing his cranium up into the man’s nose. He felt the trickle of blood on the back of his neck and knew that he had broken the man’s nose. He released his grip and Harry turned to face him. He grabbed him by the robes and spun him around, lifting as he did so. Harry threw the man over the railings and into the cold sea below. He stunned the man who still had a scalpel in his chest. Just then, the railing exploded under another curse, the force of which launched Harry off his feet. He landed on his back on the cold, hard steel. Instantly there was a Death Eater crouching over him.

“Oh no you don’t!” he growled, before bringing Harry’s own sheathed sword down on his own head. As Harry had done to others many times before, the blunt sword’s impact sent his crashing into unconsciousness.

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Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped over another dead body. The man in question, like countless others who just happened to be in the station at the wrong time, had been burned to death, caught up in the explosion. It would easily be passed off as a terrorist attack, maybe by that Osama Bin Laden bloke who had been blowing up American embassies in the Middle East

for the last few years. It wouldn't be hard, but that wasn't the point. Nearly one hundred people had died today. He had saved three, himself. The other nine Aurors between them had saved a total of thirty-one. Thirty-four lives had been saved, over one hundred had been lost. Muggle ambulance crews and fire-fighters were all over the place, hosing down the walls and tending to the dead and wounded. The smell was sickening. Kingsley had seen large-scale death before, but he could never get used to it. He felt ill. The charred bodies, the destruction; it seemed so pointless. The Dark Mark was burned into the remains of the ceiling. It glowed a sickening green against the blackened tiles.

At least they had stopped the tickets. If they hadn't, thousands would have died, not hundreds. It was the tiniest smidgeon of silver lining on the world's largest mushroom cloud. One Auror had failed to get a shield up in time, and Kingsley knew that either he or Dawlish would have to explain to a crying mother how her son had died for his country. When Kingsley saw death on this scale, he began to wonder if it was worth it, if he really made a difference. In moments like these, his faith wavered. He sat down on the steps and looked around. How had it come to this? How had they missed the signs? What kind of a world did he live in, where Voldemort could do something like this for fun? The man was a maniac. He had to be stopped, but Kingsley was beginning to believe he couldn't be. The Order was losing, slowly but surely. Aurors were dying up and down the country, and Voldemort was gathering more and more support. Could he be defeated? Kingsley's faith began to waver again.

"Sir," called a voice. He glanced up to see a young figure in a cloak running towards him. His first reaction was to scold him for not changing his clothes before coming into Muggle London, but didn't have the heart. The man was looking from body to body and appeared as though he might vomit any second.

"What is it?" asked Kingsley, rising to his feet.

"Call for you, sir," said the man. "It's coming in from a Muggle phone in Portsmouth. Some young girl; sounds foreign. Says she needs to speak to you urgently." A Muggle girl wanted to speak to him, specifically him?

"Who is she? How'd she get the number?"

"I don't know, sir," said the man. "She seems to be a Muggle, but she asked for you by name and won't speak to anyone else." Kingsley's mind couldn't make sense of it. Why would a young Muggle girl over one hundred miles away want to speak to him? He Apparated to the entrance hall and ran to his desk. On his desk was a Muggle telephone. He had used one before on the odd occasion and knew what to do. He picked up the receiver and pressed the glowing button.

"Hello," he said. "This is Kingsley Shacklebolt. Who am I speaking to?"

"My name is Rhiannon Rumanov," said a heavily accented voice. Kingsley guessed that she must be about ten years old. She sounded scared and out of breath. Her accent was Russian, possibly Ukrainian, but definitely one of the USSR's satellite states.

“How can I help you, Miss Rumanov?” asked Kingsley. He didn’t speak a word of Russian. He hoped she spoke good English or this was going to be a nightmare.

“I was gived this number by a boy” said the accented voice. “Ghosts killed my parents and I hide in the cupboard and he found me. He told me to tell you that it is emergency and he in Portsmouth on the boat, Mary–Sue.”

“Okay, slow down,” said Kingsley softly. The girl was rambling, and her fear and breathlessness were making her accent hard to understand. Ghosts could not kill her parents; they cannot harm the living. She was clearly wrong, but she was definitely scared, and it didn’t explain how she got the number. At the very least this would lead to a breach in the Statute of Secrecy. “Who did you say gave you the number?”

“He said his name was Harry,” came the reply. “Harry Potter.”

Kingsley sat bolt upright in his chair. The name was imprinted on his brain. But what was Potter doing in Portsmouth? He had said he would be at the attack. But it had all been a lie; Harry Potter had set them and now over one hundred people were dead and the station was in ruins. Every life lost was on his head. When Kingsley got his hands on the little bastard he would throttle him. Kingsley felt a rush of anger, but managed to sound calm. He was very much aware that he was talking to a young girl, who could easily hang up. Luckily, this number did not charge the caller so she would not run out of money.

“Okay, Rhiannon,” said Kingsley kindly. “I need you to tell me exactly what happened, can you do that?” There was a pause and then the girl replied ‘Da.’. Kingsley had picked it up from somewhere that Da meant yes and nyet meant no. That was as far as his Russian went. On the other end, Rhiannon launched into the tale.

“We come into Portsmouth last night, because we was be picking up some cargo,” said the girl at the far end. “Me and my papa was on board. My mama is dead so I live with him on ship. Last night, ghosts come. They was all black with capes and hoods. They had glowing white faces, like Halloween costumes. They come and they take grown ups. They had a big green lights. Daddy had a gun, but it not work on ghosts. They kill him. I hid in the First Aid room. I hid there all day until Harry found me. He gived me chocolate and water and then we run. We go to captain’s room. There was man with red eyes and long black hair. He was scary; he looked so evil. He talked to Harry. They said something like ‘did you think you could get away with it.’ They try grab Harry, but he karate them and knocked the man and two ghosts to the floor. We ran onto deck. He told me to call you. Ask for Kingsley Shackbolt and tell you that it is emergency and that he is on the Mary–Sue in Portsmouth Harbour. Then he made me fly through the air and swim to shore. I think he still on the ship.”

Kingsley had been frantically taking notes. His mind was a blur. Harry had fought Voldemort? So he really had turned? But then why had he given them wrong information? Having said that, he had told them and they had blocked off the station. He had saved lives with his information. If the Death Eaters had planned a trap for him...maybe they set him up. Maybe his letter wasn’t actually from Harry. It might have been a trap from the beginning. But then why

was Harry in Portsmouth helping little girls? Kingsley didn't have time to think about it. She had said Voldemort himself was on that ship. He could bring in Harry and kill Voldemort in one attack. He noted the ship's name and the location. The call had already been traced and he knew where she was. He checked the location on the map.

"Okay, Rhiannon," said Kingsley. "Is there anyone waiting to use the phone?"

"Nyet."

"Ok, I want you to hang up the phone and step out of the phone box. I am going to appear in the box, do you understand?"

"Da. Da Svidanya." There was a click and the line went dead. Kingsley checked the location again and Disapparated. He found himself in a phone box overlooking the harbour. Masts stretched towards the skies like trees across the harbour. It was like looking at a forest. The cloth of the sails was all stowed and he could see out past the harbour walls. A large freight ship was just disappearing out of the walls. He couldn't Apparate out to the ship, as it was moving and he might miss, then he wouldn't be able to Apparate from the water, as he would be moving there. He couldn't fly, as brooms would be seen. He needed to use the Muggle way.

He quickly looked around and saw a young girl standing next to the box. She was younger than he had expected and wore a white nightgown. She looked scared and starved. Kingsley made a note to buy her a Butterbeer when this was over. She looked like she could do with one.

"Are you Rhiannon?" he asked.

"Are you Kingsley?" He took that as a yes and nodded.

"Is that big ship out there the Mary-Sue?"

"Da," she replied. "Harry on it."

Kingsley nodded pulled his omnioculars from inside his robes. He raised them to his eyes and zoomed in as much as possible. A Ship was just leaving through the harbour walls. He could read the letters on the back.

МОРИ-СУЙ
MARY-SUE
C.C.C.P.

He lowered his omnioculars and looked around. He made a final assessment. If there was to be an attack, it couldn't wait. He stepped into the phone box and dialled the number.

"Good morning, Dale's Pawnbroker's, Jenny speaking, how can I help?" said a female voice.

“Put me through to the Auror division,” said Kingsley quickly. There was a click and then a tone before another voice answered.

“Aurors,” said a voice.

“Rachel, it’s Kingsley,” said the Auror, recognising the receptionist’s voice. “Is Dawlish back yet?”

“No, he’s still at the clean-up.” Kingsley cursed to himself, ever aware of the young girl at his side. It was that that stopped him cursing aloud.

“Okay, forget him. I need to go over his head. I’ll take the wrap. I need two assault teams fully armed at Portsmouth Harbour ASAP. Better throw in a Medi-Witch as well. I need you to get hold of the Muggle government and commandeer two troop-carrying helicopters, I believe they’re called Chinooks, and I need two of them at the same location ASAP.”

“Okay, five minutes for the men, and I would guess thirty for the helicopters. I’ll ring you back when I know for sure. I’ll tell them to hurry. Stay by the phone.” She hung up. Kingsley liked Rachel. She had her head screwed on right. She had a keen mind and were it not for her knee, she would make a fine field agent. As it was, she had suffered a bone breaking curse to the knee in a fire fight, nearly six months ago and it couldn’t be completely fixed. She could walk fine, but no longer work as a field agent, so she stayed in the office. Still, she had a good analytical mind and was knowledgeable in all things Muggle as well. Two minutes later, the phone rang. Kingsley answered.

“The teams are on their way, three minutes. I phoned RAF St Morgan. They have several out on exercise. The nearest two are on route. Five minutes on the Alpha, seven on the Beta.”

“Thanks Rach, you’re a genius,” said Kingsley.

“I know,” sighed a voice melodramatically on the other end before the line went dead.

Eight minutes later, Kingsley was on board the first of two Chinook helicopters. There were ten Aurors in addition to himself, Rhiannon and the Medi-witch. The Chinook took off amidst flashes from the Muggle tourists. This was a naval dockyard so they just assumed it was part of the show. The helicopters rose higher and then zoomed off over the water towards the Mary-Sue. Kingsley had briefed the Aurors and then the pilots once the aircraft arrived.

The helicopters zipped across the waves, towards the ships. The machines were noisy and might be seen approaching, but it was the only choice they had. The helicopters came to a stop over the deck, one at the bow, one at the stern. Kingsley remained seated at Rhiannon’s side while the strike teams jumped down onto the deck. They spread out and entered the hull of the ship. Leaving the girl with the Medi-witch, Kingsley jumped down and, withdrawing his wand, ran to the nearest door.

Voldemort was somewhere in the ship. After what he had seen today, Kingsley was more than willing to kill him. A soldier shouldn't get angry, as that is when one makes rash decisions, but Kingsley didn't care. He would kill Voldemort for all the pain and suffering he had caused.

He descended through the ship, following the instructions Rhiannon had given. She had said they were in the Captain's cabin. Kingsley found it in less than a minute, but the room was empty. The Dark Mark was burned into one wall, but the room was deserted. On the wall on one side, a message was written in blood.

**Serpent's tongue, Lion's roar
Potions Master, Mudblood whore**

**Badger's snout, Raven's beak
Say goodbye to the green-eyed freak**

BB

There was the patter of footsteps and an Auror appeared beside him.

“Sir, we've checked everywhere, no sign of life. The forecastle is full of bodies; I'd say thirty-odd. It was a massacre. sir. This is the only survivor.” Kingsley realised that the man was carrying a grey and black cat in his arms. Kingsley took the cat from the Aurors, cradling it in his arms.

Kingsley cursed to himself. They had been too late. Voldemort must have Portkeyed off the ship. Kingsley had been so close to catching him, but now Voldemort was lost to him, along with Harry and any chance of getting to the bottom of this.

“Sweep once more, then fall back to the helicopters,” ordered Kingsley. “Saunders and Milton can steer the ship back into port. If not, have the pilots fly out some navy guys. We leave as soon as the sweep is done. Leave the bodies for now.” The Aurors nodded and ran back down the corridor. Kingsley kicked the desk in anger, then marched back up to the waiting helicopters, cursing to himself, the cat in his arms. He planned on given the cat to Rhiannon, they were the only two survivors. When he got back, he would have to call Dumbledore. He had a lot of explaining to do.

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“Waayyy kooop ungrif door.”

The voice seemed to penetrate Harry's mind, pulling back the curtain of unconsciousness. Harry groggily opened his eyes. His throbbing head was spinning. His vision was blurred, but he still tried to look around. He was laying on his side on the cold, hard floor in an inch of ice-cold water, facing the wall. He tried to roll over, but found that his wrist was manacled to the radiator

on the wall. As he lay on his back, his head still spinning, he raised his hand to rub his throbbing forehead. His scar wasn't bleeding, but he had a large lump on the left side of his forehead.

Suddenly the memories came rushing back. He remembered the boat and the girl and then being caught and his own sword hurtling down towards his head. He guessed that the Death Eater had not missed.

"Wake up, young Gryffindor," repeated a voice. Harry tried to move to see who was speaking, but his entire body was numb. There was a layer of water on the floor, and he was only wearing his combats. His feet were bare, as was his chest. He was freezing and mostly numb. He shivered as he tried to roll over. He ended up with his manacled wrist twisted behind his back, but he could see the rest of the room. It seemed like a cellar. There was no wallpaper on the walls, and the plaster seemed to be falling apart. The water came from a dodgy boiler in the corner and the absence of a light put most of the room in shadow. The only light came from a single tiny window on one wall.

"Welcome back," said a voice. Harry recognised it at once. It wasn't the high-pitched scream that Harry associated with Voldemort, but it was the same man. Riddle stepped out of the shadows in front of him, dressed all in black. His red eyes burned with fury as he looked down pitilessly at Harry.

"You can scream all you want; there is a Silencing Charm around this room," Voldemort informed him. "And even if it were not, no one would dare to come near this house." Suddenly the light came on. The sudden light blinded Harry and he recoiled, rolling back over to face the wall. He blinked a few times, trying to get his eyes to adapt. "No use trying to hide," said Riddle.

Harry lay still for a few seconds while his eyes adjusted. His mind was as numb as his body. He rolled over again, still blinking in the light. Voldemort seemed completely unfazed by the light. He stepped closer to Harry, kneeling beside him. Harry felt the long thin fingers wrap around his jaw, forcing his face upwards. He wanted to shut his eyes, but realised it would do no good. He stared helplessly up into those venomous red eyes.

"I should have seen it the first time," said Voldemort, examining his eyes. "Your whole demeanour had changed, you had lost your edge, and I interpreted it as shock from your arrest. I expected a little more loyalty from my Death Eaters. I expect them to know what a serious mistake betraying Lord Voldemort is."

"Your ego will be your downfall," spat Harry. Voldemort released him and Harry fell back to the floor, his head hitting the plaster hard. Harry grunted in pain. Summoning all his strength and trying to shake the numbness from his limbs, he dragged himself up into a sitting position against the wall. With the light on, he looked around the room. All he could see was an empty bookcase against one wall and a door on another, underneath which light was peeking. How long had he been out for? His head throbbed and his vision was a blur. His watch had been removed. Hours could have passed, a whole day even.

As Harry turned back to face Voldemort, he saw him remove a small phial full of a clear liquid from his pocket. His face remained neutral except for his eyes, which regarded the bottle carefully.

“Veritaserum is inadmissible, before the Wizengamot,” said Voldemort softly. His eyes came to rest on Harry. “But not in front of me.” Harry didn’t even see him move, but the next thing he was aware of, the icy cold fingers were back around his jaw, and the liquid was poured into his mouth. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way, Harry,” said Voldemort icily, pressing his mouth shut.

Harry could feel the icy liquid in his mouth, but refused to swallow. His numb mind was awake enough to know he shouldn’t swallow. His cheeks ached under the strain but he would not swallow; he would never give in. He would never give the Order away. Voldemort would have to do better. After a few seconds of Harry concentrating hard on not swallowing, his cheeks fit to burst, Voldemort released him and Harry spat the potion out, all over Voldemort’s robes. He coughed several times, while the Dark Lord rose slowly to his full height. He flicked his wand to clean his robes and then took another bottle from his pocket.

“So be it,” said Voldemort icily. “You have chosen the hard way. Luckily I have a spare phial, but I am not going to use it. After a few hours, you will be begging me for the potion, but I won’t let you have it. I have other ways of getting the information I need. I want you to know just how wrong you were to betray me. You will be an example to all my Death Eaters. No one is above my law.” Harry cringed at the idea inside, but kept his face defiant on the outside. He glared up at the Dark Lord, hatred glowing in his own eyes.

“You no longer need to be restrained,” said Voldemort matter-of-factly. He pointed his wand at the manacle, which clicked open. Harry pulled his wrist away and rubbed it, trying to get the blood circulating, to wash away the numbness. “Are you ready?” Voldemort asked, pointing his wand between Harry’s eyes.

“After me, there’ll be others” spat Harry. Voldemort’s face stretched into a vindictive sneer.

“And when they arrive, I will see to it that they suffer just as much as you will, *Crucio!*” The tip of Voldemort’s wand was so close that Harry had no hope of avoiding it. It was upon him before he even saw it emerge from the wand. Harry clenched his teeth together as pain surged through his entire body. Every nerve in his body was on fire. His brain was on fire from all the nerves crying out in agony. His body thrashed uncontrollably under the curse, and Voldemort looked down pitilessly as Harry writhed under the pain. It seemed to last forever, but it could only have been seconds. Then the pain was gone. More specifically, the agony had gone; every muscle in his body still cried out in protest. He ached all over. In hindsight he preferred the numbness and longed for it to return. Harry’s body was gently steaming as he lay, gasping on the wet floor. He shivered uncontrollably, and wrapped his arms closely around himself, trying to preserve an ounce of warmth.

“Do you think screaming makes you look weak, Harry?” asked Voldemort. “Have no fear, I will not judge you. Better men than you have wept like a child under that curse. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Suddenly the curse was upon him again. Harry’s head shot backwards as he writhed in agony. He clenched his teeth together again, biting down hard. He tried to block out the pain, to form a mental shield, but it was far too intense. Nothing could stop the agony in which he found himself. His body writhed and thrashed in the water, splashing it over the walls. His mouth was clenched so tightly he couldn’t breathe. His lungs felt fit to burst, and the curse inflamed every cell in his body. Harry’s mouth flew open and he gasped for breath, only to release it a second later in one long scream that echoed about the room, but went no further. Again, the curse was gone.

“Ah,” said Voldemort, a sick smile appearing briefly on his face. “So you have found your voice.” Harry lay steaming, unable to move in the middle of the floor. Voldemort was still pointing his wand at him, but he couldn’t move. Every muscle ached. He gasped for air, but even that seemed painful. The icy, stagnant air filled his lungs, making his whole chest feel cold. His chest was tight and he felt sick. He trembled uncontrollably, lying topless and shoeless in the cellar of an unknown house. He glanced up at the window for just a fraction of a second, but Voldemort saw it.

“You are expecting Dumbledore and your fool of father to come valiantly to your aid?” asked Voldemort, a vicious sneer on his face. “I would not get your hopes up. This house is quite undetectable. You stand, or rather lie, in the cellar of my father’s house in Little Hangleton. This house is protected by an ancient magic that conceals its location in here.” He tapped his chest with his hand. He obviously meant the Fidelius Charm. If Voldemort himself was the secret keeper, there was truly no chance of anyone coming to help him. “No one is coming, Harry. You will stay here for the rest of your life, both days of it.”

The Dark Lord swished his wand. Harry was propelled up into the air and across the room. His muscles ached so much that he couldn’t even get his hands up to protect his face. He slammed face first into the far wall, his right eyebrow connecting sharply with the plaster. He felt a trickle of blood flow down his temple and into his hair as he hit the floor. As he hit the floor, he didn’t even have time to raise a hand to his injured eye before the curse was on him again.

“*Crucio*” said Voldemort, his voice a spiteful hiss. This wasn’t a casual torture; this was him putting every ounce of hatred he possessed into the curse. It surged through his veins like a rush of acid, burning, stinging and throbbing all at once. Nothing could prepare him for it, nor stop the pain. Buddhist Monks can train themselves to walk on hot coals by adapting their bodies to the pain. No amount of meditation could ever stop this curse. Harry thrashed in agony, trying to hold back his screams, but in vain. He screamed out loud, but that only seemed to drive Voldemort one further. The curse, if anything, became more intense. Harry felt consciousness begin to slip away, and then the curse was gone.

Harry lay panting in the freezing puddle as Voldemort retracted his wand. His arm hung loosely at his side, and he circled Harry’s fallen body. Harry just wanted it to end, to be over. He

couldn't take any more pain. But he knew that the Dark Lord wasn't even going to ask any questions yet. He had refused Veritaserum and now he would suffer for it. The Dark Lord wasn't interrogating him, just torturing. Nothing could stop him. Harry managed to push up onto his arms. He held it for a few seconds before his stomach emptied onto the floor, while Voldemort stared down pitilessly, Harry's arms gave out and he collapsed, narrowly missing his own vomit. Voldemort was completely devoid of emotion as he paced calmly around Harry. Harry's head was spinning. He couldn't think straight. He ached all over and his vision was blurred. He shook his head, trying to clear the blur. He could feel the hot trickle of blood flowing from his busted eye.

"That is just a sample of what is to come, Harry," said Voldemort calmly. "It may have already encouraged you to loosen your tongue, however, I believe I taught you better than that."

"You didn't teach me anything," snapped Harry, rolling onto his back.

"I made you what you are and now you turn your back on me," said Voldemort icily.

"I don't owe you anything. You are a vindictive arsehole and you can never win. You can't take people's freedom and I'm going to be there when you realise that."

"That is a matter of opinion," said Voldemort. "And yours does not matter, as time you realised." He pointed his wand at the door, which swung open. Voldemort turned and walked calmly out of the door. He paused just outside and turned back to Harry. "Bring him."

Two Death Eaters appeared in the doorway, one from each direction. They were probably sentries posted at the door. They marched quickly over to Harry, their heavy boots stomping on the floor, spraying water all over Harry as they approached. One grabbed each of Harry's arms and he was yanked roughly to his feet. Each held his wrist with one hand and put another under his arm, lifting him up between them. Harry was upright, but he could hardly move. They held him with strong grips but his muscles didn't seem to work anymore. It took all his strength to keep his eyes open. Part of him was telling him to just give in and let unconsciousness take him, to let the darkness keep him safe. Part of him was saying spill his guts and let Voldemort end it, and part of him was telling him not to give Voldemort the pleasure. Part of him was saying that if he had to die, he would give him hell before he did.

Finally, his 'hero complex' won over. He would not give up the Order. Too many lives, across more than one world, would be over if Voldemort got that information. No, he would never give in. That man, though he could scarcely be classed as human, had murdered his parents and Sirius. He would die before he gave up the Order. Then he would be with his loved ones. *Ah, but they are alive, aren't they?* said a mischievous voice in his head. He regretted that he had never had a real chance to get to know them. If he ever got out of here he promised himself that he would tell them everything. They needed some quality time. He found that he was smiling as they carried him. Ahead of them was a large oak door. Outside, dressed all in black, stood Bellatrix Black. She stood with folded arms and a smirk plastered on her face. She raised a palm to the Death Eaters as they approached, signalling them to stop; they did so in front of her.

She stepped forward and grabbed Harry's hair, yanking his head up to face her. "Who's number one, now?" she sneered, smacking the backs of her knuckles across his face in a hard slap. Harry's head snapped back and then lolled forward. Bellatrix turned to the double doors behind her and pushed them open. Harry was moved forward and thrown roughly to the floor. He was relieved to find that he landed on a soft carpet. He rolled over twice before coming to a stop. There was a fire burning in the fireplace, while the curtains were drawn. He was lying on the red carpet of a room that was completely devoid of furniture with one exception: in an armchair at the far end from the door sat Lord Voldemort.

The two Death Eaters that had brought Harry dropped to their knees and kissed the hem of his robes. Bellatrix closed the door behind them, lowering a crossbeam across the door before doing the same.

"Steepleton" said the Dark Lord without moving. "Your arm." Obediently the Death Eater rolled up his left sleeve and presented it to the Dark Lord. Voldemort paused for a second before leaning forward and pressing a long bony finger to tattoo. The Death Eater hissed in agony, clutching his arm with his other hand. He fell back, his brow furrowed in pain. The other Death Eater and Bellatrix also clutched their arms, as the Mark called to them. Harry had no idea what it felt like, and he didn't want to. He was in enough pain as it was. He wished unconsciousness would return, and spare him from what he knew he would endure.

Voldemort wouldn't even ask questions. He would just hurt him again and again in front of the Death Eaters to show them what would happen if they betrayed him. Harry knew it was coming; the inevitability of it plagued his mind. He wanted to cry but refused to give Voldemort the pleasure of seeing him do so.

Voldemort sat back in his chair, and waited motionlessly for his followers to appear. It was not long before the first pops sounded as the Death Eaters assembled. Harry lay on the floor, staring up at the figures in black that surrounded him. It was nearly five minutes before the Dark Lord was satisfied that everyone was present.

"Welcome, my friends," said Voldemort, rising from his chair. "You are gathered here today to witness what could very well happen to each and every one of you." He stepped forward, and as he did so, the crowd parted to let him through. He walked straight towards Harry, stopping in front of him. The path he had travelled filled with Death Eaters. A circle had formed around them. Figures in black surrounded him, gazing down at him and up to the Dark Lord. Yesterday, he had been one of the most infamous Death Eaters of all time, who commanded the respect of every one of the Death Eaters. Today he was to be tortured before them to ensure their loyalty. *Funny old world.*

"You all remember Harry Potter?" said Voldemort, circling him once more, but facing outwards to his Death Eaters. "I took him in, rescued him from his Mudblood mother. I nurtured him, taught him the Dark Arts myself. I gave him power, respect and made him the man rated Britain's second most wanted. It is fair to say, he owes me his life." He stopped and turned back to Harry. "However," said Voldemort, his voice becoming icy once again. "Mr. Potter has taken it upon himself to betray me." A gasp went up from the crowd. Behind the masks, Harry could

see eyes darting from him to the Dark Lord. Whispers went around the audience as they looked at each other, unsure of what to do. "I gave him everything, and he repays me by aligning himself with Muggle-loving fools like Dumbledore. After everything I have done for him, he came here this evening to kill me." That was a lie. This whole show was a coup d'théâtre; it was all for show.

"I called this meeting for one purpose" continued Voldemort. "I want you all to witness first-hand the price of betrayal. I want you all to know that should any of you even consider betraying me, there can be only one result. You shall be witnesses."

He paused for a few seconds, allowing his words to sink in. Then he moved with lightening speed. He whipped out his wand and pointed it at Harry. "*Crucio*" Harry never even saw it coming. It struck him in the chest, sending pain to every last nerve in his body. His muscles tensed as he thrashed uncontrollably under the effect the curse. It only lasted for a few seconds, but it seemed much longer.

Harry lay gasping on the carpet like a fish out of water, while the other Death Eaters looked on. The veterans like Bellatrix smirked down at him, enjoying his pain, getting a kick out of seeing him suffering. Then there were a few others who were looking around, unsure of what to do. The Dark Lord did another complete lap of his fallen body before turning to face his Death Eater.

"Take a good, hard look," he said. "I offered him the world, and he spat it back in my face. What concerns me just as much is that I believe he may have had accomplices." A murmur went around the circle at the accusation. "Yes, my friends," continued Voldemort. "I smell deceit." He raised his wand once more, but instead of pointing it at Harry, he pointed it at a Death Eater. The other Death Eaters around him stepped back, leaving the poor Death Eater alone before the Dark Lord.

*God, I hope that isn't Snape*, he thought. Harry had already walked into a trap, led the Aurors into another trap and blown his own cover. The last thing he needed to do was compromise Snape as well, but it seemed that was what he had done. This whole adventure had become a nightmare. If he had compromised Snape, he had single-handedly crippled the Order. He felt tears of anger building in his eyes. NO! He would not cry! Voldemort would never get that pleasure from him!

There was a pause as the Dark Lord stared unblinkingly at the Death Eater. The man in question was visibly shaking. He looked terrified, too much so to move. Voldemort stood still, enjoying the fear that he caused, before moving his wand onto another Death Eater. He walked around the circle, pointing his wand at the Death Eaters in the front. Some he passed straight by, some he paused at, and again the Death Eaters fell back, leaving the singled-out man alone before Voldemort. He had covered half the circle without a single curse when there was a pop. Harry turned, along with everyone else in the room, to look at the new arrival. A figure in black with a white mask had just Apparated into the room. The Dark Lord's wand was on him before he had a chance to move, but no curse was fired.

“You are late, Severus,” said Voldemort coldly, advancing on the spy.

“Forgive me, Master,” came a familiar voice from behind the mask. “I was in a conference with the old man. I left as soon as I could. Please, excuse my lateness.” The Dark Lord paused for a moment before lowering his wand.

“Your timing is fortunate, Severus,” said Voldemort. “As you can see, Mr. Potter here is discovering the price of betrayal. He has aligned himself with the old man.” Snape stood unmoving, facing the Dark Lord as the information set in. “I for one, believe he may have had an accomplice.” Snape still did not move, but stared back passively at the Dark Lord through the slits in his mask. “I believe you were there when a certain package was delivered to the old man. It would seem logical that the coffin contained Mr. Potter here, would it not?”

“So it would seem,” said Snape plainly, his voice as neutral as ever. Harry glanced up at Snape, but he didn’t make eye contact. Snape’s eyes were fixed on the Dark Lord. Harry suddenly realised just how costly a mistake this plan had been. He may have compromised Snape. They had no other highly placed source in the Death Eaters. He had done more harm than good. *Why was I such a fool?* He thought to himself. *I never had a hope of lying to Voldemort. Why did I have to play the hero?* He wished he could turn back the clock and stop himself from coming back.

“Since you unknowingly, or so you claim, delivered him to Hogwarts,” said the Dark Lord, advancing on Snape “The finger could easily be pointed at you.”

“Master, I would never,” began Snape, but Voldemort cut him off.

“Silence,” hissed Voldemort. “I want you to prove it to me. I want you to show Mr. Potter where your loyalty truly lies.” It was easy to read between the lines, obvious to see what Voldemort wanted. He wanted Snape to subject Harry to yet another Cruciatius Curse. Harry began to wonder how much longer before his mind packed in. How long had Frank and Alice Longbottom held out for in his world, before Bellatrix had driven them insane? He cringed at the idea of winding up in St Mungo’s, wandering aimlessly around for the rest of his life.

Snape stood still for a moment. Harry’s mind was working, but slowly. The pain slowed his thoughts. He couldn’t compromise Snape. Snape had to do it. Harry summoned all of his strength, and managed to get up on all fours then up on one knee.

“What are you waiting for, Snape?” spat Harry. He pushed himself up onto his feet, nearly toppling over backwards in the process, but he managed to keep his balance. “Do it. What are you afraid of, Snivellus? Scared I’ll have you dangling in mid-air with your underwear...” he never finished the taunt as a fist slammed into his nose. Snape hadn’t even bothered with a wand; such was his anger at the Potters. Harry was sure he felt his nose break as he fell back towards the ground. He landed hard, his mouth full of blood from his bleeding nose. He looked up, just in time to see a boot swing into his ribs, knocking the air of out him. Harry gasped his stomach and gasped for air.

“Like father, like son,” spat Snape. “*Crucio!*”

Snape only held the curse for a few seconds, but it did its damage. Harry found himself unable to move on the floor of the room. He gasped for breath as he lay there, like a fish out of water. There was silence in the room as the Death Eaters watched Harry gasping for breath. His ribs hurt, and he was fairly sure they were bruised if not cracked. Suddenly there was a series of pops. Harry’s eyes flew open, hoping to see the Aurors coming to save him, but in his heart, he knew they were not coming. He was alone in this.

In front of him stood eleven men, surrounded by Death Eaters in cloaks. Harry recognized seven of them. Two of them had been in St Mungo’s trying to break him out. He had stunned them and they had presumably been arrested. Four more, including Lucius Malfoy, had been on the Hogwarts Express. Then there was Rodolphus Lestrage. He stood in the middle of the group, surrounded by the others. Harry’s eyes met his for a fraction of a second, but it was enough. Harry thought for a second he saw concern on the Death Eater’s face. He did a double take, but the Death Eater had already looked away. He must have imagined it. They all wore blue denim trousers and shirts, standard attire for a prisoner. Harry remembered that he had once had to wear the same. Harry realised that they must have been broken out.

“I see you were successful, gentlemen,” said Voldemort, acknowledging their arrival. “And on time too; good. Any casualties?”

“None on our side, Master,” said one of the Death Eaters. He removed his mask, revealing the face of Antonin Dolohov. “The place was almost deserted. All the Aurors were either clearing up Paddington or looking for the boy. The prisoner transfer boat was manned with volunteers. No problem. Their bodies are weighed down and will not wash ashore, as you commanded.” Harry suddenly realised exactly what had happened. While Harry had sent the Order and Aurors to Paddington and then Portsmouth, and then had them all looking for him, Voldemort had snatched the captured Death Eaters back from under the Ministry’s nose. He could not have done this without Harry’s intervention. Harry realised exactly how much of a mistake it had been to come back. He had almost compromised Snape, he had led Aurors into a trap and he had allowed Death Eaters to be rescued. If Voldemort found out everything he knew, more lives would be lost, on more than one world. *Why, oh why did I come back*, thought Harry, fighting off tears.

“You have done well, Dolohov,” said Voldemort. “I would like you to say hello to the cause of your inconvenience. You would not have had to make the effort, were it not for this recently discovered spy.” Dolohov’s eyes landed on Harry. He looked shocked for a moment, before regaining his composure.

“Potter,” sneered Dolohov.

“The one and only,” coughed Harry, glaring at the Death Eater. Dolohov flicked his wand and Harry was launched upwards. He stopped a foot or so above the ground. Just as Harry had done earlier to Steepleton, Dolohov used another spell to pull his arms out to the side, as thought

he were crucified on an invisible cross. Dolohov smirked and stepped closer, coming to within a foot of Harry. Harry glared down at the man, before speaking.

“Dolohov,” he said, trying to keep the pain he felt from his voice. “Ever wanted to be a farmer?” The Death Eater looked back up with a confused expression on his face. Harry continued “Here’s a couple of achers!” Harry slammed his foot into Dolohov’s groin. It was an old joke, but it was better than nothing. He wouldn’t allow them to get the better of him. The Death Eater roared, clutching his privates in pain and falling to the floor in agony. Lucius Malfoy, clearly still irate that he had been imprisoned and disgraced, grabbed a wand from the nearest Death Eater and strode forward.

“Out of my way, idiot,” he sneered at Dolohov. “*Oxrempe!*” Harry screamed in pain as the bone-breaker curse shattered his right wrist. That was his wand arm! Looking over at his wrist, he could see it hanging loosely in an unnatural angle. He was sickened further as he saw a piece of bone was sticking out through his skin, blood dripping from the tear in his flesh. The pain was unbearable.

“Bastard!” screamed Dolohov, back on his feet. He stepped forward and delivered a punch to Harry’s stomach, knocking the air out of him. He didn’t stop. He pummelled Harry’s ribs twice more before punching him on his left cheek.

“Enough,” hissed Voldemort dangerously, halting the barrage of punches. Lucius Malfoy and Dolohov bowed and stepped back to the edge of the circle. Harry coughed and spluttered, spraying blood over the carpet as he did so. He could feel that he was bleeding internally. He probably had broken a rib or two, as it hurt when he breathed. His wrist was completely shattered and his eye had not clotted. Harry was not in a good condition, to say the least.

“Lucius,” continued Riddle. “You and your men will go upstairs. Make yourself presentable and then come back down.” Lucius bowed and retreated out of the door.

“Now Harry,” said Voldemort calmly. He stepped in front of Harry, looking calmly up at him, his eyes a sea of hatred. “Before I turn you over to them for their revenge and amusement, I have some unanswered questions. You foolishly refused to speak before. As I told you earlier, I have other ways of getting the information I want. However, I will offer you one last chance. Speak now, or forever hold your peace.”

Harry looked down at Voldemort. He was seriously considering it. His body was broken and he was in agony. The pain was unbearable. He couldn’t think straight, let alone escape. No one was coming. He was in so much pain and he knew it would only get worse. Even if he refused, Voldemort would find out what he knew anyway. No one was meant to suffer like this. If he just told Voldemort it would be over. He would kill him and he would see his parents again. It would all end, and all he had to say was ‘yes’.

But he had parents in this world, and a sister, a real live sister. She would die if he did, so would his parents, and then the people in his world, if he told Voldemort everything. No, the

price was too high. He knew how much pain he would feel, but he had no choice. Harry looked straight into Voldemort's eyes and gave his answer.

"Go fuck yourself!" snarled Harry. He then spat a mouthful of blood at the Dark Lord. There was a gasp from around the room as the spit and blood splashed onto the Dark Lord's robes. No one ever spoke to Voldemort like that. Riddle himself looked livid.

"So be it," he said coldly. "We shall do this the hard way." He withdrew his wand and after cleaning his robes, pointed his wand at Harry's head. "Bellatrix, if you would do the honour."

"Yes, Master," said Bellatrix, a cruel sneer appearing on her face as she withdrew her wand and stepped forward. "Just so you know, Harry," she said. "I was always better. *Crucio!*" The curse hit Harry in the stomach. The effect was now familiar to Harry, but he could not fight and certainly never get used to it. He was held in place and could not thrash or move. Pain seared through every inch of flesh in his body. His hair was standing on end, and his head thrashed from side to side. He clenched his teeth together, trying to block out the pain. He screamed through closed teeth as the curse inflamed every cell in his body.

Suddenly he was aware of another feeling in his head, almost masked by the pain of the Cruciatus Curse. It was a light tingling feeling. That's it, he thought. I'm losing my mind... St Mungo's, here I come. The tingle seemed to spread throughout his mind, as the pain increased throughout the rest of his body. Suddenly an image flashed before his eyes. He was standing in Dumbledore's office, the ruins of his instruments strewn around the room. There was silvery image of a woman wrapped in shawls with huge milk-bottle glasses hovering above a bowl on the desk. A pensive. *The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...* came a ghostly voice. *Legilimency!* Voldemort was going through his memories! He would find out everything! His suffering had been in vain. Suddenly the feeling was gone.

"STOP!" ordered Voldemort. "All of you wait outside, Bella stay. I need to examine this closer." Harry's head hung limp, as he gasped for breath. His body steamed once more. He felt consciousness start to slip away from him.

"Oh no you don't," said Voldemort spraying water from his wand onto Harry's face. Harry was roughly shaken. He felt the spell being withdrawn and he fell forwards. Voldemort lowered him gently to the ground and then knelt next to him.

"Who was the woman in the Pensive?" he asked. "Answer me!"

"Your mother," spat Harry.

"I'm going to ask you once more," said Voldemort dangerously. "After that, we will go back to the other method of getting answers. Now, who was the woman in the Pensive" Harry didn't answer he just stared blankly up at Voldemort. "So be it. Bella!"

“*Crucio!*” The curse hit him again. His whole body thrashed and flayed as pain forced its way into every cell of his body. Again the tingle appeared in his head and the image came back

*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...*

He was getting the Prophecy! *No, he must not get it. Concentrate, clear your mind, Harry.* He tried to empty his mind, to block out Voldemort. He tried to think of something inanimate, like a chair, to block him, but nothing worked. He couldn't concentrate. The pain from Bellatrix's curse was too intense. He thrashed uncontrollably, and his mind was on open book. The memory played over in his mind, under Voldemort's Legilimency. The memory came to an end at the end of the Prophecy and both spells were lifted.

The Dark Lord looked shocked, and Harry thought for a fraction of a second that he detected fear in the older man's eyes. He stood back up, staring down at Harry. He was clearly thinking. He looked up at Bellatrix. “I need to think” he said softly. “Put him back in the cellar and send the other home.”

Harry just saw Bellatrix bow and retreat before consciousness left him and he fell mercifully into darkness.

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The taxi screeched to a halt as Connor sprinted out into the road without looking. He had run for almost half a mile through the streets and backstreets of Liverpool, constantly pursued by two men. The taxi didn't stop in time. He jumped and rolled off its bonnet, landing painfully on his back in the middle of the road. The afternoon sun shone down into his eyes. He had hit his head on the road. He was breathing heavily from too much smoking and not enough exercise. He tried to Disapparate, but found that he couldn't. The bastards had put an anti-apparation jinx on him! He picked himself up quickly and looked over his shoulder. His two pursuers were catching up, pushing their way past the pedestrians. He didn't know what they wanted, but he knew that he hadn't done anything to them. They didn't look friendly.

Connor ran across the road and onto the other pavement. He ran along, pushing past people without an apology. He knocked two old ladies off their feet but didn't stop. He sprinted past shops and people before turning left into an alleyway. It was dark, it stank, and was covered in litter and mud. The alley was a shortcut. He ran to the end and turned right. As he did, his face and heart fell. At the end of the alley was a man in a black cloak. He stood in the centre of the alley, a wand in his right hand.

Connor turned to go backwards, but saw that the other pursuer was coming down the alley behind him. He glanced quickly from one to the other. He was trapped, but he couldn't let them take him. He would be killed, one way or another! He pulled out his wand, but never even got near a spell.

“Expelliarmus!” cried one of the pursuers. Connor’s wand flew out of his hands, and he was launched backwards into a pile of bin-bags. He lay amongst the rubbish, covered in carrot peel, banana skins, yogurt and all manner of filth. The two black-cloaked pursuers came closer, standing over him. Neither looked friendly, happy or tired, which was surprising considering the run they had just done. One had long black hair, the other short, but of the same colour. The shorter of the two had glasses and sparkling blue eyes.

“Do you know who we are?” asked the shorter of the men.

“Not who, what,” spat Connor. “Look, guys, I don’t know what you want but I didn’t do it. I was just having a drink, which I paid for. I am not even over the limit. I can drive, see,” he reached for his wallet to get out his Muggle licence.

“I don’t care about your drinking,” said shorty. “I care about my son.”

“What? Son? Why would i...what son?” stammered Connor. He couldn’t understand what they wanted.

“My name is Potter,” said the man. “I’m an Auror. Listen to me. My son is out there. The Death Eaters have him. I am going to find him, one way or another. We know all about you, Connor; we know where you live, what cereal you have for breakfast, where you buy your clothes. We know about your addiction, and about the crowd you hang out with. Where is Walden McNair?”

“I don’t...” began Connor, but never finished it as Potter’s fist slammed into his gut.

“Let’s try again,” said Potter.

“I’d tell him if I were you,” said his partner. “That man does not look stable.”

“Do you know anything about Harry Potter,” asked Potter, shaking Connor violently. “Answer me.”

“Just what I read in the papers,” said Connor. He got another punch in the stomach for telling the truth. “Get him off me!” he pleaded to Potter’s partner.

“I would,” said the man. “But his son just so happens to be my godson, and I want to find him too, so if I were you I’d answer.”

“Sirius,” said Potter “What is the policy on using the Cruciatius Curse on suspects we have in custody, but haven’t arrested?”

“No!” said Connor quickly. He had felt the curse before and had no desire to do so again. He didn’t know if they were bluffing or not, but ‘Sirius’ had been right. Potter was not stable. “Ok. I’ll talk,” he said. “I don’t know anything about a kidnapping, but McNair is staying in

London at a place called Grimmauld Place. I met him a few times down the pub. I think it's number twelve but I could be wrong. It's the old..."

"Black place," said Sirius, cutting him off. "After my mother died, it went to Bellatrix. They must be there." Potter released Connor and the Auror stood back up."

"Call Dawlish," said James. "I'll do Dumbledore. Get us a hit squad or two. I want Scholes on the team as well. Good man." Sirius nodded and pulled a black box out of his pocket. Potter did the same.

"What about him?" asked Sirius, gesturing at Connor. Potter glanced briefly down before pulling out a wand. "*Stupefy!*" Everything went black.

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*Splash!*

Harry awoke with a start as ice-cold water was thrown over him. He shook himself and tried to sit up. Pain ripped through his right arm as he tried to move it. His wrist was hanging at nearly ninety degrees from where it should. Blood had clotted around an area where a piece of bone had broken the surface. His right eye ached, and was covered in clotted blood. He could see out of it, as the cut was on his eyebrow and had flowed away from the eye itself. He had bruises all over his torso and face. He was finding it hard to breathe and his ribs ached with every movement; he assumed some were broken. His unconsciousness had been blissful, a temporary break from the agony that was now returning to him. His muscles ached; he was covered in bruises and back on the cold wet floor of the cellar.

"Wakey wakey," said a voice. "You don't get away from us that easily!"

Harry looked upwards to see a man standing over him. He was about twenty, maybe a few years older, with curly blond hair and an earring. Harry recognised him as the Auror who had been there at his arrest. The Auror was a Death Eater. That explained a lot. That was how he had known all about Harry's behaviour. It was because of his betrayal that Harry had suffered. Hatred for this man rose in Harry like a storm. The man smirked down at him. He was smoking a cigar, which at present was hanging out of the left side of his mouth. Harry coughed as the man blew a cloud of smoke over him.

"Because of my efforts in planning Thursday's activities," said the Auror "The Master has given me the honour of your company for an hour. Sixty whole minutes of *quality time*." He wore a triumphant smirk. "There are however, three rules, so pay attention, Harry," he said, in mock seriousness. "Firstly, no dying, if you die, well, it would be inconvenient and I would probably end up suffering for it, so do me a favour and keep breathing. Rule two: no going mental. You have to keep thinking straight, okay? Lastly, you must be able to talk. If I get too close to breaking your jaw, let me know and I'll back up a little. Okay? Everything else is all good. Okay? Good, let's get started." The lights came on and Harry recoiled.

He found himself being levitated off the ground. He grunted in pain as he landed on a metal table. It was cold and he shivered involuntarily. He was on his back, staring up at a bright strip light on the ceiling. He blinked as the light hurt his eyes. The Auror's head came into view as he leaned over him.

"It's serious, Nurse" said the Auror. "We need to operate! Scalpel" Harry's eyes widened as the Auror picked up his own sword, withdrawing it from the scabbard. "Close, but no cigar," he said. He replaced it and picked up another sword entirely. Harry's eyes widened even more as he recognised the jewel-encrusted sword. He looked down at Harry and nodded. "Oh, yes," he said casually. Harry watched him twirl the sword about his wrist. Then he stopped. "Sorry," he said. "I shouldn't smoke in the operating room." He took the cigar out of his mouth with his left hand and, before Harry could say anything, brought it down onto his exposed stomach. Harry screamed as the burning end was pressed deeply into his flesh. The man twisted the cigar, stubbing it out on Harry's flesh. The smell of burning flesh and tobacco reached his nostrils. After a few seconds the man pocketed the remains of the cigar. Harry couldn't move. He winced in pain as the Auror slowly dragged the blade over his skin creating two shallow, yet painful cuts. He could feel the metal cut slowly into the soft flesh. The Auror made two, one diagonally across his stomach and one across his chest. Harry bit down again, refusing to give the Death Eater the pleasure of hearing him scream.

The Auror replaced the sword on the table. Harry could see that all his possessions were on the table for the Auror to use; two wands, two swords, and a chest plate of armour. Harry dreaded to think what the Auror would do to him. There was also a syringe and a bottle of a clear liquid. It was these that the man now picked up.

"I thought I would give the Muggle methods a try," the Auror informed him. "Hey, if you don't try, you'll never know. Variety is the spice of life and such-like and so-forth. This method was used across the Far-East mainly; it seemed to work for them. Let's see if it will work for me. *Serpentsortia!*"

Harry watched as a snake came flying out of the man's wand. It landed on the table next to Harry, looking irate. It leered up, staring at Harry with cold yellow eyes. The King Cobra hissed at him before lunging. Harry screamed as the teeth sank into his neck, centimetres from his jugular. Harry felt his neck turn both hot and cold under the bite. His flesh burned, a hot feeling enveloped his neck, but below it, he felt the icy venom flow into his bloodstream. The snake recoiled, leering again. The Auror watched calmly before hooking the sword around the snake and launching it across the room.

"The King Cobra is amongst the deadliest snakes on the planet," the Auror informed him. His head was spinning and he felt sick. His vision was blurring again and he felt faint. Pain filled his brain, and he felt himself break into a cold sweat. He was finding it even harder to breathe. "Getting bitten causes a lot of pain, as you are probably discovering. Aside from the bite itself, the venom spreads through your entire body. Death should be in two hours or so, but obviously I am not going to let it go that far. The Master needs you alive. So..." the man picked up the syringe and filled it from the bottle. He plunged it into Harry's arm, causing him to wince. His

arm went numb and he could feel the cold liquid entering his bloodstream. The needle withdrew and Harry opened his eyes.

“Let’s think about that one for a few minutes,” said the Auror. “Then we’ll try again. You see...” he was cut off by a buzzing noise. It wasn’t loud, but it was certainly noticeable. Harry lay on the table panting, recovering from the venom of the cobra. He watched as the man reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black box. The Auror unclipped the black box and pressed the black button before holding it up to his mouth.

“Yes,” he said impatiently.

“Scholes,” said a familiar voice. “It’s Black.” Harry felt a rush of relief; he could contact them! He opened his mouth to scream, but before he could, the Auror shoved a handkerchief into his mouth and walked to the corner of the room. Harry couldn’t speak. He tried again and again but no sound came out. Sirius’ voice continued.

“James and I found a tout. We reckon they may have taken Potter to Grimmauld Place, the old Black house. Bellatrix owns it now. You’re shadowing her, aren’t you?”

“I was,” lied the Auror, “I lost her in Knockturn Alley.” Harry wanted to shout out, to tell Sirius it was a lie. He would come for him; he always had, just like last...he had been about to say ‘year’, but that only brought more pain back to the surface. He could feel tears beginning to form in his eyes. The Auror continued, “I followed her to Borgin’s place. They made a swap and then she left. I lost her in the crowd.”

“Damn,” came Sirius’ voice. There was a pause.

*The lightsss, hissed a voice. Turn off the lightsss. It blindssss me.*

Harry couldn’t see the snake but he could hear it speaking. He had to free his mouth. He had to talk to the snake. It could be his only way out. Concentrating hard, he managed to magically repel the hanky from his mouth. After taking a few deep breaths, he softly hissed down at the cobra.

*Hello?* he hissed.

*I can undersssstand you,* hissed a voice from below the table. *Why issss thissss?*

*I can talk to all snakes,* hissed Harry. *Listen to me, please. The other human, he is a bad man. He is trying to torture me.*

“Okay, come to Grimmauld Place, ASAP. We’re going in,” came Sirius’s voice from the corner of the room. The Auror paused for some time before replying.

*What issss torture?* asked the Snake.

*He hurts me, for fun.*

*What issss fun?*

Harry sighed with impatience

“Thirty minutes,” said the Auror. He was buying them time to evacuate.

“Can’t you make it sooner?” responded Sirius.

*He likes to hurt people.*

*He issss bad man,* observed the Snake.

*Yes, he is,* hissed Harry. *Please, help me to get away.*

*I shall, snake speaker,* came the reply.

“No promises,” said the Death Eater before hanging up. He tucked the black box back into his pocket and then came back to the table. “Sorry, son,” he said. “Looks like we will have to cut his meeting short. I... ARGH!” The man screamed in pain as the cobra attacked from under the table. The snake sank his fangs into one of the Auror’s leg, and then the other. Harry raised a leg, kicking out at the man’s face. He rolled off the table, landing hard on the floor and coming face to face with the cobra.

*Thanks,* he hissed to the snake. *I’ll set you free before I leave.*

*Thankssss.*

He managed to stand up, using the table for support.

“As Voldemort said,” said Harry coldly to the Auror. He wrenched Scholes’ wand out of his hands. “This room is soundproof. Scream all you want.” He stumbled to the table and picked up his armour, hanging it loosely over his shoulders. He picked up his watch, but his wrist was in no fit state to wear one. He checked it anyway. It was one-thirty in the afternoon. What shocked him was that two whole days had passed. He must have been unconscious for ages, both times. He pocketed both his wands and snapped Mr. Scholes’ wand. Both his Katana and Gryffindor’s sword were lying on the table. He had found it! He could probably get home! Hope filled his heart. Then he saw the Auror lying dying on the floor, and hatred filled his heart again. “As you yourself said,” he continued, “The King Cobra is amongst the deadliest snakes on the planet and you have been bitten twice. Tell me how many there are upstairs and I will give you the anti-venom.”

The Auror thought for a second before answering. He was coughing and spluttering. His breathing was fast and erratic. He was dying. “Eight to ten; two by the door, two in the meeting room, the Dark Lord and three to five others. The anti-venom,” he pleaded. Harry normally

didn't like to cause pain, or witness suffering, but this man had tortured him. He hadn't just done his job; he had enjoyed it. He deserved worse than death. In the old days, Harry would have had pity. Not any more.

Harry picked up the bottle of anti-venom in his good hand, and then calmly, remorselessly, dropped it. It smashed on the floor, spilling its contents amongst the puddle.

“NO” spluttered the man. “No, you bastard”

“May God have mercy on your soul” said Harry icily, before putting a body bind on the man and silencing him. He wanted Scholes to remain conscious until he died; to feel the same pain he had made Harry feel.

Harry picked up the snake gently and opened the only window in the room. It was up against the ceiling and when he looked out, he was at lawn level. The snake slithered out of his hands and off across the lawn, hissing its thanks as it went. He then crossed to the Auror, his limbs protesting at every step. He pulled out the black box. It was five centimetres square and two deep. There was a shallow black button on one side and a small blue light. Harry pressed the button. Nothing happened.

“Sirius Black,” he said. There was a pause before a voice answered.

“Yes, talk to me,” said Sirius. Harry felt relief wash over him as he heard the familiar voice. Tears formed in his eyes as the voice spoke. He had found Sirius again.

“Sirius,” was all Harry could say, his voice breaking on the single word.

“Harry?” came the reply.

“Harry?” A voice in the background repeated the name. “Give me that! Harry?” He recognised the voice to be his father.

“Yes, it's me,” he said, wheezing with every word.

“Are you okay?”

“Peachy,” said Harry sarcastically, before realising his father couldn't see him. “I'm at the Riddle House.”

“Where? Speak up.”

“It won't work. The place is protected by the Fidelius Charm,” said Harry. “Don't worry about me, I can escape. There are only eight of them. Look, you were right. There are Death Eaters at Grimmauld Place. Scholes is one of them. He betrayed you. He's a Death Eater.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Positive,” said Harry. “I would let you speak to him, but he’s in no fit state for talking right now. He was buying time by saying half an hour. But he never got word to Voldemort, so they shouldn’t be evacuating. They are still there. Hit that house with everything you have. I’m going to try and get home.”

“Hurry, Harry,” said James. “Your mother and sister are going spare.”

“I will,” said Harry. “Good luck.”

“You too.” The line went dead.

Harry turned off the lights and stood letting his eyes adjust for a few seconds. He then took out both wands in one hand and pointed them through his fingers like claws. He kicked the door twice, and then retreated into the corner. The door opened and two men came in. Harry fired two Stunners simultaneously. Both men keeled over in a shower of red sparks. Tucking one wand away and both swords under his right arm, Harry made his way out of the room, up the stairs and off to find a fireplace.

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“YOU CAN’T BE SERIOUS!” shouted Lily. Albus noted that it was very out of character for her to raise her voice to the Headmaster, of all people; but considering the stress she was under, she could easily be forgiven. It had been nearly fifty hours since Shackbolt had stormed the ship. Unfortunately, Lily had been in the room when Kingsley had called Albus on the fireplace. If he was being honest, he didn’t want Lily anywhere near an Order meeting in her current state of mind. It had been a mistake to let Harry go. He knew it now, and in his heart had known at the time. He had just wanted the war to be over so badly that he had simply let his head run the show without listening to reason. He had witnessed Harry’s practiced Occlumency attempts, which could be described as flimsy at best.

He never really had much chance, and Albus had let him go. He was another person who had given their life in what appeared to be in vain. Another wasted life. The price of this conflict was becoming too high, and Albus secretly was beginning to lose faith. For years he had fought this war, and for years before Tom, he had fought the Dark Lord Grindelwald. The memories of the destruction at Versailles came back to him. A chill went down the Headmaster’s spine. It had so nearly gone the other way. Albus pushed the image of the assassin out of his mind. He glanced down at the map before him, knowing that it was as good as useless. The ship had been moving so they could not Apparate off. However, they could have used Portkeys or even brooms. The second was unlikely, as they would have had to carry Harry and judging by the message in his blood, he was in no fit state to fly. Albus had to admit, he did not have a clue where Harry now was. If they ever found him, Albus promised himself he would talk to the boy. To find out what he really wanted, rather than what Albus hoped he wanted.

Every effort was being made to find Voldemort, but he couldn’t tell the Ministry whom they had kidnapped, so they offered little help while he refused to tell them. James, Sirius, Kingsley, Dawlish and Nymphadora were devoting Auror resources to the search, but they had to

be careful. If word reached Crouch that Albus had gone directly to the Aurors, he would snap. The man's temper would be his downfall. The country could not deal with another scandal. The government would collapse and Tom would win.

He looked sadly up into the eyes of the irate mother that stood before him. He had failed to stop her son and he was almost certainly dead by now. She would hold him responsible until the day she died. Harry hadn't even been their son, but they had embraced him as if he were. For a day, the Potter family was whole again. The orphan was reunited with parents. Did it matter at the end of the day that they came from different worlds? They had missed each other, loved each other and had found comfort in each other's arms. Harry's world was not so different. Had it not been him, had it been someone else, someone not bound by such a damning Prophecy, Albus was sure he would have been delighted to stay. As it was, Harry had believed in his duty and tried to do it. Albus admired him for it. At his age, Albus would not have done the same, but Harry seemed to accept his roll, even if he did resent it.

"Lily," said Albus, taking off his spectacles to polish them. He sighed and replaced them. "I can only imagine how you must be feeling."

"You don't know shit!" stormed Lily. Age had not mellowed the redhead's temper. Albus remembered seeing it directed at her husband, years before they were married. How they had fallen in love was one of the great mysteries of the universe. Having said that, they were perfect for each other, it just took them five years of near war to figure that out. "You don't have children. You have never lost a child...twice!"

Potions classes had had to be cancelled once Kingsley had called. Lily had been pacing with anxiety ever since. She was worried sick and wasn't hiding it. She was going spare and was in no fit state to teach. That had been nearly three days ago. Now, fifty hours later, she was inconsolable.

"I'm sorry, Lily, but the Aurors can't go on like this. I know how hard this must be, but the Aurors have to call off the search."

"NO!"

"They have to," said Albus gravely. "The Order will continue to..."

"The Order couldn't find snow in the middle of winter," snapped Lily, pacing the office, her face red with fury, her eyes red from tears. She was a mess. Albus hated to see her like this.

"Lily, I know this hurts," said Albus. "But it has been nearly fifty hours. We have to face the possibility that perhaps Harry is..." he never finished the sentence as the fireplace burst into flames and a boy fell out, collapsing on the floor.

"Harry!" screamed Lily, running over to his fallen body, which was lying on his side. It was Harry, though he was hardly recognisable. He was a bloody mess. His top had been removed; his armour was dangling from his shoulders over bare skin. He must have picked it up

his escape. He also held both his wands and two swords, one that Albus had only even seen a picture of, in a very, very, old book. Albus felt sick, looking down at the boy. No one should have to endure this kind of pain.

His right wrist was clearly broken, hanging at an unnatural angle. A piece of bone was sticking out through the skin, blood trickling from the penetration. He had bruises all over his face, arms and torso. Several large gashes and cuts were bleeding across his chest and back. It looked as if someone had cut him with his own sword. There was a large area of crisp flesh where he had been burned. His face was lacerated and bleeding all over, including a broken nose. He had large lumps where something blunt had hit him. His mouth was red with blood, that was flowing up from inside. He must have internal bleeding. Most disturbingly of all were two large white swellings on his right shoulder and neck. They were at least five centimetres around and bulged out, full of puss. An ugly purple mark was on the top of each lump. His neck was heavily swollen. Albus recognised them as bite-marks, presumably from a snake of some kind, knowing Tom. This boy had endured more pain in the last fifty hours than the rest of the Order put together in their entire lives.

“I never was much good at Floo,” said Harry weakly, trying to smile, before he passed out on the floor of the office.

~~~~~ Chapter VIII ~~~~~  
**Leopards Don't Change Their Spots**

*“Holy man open up your eyes  
To the ways of the world you've been so blind  
As the walls of religion come crashing down  
How's the ignorance taste second time around*

*Welcome to the horror of the revelation  
Tell me what you think of your saviour now  
I reject all the biblical views of the truth  
Dismiss it as the folklore of the times  
I won't be force-fed Prophecies  
From a book of untruths for the weakest mind”*

~ Slayer (New Faith)

*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...*

The words repeated over and over again in the Dark Lord's mind. A Prophecy had been made predicting his downfall. How could this be? Voldemort had many spies in the Department of Mysteries, yet none of them knew of any Prophecy pertaining to his defeat. Was this a fake, one of the old man's tricks, perhaps? No, it did not feel right. This was real. Deep inside, Voldemort knew that this was a real Prophecy. Fear was a feeling he had not experienced in decades, and yet it was the only word he could think of to describe the sickening feeling he now felt. It had been a Prophecy that had thrust him to power, and it seemed too poetic that one would be made to end it all.

Voldemort stood by the window, staring out into the grounds of the old mansion. The wind was blowing through the trees, causing them to sway and raining pine needles down onto the lawn. An old Muggle with a bent back and bent nose was attempting to rake up the leaves, but the wind prevented him from making any progress. Frank Bryce had been the gardener since before Voldemort had been born. He was kept on to keep the place in shape enough to keep the Muggles happy and away, and justify it not being demolished. There were Muggle repelling charms on all the doors and windows to keep him from actually entering. He had been blamed by the townsfolk for the murders Voldemort himself had committed here all those years ago. His father had gone first; Voldemort remembered every detail of his face as the life was sucked out of him in a green flash. His wife had followed and then their son, Voldemort's half brother.

Voldemort suppressed a smirk at the Muggle's misfortune. He stared out of the window, watching the old man for a few seconds before he saw a large snake slither across the lawn and into the hedge, unseen by the gardener. His keen eyes recognised the snake as being a cobra as it slithered quickly across the lawn. Voldemort hardly gave it a second thought. Two things kept running through his mind. Aside from the Prophecy, there was one other thing that infuriated Voldemort. Harry's Dark Mark was gone. He had noticed it as soon as he had entered the cellar where Harry had lain unconscious all night. He had given Harry the mark over a year ago and he knew for a fact that it was impossible to remove. It was a mark of ownership, branded onto a man's soul. There was no spell in existence that could remove it. Yet, Harry no longer had it.

Instead he had a strange curse scar on his forehead. Voldemort had made sure not to mention the fact the mark had been removed while other Death Eaters were present. He knew that some of the newest recruits had yet to adapt to their new way of life, and may still be looking for a way out. If news got out that it could be removed then he may suffer huge defections. But it was impossible; *it cannot be removed!* So how had Harry done it? Harry's demeanour had changed, his whole attitude was different, the Mark was gone, but it was still Harry. It wasn't an impostor; of that he was certain. So how had Harry removed it and why had he defected?

But back to the Prophecy. Voldemort had not actually been looking for the Prophecy. He had not even known of its existence before he had stumbled across it. He had been searching for the meeting with Dumbledore. The mind, or at least the unorganised mind, works in a very predictable way, and a rather inefficient way at that. When there is a thought one wants to hide and protect, then that thought is towards the front of the mind. When one tries to hide that thought, one invariably thinks of said thought, pushing it right to the front of the mind. That was part of the skill of Occlumency; to be able to hide thoughts and memories, rather than display them for any Legilimens to find. Harry was obviously no Occlumens. He seemed to have received poor instruction in fighting off a forced entry. He had the potential to be able to force an intruder out of his mind with better tutelage and more practice. But to be able to allow his mind to be viewed, but still conceal certain memories without appearing to do so was something that Harry could not do. Voldemort had forced his way into Harry's mind, searching out memories regarding his meeting with Dumbledore. The first one he came to was the one Harry deemed most important, and also the one he was most trying to hide, and now Voldemort knew why.

*Born as the seventh month dies;* Harry was born on the last day of July. *To those who had thrice defied him;* James and Lily Potter had escaped a total of eleven times, but at the time when Harry was born, Voldemort counted only three. *The Dark Lord shall mark him his equal;* was it referring to the ceremony at the Devil's Cauldron? Voldemort would not define that as marking him his equal, certainly not in terms of strength and power. But then again, Voldemort had granted him power, and had given him the Dark Mark. Was that what the Prophecy meant? The next part was more hopeful. *And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.* Voldemort knew that he must dispose of Harry Potter quickly. But then again, it didn't say which of them would win. Voldemort didn't like to enter duels, the outcome of which was uncertain. Normally he would not hesitate, but the vagueness of the Prophecy was cause for concern. What if... No, it was not worth any risk. The boy had to die, *immediately.* Voldemort wouldn't take the chance. There would be no summoning, no ceremony, no witnesses, just plain death for the traitor who was destined to kill him.

Voldemort turned from the window and walked silently across the room. The door magically burst open on his arrival. He marched through, making no sound as he went. The sentries on either side of the door bowed as he passed, but he spared them no sign of recognition. He swept down the corridor until he came to the stairs. The Dark Lord stepped downwards into the cellar. At the bottom of the stairs was a small, dark room with a thick steel door on the far side, behind which Harry Potter should be feeling new levels of pain. However something was very wrong.

Voldemort froze at the bottom of the stairs. The door was slightly open and there were no sentries. He had ordered that there be two at all times. Drawing his wand, Voldemort strode forward towards the door. With a single curse, he blasted the door off its hinges, sending it flying into the room in a cloud of dust and plaster. He stepped into the cellar, his rage building with every step. What he saw caused his anger to reach new heights. It was not the fallen Death Eaters who lay just inside the door, he couldn't care less if they died. What infuriated him was the absence of the boy. Harry Potter had not only betrayed him, but once captured, he had escaped. He had made Voldemort look a fool in front of his disciples.

Voldemort strode over to Scholes, his anger causing green sparks to fizzle around the end of his wand. The Auror lay in an inch of water next to the steel table. His eyes were wide and his breathing short and sharp. He was deathly pale and was spasming with every breath. His hands were clutched to his thighs, under which Voldemort could see the familiar sight of a snake bite.

“What happened?” he hissed at the Death Eater. Scholes' eyes moved ever so slightly to look at him. He took two or three short tight gasps, his whole body bucking slightly with every breath. He was dying, but the Dark Lord felt nothing, no pity, no remorse; just pure anger - he had failed. “Where is Potter?” continued Voldemort. “Answer me!” Scholes was no longer able to talk. If he could not talk, Voldemort no longer had a use for him.

“*Crucio!*” screamed Voldemort, pointing his wand at the fallen Death Eater. His anger was boiling beneath his skin. His eyes glowed with rage. He vented his frustration with the most powerful Cruciatus curse he had cast since Harry himself. He poured every ounce of anger, hatred and frustration into the curse. His blood seemed to heat up, and a rush enveloped his heart. The sheer power he had over the man seemed to calm Voldemort. He had the power over life and death for Scholes. The rush of power was what he craved. It was like an addictive drug. To kill gave him such a high: the anticipation leading up to it, the fear in the eyes of the victim, the power flowing through his veins as the curse was cast, the rush of having the God-like power over life and death, and the respect that followed. The kill was all that mattered.

As Voldemort's anger pulsed through every nerve ending in Scholes' body, the broken body thrashed uncontrollably. It was nearly three minutes before Voldemort lifted the curse.

“You have failed me for the last time, Scholes,” said Voldemort icily. “AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Scholes was gone in flash of green light. The sound of rushing death was like a symphony to Voldemort's ears. As the last breath left Scholes' body and the light faded from the curse, Voldemort stood in silence, immersing himself fully in the rush of the kill, the feeling of total power and content. It faded again after a few second, leaving a lust, an overwhelming desire for more. Two more Death Eaters had been on guard and let the boy escape. Two more would curb his blood lust before the sun set that evening. And as for Harry, he would die, as soon as Voldemort discovered where the boy was hiding.

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At first, Harry thought he was still dreaming. As the sea of red came into focus, he didn't dare believe it was true. His dreams had been full of snakes, swords and wands. Nightmares were a natural reaction to what he had suffered. He had read somewhere that Post Traumatic Stress, to give it its medical name, affects eighty-five percent of hostages. But then again, Stockholm syndrome affects large numbers as well, and there was no way that Harry would ever fall in love with his captors. He could, and would, rise above these dreams.

As the blurry mass of red came into focus, one thought filled his mind. *I'm home!* Or at least, home in this world. It had been a while since he had woken up, expecting to be back in his own world, but this place was good enough. The Room of Requirement was a good a home as he was hoping for. At least here, he was safe from snakes and Death Eaters.

Memories of his time with Voldemort came to him in a series of vivid images racing through his conscious mind, reminding him of what he would rather forget. A shiver ran down his spine as he remembered the feeling as Gryffindor's sword was slowly dragged across his exposed skin, slicing into his defenceless flesh. But Scholes had got what he had deserved. Harry realised that he felt absolutely no remorse for the man. Harry had felt bad about the Trolley Witch on the Hogwarts Express. She had been innocent and he had order her killed. At the time, it had seemed the right thing to do. Everything had worked out and it seemed he had made the right choice. He still believed that now, but it did not change the fact that he still felt incredibly guilty. Her terrified face still haunted his dreams. Mr. Scholes on the other hand was a different kettle of fish. He had betrayed his friends, family and the entire Wizarding population by siding with Riddle. Not only that, he had also tortured Harry. Images came to him of his suffering at the hands of the treacherous Auror. Harry had had the chance to save him, but he had chosen not to. He had left him to die what was certain to be a painful death. Harry didn't regret it, nor pity the man. Scholes had enjoyed torturing Harry too much. He was not a soldier doing his job in a war. He was a sadist who enjoyed hurting people and he had died for it. Harry had felt no compassion or pity for the man. He was surprised at the ease with which he had left the man to die. He could feel a mass of anger in his stomach, a darkness that seemed to be bubbling deep inside, waiting to break free. Harry's only concern was that his parents and Rose would judge him by that one choice. He had essentially murdered the man and did not regret it. Did it make him a bad person? Was he any better than Voldemort?

But it didn't matter, not now at least. He was home, safe and unless Madam Pomfrey had lost her touch, was on the road to recovery. Harry awkwardly glanced around the room, taking in his surroundings. This was not as easy as it sounds as his neck was heavily bandaged. The room was once again laid out like the dormitories of Gryffindor Tower, with a few more veils in the room. The curtains around his bed were replaced with translucent scarlet veils, which fluttered slightly in the breeze. Through the window, Harry could see the moon, shining outside and bathing the room in the gently glow of silver.

He tried to sit up, but found it hard to move. His entire body ached, and parts of him were as good as useless. He managed to prop himself up against the headboard of the bed. From there, he was able to survey his injuries. His head was spinning, and throbbing, but he was sure he wouldn't suffer any long-term effects of continued exposure to the Cruciatus Curse. His mental health was fine, he was certain, or at least, it was as it had been before. His mind, may have been

fine, but his body was another matter. Looking down, he was dressed only in a pair of pyjama trousers. Almost all the rest of his body was covered in bandages. His ribs were bandaged and taped. His right wrist was heavily bandaged and strapped to a thick splint. He shivered as he remembered Malfoy's curse. The burn and the sword incisions were concealed beneath the bandages on his ribs. His nose felt as though his sinuses were blocked and he could feel patches of plaster over his eye and cheek. His neck was also wrapped tightly with bandages, making it uncomfortable to breath and hard to turn his head. He throat was very dry, he realised. He glanced around as best he could looking for a drink. He eyes, instead of coming to rest on a glass of water, stopped on a figure he hadn't noticed before. He could only see cascade of red hair and scarlet robes, leaning on his bed. Lily Potter must have fallen asleep as she sat with him. She was dressed in red and, with her red hair covering her face, was almost camouflaged against the red of the bed.

Harry didn't really want to disturb her, but couldn't move on his own. He gently placed his left hand over hers and lightly squeezed. Her head slowly and groggily rose. He blinked a few times, trying to shake the grogginess from her eyes, before she realised exactly what she was seeing. A warm smile spread slowly over her face. Harry tried to smile back, but smiling stretched the healing wounds on his face, causing him a great deal of discomfort. Lily moved her other hand, across to wipe the hair away from Harry's forehead. He recoiled slightly as her fingers brushed over his scar.

"Please, don't," he said softly, his throat aching with every move. She withdrew her hand, placing it atop of his. Her eyes sparkled with tears once more. Harry realised that he had hardly seen her happy. She seemed to be on the edge of tears every time he saw her. It was his fault. Among the many other disastrous effects of his return to Voldemort, he had also put her through the ordeal of loosing a son, again. She didn't deserve it, none of the Potters did.

"How do you feel," she whispered, gently rubbing the back of his hand with her thumb. Harry didn't want to alarm her, but he felt awful. Not only was his body in a near critical state, but also his mind was plagued with guilt and regret. His infiltration had been a disaster on many levels.

"How do I look?" he replied, trying to keep the pain from his voice. He didn't want to discuss how he felt, and hiding his pain was what he had always done. Harry wasn't sure if she could see the pain he was trying to hide, but she sighed and still managed to smile, albeit faintly. He realised how awful he must look. He was nearly a mummy with all the bandaged that he was wearing.

"You'll recover," said Lily. "Madam Pomfrey says you need..."

"Rest?" offered Harry. Judging by the state of him, she would probably prescribe six years of rest. Normally he would try to escape at his earliest opportunity, but in this case, a few days in hospital was just what he needed. That and the fact that he couldn't move, would keep him there.

“Among other things,” said Lily. “Several potions and ointments wouldn’t come amiss either. Poppy left them here for you.” She gestured to a row of five bottles on top of the table.

“That bad, huh?” sighed Harry. “Is a drink out of the question?”

“Of course not,” said Lily kindly, passing him a beaker of water. He took a few sips and then handed it back to her. She placed it back on the cabinet from which she had taken it, and turned back to face Harry.

“What time is it?” asked Harry. His watch had been removed and he knew better than to trust the sun or the clocks in this particular room.

“It’s twenty to ten in the morning,” said Lily, checking her wristwatch. That meant the moonlight outside was meant to make it easier for him to sleep. It was thoughtful, but it meant he could hardly see. It also raised another point; he had no idea how long he had been asleep for.

“I’m almost afraid to ask, but what day is it?” he asked, expecting the worst. Lily bowed her head and sighed deeply. That was an ominous sign. If she was reluctant to tell him, he must have been out for a long time. How long had it been? A day, two, three? “What is the date?” he repeated. He didn’t want to hear it, but he had to.

“It is Saturday, thirteenth of September,” she said softly. “You’ve been asleep for seven days.”

Seven days? There had to be a mistake. Seven days would mean that he arrived back on the sixth. He left on the third. *I was captive for over forty-eight hours!* To him, it was still one big blur of pain. He had no idea how long he had suffered, or how long he had remained unconscious in the Dark Lord’s home. *Seven days?* That was a personal record. He was usually awake within a day of passing out. But then again he had never suffered as he had in the last week. A bite from an acromantula and a stabbing in one arm seemed trivial compared to the extent of his injuries this time.

Harry was brought out of his thoughts by the arrival of another figure in the Room of Requirement. Albus Dumbledore had arrived. He wore the usual purple robes as well as an additional cloak and red hat. Concern was etched into his aging features, but he broke into a smile upon seeing Harry awake.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter,” he said jovially as he approached the bed. Harry couldn’t move even if he wanted to. He was sitting up, leaning against the headboard of the bed. The veils surrounding the bed magically parted, letting the breeze in. Harry briefly shivered as the cool air hit him. “How are you feeling?” inquired the Headmaster.

“I’ve been better,” said Harry flatly. “I take it Snape told you what happened?” He didn’t really want to have to relive the events in Little Hangleton, nor his stupidity on board the Mary Sue. Speaking of which, “Where is Rhiannon?” he asked. His mother gave him a confused look while Dumbledore smiled calmly back.

“Miss Rumanov is safe and sound,” replied Dumbledore. “She is a little shaken about the loss of her father. Her future has yet to be decided. It is probably that she will be handed over to Russian Social Services. She does, however, send her thanks and asks how you are.” Harry nodded. He was glad the girl had managed to get away and succeeded in contacting Kingsley. He did not need her death on his conscience and she did not deserve any more suffering.

“If it wasn’t for her, I’d be dead,” said Harry, gravely. “If I hadn’t found her, I would have walked straight to Voldemort and no one would have come looking for me. It is I who should be thanking her. I’m just glad she’s okay. She’s an orphan now, like me. I wish I could do more for her. I’m surprised you didn’t wipe her memory.”

“Why would we do that?” asked Lily.

“I used Magic in front of her,” said Harry. “She knows how to contact our ministry, she can recognise myself and Kingsley.”

“There was no need to Obliviate her,” said Dumbledore, the familiar twinkle back in his eye. “You will not be the last person to perform magic in front of her. In fact, from next September, it should be a regular occurrence.”

“You mean...?” began Harry, trying to smile.

“Miss Rumanov will begin her Magical education at the Durmstrang Institute next year.”

“Good for her,” said Harry, more to himself than anyone else.

“As for your first question,” continued Dumbledore. “Yes, Severus has informed us of the meeting, what little he witnessed. He also returned that evening, when you were to be tried and executed before the Death Eaters, only to find that you had escaped. There are large gaps in his tale, and I believe you are the only one who can fill them in.”

“I’d rather forget all about it,” muttered Harry.

“Unsurprising,” said Dumbledore. “However, needs must.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Harry bitterly. He had been waiting for the inevitable, but it just didn’t seem to be coming. He was expecting Dumbledore to turn around and accuse him of messing up an Order operation and getting Aurors killed in the process, all of which he was guilty of. Harry wished he could turn back the clock and undo what he had done.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room. This was what Dumbledore was infuriatingly good at: making him feel even more guilty about what he had done, without Dumbledore even having to say a word. Harry couldn’t take it any longer; if Dumbledore wasn’t going to bring it up, he might as well take the plunge himself. Half of him wanted to just forget it, not to talk and hope it wasn’t brought up. The voice of reason told him to get it out the way, because it would be more difficult later. For once, the voice of reason won.

“I know what you are thinking,” said Harry slowly, staring at his feet, or rather the lumps beneath the bed sheets that were his feet. “You’re thinking that I should never have run off like that, that my rash decision cost the lives of Aurors and nearly compromised Snape as a spy, that I nearly destroyed the Order with one fit of stupidity.”

“Is that what you think?” asked Dumbledore calmly.

God Damn it! Harry hated it when he did this. He wanted Harry to confess the full extent of his mistake in front of other people. Harry found himself hating the Headmaster’s utter calm, his twinkling eyes and composed stare. He made Harry feel as if he was hiding something, or not being truthful. He wanted Harry to make his own conclusions. Harry had never objected to it until last year, when his complete calm had stopped Harry’s utter rage. Maybe he was jealous of Dumbledore’s ability to remain calm. He didn’t know or care; all he knew was that at this moment, it was infuriating. Did he want Harry to confess in front of him and his mother? Was humiliation his goal? It didn’t seem like the Headmaster he knew, but then again, this wasn’t the Headmaster he knew.

“Well I did, didn’t I?” he asked. “You all warned me not to go, but I wouldn’t listen. I marched blindly into a nest of vipers. What hope did I have to lie to Voldemort? What made me think I could be a spy? I had no experience or anything. It was a stupid move, you all saw it, but I didn’t. I then fell right into their hands. I sent the Aurors to Paddington, and I can assume there were casualties. I got myself caught, nearly lost Snape as a spy, and only just managed to escape. What could possibly be good about that?”

“Swings and roundabouts,” said Dumbledore calmly. “Every cloud has a silver lining.”

“Like what?” said Harry, a little more aggressively than he meant to.

“The Dark Lord believes you had help escaping,” said Dumbledore, leaning forward. “Severus was with the Death Eaters at the time. He has an alibi and so Tom still trusts him. Not only that, we had known that the Dark Lord would try to break the Death Eaters out of prison. We knew the ministry could not hold them and that they did not have manpower to mount a decent guard. So, we replaced Rodolphus LeStrange with a highly experienced field agent with years of experience in the Aurors. The real Rodolphus LeStrange is in this castle in a secure cell. Dawlish and Kingsley managed the swap. We now have two spies in the Death Eaters. Not only that, you gave your father and Sirius the location of a Death Eater stronghold. Less than an hour after your call, the Aurors assaulted the address in Grimmauld Place. We have twenty-eight Death Eaters in custody and a further nine are dead, not to mention all the documentation and Dark texts that we have confiscated.”

“And you have returned to us,” added Lily.

“Yes, your safety is of great concern to us,” said Dumbledore.

“I bet it is,” said Harry making his doubt blatantly obvious. *All because of that bloody Prophecy.* Lily opened her mouth to protest, but Harry cut her off. He was in no mood for an

argument, and so he moved on to another awful consequence of his actions that Dumbledore needed to know. “We have another problem. Tom saw the Prophecy. He used Legilimency on me while I was under the Cruciatus Curse.” He saw Lily visibly shudder as he mentioned the curse. Had she felt it or was she just concerned for him? He was grateful that she cared, he really was, but he didn’t know how he should be feeling towards her. Was it right to let them get close if he knew he had to leave. He must leave, he knew that and it would only hurt more in the end if he allowed them to get close. That was cool logic but the look in her eyes, the same look he had seen from her daughter as well was heartbreaking. He couldn’t shut her out. She had suffered so much on his account. She didn’t deserve it, none of them did. Besides, he felt *he*, himself, was owed a little happiness amidst the horrors of war. Why not indeed?

“What else did he see,” asked Dumbledore gravely.

“Not a lot: just a few images. They were flashes, but nothing important, just from my youth. I think he saw Dudley chasing me and that is about it. He caught a glimpse and then sent the rest of the Death Eaters out of the room. He replayed the Prophecy, once, maybe twice, I’m not sure, I was barely conscious. After that he stopped to think. That’s when he turned me over to the Aurors, Scholes.”

“Another gain from last week,” said Dumbledore. “A highly placed source has been neutralised.”

“Good choice of words,” said Harry darkly.

“We know about him now; he can no longer return to the Aurors,” said Dumbledore with a twinkle in his eyes.

“He won’t be returning to anyone,” muttered Harry.

“Was do you mean?” asked Lily, glancing from Harry to Dumbledore. Harry didn’t even have to say a word. Dumbledore seemed to understand. He nodded gravely interlocked his fingers in front of his face in a sign of tiredness that he topped with a deep sigh.

“If Tom has seen the Prophecy then he is scared,” said Dumbledore thoughtfully. “He believes in them, which is more than I can say for many wizards now-a-days. He will most likely make an attempt to breach the Department of Mysteries to confirm the Prophecy.”

“I thought you were checking on it,” said Harry. Flamel had said he was going to investigate the Department of Mysteries.

“So we did,” said Dumbledore. “And as expected, it was not present. Voldemort will therefore assume that I had it removed.”

“Could we insert a false prophecy with a little misdirection?” suggested Harry.

“A good suggestion, but he already has the Prophecy from you and a Pensieve will allow him to revisit it. It would be pointless,” said Dumbledore nodding in approval. “However, now is hardly the time to talk business. After your ordeal, I think we can grant you a few days before you have to face the world.”

“Face the world?” said Harry and Lily together.

“A figure of speech,” said Dumbledore. “I would not dream of making you relive your ordeal quite so soon. You have already let me know that Tom has discovered the Prophecy. That is more than enough for today.” Harry was glad the old man wasn’t going to push him any further. He shivered at the thought of what had been done to him over the last fortnight. “The reason I am here,” continued Dumbledore. “Is because in your absence, I made a promise to myself. What you said to me, before you left about how I should stop manipulating people.”

“I was angry, I just wanted to...” began Harry, trying to shrug it off. He would not be led down another guilt trip by the old man.

“It is quite understandable,” Dumbledore cut him off. “But it made me think. I have been manipulating people all along.”

“Albus...” began Lily, but she too was cut off.

“You made me take a long hard look at myself,” said the headmaster. He suddenly looked several years older. He removed his spectacles and began to polish them on his robes. Harry had seen him do it before when they had talked. It seemed to be a nervous habit of his. When he was under pressure like when Harry had first been told of the Prophecy, he seemed to polish his glasses. At length, he replaced them upon his nose. “I realised that I have lost sight of the forest, amongst all the trees. I promised myself, that if ever I got to speak to you again, I would not try to manipulate you, or anything else. I would listen, for once, truly listen to what you think, what you feel.”

“I made my own promise,” said Harry weekly, lying back down on the pillow. He was touched by the Headmaster’s sentiment, and found that he did believe Dumbledore truly did regret his manipulation. For once, Harry was sure it was not an act. “I promised myself, that if I ever got out of there alive, that I would tell you everything. Well, I promised to tell my family to be perfectly honest, but I promised myself that I would stop hiding behind half truths and foolish riddles and tell you who I really am, why you can really trust me.”

“Harry, you don’t have to...” began Dumbledore.

“No, I do,” he insisted cutting Dumbledore off. Harry felt he had to tell them. Not only had he promised himself, but he was tired. Tired of all the lies, the secrets he kept from everyone but himself. He had spent days over the summer grieving and avoiding all human contact. He needed to talk to someone. Time after time he had skirted the issue of his past. There were demons lurking there, demons he would rather not face, but he had to. He had a choice: run from his past, or learn from it. He never learned from his mistakes. If he had, he would never have

gone back to Voldemort, and probably he would never have gone to the Department of Mysteries last summer. If only he hadn't been so foolish; if only he learned from his mistakes.

"I was angry at you, last time for arresting me, and angry at my Dumbledore for keeping things from me, but I realised that childishly blocking you out won't help. I have to realise that you are not him; I have to stop being difficult to you just to try and spite someone else."

"We all do things we are not proud of," said Dumbledore. "I have lived for over one hundred and fifty years, and I have never met a person who is free from regret."

"Most of us learn from those mistakes," said Harry. "I never seem to. Over the years I have gone from one near-death situation to another. I don't seem to learn from them. Time and time again I make rash decisions, I ignore what others tell me. I played with fire, and I got burned, or rather someone else got burned because of me. If I had done as I was asked, if I had not been so headstrong, if I had listened to reason and not tried to save the day myself, Sirius would never have come to the Ministry, he would never have fought Bellatrix Lestrange, he would never have..." Harry trailed off. He was rambling. He realised he had been staring into space. Tears had formed in the corner of his eyes. It was all his fault. He knew it and they knew it. Worst of all, he had let Sirius' memory slip. He had had a lot on his mind recently, what with the change of worlds, the trial and then his capture. Sirius had hardly crossed his mind. He felt like he had forgotten about him. He had betrayed Sirius' memory.

"He was the closest thing to a father I have ever known," began Harry. "I've spent so much of my life alone, hiding my pain, keeping secrets from everyone but myself. I have never spoken of some of this. Even Dumbledore and my best friends don't know half of it. The whole world seemed to think I was a disturbed, attention seeking, little show off. They think I wallow in fame, and enjoy having this god-forsaken scar on my forehead. Ron and Hermione know better, they know I hate it. Their help is reassuring, but I can't ignore the masses. I try not to let it get to me, but it does hurt. I hide it as best I can, but Rita Skeeter and the *Prophet's* lies do hurt. Everywhere I go everyone recognises me. They recognise the scar on my head, and they see the boy from the papers. The Boy-Who-Lived, they dubbed me. One boy, who at the age of one, was responsible for the first defeat of Voldemort. Thanks to me, Voldemort disappeared and Britain knew over a decade of peace. Thanks to me they could resume their lives, and not have to worry about being attacked. I did the world a favour, and in return I am famous. That's what they think, because none of them know me. None of them can see past the bullshit. Sorry, Mum," he added as Lily raised an eye at his choice of words.

"But they don't see the obvious. They don't see me. They see the legend. Do they think I'm proud of it? Do they think I enjoy being in the *Prophet*? The attack fifteen years ago cost me everything. My parents were killed, my godfather incarcerated in Azkaban, and I was sent to live with the Dursleys. Do they not see that that event ruined my life? Don't they see that I would give up everything for a chance to meet my parents? And therein lies the irony. That is how I have always thought. Ever since I can remember I have wanted nothing more than to know my parents. The first time I ever saw you, Mum, was in the Mirror of Erised. Now I'm here, and I have what I have always wanted, I find that I want nothing more to go back to my old life. It's not that I don't like it here; it's just that they are my friends, and they were relying on me to help

them and now I'm stuck here. I can't leave them to the fate that awaits. When I first realised that I might be stuck here, I thought about settling down and not getting involved, but I couldn't do it. I've come to realise that I have but one purpose in life, to fight. I can't escape fame, or so it seems. I have always wanted a normal life, but even here I am wrapped up in this damn war. Here they see a monster, I don't know if that is better or worse than before. At least here I am known for what I did actually do.

“In my world, people look at me and they assume that I was always the pampered prince. That couldn't be further from the truth. When you left me on the Dursleys' doorstep, you left a letter. When Petunia took me in, she sealed the magic that kept me safe for years. As long as I called Privet Drive home, and as long as her blood resided there, I could not be touched. Great. You knew Tom would return sooner or later, so I had to be preserved. The protection would keep me safe. But once again, the Boy-Who-Lived was safe, but poor old Harry Potter was in hell. I lived in the cupboard under the stairs until my first year at Hogwarts. I was underfed and locked up in the cupboard often for days at a time, coming out only one a day for a bathroom break. She accepted me, but resented me for it. By your own confession you knew I would suffer, but for the greater good and all that nonsense you permitted it.

“Once I left Primary school, myself and Dudley were going off to secondary school. He was off to the prestigious Smeltings, while I was to be sent to the local comprehensive. They never gave me anything that wasn't absolutely necessary. Dudley's old clothes became mine, when he was too big for them. I never had pocket money. I hate to think what would have happened. I was doomed from the start. When I had finished my GCSEs, they are the Muggle equivalent of OWLs, I would have been out on my arse. I would have been kicked out and ended up homeless at the age of sixteen. I would have no home, no money, mediocre grades from a mediocre school and no prospect of amounting to anything. I was in a living hell, where everyone hated me, but never even told me why. I had no friends as no one wanted to cross Dudley by talking to me. I never got a Birthday present until I was thirteen. I was in hell, and I knew I had nowhere to go from there. I couldn't escape, and I would end up on the streets.

“Then Hagrid came. I can't describe the feeling I felt. For the first time in my life I had hope. I knew who I was; I knew why they hated me. I was going somewhere where they couldn't follow. I was unique. Everything I had ever owned, except my glasses, was previously owned by Dudley, but then overnight I had my own stuff. I was more than an annoying shadow about the house. I had friends, once I got to school. Looking back on that age of innocence, I can't help but smile. Life was simpler back then. Voldemort was nothing but a name in the History books, a boogey-man figure. Some people said he was still alive. I believed it, but I felt safe, knowing he was miles away. I was content in my new life. I had friends, two really good friends. Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. On the train on the way up I brought a load of sweets with the money in your vaults. I had always had just enough to survive, so having something to share felt so new.

“I first went to the Burrow before my second year. They accepted me in five minutes, while the Dursleys took ten years and still loathed me. The Burrow was so warm, inviting. It was the family environment that I knew nothing of. Molly almost counted me as one of her own. I look at Ginny, almost as my sister, and Ron.... Is it wrong to envy them? Love almost radiates

from the Burrow, and it is there I felt most at home. I keep thinking to myself, that that is how I should have grown up. That might be what life would have been like had Voldemort not come and taken everything from me in one foul swoop.

“I never had a guardian that cared for me. I kind of hoped Sirius was up for the job. I never even heard his name before he escaped from Azkaban at the beginning of my third year. He was supposed to be after me. I wasn't allowed out of the castle and everyone seemed to form an advanced guard everywhere I went. Dementors were guarding the castle. That was the first time I ever heard my mother's voice. Every time a Dementor comes to close I hear her begging Voldemort to take her instead of me, I hear the screams and the sounds of rushing death. People laughed when I first encountered a Dementor. They all felt cold and sad, but I ended up on the floor. Remus was such a help that year. He was your friend and I knew I could go to him if I needed help. He also taught me the Patronus Charm. Sirius found me at the end of the year, and as it turned out, we had been wrong. He had never been the secret keeper, and had never betrayed my parents. He even offered me a home, once his name was cleared. For the first time in my life, a future was in sight. I had always gone home back to the Dursleys every summer, back to the prison as it seemed. But here was an offer of a home, a real home, like the Burrow. I felt like at last, my life was going somewhere, that I wasn't bound to go back to the Dursleys. It so nearly happened, but it all went to pot and Sirius was forced to flee. He was on the run, and I was back at square one. I figured that I was owed a little good luck after the last twelve years or my life, but it was not to be.

“So I went back to Privet Drive, back to the tiny room with locks on the doors, two inadequate meals per day and an endless list of chores that bordered on slave labour, which to an extent it was. The irony is that everyone else thought I was a pampered child, who got anything I wanted. They thought that my hostility towards the Dursleys was arrogance and unjustified. Dumbledore knew I would suffer, and wouldn't let me leave, not that I knew it at that point. That was the year of the Quidditch world cup. Arthur Weasley got up top-box seats. It was the best summer I have ever had. it was off to the Burrow, the closest thing to home I had. I do owe Molly and Arthur so much, but I have never told them. One or many regrets I have. Unfortunately the same could not be said about the following year.

“The Triwizard Tournament was reinstated that year and guess what, my name was entered. Not by me, but by a Death Eater. I didn't put my name, yet I was forced to compete. Everyone thought I put my name in to boost my ego. Even Ron left me then. Then there was Rita Skeeter, who wrote articles telling the world what a disturbed individual I was. It was all lies, but fiction makes for better reading than fact. I didn't want to be in the tournament, I just wanted a normal life. It is what I have always wanted, but no, once again I was put in front of dragons, mer-folk, skrewts, boggarts, acromantulae and God knows what else, with no one but Hermione to help me. But it was all a trap, Voldemort turned the cup into a Portkey and used it to kidnap me. ‘Bone of a father unknowingly given, you will renew thy son. Flesh of the servant, willingly given, you will revive thy master. Blood of the enemy forcibly taken you will resurrect your foe.’ He used my blood to get his body back.

“Voldemort was back, but no one believed me. After Skeeter's articles, everyone thought I was attention seeking. I gave everything for these people. I lost my family and friends. I have

nearly died more times than I can count. I have bled, fought and endured what these people daren't dream of, and they think they have the right to judge me. Based on what? The rantings of a woman who twisted the truth to better her story. They don't know me, or what I have suffered. They still think they have the right to tell me that I'm insane. Dumbledore believed me and the Order of the Phoenix was recalled, but he was the only one. Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, convinced himself that we were making trouble to unseat him. He didn't want to face the reality of Voldemort being back. He removed Dumbledore's titles, and had the *Prophet* make sarcastic comments about me to further my bad image. They put a High Inquisitor at Hogwarts to monitor us. Dolores Umbridge ruled the school by terror, removing Dumbledore and anyone who opposed her. She didn't want the students becoming an army against the Ministry. Defence became purely theoretical. Clubs were banned without her approval, and I was banned from Quidditch. Some of us resisted, starting a Defence club in secret to practice defence to pass exams and because of the return of Voldemort, which I don't think any of them believed. All through the year I had been having dreams, strange dreams sent to me by Voldemort, but you never told me. You kept your distance and so I wandered blindly for a year. You refused to so much as look at me. All I had to deal with Umbridge's reign of terror and these dreams with no help from you. Christmas was a welcome break. Aside from a little trouble with Arthur Weasley, who was attacked. We all went to Grimmauld Place. It was the closest Sirius and I ever got to a normal life. I can still see his face as he went around singing God Rest Ye Merry Hippogriff. He had offered me a home two years prior and finally we had one. I went back to school filled with hope. Maybe I would be leaving the Dursleys. Maybe I could live with him over the summer.

"When OWLs came around, we all knuckled down to working. They went alright I think. Even Potions. I think it helped I didn't have Snape breathing down my neck. Halfway through the history exam I had another Vision. Voldemort had Sirius in the department of mysteries. Dumbledore had been removed and had escaped. McGonagall had been sent to St Mungo's after taking four stunners to the chest as the Aurors tried to evict Hagrid. We were alone, and alone we went to the Ministry. Myself, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom. In my world he is alive and well. He has been my friend for five years. It was his parents that were tortured to insanity. I've seen them at St Mungo's wandering aimlessly around. Their loss destroyed Neville's confidence. You can't help but feel sorry for him.

"But it was a trap. Voldemort sent me a false vision and I marched straight into a trap. Push came to shove and we ran. We were outnumbered two to one by Death Eaters. Ginny broke her ankle, Ron was nearly killed by a mutant brain and Neville came face to face with the witch who had broken his parent's minds. Bellatrix Lestrange. In my world she is married. We had been lead to the Prophecy section. Only myself or Voldemort could remove it and he didn't want to reveal his presence. He could move more easily if the Ministry refused to acknowledge his return. We took the prophecy and ran. But we were cornered. Then the Order came. Sirius, Lupin, Tonks, Moody all came for us. The Prophecy smashed in the mess that followed. Sirius... was killed, pushed backwards through the veil in the Department of Mysteries. Bellatrix had cast the spell. I hate her more than anything else on the planet, maybe as much as Riddle himself. For the first time in my life, a home, a family was in sight and she snatched it away from me, just as Riddle had done fourteen years earlier. I ran her down. The Unforgivables carry I life sentence, but in times of stress it seems worth it. Pure rage, that the best I can describe it. If I thought I could manage it, I would have killed her. I wanted her to suffer for killing him. But I

could never enjoy causing pain, so the Cruciatus curse failed. The Prophecy was lost and the Ministry was in ruins. Voldemort came to make sure. He was about to kill me when you turned up. I watched you duel. It was unbelievable. I knew then that I had no hope. I could never duel like you can, but the prophecy says that I have face and beat him. I can't do it. I keep deluding myself, but I know I could never match him.

“But now everyone knows he is back. The last week of school was different. I didn't care about anything but Sirius. He was gone and nothing else seemed to matter. People suddenly wanted to know me again. Suddenly I mattered again. It just shows how shallow everyone is. Now the truth was known, people were nice and expected me to just forgive them. That's how they always think of me, They expect me to fight him for them. They expect me to do it, so they don't have to. Then they think they have the right to tell me I am not doing enough, or doing something wrong. They think they have the right to tell me I am deluded. What right do they have to judge me? They take me for granted. They do nothing but sit on their arses waiting for me to kill him. Sometimes I wish he would appear in the Great Hall and scare the hell out of them all, just so they can see what it is like.

“I spent the summer pretty much alone, hardly leaving my room. It truly was alone. Sirius was gone, my parents were gone, Hermione, Ginny, Ron, Luna and Neville all nearly died on account of me. No one had believed me and it was too late now. He was out there, and his Death Eaters were returning to him. It was too late for Sirius. He had spent thirteen years in Azkaban for something he didn't do, and he had died before he could be exonerated. It seemed like such a waste. He was innocent, but no one would ever know it. He wasn't even given a proper memorial, as far as I am aware. I didn't know what would happen. I was back at the Dursleys, out of contact with the Wizarding world, except for a weekly letter saying I was fine. Then, isn't life grand, I find that the ancient magic my mother died to give me doesn't work after all and Voldemort nearly kills me...again. But I didn't die; I end up in a living hell. A world, where everything that I know to be good is gone and evil is everywhere. Where everything I have fought for is backed into a corner like a nightmare. A world where I am hated, feared and everyone wants me dead. I don't know what is going on, or whom I can trust. I walk as a Stranger in an Unholy Land, but no one to aid me, and double-crossers left right and centre. Then to make things even better I find out the Prophecy doesn't apply here, and I have a family. Fantastic, I can settle down, but nom fate won't let me go, will it? Since Voldemort now knows the Prophecy, I am back to square one. He wants me dead as I am the only one who can kill him, or so he believes. Seems that wherever I go, I have to fight and suffer.”

There was silence in the room. Dumbledore sat looking pensive, while Lily was wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. He stared unblinkingly towards Harry, but not seeing him. He seemed to be staring past Harry. Lily on the other hand, had her hanky out. Her eyes were full of tears and she was holding the white handkerchief up to her face. They sat in silence for a few seconds, before Lily stood and enveloped Harry in a huge hug. It was gentle so as not to hurt him, but it was just as warm and meaningful as if she had crushed the air out of him. Harry felt lighter, as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. She had not rejected him, despite all that he had done and the fact that he was not hers.

“You seem intent on blaming yourself,” noted Dumbledore at last. “Your story tells of great suffering, but I feel I have to point out that some of it is needless.”

“I’ve heard it before,” said Harry over his mother’s shoulder. “What am I supposed to say? Bollocks to Cedric, it happens? Move on? Forget him? I can’t do that. He was murdered because he took the cup at my request. How can I not feel guilt about that? And Sirius. I went to the Ministry that night. You should have told me about the Prophecy, but at the end of the day, I should never have gone. I should have alerted the Order somehow. I tried with Snape, but there were other ways. I had a two-way mirror, but it never thought to use it.”

“What do you mean, you tried with Snape?”

“I told him ‘they have Padfoot in the place where it is kept’,” said Harry. “He spat it back in my face. I should have known he couldn’t overtly show he was going to help in the face of Umbridge, but I was so worked up, and I hated him so much that I thought he was really ignoring me. He went on to alert the Order who came to rescue us.”

“So Severus is a spy in your world too?” said Lily.

“Sort of,” said Harry. “Before Voldemort fell he came back to our side. Once Voldemort did fall, the Death Eaters were tried. Evidence was presented that Snape had come back to our side. Dumbledore defended him. It is public knowledge that Snape came back to our side. When Voldemort came back, Snape couldn’t go back because of the fact that it was known he had turned *before* his downfall. The Wizengamot even acknowledged Snape as being cleared. At his rebirth, Voldemort even said that he knew one of the Death Eaters had left his service forever and would be killed and one was too cowardly to return. The coward was Karkaroff, who fled that very night and the other had to be Snape. I don’t know what Snape does, but I expect he follows known Death Eaters, using his extensive supply of Polyjuice potion.”

“You mentioned that Voldemort sent you a vision?” said Dumbledore. “But how is that possible?”

“My scar is a psychic link to him. I have been meaning to ask you about that. Why is it not working here? He couldn’t touch me without being burned until he took my blood in his rebirth potion. He hasn’t taken my blood here, yet he can still touch me. Also, I can’t feel his emotions or presence. Usually I can feel if he is happy or angry. I can tell if he is close, but I feel nothing here.”

“Do you remember how I mentioned the idea of a soul rather than a body?” asked Dumbledore. “That kind of psychic link would theoretically be linked to the soul, rather than the body. Your link would be to the Voldemort of your world, rather than then one in this world. Hence he would not feel this pain you describe when he touches you and you would not feel his emotion.” That was a relief. At least he didn’t have to worry about Voldemort sending him a migraine if he found out how. On the other hand he had lost his early warning system, the same ability that had saved Arthur Weasley’s life last Christmas.

“Why can’t I feel the Voldemort from my world?”

“Perhaps this link cannot cross between worlds. In theory, you should not have been able to.”

“On a related note,” said Harry. “Any progress getting me home?”

“Harry,” moaned Lily softly. He glanced over at her, still with tears in both of their eyes. There was a harsh truth to face. He had to leave and it would not be easy on either of them. Already he was attached to them and he knew it would break more than one heart when he had to leave.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry. “But ultimately, I have to go home. As much as I want to, I can’t stay here forever. Too many lives depend on me. I can’t just forget about them.”

“Harry,” said Dumbledore. “You have suffered some horrific injuries in the last fortnight. Your right wrist was completely shattered. Madam Pomfrey can fix bones in a heartbeat, but your bone was smashed into seventeen different pieces and will take a further two to three weeks to heal. Your bruises will go down in time. The venom has been flushed from your system, and the cuts and burns to your torso and arms have been closed and healed. You need to take this potion for your wrist. Unfortunately its side effects are drowsiness. For the next few weeks, you will feel very weak and drowsy. *Even if* I found anything, I must insist that you remain here in our care for that amount of time.”

“Even if, as in you are not trying?” He felt frustration bubbling in him. Dumbledore had to help him. If he was just stalling, Harry would...no, he would not kill him, but...he felt so angry. He had better not be holding back.

“On the contrary, Harry,” said Dumbledore with a smile. “I have found an ancient Greek text which talks about what has been interpreted as Black Holes and to quote them ‘the world beyond.’ From the first page or so of our translation, it speaks of an attempt to make a gateway. It failed, but was only a first attempt. We are working on the translation as we speak. Unfortunately, the book is written in the language of a long lost tribe, rather than the actual Greek language. It should take about a month to translate. I have high hopes for this book.”

“Thank you,” said Harry. “Was Gryffindor’s sword any help?”

“Not as such. I would not wish to recreate the circumstances that brought you here, in case you were killed. And we would need Tom, who I doubt would be willing to help you get home. That combination of magic launched you into this world, but not in a controlled manner. Even if we could get it to work again, there would be no knowing where you would end up.”

“Ah.”

“So who is doing the translation?”

“Someone I trust, Harry,” Dumbledore reassured him. “Professor Flamel.”

“What does he teach anyway?” asked Harry. “I know Snape does Defence, my mother does Potions, McGonagall does Transfiguration. What about Flitwick, Sinestra, Vector. Who does Care of Magical Creatures? Is Trelawney still here?”

“Slow down, Harry,” said Lily. “Yes, Professors Flitwick, Sinestra and Vector are here, teaching Charms, Astronomy and Arithmancy respectively. Care of Magical Creatures was taught by Hagrid until an incident with a student and a Hippogriff a few years ago.”

“Malfoy?”

“Bingo,” said Lily. “Now we have Professor Grubbly-Plunk. I don’t know who Trelawney is, but Professor Flamel teaches History of Magic.”

“Well anyone would be better than Binns.”

“Professor Binns died years ago,” said Dumbledore.

“I know,” said Harry. “In my world, he just got up one morning and left his body behind. He taught as a ghost ever since. Good time to catch up on other homework or have a sleep in History.”

“Not here,” said Dumbledore, his amusement evident. “Nicolas receives positive reviews from the students here.”

“No more Goblin rebellions?” asked Harry.

“One or two.”

“Harry,” said Dumbledore. “I am glad you decided to share your past with us. I can imagine how hard that is. You have clearly lived a very hard life. I am afraid to tell you that you cannot leave here for the next few weeks, until Madam Pomfrey informs me that you are strong enough to be able to defend yourself. As you should have guessed, there is a price on your head.”

“Really, how much am I worth?”

“Harry!” snapped Lily.

“Sorry,” muttered Harry.

“Once you are fit,” began Dumbledore, his amusement clear. “We can work out how to reintroduce you to society.”

“Rather than to a cell in Azkaban,” said Harry.

“Exactly,” said Dumbledore. “Azkaban has been rebuilt and strengthened, following your attack eighteen months ago.”

“That’s another question for you,” said Harry. “Why me. Why did Voldemort choose me to be his number one? Surely Malfoy, or Bellatrix, someone like that would be a better contestant. Why, at the age of fourteen, was I taken?”

“I couldn’t say,” said Dumbledore gravely. “We truly don’t know why it was you, or exactly what was done to you.”

“Didn’t Snape see anything?”

“No. He was not present at the Devil’s Cauldron.”

“I’ve heard that before. What is it?”

“It’s a naturally occurring area of Lydford Gorge in Devon. It is a whirlpool filled with jagged rocks, about thirty feet below ground level. The rock there harnesses and concentrates dark magic. The air is thick with it. We know you were there with Voldemort and the inner circle, along with a few sentries including Riener Attacus and his wife Caitlyn, who were mentioned in your trial. What happened, we do not know.”

“So what happens now?”

“Now, you rest,” said Harry.

“For three week?”

“You may use this room however you wish,” said Dumbledore. “Myself and Nicolas believe it best to place an article in the Prophet announcing your current situation.”

“The truth?”

“No,” said Dumbledore. “We feel amnesia is the best excuse we have. It accounts for you not being familiar with some aspects of our world.”

“So what, we publish the article and then one day I pop up in a charms lesson. Hi guys, remember me? I used to be a student here before I went on a killing spree. I don’t think that would work.”

“This is not an easy task,” Dumbledore conceded. “The article will break the ice. I do not deny that this is an uphill struggle. The Ministry is in disarray. There are calls for the Death Penalty to be reinstated, simply because of you. Many people have been affected by your actions of the last year or so and the public will react very badly to this at first. Blood is thicker than water. Revenge and anger will cloud their minds and calls for your execution will be numerous. Not only that but you are a symbol of all that we fight against.”

“In my world, I was seen as a beacon of light,” said Harry soberly. “Here...”

“You are precisely the opposite. You were once dubbed to be the Dark Knight, in comparison to the Dark Lord. In fact they names the Death Eaters after chess pieces. Tom was the Dark Lord, or King. You were going to be the queen as the most powerful piece on the board, but you are male so that piece was given to Bellatrix Black. Rodolphus Lestrange was the Bishop, Antonin Dolohov was the Rook and you were the Knight. Occasionally you are still referred to as the Dark Knight.”

“So was Batman,” muttered Harry,

“The trouble was that certain people on our side were given the tags of the opposite. I was the White King for example. Of the five of us given titles, only myself and Alastor Moody are still alive, though Alastor spent nearly a month in hospital following an attempt on his life. But I digress. Your label soon died out, but around the school you are sometimes simply referred to as *him*, which, I am sure you can appreciate, is only one step short of You-Know-Who. The Aurors may be easy to swing, all least those in the Order will, but the Ministry on the whole is more complex. Politically, Barty Crouch would be made to look a fool if he did not conduct a thorough investigation before approving you. From there the hearts and minds of the people will need convincing. From there we can go to an audience with the Minister and Wizengamot, a private hearing of course. From there, we would take it one step at a time. I am afraid you are for a long haul. Many will find it hard to forgive and will tip toe around you.”

“I deserve it, though,” said Harry sadly. “I did all those things.”

“It wasn’t you,” said Lily, firmly, squeezing his hand gently.

“I still carry the memories with me,” said Harry, bringing a look of concern to the adult’s faces. “I have nightmares. When I sleep I sometimes see what he did. I often dream of Sirius dying, and Voldemort’s rebirth. But now, there is...murder, death. I see the time I attacked Diagon Alley at Christmas.”

“Black Noel,” gasped Lily.

“I see the fear in the eyes of the Minister, just before I kill him,” said Harry, looking at his feet. “Memories come to me sometimes, faces, images, and dreams. Sometimes I feel like déjà vu when I go somewhere and it’s getting stronger. When I first came here, I was fine. Then after my escape, I started to have the dreams. Now I find more and more faces coming to me. I can feel the darkness in me. I am dangerous: I killed a man at St Mungo’s by instinct alone. I lost control, I didn’t mean to, I just reacted when I saw the wand. And then there was Scholes. No mercy, no pity, no compassion. I’m scared I could hurt Rose or Ginny or any other student if I got near them.” Harry could feel the anger in his belly. It was what had driven him to nearly kill in St Mungo’s. Every instinct told him to kill them. He was sure he could have managed the Killing Curse at that point. That was the same darkness that compelled him to nearly kill Kreacher. He knew he had to resist it.

“You can beat this,” said Dumbledore. “You have been through hell, and have every right to feel angry and vengeful, but you don’t. You beat your anger then, you can do so again. Your family will be invaluable, as will the Weasleys. At present, only Molly, Arthur, Bill, Charlie and Ginny know of your situation and only Ginny knows more than the fact that you are here and that you wish to join the Order.”

“I never said that,” said Harry firmly. He was not going to be taken advantage of.

“But it is what you want?” Damn it, it was, but he didn’t want Dumbledore to think he would bow to his every wish.

“It’s what I need, not what I want. Haven’t you been listening?”

“Harry,” objected Lily.

“He is going to come for me,” said Harry solemnly. “I can’t hide, nor can I run. I have to make a stand and this is the only way. Surely you see that.”

“I’ve already lost you once,” said Lily, tears filling her eyes.

“You won’t again,” said Harry. “But I can’t just sit and wait. I have to prepare and we both know I can’t do that alone. Keep Rose out of the Order. She doesn’t need this, she needs to be kept safe, but I do need this, because there is no way for me to be safe.”

“He’s right, Lily,” said Dumbledore. “There is no other way.”

“Trust me,” said Harry. Lily looked from one to the other and nodded, sighing deeply as she did. Harry knew she didn’t want this and he didn’t either, but he had to. Both of them knew this, accepted this, but resented it anyway.

“Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Do you have any ideas what you would need, training wise, to help you?”

“You’ll need a pen and paper,” muttered Harry bringing a smile to the old man’s face. “A bazooka, a nuclear warhead and enough TNT to flatten Arnold Schwarzenegger and I might have a chance.”

“I don’t think Diagon Alley will stock all that,” said Dumbledore lightly.

“Try Knockturn Alley,” said Harry, causing both adults to chuckle. “No, seriously, I think I need duelling lessons, with Mad-Eye and Kingsley. Occlumency would be good, but not with Snape; I need a teacher, not a sadist. Lastly, and I have been thinking about this for some time. Actually, I’ve been thinking about this ever since I first cast a Patronus. The first time I saw Prongs, I thought that...well...I was wondering if...I was thinking of trying to become an Animagus, like my father.”

“I see,” said Dumbledore. “Since you are still a minor, you will need your parents permission. I can get the papers for you...”

“Off the record,” said Harry interrupting. “No registration, no one else is to know.”

“That’s illegal,” said Lily.

“If we do this on the record, then with the Ministry being so full of leaks, it will be out in the open in no time. This has to be done in secret. Once he knows then I can register, but not until he has found out the hard way.”

“You have too much of your father in you,” said Lily. Harry couldn’t tell if it was a compliment or a criticism.

“If that is a yes, I will ask Minerva to come and see you this evening,” said Dumbledore. “Bear in mind that this is not something to be undertaken lightly. Not everyone can become an Animagus. It takes time and dedication to become one. Are you absolutely sure? Don’t answer now. Think long and hard. Minerva will come to you after dinner. Now I am afraid I have a lot of business to attend to. I just want you to know, that from now on, I will try and be less manipulative.”

With that the Headmaster left the Room of Requirement, leaving Harry and Lily alone.

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Minerva McGonagall placed her knife parallel to her fork on her empty plate and wiped her bottom lip with the napkin, which had been delicately folded by the House Elves of Hogwarts into an ornate star-like shape. She took one last glance at Albus who was engaged in a conversation with Professor Flitwick. *Why did I agree to this?* wondered Minerva.

Albus had that annoying ability to be able to convince her of almost anything. To be fair, asking her to instruct Harry Potter to become an Animagus was the last thing she had expected him to ask. As she made her way out of the back entrance to the Great Hall, she made doubly sure that her wand was where it could be easily reached. She trusted Albus, she truly did, but she couldn’t suppress years of instincts. She knew what the boy had done, and all this talk of Alternate Realities just seemed a little too far fetched. She wanted to believe it was true, she wanted him to have turned for Lily and James’ sake. She remembered when Harry was just another young Gryffindor, and come to think of it, when James Potter was another young Gryffindor. Having said that, she was not going into that room with no means to defend herself.

Becoming an Animagus was not quick, easy or painless. She remembered hearing for the first time that Potter, Black, and Pettigrew had all managed it. She was surprised to say that least that they had managed it, that they would do it for a friend and that they had managed to keep a secret. She wondered if Potter would have the ability to do it. If he didn’t then no amount of teaching would allow him to become one. It was like rolling one’s tongue. It was an ability one

was born with though, not something one inherits. No one truly understood why some wizards can and others can't.

Minerva made her way up to the portrait, and glanced in both directions. The last thing she needed was for Draco Malfoy to see her and inform his father that Harry was here. Satisfied that she was alone, she opened the door and stepped into the room. A small smile crept over her face at the manner in which Potter had customised the room. She quickly quashed it, as it did not compliment her image as the disciplinarian of the Hogwarts staff. She realised that should she ever become Headmistress, she would have to change her image. Albus had a way with the students, a respect that was based on more than fear. He loved them, and by and large, they loved him. So had the man before him and the man before him. That was the way of the Headmaster. If Minerva ever rose to that rank, she would need to drop the image, but until then, disciplinarian it was.

The room had changed into a large terrace, floored by decking. It led out onto a white sandy beach, and past that, Minerva could see the magnificent blue sea. Palm trees grew on the beach and swinging gently in a hammock was Harry Potter. The Caribbean scene was strangely comforting to Minerva. There was a light sea breeze and the sun shone warmly over head. Lying on a sun-lounger next to the hammock lay Rose Potter. The two were deep in conversation and had not heard Minerva enter the room.

“So I turn away, right,” said Harry, clearly in the middle of an anecdote. “I knew he wasn't going to do anything, he'd too scared. So as I turn and then I feel this warm furry thing shoot past my head. I thought, *that can't be a curse*. So I turn around, wand in hand, ready to hex him into tomorrow. But I can't see him. In his place is this small white ferret. Now, Crabbe or Goyle, can't remember which, don't really care to be honest, goes to pick him up. Moody tells him to leave him. He goes on about how he hated people who attack from behind, and how his father managed to get his charges clear without even seeing an Azkaban cell. Next thing Moody, points his wand at Malfoy and *BOING!* Malfoy is launched into the air. Moody bounces him off every wall in the Great Hall, off the ceiling, the floor and windows and just about anything you can think of.”

“Fantastic,” said Rose, between her laughter.

“So he's there bouncing him around, we're all laughing, Crabbe and Goyle are standing around looking like, well like they usually do really, thick and stupid and then McGonagall comes in. *Moody, is that a student?*” shrieked Potter in an awful Scottish accent. Minerva raised an eyebrow in distaste. “We don't use transfiguration as punishment, put him down now!” His accent was terrible, but Rose seemed to find it hilarious. Minerva was slightly amused, but also slightly put out. She managed not to let her distaste show too much.

“Spoilsport,” said Rose.

“Transfiguration is not a sport,” interrupted Minerva at that point. Both Potters spun around to face her, the elder even had his wand in his left hand. “And you may wish to brush up

on your Scottish accents, Mr. Potter. They say impression is the sincerest form of mockery, so please be sincere enough to practice the voice.”

“Yes, Professor,” said Harry, blushing slightly, and lowering his wand.

“Dinner is served, Miss Potter,” said Minerva. Rose glanced at her brother before nodding and then leaving the room. Minerva approached the sunlounger and caught her first clear look at Harry’s injuries. His face was covered in ugly purple bruises and he had two white patches, one over his right eye the other over his left cheek, as well as a piece of tape over his broken nose. His neck was heavily bandaged as was his right wrist. He wore black trousers and a dark blue shirt, which was open slightly, exposing his bandaged ribs. Minerva shivered at the thought of the pain he had suffered.

“You know why I am here, Potter,” began Minerva. After debating whether or not to come on strong and risk getting him angry or to come on gently, she had decided to just be herself. Her wand, which was secure on the inside of her cloak, was a small comfort.

“I do,” replied the boy, rolling out of the hammock and sitting on the other end of the sunlounger.

“I am here to find out if you have the potential to become an Animagus,” said Minerva. “Please note that it is not a skill suited to everyone. About forty percent of wizards have the capacity to be one. Of those forty percent, only about five actually do become one. I am amazed that all three of Lupin’s friends had the potential, but I digress. It is not easy and will require a lot of work, dedication and unfortunately pain. “

“I’m no stranger to that,” said Harry softly.

Minerva thought to add, ‘I can see’, but chose not to. “Be that as it may, I hope you are not taking on this endeavour lightly. Let me explain to you what will happen. Firstly, assuming you do have the potential to master the skill, and I would like to point out that you should not assume you do, it is a birth skill, but not a hereditary one. Just because your father was one does not mean that you can. If you do have the ability, I will give you simple exercises to get used to transforming yourself through the power of your mind. I hear that you are going to begin with Occlumency, this may help you, but the greater steps you take the more painful it will be. You will start with simple things like lengthening fingers and nails. At first it will hurt to maintain then transformation and even more so when they return to their original shape. It will feel like a build up of lactic acid, as if you have run five miles and then stopped with no warm down. You must build it up. If you went straight into transforming your entire arm, then I would hate to think what it would feel like. As your exercises increase and you get used to it, we will begin to discuss your form. Now, as with wands, the form will choose you rather than you it. It will come to you. From there, I will endeavour to find an animal for you to get to know, to study in order to further your connection to it. Eventually, you will be able to transform completely. From there, you must keep practicing or the pain will return. It will hurt for about a month, until you get used to it. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Are you absolutely, one hundred percent sure you want this?”

“Yes.”

“Once we start there is no turning back.”

“There is no going back already,” said Harry. “The idea is stuck in my head. I can’t forget and it will haunt my dreams forever. No, this is definitely what I want.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” said McGonagall. “We don’t even know if you can. If you can’t nothing can help you.”

“Okay,” said Harry.

Minerva was sure he did not appreciate the high probability that he would not have the ability. He seemed a little cavalier and that caused a raised eyebrow of irritation on Minerva’s face, but she didn’t say anything. *Ah, the arrogance of youth*, she thought to herself. *In these cases, a scalded hand teaches best.* “Right,” said Minerva. “I want you to think back into the past. Have you ever done any accidental magic?”

“Yes.”

“Was any of it on yourself, more specifically, did you change yourself?”

“I once grew my hair back in one night, after my aunt cut it. I was so worried about going to school looking like it, that I grew my hair back. I didn’t know it was magic at the time, I didn’t even know I was a wizard.”

Interesting, thought McGonagall. In her heart, she was hoping that he was not capable, so she wouldn’t have to teach him. Her heart fell as he spoke. This was just the sort of thing that she was dreading. “I see,” she said keeping emotion out of her voice. “Anything else?”

“Not that I can think of,” said Harry.

“Okay,” said Minerva. “I want you to look at your fingernails. Look closely, take in every detail. Examine them and commit every detail to memory. You should be able to visualise them clearly with your eyes shut.”

He gave her an unconvinced look, but did as he was told, starting with his right hand. His emerald green eyes stared unblinkingly at his fingertips.

“You look unconvinced,” noted Minerva. “I am not doing this for my own good, Mr. Potter. If you don’t want to do what I tell you then I can leave.” The boy’s eyes widened and he quickly stammered an apology.

“No,” said Harry. “I’m sorry. This just isn’t what I was expecting.”

“What were you expecting?” said Minerva amidst a patronising stare.

“I’m not sure,” stammered Harry,

“Then how do you know this was not it?”

“Never mind,” stuttered Harry, trying to end the discussion. Minerva conceded and held back any more comments.

For the next five minutes, Minerva sat in silence watching him. His fingertips were held inches from his eyes. They took in every detail, moving from one hand to the other. Occasionally he closed his eyes for a few seconds, presumably seeing if he could picture them with his eyes shut. *He hasn’t said a word since he had started, noted* Minerva. She had expected him to stop after thirty seconds and tell her that he had done it. It was a pleasant surprise. She doubted he truly comprehended what was ahead of him, but she would not let him quit. He was in it until the end. Contrary to what she thought earlier, the attention Harry was working with caused a change in Minerva. She found that she was quite looking forward to having a little project. It reminded her of when she was at school, with a goal ahead of her. She didn’t have too many goals in life these days, and young Harry may just make a good project, if he continues like this. But it was the first day, and young boys were always attentive, until the novelty wore off. She was worried that in a fortnight, he would be whining and wanting to quit. She hoped it was not the case, but she knew how the mind of a juvenile male worked.

“Okay, stop,” said Minerva quietly. He looked up at her. His body was one of a sixteen year old boy, but she could see in his eyes that he had lived like a man, not a boy. They betrayed an older man. If what Albus said was true, then he would have grown up fast. The trouble with people like that is that they often think they should be allowed to act like a child when they want to and an adult when they want to. They think they have a right to run their lives, but also have a right to get any protection they want and avoid what they don’t want to do. She hoped Harry had a little more maturity than that. “Next I want you to close your eyes and relax. Sit still and relax. Listen to...” she glanced around, looking for inspiration in the Caribbean surroundings. “The waves. Can you hear the waves gently breaking on the shore?” he nodded. “Listen to them and relax. Breathe slowly and clear your mind. Put all thoughts of war, home, people, paces and Dark Lords aside. Imagine you are just lying on the beach, staring up at the deep blue sky. Be calm.”

Minerva watched him sitting cross-legged on the lounge. His arms were both in his lap. She wondered if the pain from that arm would cloud his ability. She hoped it wasn’t so, but didn’t want to direct his thoughts to it by bringing it up. She watched him for a few seconds. His face was still the neutral mask that he had worn since the beginning for the meeting. She sat waiting until to her relief she saw the mask begin to melt. The muscles in his face relax and the mask slipped, leaving a truly blank face. Minerva smiled inwardly to herself. He was letting go, he really was relaxing. This might just be worth it, *if* he has the potential.

“Now, picture you fingertips. Call that picture to the front of your mind. Concentrate on your fingernails and only your fingernails. Nothing else exists, just your fingernails.” She waited a few seconds, hoping that he was complying. He was not saying a thing.

“Now, imagine that your nails are much, much longer. Imagine that they are two inches long. Can you picture them like that? Picture your fingertips, with nails that are two inches long. Concentrate. Hold that image.” She watched his fingers, which lay in his lap, intently. *Come on*, she thought. *You can do it*. She noted how much her thoughts had changed from the time she had entered. Then she had not wanted him to succeed; now she did. She didn’t even remember when it had changed.

“Now believe that your nails are like that. That is what your nails look like. You really do have two-inch nails. They are huge. They really exist. Concentrate. Believe.”

She spoke quietly and gently, in little more than a whisper. Harry sat motionless on the lounge. She couldn’t tell if he was absorbing what she was saying. He had definitely relaxed, but so far he was not making any progress.

“Relax Harry,” she gently urged him. “Picture the nails clearly. Concentrate.” She watched him for over a minute without any form of success. She was beginning to think that maybe it had just been accidental magic and not a manifestation of Animagus potential that had allowed him to grow his hair back. It was not conclusive proof. Usually the story was that the subject could reach something and his or her arm grew by a few inches to reach it. Hair was often there but on its own was not conclusive proof.

Out of sheer hope, Minerva allowed him to continue for another five minutes, whispering the same old words over and over again to him. It didn’t seem to be doing any good. His fingernails seemed no longer than they had been a few minutes ago. His left hand was placed protectively over the bandaged right. It looked like Harry was going to be going home disappointed. Minerva reached out to gently touch Harry on the arm, to bring him back out of his meditation.

“Wake up, Harry,” she whispered. “Come back to me.” Slowly the boy opened his eyes.

“Did I...?” he asked, looking hopefully up at Minerva.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” said Minerva sadly. “Your nails didn’t change. It looks like you don’t have the ability. I’m sorry.”

The boy bowed his head in defeat. Minerva hated to tell people that they had failed. She was known to be a stern teacher, but she didn’t enjoy giving people bad news, which was inconvenient, as she often had to do just that as Deputy Headmistress.

“I tried,” said Harry solemnly. “I just couldn’t ignore my wrist. It hurts too much. I think the painkiller potion has worn off.”

Minerva paused. An idea came to her. He may still have a chance. She closed her eyes and concentrated. She had never used the room before, but had been told how it worked. When she opened her eyes there was a small table next to the sunlounger, on which there was a small phial containing a dark green liquid. She handed it to Harry.

“Drink this,” she said. Harry took the potion and obediently drank it. “Now, try again.”

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes again.

Minerva watched in silence, repeating the words, not aloud but to herself. In a silent mantra, Minerva hoped that Harry would succeed. *You can do it*, she thought. She was almost pleading to herself. She watched his fingernail. Both hands were laid apart in his lap. The numbing Potion should take care of the distraction. *Come on!*

She watched for thirty seconds, but nothing happened, but then slowly, she saw his fingernails lengthen. It was subtle at first. She didn't even notice it until they were nearly half a centimetre longer than they should be. Minerva couldn't help but let out a long sigh. Big mistake; that broke Harry's concentration. His eyes flew open, just in time to look down and see his nails shrink back to normal.

A huge smile was plastered all over his face. He looked like a child in a sweet shop, grinning from ear to ear. “I did it?”

Minerva nodded, smiling herself. “Congratulations. You have taken your first step. I think that this also shows that we need to take the potion until that wrist of yours is healed.”

“So anytime I get injured I won't be able to transform?” he asked.

“No,” said Minerva. “You will in time. Once you get used to this it will become second nature and you will be able to transform when you are not meditating, but initially it helps. Until you get comfortable, we will take the potion and meditate. The waves here were most convenient.”

“Yeah, relaxing,” said Harry lightly.

“And they will help,” said Minerva. “Okay, I have seen enough. For tonight, you can continue to try and do your fingernails. Do not try anything further and do not take more potion. That potion will last for about another ninety minutes at the most. Practice all you can, but do not stray beyond the nails. You are not ready for it yet. The potion can be very addictive, so don't take anymore until I return tomorrow evening.”

“Okay,” said Harry.

“Now, as it is getting late, I suggest you get to bed. Sleep is the best healer. I will leave you this book on Animagi. Some background reading may help.”

Minerva placed the book she had taken from her own personal collection on the table and then left the room, she saw it change. The sun became the moon. The full moon shone down on the beach and Harry was climbed back into the hammock. The gentle breeze rocked the hammock, and the air was pleasantly warm.

“Sleep well,” muttered Minerva as she closed the door.

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And that was the way it went for the next fortnight. As Harry’s wrist healed, McGonagall came around each evening for an hour and a half and they practiced changing his hands. They had progressed from lengthening his nails to his entire fingers. Harry found the experience as painful as McGonagall had warned. He had been a little cavalier about it, if he was being honest. Both his hands ached at the end of the night, but McGonagall seemed delighted with his progress. During the day he had Flamel come by and try and teach his Occlumency. Flamel was a far superior teacher to Snape. After just one lesson, Harry had some idea on what he was aiming for. After informing him of McGonagall’s meditation exercise with the waves, Flamel had decided to adopt that same image of the waves. Flamel had Harry meditate, much as he had with McGonagall, emptying his mind, just listening to the sound of the waves. Unlike Snape, Flamel also took the time to explain exactly what Occlumency was and what he was aiming for. He explained how to repel an attack as well as how to hide memories from intruders, rather than just bullying Harry with it. Now that he knew what he was aiming for, he felt a little more confident about the whole thing. He had frequent visits from his family. Ginny even made an appearance on the first Thursday.

Life wasn’t as bad as he had thought it would be, being locked in a room all day. Sure, there were places he would rather be, but it wasn’t too bad. He got to know his family a lot more over the fortnight he spent in ‘hospital’. Someone was with him more often than not. It was quite refreshing to know who they are. For the first time, his parents were more than a scream in his mind, or an image in a Pensieve. For the first time, he felt like he had a family. It was a completely alien feeling to him, but he soon found himself immersed in it. He found it a great relief that they were so ready to accept him, knowing all that he had done, and who he really was. He assumed his mother had told her husband and daughter. This was what he had dreamed of. This is how he should have lived. Rose one told him it was as if he had never left. Harry disagreed, but took her statement as a compliment. As far as he was concerned, memory is what makes a person. If you obliterated a person to forget five years of their life and full their mind with five years of false memories, then you would make a different person. People often say that they would like to forget what they have learned. Harry disagreed. He thought it was better to live in peace knowing how bad it used to be, so you can truly appreciate just how good life is, and how lucky one is. If you did not remember the hardship, you would be just as discontent as you were and would walk the same ill-fated path all over again.

Two weeks and four days passed, until Harry lay dozing in the hammock at dinnertime on Tuesday second of October. Madam Pomfrey had been in that morning to remove the bandage from his wrist. It was still sore and he was told not to lift things with it or use it to wield a wand for a few days. He had a scar where the bone had pierced the flesh, but otherwise looked

fine. It was paler than his arms, as he had tanned slightly in the sun the room had provided. He had done a few Animagus exercises and had managed to shrink and extend his entire hand. Up until then he had only done it on his left hand, not wanting to risk damaging his right. He had no wish to lengthen the amount of time needed to recover. When he was not practicing, he had to wear a wrist support, which was basically a thick padded thing that was wrapped around his wrist and thumb, which seemed to be made out of wetsuit material. With it wrapped tightly around his wrist, he could use it for simple things. It strengthened his wrist and helped with the healing, but he still had to be careful when lifting or twisting.

He had made it his practice to go running along the beach when he woke up, as the sun rose to make him feel less guilty about sleeping in until eleven. That helped him feel a little less like a couch potato. That evening, as Harry lay dozing, the door opened and McGonagall came in. Checking his watch, Harry realised that it was Animagus time. He had lost track of time. He had been thinking about his home, about the Dursleys, about Ron and Hermione and all that he had left behind. He also thought about Rose, Ginny and his family here. If he went back, he would be turning his back on those who loved him, just as he would be if he stayed. If he went back, he would condemn a world to fight alone, just as he would if he stayed. If he went back he would be putting his life and the lives of everyone he loved in both worlds in danger, just as he would if he stayed. It wasn't a happy thought, but it was all that filled Harry's mind.

For the next fortnight they practiced every night, and after a week, Harry progressed on to changing toes and well as fingers. Once Harry had managed to stretch his toes, it was simply a matter of being able to hold the transformation for extended amount of time. It was basically endurance training. Harry found that after about fifteen seconds, his hands and feet began to ache and then it really hurt once they returned to normal and then just ached for a long time afterwards. He had progressed away from needed to meditate first, and could grow his nails with little more than a thought. McGonagall also had him grow them, hold it for five seconds, shrink them, and then five seconds later do it all again. After two repetitions his hands began to sting, but she assured him that the more he did it, the less it would hurt.

Just then the door opened and Dumbledore stepped into the room. Harry was relieved as it would give his aching hands a short break.

"Sorry to interrupt," the Headmaster said. "Ah, the Caribbean." He added upon taking in the surroundings. "I really must visit you more often, Harry."

McGonagall rose to her feet as the Headmaster entered. He sat himself down on the sunlounger opposite Harry.

"If you no longer need me, I've got some essays to mark," she said before receiving a nod from Dumbledore and leaving.

"How is your training going?" asked Dumbledore.

“Animagus training is good. I just need to find my form,” said Harry. “As for Occlumency, well, now I have an idea what to aim for, I think it will work a little better. I’m just getting to grips with the idea of clearing my mind.”

“It will come in time.”

“I’m not very good at subtly,” said Harry. “Potions and Occlumency seem to defeat me. Snape always said I don’t have the patience or skill for such tasks. I am better at Defence and Charms than that kind of thing.” He remembered Snape’s initial introduction to Potions in Harry’s first year, just before he had spotted Harry. As there is no foolish wand-waving and silly incantations he did not expect many to understand the subtle art and exact science that was potions making. He had been right. Harry didn’t do subtle or exact. Battle was a much more fluid situation where improvisation and adaptation were the key to success, not precision and technique. Hermione sometimes needed to realise that. Having said that, her knowledge had saved him time and time again.

“Again, it will come in time, if you are willing to put the effort in,” said Dumbledore.

“So what was the reason you wanted to talk to me?” asked Harry.

“I believe that you are now more or less strong enough to face the world,” said Dumbledore. “Obviously I can’t just take you into the Great Hall. We need to get the word out. Over the last fortnight, I have circulated word that you have left the Dark Lord’s service. Not to the Ministry, but I had Mundungus Fletcher start the rumour in Knockturn Alley. The underworld are talking about you. I am proposing that we enter this article into the tomorrow’s prophet.”

He produced a sheet of parchment from his pocket and handed it to Harry. Harry glanced over it. It was good, but it was not enough. Harry knew from experience that one honest article would not sway the masses. It would do little to no good.

“And then what?” he asked. “People won’t just believe you. Trust me, after last year, I know how the public will take this, especially if there is an emotional attachment. They’ll crucify me and you’ll be removed of all titles.”

“Which is why after the article, you will have a meeting with Alastor Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt, Amelia Bones, and possibly Dawlish if I can get both him and Kingsley away. Next the Ministry and the Wizengamot.”

“But they will want answers, answers I can’t give,” protested Harry. “And if they give me Veritaserum.”

“You have the right to refuse,” said Dumbledore, “and it will not come to that, not while I run the Wizengamot.”

“Even if you call it amnesia, they’ll still... it won’t work,” said Harry. No-one would believe them. It was *deja-vu*. He would be feared and despised here as well as in his world.

“We have no other choice,” said Dumbledore. “It is far from ideal, I know. But what else is there?”

“I hope you’re right, for all our sakes,” muttered Harry. “Fine, with my mother’s permission, go with it. Just brace for impact. And keep an eye on Rose, once this breaks, the students are going to come down on her like a tonne of bricks.” Harry didn’t want her or Ginny to suffer on account of him. Too many people had already done so, and he didn’t need them on his conscience.

“It will be taken care of,” said Dumbledore, rising to leave.

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Ginny Weasley had just finished her second poached egg the following morning at breakfast when Rose entered the Great Hall. She sat down next to Ginny and helped herself to a large piece of watermelon and half a grapefruit.

“Sleep well?” asked Ginny.

“Hibernated,” replied Rose.

Ginny smiled to herself. She hadn’t seen Rose so happy since before Harry disappeared. It was as if someone had re-lit the fire that had long since gone out in her. She smiled, genuinely smiled. She seemed to be holding her head high once again, instead of hiding in the shadows. She looked a year younger than she had a month ago. It was almost as if the last two years had not happened. Harry had finally done something good for her.

When they had first met, Ginny had not trusted him. She had not wanted to, maybe that was it. She had read about what he done, and believed in it. She didn’t believe his story. She had even gone to Hermione Granger and asked if she thought it was possible. The answer had been anything is possible, but that is as improbable as it was possible to be. But, the real Harry or no, he was back, he had suffered for the Order and he had not broken. Maybe this really was for real. It seemed too good to be true, for Rose-Marie anyway. Maybe, just maybe it was true.

Just then there came the flapping of wings from overhead. Ginny glanced up to see hundred of owls come swooping into the Great Hall. It briefly occurred to Ginny that if there was a hole in the ceiling or them to get in, why did they not get a draft in the Great Hall, or wet if it rains. Probably some form of spell. Merlin knows, the roof of the Burrow had its fair share of leaks, until Bill and Charlie had gone around and sealed them up.

As the bird delivered their payloads to various people in the hall, Ginny became increasingly aware of the whispering that was going on. A nervous whisper seemed to have broken out and crowds were gathering around those with a paper. *Oh Merlin*, thought Ginny.

*What has happened now? What has You-Know-Who attacked?* The whispering grew louder, and to her surprise, Ginny noticed several glances being shot over to her and more specifically, to Rose. Ginny suddenly realised what the article must be about.

She glanced around looking for the nearest owner of a copy. She glanced at Ron, who was completely oblivious to what was going on and was currently stuffing his face with hash browns.

“Hermione,” called Ginny, addressing the girl who was reading a copy by herself two places to her right. “Can we borrow your copy?”

The bushy-haired girl nodded and passed the paper over to her. Ginny laid the paper flat between her and Rose.

“Jesus,” muttered Rose, just as Ginny muttered ‘Merlin’.

### ***HARRY POTTER DEFECTS!***

*In December 1994, amid the destruction of Diagon Alley, in what has become known as the Black Noel, one name was whispered with almost the same respects as the Dark Lord himself. Knockturn Alley was alive with the buzz of gossip. Rumours circulated that the Dark Lord had one Death Eater he valued above all others, one lieutenant, one heir. Who was this mysterious figure who had murdered the Minister of Magic? Who could rise above the ranks of the Death Eaters to sit on the Devil’s right hand? Many names and aliases were whispered, many tales of terror and destruction at the hands of the Dark Knight. It was not until the infamous Gringott’s Siege of 1995 when the world learned the truth. The Dark Knight went by the name Harry Potter.*

*Harry James Potter was the first son of Lily and James Potter, a Hogwarts Professor and Auror respectively. He was born in July 1980. His parents were amongst the forerunners in the fight against the Dark Lord. He grew up as any normal boy would, and when he was eleven received the famous letter from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Everything seemed to be proceeding normally, until the last day of August 1994. Harry Potter disappeared in the middle of the night. It quickly became one of the biggest man-hunts in Wizarding history. He was next seen at Diagon Alley in December 1994. We all know the stories that followed.*

*Since then, the name Harry Potter has been associated with death and destruction. The now 16 year old Death Eater has been missing since he disappeared in August 1994, however after Black Noel, the Missing Presumed Dead, tag was replaced with Wanted Dead or Alive. The bounty for information leading to the capture of Harry Potter is second only to He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named. Among his most*

*infamous exploits are the attacks on Diagon Alley, Canamaro Square, and setting Dragon's loose in Butlin's Holiday Park. But there is however, one final twist to the Harry Potter saga: Amnesia. Rita Skeeter can exclusively reveal that after suffering a massive mental trauma, Harry Potter has suffered near total memory loss.*

*Upon his arrest last month, and right up until his escape, Potter's behaviour was described as confused and erratic. While his words were dismissed as a mind-trick, it now appears that Mr. Potter truly does not know why he was being arrested. The exact cause of his mental trauma is still unknown, but Mr. Potter claims to have no memory of any of the atrocities he has committed. Does this make him innocent? Far from it, whether he remembers or not does not change the fact that he did in fact commit them. While it is easy to dismiss this claim as nothing more than a mind-game or an attempt to reduce his sentence, one must consider the possibility that it is true. What if you were to wake up one day, not knowing what you had done and being told that you were Britain's second most wanted?*

*Potter's location is a closely guarded secret at present, though the boy has been vouched for by Albus Dumbledore, current headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Dumbledore has long been known for his unorthodox decisions, such as the hiring of Half-Giant Rubeus Hagrid as Hogwarts Gamekeeper. With one of Potter's parents on his teaching staff, Albus Dumbledore's view can hardly be seen as unbiased. Potter has yet to be questioned by the Aurors, though that is set to happen in the next few days. The Minister of Magic was unable to comment at this time, as was Albus Dumbledore and Master Aurors, Moody, Dawlish and Shackbolt.*

So, it had finally broken. Part of Ginny was relieved, part of her scared. She was worried about how this would affect Rose. She had met Harry twice more since the first time. She had seen the extent to which he had suffered. He refused to talk about it, saying that it didn't matter now that he was back, but Ginny wasn't stupid. He was covered in bandages and had spent over a week in a coma and then a nearly another fortnight before he was strong enough to leave the room.

All around them, heads were turning, gazes were falling on Rose, who's face showed a mixture of emotion. Ginny glanced over at the head table, where Professor Potter was reading her own copy over a bowl of cereal. Ginny watched her exchange a quick glance with Dumbledore before glancing over at Rose. Her eyes met Ginny's briefly, but long enough for the professor to beckon her over.

Ginny rose and quickly made her way to the top table, several eyes following her. She caught a few pieces of conversation on the way.

*He can't be coming back, not after what he has done.*

*It's a lie, I don't believe of for a second.*

*You expect me to trust him.*

*I bet she's in on it too. Harboring a criminal. It doesn't say he's pardoned.*

*You reckon there's a reward if we find him. I reckon he's here somewhere*

*We'll ask in Potions.*

Ginny reached the table after a few seconds. The Potion's Mistress beckoned her to lean in close.

"You've read the *Prophet*?" asked Potter. Ginny nodded, causing to the teacher to smile slightly. "So by now everyone knows. The reason I wanted to talk to you was because, by now, rumours will be flying around. You are the only one, aside from Rose-Marie, who already knew. You are in her classes all day, are you not?"

"I am," said Ginny.

"I want you to stay with her. Everyone is going to want answers from her. She needs someone to help her. Don't let he be hassled all day." Ginny glanced over to Rose who was already in a conversation with another Gryffindor. Ginny wasn't sure if it was about Harry was chances are it was. Poor Rose; Ginny knew just as her mother did, that Rose was not going to have an easy day.

"I'll do my best," said Ginny. "I could hear the whispering on the way here. I think you'll get a barrage of questions in your lessons."

"I can deal with it," said Potter calmly. "Rosie is going to have a hard day and she will need a friend, the fact you already knew will help."

"So am I supposed to stop people asking her anything?" asked Ginny.

"Do what you feel is right," said Lily. She could have been a little more specific. "If she seems alright let her, be, if it gets out of hand, intervene."

"And if I'm asked?"

"Be careful with the facts. Amnesia, that is to be the only message getting out."

"Okay, luckily were don't have Snape until tomorrow. He'd be a nightmare." Ginny noticed a small smile spread over the teacher's face. She had been to school with Snape, as well as working with him for ages. She knew what he was like. Was he unpopular even in the staff-room?

“I’ll speak to him,” said Lily. “Now, you’d better get back. It looks like your brother has spotted the article and subtlety is not what he is famous for.”

Ginny swore under her breath as she glanced back over to the table where Ron was reading the Prophet and slowly turning red. Ginny headed back to table just as Ron finished the article. She arrived back in time to hear him start his barrage against her friend.

“You knew? Why didn’t you tell...how long?” he stammered.

“Shut up, Ron,” said Ginny hotly, taking a seat. “I knew as well. And we were ordered not to say anything.”

“You knew?” said Ron, going even redder. He was clearly getting angry. It took all Ginny’s composure not to roll her eyes.

“Yes I knew.”

“You’re a member?”

“RON!” snapped Rose. She gestured at Hermione Granger who was sitting next to her. How could Ron be stupid enough to mention the Order at the dinner table of all places?

“How come you’re a member?” snapped Ron, his anger getting the better of him. “I’m a year old than you and they never asked me. What I want to know is why Ginny, who is least able to defend herself, gets to join when none of us can!”

Ginny suddenly felt furious. Least able to defend herself, indeed. Her spell work was just as good as Ron’s was; she was capable of an E in charms and Defence though Snape informed her every day that she was destined for a T. If Ron didn’t stop soon she’s prove it with a well-placed Bat-Bogey Hex.

“It’s got nothing to do with that,” said Rose calmly. “And for your information, Ginny is more than capable of defending herself.”

“So why is she in?” asked Ron.

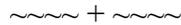
“It’s because of Harry,” said Rose calmly, buttering a slice of toast.

“You’ve met him?” asked a startled Hermione.

“Twice,” said Ginny matter-of-factly.

“And...” Ginny was suddenly aware that it was silent around them and everyone seemed to be listening to him.

“And he seemed nice enough, if a little confused,” said Ginny picking her words carefully.



Lily Potter marched into the Potions Classroom just as the clock on the wall struck nine. Usually, she would have had to tell the occupants of the room to calm down and get ready. Usually they would be chatting, playing, and all crammed onto the back few rows. Not today. Everyone seemed to be crammed to the front and they all sat in silence, looking eagerly at Lily as she removed her cloak and threw it over the back of her chair.

The class comprised of sixth year students from all four houses. They sat in perfect stillness during the register. Lily knew why this was and she also knew that this was how every class that day would begin. She sat at the desk in silence for a few seconds before beginning.

“The elixirs you made last lesson require two weeks to ferment, and as such are not ready for you to continue with. Consequently, today’s double lesson will be split in two. For the second half, we will be making Bone Replacement Potion, commercially nick-named Skele-gro. This is an immensely complex potion. It is made in one hour. You are consequently on the go as the ingredients go off quickly in the air and must be properly prepped and added on a tight time frame. At first glance it seems quite simple, but it is easy to lose composure, get flustered and miss a deadline, and therefore ruin a potion. For the first half, I’m afraid it will be purely theory, so place your equipment to one side and grab a quill.”

Lily had her lesson plan all mapped out. She would discuss the differences between reptilian and mammalian ingredients and the consequences of their use. She would teach them how they react to different categories of ingredients and see if they could put together a recipe based on the simple specification she provided. NEWT level was all about the ‘why’. Why did ingredients go together, or not as the case may be, and hence how given a problem, ingredients should be selected. As it was, she didn’t even finish three sentences before the first hand went up, and unsurprisingly it was a blond haired Slytherin.

“Do you have any thoughts about the *Prophet* this morning, Professor?” sneered the Slytherin.

“Many, and none of them are your concern, Mr. Malfoy,” said Lily coldly. She took a deep breath and was about to launch back into her introduction about reptilian blood, when the boy spoke again.

“Have you seen him yet?” asked Malfoy, rising from his seat.

Lily sighed and walked over to in front of Malfoy’s desk. She glared down at the young Slytherin, making a mental note to inform Severus of his interruptions. Not that it would do any good. Aside from overtly favouring his own house, Severus could not punish him as he had to keep up the appearance of being a loyal Death Eater. Lily also was not allowed to elaborate too much on the situation.

“Mr. Malfoy, I am not at liberty to say much about this,” said Lily icily. “If you interrupt, you will find yourself helping Mr. Filch to clean the owlery this evening without magic, is that understood?”

Reluctantly, the blond sat down, glaring daggers at Lily.

“And wipe that look of your face,” snapped Lily. “Sulking is very unbecoming of a Malfoy.” A murmur of laughter went around the room. It was not her custom to put Slytherins down unless they deserved it and this boy definitely did. She would just as happily put down a Gryffindor should they behave likewise. Firm, but fair. Having said that, she did feel a certain pleasure at striking out at Lucius Malfoy’s son.

“But you must know something,” said a voice suddenly. Lily’s eyes fell on Ron Weasley. He had once been Harry’s friend, she knew. He was often around for Order meetings with Ginny, but Lily did not know him too well. He sat next to his girlfriend, Lavender, with Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan on his right. Lily noted that Hermione Granger was sitting well away from the rest of that her housemates, her books open and looking a trifle annoyed at the interruption. Lily smiled inwardly. She knew that she used to be like that before a certain raven-haired boy had brought her out of her shell. Someone needed to drag this girl out of her shell, or she would be so busy reading about wizards who had lost their lives, that she would forget to live hers.

Lily stared at Ron for a few seconds then gazed around the class. Everyone else sat in perfect silence. One could have heard a pin drop. Lily sighed knowing that there was no way around this.

“Fine,” she said, bringing smiles to the other faces. “Ten minutes. After that we are continuing and anyone who doesn’t finish this lesson will come back after dinner and remain here until they finish. Anyone have a problem with that?”

“No, Professor,” chorused the class.

“Okay, I will answer your questions as best I can,” she said evenly. “In return, you leave Rose-Marie alone, is that understood. You don’t harass her, and if I find out that she is being harassed, that person will find themselves in detention until the end of term with Mr. Filch, and each evening they will write me a one thousand word report on the detention and what they have learned from it. Is that understood?”

“Yes,” said everyone in more or less unison. Some looked a tad more nervous, and would probably not speak to Rosie at all that day. Not necessarily a bad thing, concluded Lily.

“Then begin,” said Lily, looking at Ron.

“Where is he now?” asked Ron.

“Close enough,” said Lily. “I can’t say exactly where.”

“Is he coming back to school?” this time from Dean. “To our dormitory?”

“That is as of yet undecided,” said Lily, sitting down behind her desk and removing a Thermos flask from her bag. Old habits died hard; they say if you have more than three cups of tea per day you are addicted. If that was true, Lily was buggered, but she didn’t care. Some people are addicted to tobacco, heroin, or alcohol: tea is nowhere near as bad as those. Tea is fantastic. One cup and the world seems a better place. God was on form when he created tea. “His whole future is still unknown. He faces an interrogation by the Aurors and Wizengamot. Since he was never expelled and just left, he can still come back. I can’t say if this will happen though. His skill is such that he may just take NEWTs and not return to school. Even if he did, he may not return to Gryffindor Tower, but rather stay with me in the staff wing. But all this is speculation, until the Aurors, the Ministry, the Board of Governors and Professor McGonagall come to a decision, you will not be seeing him.” She poured herself a cup of tea from the Thermos flask and placed it back in her bag before sipping the tea.

“But you have seen him?” said Malfoy speaking out of turn again.

“I told you not to interrupt,” said Lily. “And yes, I have seen him.” A murmur went around the room at that, and several people exchanged concerned glances.

“Isn’t that harbouring a fugitive?” smirked the blond. “Is that not a crime in itself?”

“And what about your father?” snarled Ron from his desk.

“My father was cleared of all charges,” said Malfoy. “It was in the papers nearly three weeks ago. He was under the Imperius Curse when he allegedly attacked you on the train. That had been proved and he is a free man.” Lily grimaced internally. Malfoy had indeed pleaded bewitchment and had somehow gotten off. Lily was sure gold had changed hands. Luckily Albus had wiped Lucius Malfoy’s memory and didn’t know it was Harry who was responsible for his capture.

“We all know that’s bollocks, Malfoy,” said Ron, seething with anger. “We all know you’re a Death Eater’s son.”

“Prove it,” said Malfoy, leaning back in his chair, looking smug.

“You are eating into your ten minutes,” said Lily evenly. “Lucius Malfoy’s innocence or guilt is not what we are discussing here. And that will be five points from Gryffindor for language, Mr. Weasley.” Reluctantly, Ron sat back down, though continued to glare at Malfoy who was smirking at him. Several members of the class had their hands in the air.

“Is it true he has no memory?” asked Parvati Patil. Lily glanced at the girl, who she knew was only here to learn beauty potions and hair-care potions. It made Lily laugh when she thought of it, but she put that aside.

“He suffered a massive mental trauma shortly before his arrest which seems to have wiped most of his memory,” said Lily carefully. It was a lie she had rehearsed, but she wanted to make sure she got it right. “He no longer remembers most of his life or experiences. His skills, instincts and fundamental knowledge, for example, the ability to read, write, speak English, are unaffected. He still knows what Floo is and who is the Minister of magic, but all his identity and his personal history are a mystery to him. He has dreams, nightmares about what he has done, and is feeling huge amounts of guilt for it.”

“And so he should,” said a voice icily.

Lily shot a glare instinctively at the speaker, Hannah Abbot from Hufflepuff. Lily sighed, knowing all too well her reason for speaking out. Her mother had been killed nearly six months ago, when she tried to defend Hannah’s Aunt and baby cousin from an attack. Her mother had died at the hands of Harry Potter. Lily remembered seeing the pictures in the *Prophet* of the cold, dead infant, next to the mess that was Hannah’s mother.

“I know where you are coming from,” said Lily evenly. “Nothing I can say will comfort you. All I can do is point out that he does not remember ever doing it. He is a changed person now. Last time I spoke to him, he said that he didn’t want to know who he was anymore, because everything he had found out, he wanted to forget. Is that the thinking of a murderer?”

“Tigers never change their stripes,” said Hannah coldly. “And how do we know your love for your son hasn’t clouded your judgement. Maybe you want him back so much you have blinded yourself from the fact that he is a monster.” There was a gasp from everyone. No one spoke to a professor like that, especially not this professor, or Snape. Lily opened her mouth to take points from Hufflepuff, but managed to stop herself.

Lily couldn’t answer that and she knew it. She couldn’t ask her to forgive Harry. She couldn’t tell her way she knew, only that she did. He had murdered her mother and nothing could bring her back. Susan would hate Harry for the rest of her days.

“I can offer you no proof,” said Lily softly. “All I can say is that Harry faces a trial by the Wizengamot and Aurors, before anything can happen to him. They will be your proof. Now, any other questions?” She glanced at the few remaining hands in the air. Most had lowered their to ponder her response to a very personal question. He picked one. “Yes, Miss Granger.”

“Is it not strange that he only lost some knowledge?” asked Hermione.

“What do you mean?” asked Lily cautiously. She felt the awkwardness in the pit of her stomach. Granger was very clever, too clever in some respects. Had she already seen through the façade?

“I mean, it is very selective what memory he has lost,” she said. “I can understand remembering skills and muscle memory and things like that. Reading and writing, okay I can go with, they are instinct after all those years, but to know who the Minister of Magic is? Using Floo? That’s not the sort of thing that would be instinct. Why would he recall that?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I just noticed an inconsistency. Is it not possible that he knows more than he is willing to reveal?”

“He met the Minister after his capture last month,” said Lily. “He is picking up knowledge all the time, relearning things. He also has dreams. They say that imprisonment is the worst punishment, and having visited Azkaban once with my husband, I can verify that it is horrific. However, Harry has nightmares of all that he has done. He has no memory of doing them, he is a changed person, but he still dreams of violence, death and destruction the likes of which I don’t dare imagine, night after night. He has to relive it night after night, even though he, from his point of view, never did it. He is trapped in a nightmare he cannot escape from. He is suffering over this too. He is not a pleasure cruise.” She seemed to accept the answer.

“How can you be sure he is for real and this is not a trick?” asked a Ravenclaw near the back. “What is to stop one of these dreams triggering him to remember who he is and return to his wicked ways? This lack of proof bothers me. I personally, don’t believe it, based on the information I have. No offence, professor.”

Lily knew the answer, but she also knew that she couldn’t give it. She couldn’t tell them where he came from, nor that these nightmares wouldn’t cause him to remember as he never knew it in the first place. This was a different person, but they didn’t understand; they couldn’t, they mustn’t. This was an argument that she couldn’t win because the answers weren’t hers to give. She sighed inwardly and wondered if Rosie was fairing any better.

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Ginny stood with Rose threw their things into their bags with added urgency at the end of Professor Flitwick’s Charm’s lesson. They had just had double charms and since they had worked together, they had both managed to avoid the inevitable interrogation that they would both receive during the lunch break. The two Gryffindors slung their bags over their shoulders and almost ran out of the room, before the others in the room could say anything.

A rather inefficient detour later, the two girls arrived at the Great Hall, five minutes later than they would have been had they gone directly. The few people they had encountered had been alone and had wisely kept their distance from the girls, both of whom had their wands in their hands ready. Both expected a certain blond haired Slytherin to appear at any moment.

As the girls arrived at the Great Hall, Rose’s heart fell and Ginny turned a shade of red in fury that seemed to match her hair. There was a crowd around a section of the Gryffindor table, through which Rose could just about see a head of red hair and could certainly hear a familiar voice preaching to the audience.

“Yes, my family has always been very close to the Potters,” Ron was telling his audience. Rose knew he had a lot of brothers to compete with, and craved attention, but this seemed low. Rose didn’t know if she felt more angry or betrayed. She glared furiously at Ron, but her anger

was nothing compared to Ginny's. Just as Rose had inherited her mother's fiery temper, Ginny had inherited her mother's ability to shout. How could Ron do this? It infuriated Rose the way he tried to impress Lavender by claiming that he was involved in Dumbledore's hush-hush fight against Voldemort. This was a new low. Harry had described Ron as being a tad jealous of being in the shadow of the Boy-Who-Lived. Here, he was not in anyone's shadow except his brothers. Nor did he have the experience of combat as Harry's Ron did. How could Ron be so oblivious to the ways of the world? How could he be so insensitive?

"I am not allowed to tell you too much about what is going on," continued Ron, loving the limelight. "Security reasons and all that."

"But you must know something," pressed a Ravenclaw first year.

"Of course I do," said Ron affronted. Rose glanced up at the head table. Unfortunately her mother was not present. She knew the inevitable interrogation would come, sooner or later, but Rose had every intention of putting it off as long as possible. She didn't have to justify herself to anyone. With her mother absent, people would inevitably ask the questions she feared.

"And what would that be, Weasley?" drawled a familiar voice, from somewhere in the crowd. *Oh great*, thought Rose. Malfoy was there as well. "Well?"

Ron looked a tad flustered, but managed to recover. "I told you, my hands are tied, I can't tell you much. Let's just say that the Prophet's report is accurate. Ginny and Rose will tell you the same."

Rose glanced at Ginny who sighed apologetically for her brother.

"Ready?" asked Ginny, laying a hand on Rose's shoulder for support.

"As I'll ever be," muttered Rose, before starting forward and pushing her way through the crowd. As the audience noticed the two new arrivals, the crowd parted to let them through. Ron, Rose noticed, went a deeper shade of red as the girls sat opposite him on the Gryffindor table.

"What's going on?" asked Ginny in false innocence.

"You're idiot brother was telling us everything he knows," supplied Malfoy. "So as you can imagine, it didn't take long," he added, sneering at Ron.

"What's he been saying?" asked Rose. Ginny thought she heard a note of concern in his voice.

"That you're harbouring a fugitive," sneered Malfoy. "If the Ministry heard that you were hiding a mass-murderer, you would all be in Azkaban."

“As if you don’t know where your aunt is hiding,” snapped Rose. “As if you don’t know where your father is, while he grovels at the feet, begging for power like a sick puppy. Is that what you want in life, Malfoy. To spend your time on your knees? Where’s your Malfoy pri...”

Malfoy’s wand shot out of his sleeve into his hand in the blink of an eye. The boy’s face turned pink in anger. He was seething with rage. He levelled his wand at Rose’s throat, just as the wands of almost everyone else gather levelled at his. He was outnumbered thirty-to-one; thirty-to-three if you included Crabbe and Goyle. Rose stood perfectly still; she hadn’t even withdrawn her wand.

“Tell me Malfoy, is it customary for Malfoys to kiss the feet of Half-Bloods?” asked Rose calmly. “You did know, didn’t you? According to Harry, the man’s a Half-Blood. Just because he murdered his father, doesn’t mean he isn’t still half and half. The heir of Slytherin a Half Blood, now there’s irony for you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Half-Breed,” sneered Malfoy, lowering his wand. “You and your parents picked the wrong side, the losing side. No one stands against the Dark Lord; even with your foolish brother, you have gained nothing. The Dark Lord will rip him apart. He made him, and he can break him just as easily. One day soon, Potter, you, your brother and your whole filthy family will meet a very sticky end.”

Unblinkingly, Rose raised both her hands and clapped once, twice three times, slowly. “Good, speech,” she said calmly. “I didn’t want to interrupt. It sounded really good. You really ought to write all that down.” She was glad to see that this only made the blond madder, luckily before he could utter a spell, they were interrupted.

“What’s going on here?” asked a voice at that moment. Rose sighed inwardly in relief. Professor Potter had arrived in the nick of time. “Mr. Malfoy, I believe I told you not to pursue your investigation here,” she continued.

“Professor,” said Malfoy calmly. “I have not asked your daughter a single question. I was merely informing her of current affairs, and the nature of causality, as well as listening to Weasley’s riveting tale of what he doesn’t know.”

“Am I to understand that you, Ron, have taking it on yourself to inform the school about the article in this morning’s *Prophet*?” asked the Potion’s Mistress, advancing on the shaky looking Gryffindor.

“Well...” began Ron, stammering on the single word.

“And if you don’t mind me asking,” continued Lily firmly. “How have you acquired this knowledge? I know for a fact that you have not come into contact with my son, and both your sister and my daughter had specific instructions to keep their mouths shut until the Aurors had conducted their interviews.”

The crowd seemed to hang on every word. Ron was a deep shade of crimson and it was getting darker.

“Next time you wish to share your expertise, make sure you have the facts first,” she said sharply. “The rest of you can return to your tables.” With that she swept past them and up to the top table.

Ginny waited for the crowd to disperse, before she turned on her brother.

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Lily Potter made a quiet exit from the Great Hall once she had finished her dinner. As soon as Minerva had entered the hall, she knew that the Animagus training was over. Harry would be alone, and after today, she needed to talk to him. Despite her arrangement with the Sixth years that morning, she knew that Rosie and Ginny would have been barraged with questions all day. It had been a very long day and right now she needed someone to talk to. It was lonelier being a teacher than most people realised, especially at a boarding school. Her husband was away with the Aurors most of the time, though when he was allowed leave he would spend most of it at Hogwarts, but he could always be called back in, in the case of emergency. She had her daughter, but when it came to people her own age, she had little contact. The other staff were all lovely people, even Severus once one managed to see past the outward hostility. She had friends of course, but she rarely saw them. She would occasionally leave at the weekend to go and see them, but with all the work she had, it seemed that she ended up in her office working more and more at the weekends. And then there was the Order. She was not required in the field, but that was more of her time she did not have to herself. Right now, she needed someone to talk to; someone who knew what she had been through, someone who knew the truth.

She left the hall discretely, but not discretely enough, for a certain pair of steely grey eyes, which had been watching her intently, narrowed as she left.

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Draco Malfoy watched the Potions Mistress leave the Hall, after a quick glance each way. His eyes narrowed. It was time. That morning, when she had been asked where Potter was being kept, he had seen it in her eyes. He was close. Since he had allegedly turned, but was not in Ministry custody, that must mean that Dumbledore’s band of Mudbloods must have him. *Ten to one*, Draco thought to himself. *Potter is in the castle. Twenty to one, she is going to meet him.*

Draco got up, quickly, shaking his head at Crabbe and Goyle as they started to rise with him. They sat back down and continued with their plates, which were piled high. He didn’t need them for this. He needed to be stealthy, and they were just not suited to the job. He had to be discrete. He walked quickly out of the hall, sparing a quick glance at the Potter girl. Unluckily she looked up at that moment and their eyes met. Draco panicked for a second, but managed to keep his face in his well practiced sneer he used for Gryffindors. She glared at him, and then went back to her meal.

Draco slipped quietly out of the Great Hall. He had to be careful. One of the interesting things about Professor Potter was that she seemed to have a sixth sense. She always seemed to know where people were in the castle. She knew if someone was hiding around corners and in broom closets. If someone was absent from her class without good reason, she would send a prefect to fetch them, knowing precisely where they were. No one knew how she did it. Draco hoped she didn't detect him, he needed to find her son; he needed answers.

Once he got out of the hall, he accelerated to a quick jog, but concentrated on keeping his footsteps light. He turned right and then right again, into the passage, which ran along the side of the great hall. He hurried towards the exit that the Potions Mistress had used. He arrived at the door and glanced in all directions. The passages were all empty. He cursed inwardly to himself. He listened intently for the sound of the heels she usually wore. He couldn't hear anything. *Damn!* he cursed to himself.

Taking a gamble he sprinted up the stairs in front of him. At the top, he was just in time to see a head of long red hair and a black cloak sweep around the corner at the far end. Was it her, or was it the Weasel girl? No, she was eating in the hall, wasn't she? Draco ran forward, and peered around the corner. Yes! He thought. It was her.

Finally he was going to get some answers. Something about this didn't make sense. He could feel it in his bones. Being a professional liar himself, he could see that Potter was hiding something. It had been written all over her face as she had spoken about him in the lesson that morning. There was something deeper going on. When the girl had confronted him in the hall earlier that day, he had allowed himself to look ignorant. His inner Slytherin had come into play. He had sacrificed his pride to maintain the element of surprise. Rose-Marie was just ranting and giving out petty insults. Draco had known he was not going to gain any information from her. Following her mother was a much better plan. He had made it appear that he believed Potter had defected, and they had believed him. They would not be so guarded with their conversation if he acted as though he was not suspicious. His pride had taken a knock, and he had had to suffer Pansy telling him how he should have cursed Weasley into the next world, but on the whole Draco was happy with the situation. Now he was going to find out exactly what Harry Potter was up to. He was not stupid; Draco knew that some things didn't make sense.

Firstly, they wouldn't seriously just think about letting him loose into the school population. He had done so much damage in the name of the Dark Lord that he could never be pardoned. Did Dumbledore really expect everyone to just forgive him. The Hufflepuff girl was just the beginning. He had killed many more than just her mother. Draco knew of eleven people who had lost a member of their immediate family to Potter and the Death Eaters, and many more whose parent had been Aurors. If Dumbledore thought that he could just let Harry Potter join classes again, then he really was as foolish as father always said.

Secondly, there was Harry himself. They said he had lost his memory, which Draco didn't entirely believe. As much as he loathed admitting it, Granger had a point. What Harry apparently could remember wasn't consistent. If he did recall all his skills, then he was still a killer heart, so what had changed? He would still bare the Dark Mark, which Draco himself hoped to bare one day. She had mentioned nightmares. What was stopping him remembering

who he was? Nothing. If his instincts were intact, why was he running to a group of Mudbloods, rather than to the Dark Lord. That was another thing. Why turn your back on the Dark Lord. He was clearly winning this war. It was only a matter of time. Those who stand in the way would die. So why would he defect. Why not return to his master and get his memory back? There was no logic in his moves. Something didn't add up.

Maybe it was a trick. Potter was not stupid enough to betray the Dark Lord. Maybe this was all a trick and he was working for the Dark Lord. Maybe this would finally cripple Dumbledore's forces. Draco smirked at the thought. He had to get to Potter, find out where he was. He had to be sure. Most likely this was a trick. Maybe he could help. Harry Potter was his right hand man. No other Death Eater had the power he did. Even father had had to bow to Potter in the past, much to his disgust. The Death Eaters often stabbed each other in the back to gain the Dark Lord's favour, but none dared to touch Potter, for his anger carried the wrath of the Dark Lord. If Draco could help Potter out, then he might carry him on and get him the Mark. Draco was a Malfoy, and that meant that while power was the ultimate objective, it also meant that he weighted up his chances. To be perfectly honest, a life as a foot soldier did not appeal to him. He was not supposed to walk amongst the masses. He was a Malfoy. He was supposed to command their respect.

But to oppose the Death Eaters, meant death, with no uncertain terms. He had to side with the Dark Lord. Neutrality would not be an option once he left school. He could stand with Dumbledore and die, or he could join the Darkness. That gave him the chance of survival. But he didn't want to be just another anonymous Death Eater. His father was a cold bastard and he knew that he could expect no help from him. He was fairly sure that Lucius would happily cut out Draco's heart, or his wife's if it would gain him favour with the Dark Lord. But Potter on the other hand. Potter was a shortcut. If Draco could get to him, befriend the legendary Harry Potter and aid him, maybe he could carry Draco into the Dark Lord's favour. Draco could be initiated immediately into a position of power greater than his father's. He remembered his father's disapproval that Granger had received higher marks than him in all exams. He had put Draco down time and time again. But when Draco immersed into the inner circle, on Potter's right hand, having the power to command his father to do his every bidding, Lucius would see that Draco was now the man of the house.

Draco wiped the smile off his face as he pursued the Potion's Mistress down the passage. She climbed the stairs onto the third floor. Draco waited in the shadows until she was clear of the top of the steps. He was about to step out, when he heard the sound of heavy feet running up the passage behind him. Draco stepped further back into the shadows. He held his breath as a familiar figure sprinted around the corner. He felt a flush of anger as he recognised the figure. Pansy Parkinson ran forward to the bottom of the stairs and then glanced upwards. After a quick glance she ran up the stairs, her heels clicking on every step.

Damn! cursed Draco silently. She was following Potter too. Parkinson's parents were also Death Eaters, though not inner circle. Pansy was ideal foot-soldier material, Draco realised. She was vicious and for lack of a better word evil. However she was as thick as pig-dung. She didn't have the ability to think beyond what was in front of her face. Draco could think ahead and that was why he deserved more than she did. The foolish girl was attempting to follow the

Potions Mistress. He wondered if she had come to the same conclusion or had merely realised that if Draco was following her, then she should as well. It seemed perfectly obvious that Potter was lying. Oops! Draco realised he had mentioned he didn't believe her to Vince and Greg earlier and Pansy had been there. She was going to try and find Potter and let her father know. If Lucius had mentioned nothing, this whole Potter ploy must be a need to know. She could ruin everything. Draco cursed again, before tip-toeing up the stairs.

He withdrew his wand, preparing to stun Pansy. He couldn't let her mess this up for him. As he turned left to follow the two women, he froze. Pansy was turning right at the end of the passage. As she got to the corner, Draco saw her freeze. He watched in horror as she took two paces backwards. From around the corner, the figure of Professor Potter stepped out of the shadows.

"Looking for something, Miss Parkinson?" she asked icily. *What have you done, Pansy?* cursed Draco silently. She had gone and gotten caught. *Stupid slag!* Pansy tried to stammer an answer, but brains never were her strong point. She couldn't get a coherent word out.

"If you have no business here, get back to your common room," snapped Potter. Draco rolled his eyes. As a Potions Mistress, she wasn't that bad. Not as good as Snape had been, but she knew her stuff. She was fairly popular amongst students, though possibly mainly for looks. She was after all, the only shagable member of staff. It was also a well-known fact that she was not to be messed with, and had quite a temper. Pansy didn't see that.

"I can be here if *I* want to," replied Pansy, making Draco cringe. He was embarrassed to be in the same house as someone so stupid.

"You can also be in detention with Mr. Flich for a week, if *I* want you to," said Potter icily. "Now get back to your common room, before I take points."

Pansy stood for a second before turning and stalking off.

"The same goes for you, Mister Malfoy," called the professor once Pansy was gone. Draco's eyes grew wide in shock: he had been caught. Pansy's interference must have given him away. *Damn her!* Draco stepped out of the shadow and turned, coolly walking away. He made a mental note not to try and follow her the next night, or the one after, but the one after that. For the next two nights, she would be very cautious. Two nights without any attempt should cause her to relax. Also, next time, he should follow the daughter, who would be less likely to notice him. Sounded like a plan, but in the mean time, he had to stop Pansy from doing something incredibly stupid.

Draco sprinted down the stairs and made his way as fast as he could to the Slytherin common room. He didn't even stop to take points from Weasley who was snogging Brown down one passage. On reflection, he would have vomited if he opened his mouth to speak. He didn't stop until he arrived out of breath in the common room. He arrived just in time to see Pansy closing a window. She had sent an owl!

Draco froze in horror. Pansy shot him a knowing glance. She thought she had the right thing. *Idiot! Think!* Draco walked to the desk by the window, where there were a few sheets of parchment. He picked up the top sheet and then glanced around. He spotted what he was looking for in the corner of the room. Two second-year Slytherins were sitting there, once drawing a portrait of the other in charcoal. Draco marched over and ‘confiscated’ a piece of charcoal. He returned to the desk. Turning it on its side, he rubbed it over the parchment. As he did, the charcoal filled the imprint left from Pansy writing on the sheet, which had been on top of this one. Draco’s heart fell as the letters appeared on the parchment.

Dear Father,

I read in the Prophet this morning about the defection of Harry Potter. I realised that his mother was hiding something this morning when she told us about him, so I followed her after dinner. Unfortunately, some Mudblood students happened by and asked for directions and I lost her. She was being very cautious. I believe Potter is being held in this castle.

Love

Pansy

Draco scrunched the paper in frustration. She was so stupid and a pathetic liar. She didn’t see that this had to be a trick. This was all going wrong! He had work to do, to try and rectify this show of stupidity.

~~~~~ Chapter IX ~~~~~ The Last Man Standing

*“Step by step, heart to heart, left right left,
We all fall down, like Toy Soldiers
Piece by piece, we’re torn apart, we never win,
The battle rages on, for Toy Soldiers”*

~ Eminem (Like Toy Soldiers)

Over the last two weeks, Harry had gotten to know Minerva McGonagall a lot better. Far from being the person she showed to the school, she was actually quite warm and friendly, once the ice, and there was a *lot* of ice, was broken. He had even made her smile a few times. She had been at Hogwarts many years ago and had been taught Transfiguration by Dumbledore himself. She had been in her second year, when Tom Riddle had opened the Chamber of Secrets. As Harry and McGonagall chatted about Tom Riddle as a student, Harry noticed more and more disturbing parallels between himself and the monster he was fighting to destroy. Harry was not keen to continue the conversation, and made every effort to avoid that topic in the future. This conversation did raise one interesting point: in this world, the diary had never surfaced, which worried Harry as it meant it was still out there somewhere, probably in Malfoy’s hands. Harry had informed Dumbledore on their next meeting.

His Animagus ability had increased significantly from the first exercises. Now, not only could he extend and shrink his fingers and toes, but he could also do the same with his hair. He no longer needed to meditate to be able to transform. McGonagall set more exercises based around getting comfortable with the change. Harry was eager to get on to the bit where he chose his form. He was really excited about this, though he had no idea what animal he would be. He had read the introduction to the book McGonagall had left him, but, with all the visits, Occlumency classes and Animagus training, he hadn’t found time to read the rest. He found that when he did have spare time, he always seemed to end up relaxing or meeting with Ginny and Rose. Since the article in the *Prophet* had been published, they had been in to see him at least twice a day.

The article had been published three days ago. What followed the next day was an aptly named article,

Can He Be Trusted? with the accompanying, *Has Dumbledore Finally Lost It?* on page five,

Followed this morning by the rather more provocative

Nation Calls for Dark Knight’s Arrest!

Every night, Harry’s dreams had been plagued with death and destruction. When he closed his eyes, Harry was forced to relive the crimes he had never committed. He bore witness, as his alter ego killed and tortured his way through Muggle after Muggle, Wizard after Wizard, even entire families, children and all. He saw them through his eyes and could feel the hatred and

power flowing through his veins, driving him to make that kill. He could feel the rush as another life succumbed to his power. The papers all had a point; the other Harry did deserve to burn in hell for what he had done. Everyone blamed him, but he and Harry were two different people. Harry was innocent, but he couldn't tell anyone. Usually with criminals, it was the other way around; most people are guilty and can't tell anyone. But then again, Harry was always the exception to the rule.

Judging by what Rose and Ginny had said, the school was mostly against him. There seemed to be a lot of fear and distrust amongst those who they talked to. Everyone seemed to want to know how he could be trusted. They wanted proof. Harry knew that in their position, he would want proof too. He had asked his own Dumbledore on many occasions why he trusted Snape, but he had never received an answer, hence Harry did not trust Severus Snape. The same principle applied here. Here, Harry had a perfectly good reason, but no one could ever find out. Catch bloody 22.

Harry tried to shift these things out of his mind, and concentrate on his Animagus training. His arm was more or less healed now. He still wore the wrist support and had yet to start his duelling training with the Aurors, or even to have his interview with them. That was set for three o'clock that day. Technically, he was still a fugitive. He would be interrogated by the Aurors, and hopefully cleared. Following that he simply had to attend a trial before the Wizengamot, who still had the power to overturn the Aurors and send him to Azkaban, and if he passed that trial, he would be free. That interview was yet another thing on his ever-growing to-do list.

At present, Harry was sitting on a Sun-lounger on a white sandy beach in the Room of Requirement, with hair down to his neck and eight inch fingers, in the midst of his Animagus training. He had spent the morning practicing Occlumency with Professor Flamel, who Harry had taken an immediate liking to. Harry's progress was slow, but he had made significant steps. He could just about expel Flamel from his mind if the professor forced his way in using the actual Legillimency spell. He was in the middle of reorganising his mind, to be able to hide memories from the more subtle eye-contact method. Harry wasn't sure he was making progress, but Flamel assured him he was; it just wasn't obvious to him yet. Following his Occlumency, he had had fifteen minutes for lunch before it was time for Animagus training. After nearly an hour of practice on all of the exercises, McGonagall called the proceedings to a halt.

"Very good, Harry," she complimented him, "I must say I am most impressed that you have come so far." Harry had sat through five years of her classes and not even Hermione had received such praise, at least not in front of everyone. His new found friendship with McGonagall seemed to have melted the ice in her persona.

"Well I'm not fitting it in between lessons or anything, now" said Harry, trying to sound modest. He was always embarrassed by praise. In his early years, he was punished for doing well, especially if he had done better than Dudley. That combined with his experience with the media and Colin Creevey's infernal camera, had made Harry very uncomfortable with praise. "I've had a lot of time to practice."

“And the more you do so, the faster you will progress,” said McGonagall. “Though be careful not to strain yourself. Unfortunately, we cannot take your training any further until we know what you are going to become.”

“So I get to choose my form?” asked Harry excitedly.

“No one gets to choose,” said McGonagall. “Your form will make itself known to you. Until it does you must keep up with your endurance training. This kind of transformation should become second nature to you. Keep practicing; not all the time, but a little each day.”

“So how do I find my form then?” asked Harry, struggling to keep his excitement at bay. Images of himself as a tiger, as a dragon, as an eagle and a hippogriff flooded into his mind. He could imagine himself prowling the African planes, or soaring through the air. “Is a trip to the forbidden forest in order?”

“Sadly no,” said McGonagall a touch sarcastically. “And all students, including yourself are forbidden to enter the Forbidden Forest, as it is just that: Forbidden. The clue is in the name. Now, back to your training: your form is locked inside your mind. It is a physical representation of your character. Who you are as a person affects your form, your inner animality if that is even a word.” Harry understood what she was trying to say. His strengths would reflect an animal. His Gryffindor courage and loyalty would decide. So from their forms, he could work out what the Marauders were like as people.

“So my father, being a stag,” began Harry thoughtfully. He was speaking more to himself than to McGonagall. “Is a tad vain and a natural leader. Sirius is a friendly, hyperactive, yet lovable hound and Pettigrew is a dirty little rat?” Harry practically spat the last few words.

“In a way,” said McGonagall. “Though they all had to pay a two hundred and fifty galleon fine for not registering. You may have to do the same, should you be discovered. I still believe you should register.”

“No,” said Harry. “I know you mean well, but I need every advantage I can get. Voldemort is coming for me, because he heard the Prophecy. It doesn’t even though it doesn’t apply here, though he doesn’t know that. That is why he is after me. His every effort is being poured into killing me. I need every advantage I can get.”

“It’s your decision,” said McGonagall. It was clear that she still did not agree with him, but was content to let him have his own way. After a second’s pause, she continued. “So, back to forms; how would you categorize me?”

“You have an affection for balls of wool?” suggested Harry with a grin, receiving a glare in response. “A noted partiality to Whiska’s cat food, perhaps?”

“Harry,” said McGonagall, feigning frustration; at least he hoped she was feigning it. Harry decided it was time to end the joke. He knew full well what McGonagall could be like if he pushed her too far.

“Because you’re wise, independent, hate water and have nine lives?” suggested Harry, unable to think of anything concrete.

“Close enough,” said McGonagall. She looked like she wanted to explain, but did not do so. She probably didn’t want to appear arrogant.

“And what do you suppose I would be?” asked Harry, his whole body quivering with excitement.

“I don’t know,” said McGonagall. “I see loyalty, courage, cunning, determination, aggression, intelligence...”

“The Sorting Hat had trouble too,” muttered Harry. By the sound of it, he was in for a long wait. “Which will mean that my form will take ages to come to me.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” said McGonagall. “Don’t be discouraged. You have progressed further than I expected, so getting more comfortable with the exercises we have been doing would not hurt. Do not rush it. The more you try, the harder it will be. Just let it come to you. Meditation may help.” Harry managed to keep his disappointment off his face. He had been hoping to have discovered his form by the end of the day.

“When it does come, how will I know?” asked Harry.

“You will know,” said McGonagall, smiling to herself. Harry didn’t know what was so funny, but he didn’t comment on it.

“That’s not very helpful,” said Harry.

“What would you like to be?” asked McGonagall. “It doesn’t truly matter, it is only to satisfy my own curiosity.”

“Well,” said Harry thoughtfully. “I thought at first about something that might be good for spying, like Rita Skeeter’s beetle. Then I thought that I’d probably get squashed and spying isn’t my strong point, as I proved last week. Maybe something bigger. A dragon would be cool and all that...”

“You have not done any research, have you?” asked McGonagall with a penetrating stare. Harry shifted uncomfortably on the lounge. He had been caught red handed.

“Not as such,” said Harry guiltily. “I flicked through that book, but then...” he trailed off, under McGonagall’s penetrating stare.

“If you had read it in more detail,” McGonagall informed him, a note of frustration in her voice. “You would know that it is impossible to become a magical creature. You cannot become a dragon, or a unicorn or anything like that, only normal, non-magical, ordinary animals. Dogs, cats, even giraffes, or duck billed platypuses, are all fine, but nothing that has magic in it.

Combining two forms of magic, animal and human, would have unforeseen consequences. Imagine if the animal instincts or magic took hold of you. Depending on the creature, you could end up like a werewolf. It is entirely possible that that is how the werewolf came into being.”

Harry cringed at the thought, remembering Remus’ transformation outside the Whomping Willow in his third year. He had described the transformation as incredibly painful and Harry had no desire to endure it. Harry had only seen Remus once, when he had been on the Hogwarts Express. He couldn’t help but wonder how his old teacher was doing in this world.

“If you don’t mind me asking, Harry,” said McGonagall, after a short pause. “Is there something troubling you? You seem a little distracted today.”

“I’ve just got a lot on my mind,” said Harry, shrugging it off.

“Anything I can do?” asked McGonagall. “I am your head of house after all.”

“What?”

“You were never expelled,” said McGonagall, sparing him a small smile. “You simply disappeared, so you are still a pupil, and I was your head of house. You are supposed to come to me with problems.” Harry smiled to himself. There was no way she could help.

“I’d be very impressed if you can deal with this,” muttered Harry.

“Try me,” McGonagall persisted.

“Okay,” said Harry, shaking his head. He found the idea quite amusing. There was nothing anyone could do, but for some reason he found himself laughing. After a few seconds, he calmed down enough to speak. “I’m trapped in a world, which, if I leave, my friends here will die, and if I stay, my friends in my world will die. In this world, which I may be unable to leave, I am wanted by the Aurors, whom I am to be interrogated by this afternoon, and the Death Eaters, who want to kill me. No one trusts me and half the country wants me dead, and I cannot tell them why I have changed. Everyone wants me dead, but I am innocent and I can’t tell people that. And to top it all, I have nightmares. I see what the other me has done, I see death and destruction night after night. Besides that, there are the usual problems, Voldemort is trying to kill me, the *Prophet* is out to create a scandal about me, and once I’m healed all I have to look forward to is more fighting and death. Any thoughts?”

As he had been speaking, the smile had melted away from McGonagall’s face. Her mouth now hung slightly open and she stared wide-eyed at him.

“Not your average problem,” said Harry, bowing his head with a sad smile. “But since when have I ever been normal?”

“Have you tried Dreamless Sleep?” suggested McGonagall, recovering her tongue.

“It’s supposed to be really addictive,” said Harry. “Besides, I don’t want anyone else thinking I am a nutcase; the rest of the world seems to already.”

“Well, Mr. Potter,” she said formally. “You have a meeting with the Aurors later, I believe. I believe this is your chance to get the word out.”

“The word already is out,” protested Harry. “And everyone wants me dead. I can’t even defend myself from the accusations.” His situation seemed so hopeless.

“Who is going to be there?” asked McGonagall.

“Moody, Shacklebolt, Dawlish,” said Harry, “And Amelia Bones. Dumbledore told me yesterday. Speaking of which, is Bones with the Order? How much should I tell them?”

“Amelia is indeed one of us,” McGonagall reassured him. “Everyone you have had contact with is on our side, with one exception.”

“Snape?” said Harry instantly, trying not to spit the name.

“Poppy Pomfrey,” corrected McGonagall. Then, to Harry’s puzzled expression, she explained, “In Med-School, she took an oath, *‘to preserve the sanctity of human life at all costs’*. She can’t fight on either side. She would treat You-Know-Who himself if he were injured. She has no choice in the matter.”

“So that explains why she never turned us in,” said Harry thoughtfully recalling the times when he, Ron and Hermione had been to her with all manner of injuries and she hadn’t even batted an eyelid. McGonagall raised an eyebrow. “Well, all the things over the years that have ended us in the hospital wing, she never asked questions. Hermione was turned into a cat one time and then her teeth grew to five times their normal size and Pomfrey never asked any questions.”

“I see,” McGonagall said. “I have tried many times to extract information from her, but she always says the same things. ‘I’m a healer, not a policeman.’ Catching rule-breakers is not her mandate. Apparently, making students abide by the rules is my problem, not hers, and I am not going to convince her of anything else.”

“During the Triwizard Tournament,” said Harry, grinning, “She was vocal enough about subjecting me to Dementors one year and Dragons the next. She seemed to stretch her mandate to advise Dumbledore not to let it continue. A tad hypocritical after what you have just said. Is there any dislike between the two of you?”

“Not really,” replied McGonagall. “I do not...”

“Speak ill of your colleagues, I’ve heard.”

“Precisely,” continued McGonagall raising an eyebrow. “We have differences of opinion, but we all do with each other. I never question Albus in front of people, but I do occasionally find myself wondering if he is sure he is right about something.”

“Like what, serious stuff, the war and everything...?”

“Rarely,” she replied. “More about the school. Maybe I am just old fashioned. Take those known couples’ places for instance. Most are well known by the staff and could easily be charmed or patrolled, but Albus allows them to go unchecked. As he puts it, *teens will be teens*. He says that if we block off that route, you would all find another way, one which would probably expose yourselves to more risk.”

“He has a point, as long as...well...you know...people are educated.” said Harry. “Do you disagree?”

“At present, all girls are taken aside in their fourth year and informed of the contraceptive options offered by Madam Pomfrey. It works, I’ll give Albus that, but...I can’t help feeling that we are encouraging a culture of rule-breakers.”

“Better than outlawing it, though, because then it really would take off,” said Harry, thinking of Umbridge’s attempts to ban the Quibbler. “Just for the act of rebelling, as well as hormones. I reckon, if they made knitting illegal, just to be seen as the bad-boys, and to rebel against the system, I reckon everyone would take up knitting, especially the Slytherins.” Harry found himself grinning at the idea of Malfoy sitting in an armchair, knitting a bright pink scarf, the likes of which only Trelawney would wear.

“How on earth did we get onto this subject?” asked McGonagall, shaking her head. She rose to her feet. “Well, I do have essays to mark.”

“Is teaching worth it?” asked Harry. He just blurted it out. He had been thinking about it earlier, and his curiosity got the better of him.

“Why do you ask?”

“I have just never heard of a staff social, and being a boarding school, you never seem to go home. I was just wondering. It occurs to me that Muggle Professors go through years of university, doctorates, PhDs and everything to get the title, whereas here, whoever is recruited gets the title. No disrespect, Professor, I know you are a really good teacher, but one year I had Gilderoy Lockhart, who couldn’t tell his arse from his elbow. I was just wondering how Dumbledore recruits and if it is really worth the effort you guys go to. You never seem to leave; I’d imagine it would be lonely.”

“It can be. But when I see people I taught doing great things, then yes, it is worth it,” replied McGonagall, in a voice that betrayed her feelings—she was touched by the question. *So Dumbledore must feel guilty over Tom Riddle*, thought Harry.

“Good day, Harry,” said McGonagall, taking her leave.

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Amelia Bones took her seat next to Kingsley in the interrogation room. To his right was the ever-paranoid Alastor Moody and two places to his left was Dawlish. All of the Aurors wore their customary red robes, while the Head of Department wore robes of a very dark purple, which if it were a wall-paint, would be called Deadly Nightshade. She had been the last to arrive and, after smoothing her robes and windswept hair, sat down in the middle of the table. There was also a glowing orb on a table in the corner of the room. It was a magical voice recorder that would record the interview. In front of all five of the panellists were the usual interrogation tools; a quill and several sheets of parchment topped by the letterhead: Ministry of Magic: Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Each of them had a pot of ink and a self-replenishing glass of water (not to be confused with each other).

Cornelius Fudge, the Head of the Department of International Co-operation, had once made that very mistake, and had swallowed two mouthfuls of black Indian ink before realising his error. He had insisted on being taken to St Mungo’s to be checked out and then had tried to silence everyone from telling the tale. Needless to say he had failed and everyone at the Ministry knew the story. Fudge was a bit of a walking joke these days.

Mad-Eye had checked over the room ten minutes earlier and had found no danger or outside means of recording. All five of the panel were members of the Order of the Phoenix. The recording of the interview would be mysteriously lost and the summary edited by Albus Dumbledore before it was submitted to the Ministry. Amelia would report the result to Crouch. Kingsley had brought a vial of Veritaserum, just in case. There was something about the boy that Kingsley just didn’t trust. He had seen him before and knew full well what he was potentially capable of. Kingsley wanted to know for sure that Harry was not a danger to others, even if it meant force-feeding the boy the potion. Having said that, if Harry was innocent, why would he object to the use of Veritaserum? Forced use was illegal, but it could be used, with the suspect’s consent. The Wizengamot didn’t allow it, but for this case it had been authorised.

“Are we all ready?” asked Kingsley. He received nods from the other four. He then pulled a small black box out of his pocket and holding down the button on the side, spoke into it. “Bring him in.”

There was a few seconds pause before the steel door opened and Harry Potter entered, with James Potter and Albus Dumbledore on either side.

“Welcome,” said Kingsley formally. “Do you concur that the subject is unarmed, and does not carry any hazardous material?”

“I do,” replied Dumbledore calmly.

Kingsley nodded. “Professor, Auror, please wait outside. Mr. Potter, please sit down.” Dumbledore and James Potter exchanged a glance, but after the former nodded, both retreated

wordlessly out of the room. The younger Potter stood still for a second, surveying his audience. Kingsley noticed that Mad-Eye had his wand in his hand beneath the table, pointing at Potter. After a second, just before Kingsley was about to repeat his order, the boy walked to the chair and sat.

The interrogation room was fairly large, consisting of one long table covered in a thick blue cloth for the panel. In front of it was a wooden chair for the suspect. The walls were padded like a Psychiatric Hospital's restraint room, making it soundproof, and preventing echoes, which played havoc with the voice recorder. The padding was a pale blue in colour and the floor was black. The panel themselves sat on padded chairs, which were far more comfortable than the suspect's chair.

Potter glanced around the room, taking in the details with those startling green eyes of his. Kingsley had seen them before. Kingsley had been the first Auror to learn the identity of the Dark Knight. He recalled the first time he had met the real Harry Potter...

*With a huge explosion, the ornate double doors of Gringott's Bank were redistributed over Diagon Alley, showering the hit squads with rubble. The eruption of debris filled the entrance hall and steps with smoke. Kingsley removed his hands from over his ears. The entrance was clear, but he couldn't see inside. This was it.*

*"Go!" called a voice.*

*Kingsley quickly moved up the steps, sparing one final glance behind him at the Aurors in their cover spots, and beyond that, a sea of spectators, barely contained by the struggling MLE officers and flimsy crowd control barriers. Journalists pushed against the barriers, desperately trying to get a few inches closer for that all-important photograph that would make the front page. If they were lucky, they might catch a glimpse of a dead body; that would guarantee them a story. Vultures, thought Kingsley viciously. Pushing those thoughts aside and concentrating on the assault, he stepped through the smoke, keeping his wand levelled in front of him, alert for any sign of movement. He could hardly see five feet in front of him, due to the cloud of dust that had enveloped the atrium. Keeping close to the wall, Kingsley advanced, knowing that seven more Aurors were behind him. Kingsley stepped over the body that lay on the floor in front of him, amidst the rubble. The poor sod had been standing against the door when it blew; he would have been killed instantly. Leaving the body, he crept forward, emerging out of the dust into the main hall of the bank. All the cashiers' desks were empty, piles of coins were strewn over the desks and scattered over the floor. Pots of ink had been spilt, stacks of paper upset and chairs lay on their sides. There had definitely been a struggle, but there were no signs of captives, or captors. The room seemed too quiet. This smelled like a trap.*

*CRASH!*

*Kingsley looked up, to see the skylight smash into hundreds of pieces. Ropes was thrown down to the floor, as six more Aurors abseiled into the room. They reached the ground unhassled and detached themselves from their ropes, with Kingsley's previous team offering cover. The fourteen Aurors under Kingsley's command proceeded cautiously to the back of the main*

*chamber, the footsteps of their thick boots echoing eerily off the walls. The bank seemed deserted, and the silence was unnerving; it felt like a Ghost Ship. Kingsley's instincts told him this was wrong. They should have met some form of defence by now. According to sources, the Dark Knight himself was inside. So why was there no resistance?*

*"The carts are that way," pointed out Newman, who ironically, was the new man to the team. Kingsley motioned for the abseil team to proceed down to the vaults. He knew that the objective for the Death Eaters had not been the money in the vaults, but rather the records in the upstairs offices. If they could track the transfer of funds between the Ministry of Magic and Hogwarts and their agents, they could trace every informant the Aurors had. The Gringott's manager was the only one who had the ability to access the information. If a Death Eater could convince him to part with the access, Voldemort would have a list of every undercover Auror, every tout and every agent the Aurors or the Order of the Phoenix had. It would be a disaster. What the Dark Knight wanted was upstairs. Still, it was be foolish not to check the Vaults; there may be hostages down there, or Death Eaters waiting in ambush. The abseil team disappeared into the shadow-filled corridor that led to the vaults.*

*Kingsley moved swiftly to the staircase. The lift would ping, and give away their approach, and the Death Eaters could easily cut the wires and remove the safety spells, causing the lift to fall; it was not worth the risk. He kicked open the stairs and they proceeded in. Two Aurors ran up the first two flights of stairs under the cover of the rest of the team, then two more went up the next two flights, and so on. The idea was that they were in two's if separated. They were close enough to cover each other, but not so close that one group of Death Eaters could kill them all at once with one barrage of curses.*

*They reached the fourth floor and lined up against the wall, next to the door, with two Aurors at the top of the stairs to stop anyone coming up behind them. It was amazing how all the training seemed second nature to Kingsley. Some people thought that becoming an Auror was a matter of filling out a few forms, and doing a quick fitness test. Nothing was further from the trust. Only five percent of applicants who start the training complete it, and only five percent of those who apply are selected to begin the training. British Aurors were the best for a reason.*

*Kingsley checked that everyone was ready, before grasping the door handle and gently twisting. He opened the door just enough to peek through. The foyer beyond seemed empty. He was about to throw the door open, when he noticed a thread, across the opening, which was pulling taut. It was a booby-trap, and he had almost set it off!*

*Clever, thought Kingsley. But not clever enough.*

*With his wand, he severed the thread. He gently opened the door, and on the far side, found a small Magical Incendiary Device, attached to a bottle of purple potion, which Kingsley was sure was some form of poison gas. These bastards had gas!*

*"Bubble-head charms," he ordered his men. Each erected the spell instantly. They looked quite comical. They all had dragon scale armour, which was jet black over the top of their customary red clothing. Strike teams don't wear robes as during an assault they get in the*

way and are more vulnerable to catching fire. Instead, they dressed similar to the Muggle SAS, except in red. They wore crimson overalls, with black body-armour over the top. The word 'AUROR' was written in white across the armour. They had stun-batons strapped their right thighs, black gloves and boots, and now what looked like goldfish bowls over their heads.

The Aurors slipped quietly into the foyer. It was smaller than the main hall downstairs, but far more luxurious. These were the executive offices, and so the foyer had to exemplify wealth and luxury and it definitely did just that. If Gringott's billed the Ministry for anything getting broken today, the ministry would probably go bankrupt. It was dim inside, but Kingsley could see well enough as a column of light descended from a skylight, illuminating a circle in the centre of the room around the reception desk, but leaving menacing shadows around the edge of the room. The room was large and square with a marble floor and a pillar in each corner. Along the walls were doors that led to the offices, and on the far side of the room, a huge pair of ornate doors led to the Head-Goblin's office. The room was silent and empty. Kingsley's breathing seemed dangerously loud and his heart was pounding in his chest. Maybe he was being paranoid, but he felt like they were being watched. A shiver ran down his spine. His keen eyes scanned the room, but found no sign of life. Slowly, trying to keep his footsteps quiet, he edged forward. The team started to spread out. They would check each office in turn before moving on.

As the last Auror entered the foyer, the door slammed shut behind them; they were trapped.

"Form up!" Kingsley commanded. The Aurors couldn't see properly, but formed a defensive formation with their wands at the ready as quickly as they could. Kingsley's eyes scanned the shadows, searching for any sign of movement. The only light in the room came from the skylight; the edges of the room were in darkness. They were wasting time, Kingsley realised. They had to hurry. He was just about to cast the Lumos Charm, when light was provided.

A line of fire started at the far end of the room and snaked along each wall, coming towards them. In just over a second, there was a soft whoosh as the two trails of fire joined at the lift behind them, blocking the door and effectively sealing them inside. They were caught in a rectangle of fire. It was not meant to burn them, Kingsley noted, just to prevent their escape. The flames danced menacingly up the wall, crackling softly, and providing light to every corner of the room. Kingsley pulled his black box from his pocket, to call for back up, but received no reply. Someone was jamming them. They were alone in this. The flames lit the room in a sickly orange glow. Kingsley suddenly felt very claustrophobic. The room was becoming unbearably hot, and he found it hard to breath. He was sweating all over, and the flickering flames were causing shadows to dance over every wall. There was movement all around them; he was finding it hard to focus. Suddenly several white masks appeared out of the darkness. The Death Eaters appeared from the shadows, converging on the Aurors. There were ten in all. The Aurors were surrounded, and outnumbered. Kingsley wished he still had the whole fourteen of them, but he had sent the abseil team down into the vaults. There were only eight of them now, and they were surrounded. It had been his decision to split up. Although he knew it was the right one to make, he wished they were here. It was his decision and his fault; such was the price of leadership.

*“Aurors,” commanded one of the Death Eaters. “Drop your wands and batons and you’ll live.”*

*“And if we don’t?” inquired Kingsley, glancing around, taking in the layout of the room and the numbers. He was sure that the eight of them were a match for the Death Eaters. Auror training was no walkover; they were the best for a reason.*

*“Then we will exterminate you one by one,” replied the Death Eater, levelling his wand at Kingsley.*

*“If you get a spell off, we’ll take you with us,” said Kingsley firmly. He glared at the Death Eater. He couldn’t even see if the man was scared because of his mask. He didn’t even know who he was. The other Aurors had their wand trained on a Death Eater. They were ready. He didn’t even give the Death Eater a chance to respond.*

*“NOW!” shouted Kingsley. “STUPEFY!”*

*The jet of red light shot out of his wand at the startled Death Eater, who quickly managed to raise a shield. The stunner rebounded off towards Kingsley’s left. He heard the shouts of other spells and duels behind him as the others joined the battle. The air was thick with spells, and Kingsley had to be wary from all 360 degrees, in case a wayward spell from another duel caught him. One on one was simple in that you knew where a spell was coming from at all times. In this kind of chaos, one ricochet from behind could end his duel. They were outnumbered and Kingsley found himself duelling with two Death Eaters.*

*He raised his shield in plenty of time to block the curse from one of the Death Eaters before diving backwards to avoid the Killing Curse from the other. His reflexes were very good for his build and he landed deftly on his feet, before sending a Paralysing curse at the legs of one the taller of the Death Eaters. The man conjured a small turquoise shield. It was a tiny thing, about a foot across, centred at the end of his wand. The Death Eater moved the tiny shield into the path of Kingsley’s curse, batting it away to the side. Before Kingsley could utter another spell, the Death Eater had already sent another Killing Curse towards him.*

*“ON GUARD!” shouted Kingsley, letting his Aurors know that there was a loose Killing Curse in the air, as he flung himself to the ground. Merlin! This Death Eater was good; he was so fast - probably an ex-Auror. Kingsley expertly rolled and was back up on feet in time to send another curse at each of the Death Eaters. Both sidestepped easily. While the shorter of the two aimed the Cruciatus Curse at Kingsley, the other used his wand to cause a potted tree to fly at Kingsley. The Auror sidestepped the Unforgivable easily, but that put him in the path of the incoming tree.*

*“Reducto!” he roared. The curse blew the plant to smithereens and then continued on to blow a three-foot hole in the wall, showering the smaller Death Eater with chunks of plaster. The taller Death Eater, who by now Kingsley was sure had been trained by the Aurors, took the opportunity to send a Killing Curse at Kingsley, who summoned a chunk of the broken pot into the path of the curse. As the terra cotta exploded, Kingsley charged forward, shield raised.*

*He surged ahead, sidestepping the next curse and allowing his shield to absorb the impact of the following one with a loud gong-like noise. He saw the Death Eater draw his wand back, ready to cast the Unforgivable.*

*“AVADA...”*

*Kingsley’s shoulder slammed into the waist of the ex-Auror. As they tumbled to the ground, Kingsley lost his grip on his wand. It had been a rash move. The other man was too fast, and very agile. He was probably younger than Kingsley and was what Dawlish would call a ‘nippy little bastard’. He could avoid Kingsley’s spells, so the Auror needed to get closer to lessen the time the Death Eater had to respond, and to be where Kingsley’s advantages of size and physical strength could be exploited.*

*As they hit the floor, Kingsley rolled away, back up onto his feet. He noticed a movement to his left and turned just in time to see the shorter Death Eater come at him. Kingsley ducked the curse and subsequent punch. He delivered a hard kick to the stomach of the man and withdrew his Stun-Baton in one movement.*

*“Stupefy!” he hissed. The baton burst into life, emitting a bright scarlet glow. It was about a foot long and was enough to cause the Death Eater to pause. Kingsley’s kick had caused him to lose grip on his wand. There was a second when he knew the inevitable was coming but couldn’t stop it. He had no wand, and could not run. Shorty screamed as he threw a punch at Kingsley, who expertly dodged the punch, spinning away and bringing the glowing red baton down hard on the Death Eater’s head. The man was launched off his feet by the force of the hit. He did a front flip before landing hard on the floor in a shower of red sparks.*

*“Crucio!” Kingsley didn’t even have time to acknowledge his victory over the shorter, weaker Death Eater before the presumed ex-Auror had unleashed an Unforgivable at him. Kingsley dived backwards, landing painfully on a piece of debris from the wall. He sat up and hurled the Stun Baton at the Death Eater. The man uttered a few well-chosen words and a beam of yellow light blew the baton to pieces, causing an explosion of red and yellow sparks. Kingsley jumped back to his feet, pulling his second wand from its holster. Aurors were the only people in the country licensed to have a second wand.*

*He pointed it at the Death Eater, screaming “Paralyzio!” at the top of his voice. The Paralyzing curse hurtled towards the Death Eater, who blocked it easily and responded instantly with a curse of his own. They exchanged curses at a phenomenal rate, which would have even stressed the reflexes of the world’s fastest Seeker, that Bulgarian kid, whatever his name was. This man had been trained, and trained well. As soon as Kingsley blocked one attack, there was another on the way. It seemed that he hadn’t managed an offensive spell in ages. This man was definitely an Auror, or had been. Kingsley didn’t have the time to contemplate that now. He ducked one curse and then another. He replied with one of his own and blocked the response. He opted for the strategy of avoiding curses and blocking them, trying to tire his attacker out. He was attacking so hard and so fast that he couldn’t possibly carry on like this. Kingsley wanted to glance around and see how the others were doing, but a second’s lapse in concentration would cost him his life.*

*Just then the Death Eater shot a blasting curse at Kingsley. He instinctively ducked and the curse rocketed above him. The curse blew the wall apart, the force of it knocked Kingsley off his feet. He found himself flat on his face in the rubble. He tried to get back up, but then to his horror a heavy boot slammed down on his wand arm, pinning it down. He looked up to see a wand pointed at his nose. The Death Eater stood over him, glaring down. Malice flashed in his eyes through the holes in the mask.*

*“And to think you gave me a B- for my duelling,” sneered the Death Eater. He was an Auror! noted Kingsley, hoping that that would not be his final thought.*

*“Shacklebolt!” screamed a voice. Newman was running towards them, his wand level, a stunner already in transit. The Death Eater turned to face him, easily blocking the stunner. “AVADA KEDAVRA!”*

*“No!” shouted Kingsley. Newman ducked the curse, but lost his balance, falling to the floor. The Death Eater marched over to him as he tried to get up. Kingsley picked up his wand and aimed it at the Death Eater, was who standing over Newman in victory, on the rug. The rug!*

*“Accio rug!” shouted Kingsley. The rug was swept from underneath the Death Eater, who landed hard on the ground, his wand rolling away from him. “Stupefy!” the stunner hit the fallen Death Eater on the torso and he went limp.*

*“Clear!” called a voice.*

*“Thanks,” said Newman, as Kingsley offered him a hand to get up. He picked up his wands and then glanced around to see the rest of the team, almost.*

*“Where’s Scotty?” asked Newman.*

*“He took an AK to the face,” said Keaton. His face was a bloody mess. His nose was bleeding profusely and he had a cut above the hairline over his right eye, which was dripping down his face. “He’s gone.”*

*They paused for a moment before Kingsley took control as team leader. He walked over to where Vincent Scott’s body lay, and removed the Stun-Baton from his thigh to replace the one Kingsley had lost.*

*“Okay, we can mourn later, right now we have a job to do. Bind them and let’s move out. Keaton, are you alright? That’s a lot of blood.”*

*“Fit as a fiddle,” said Keaton, wiping it on his sleeve.*

*After binding the Death Eaters and draping a cloth over the head of their dead comrade, the Aurors approached the door at the end. Executive offices surrounded the great hall, but at the end, beyond the huge double doors, was the manager’s office. The tired Aurors readied themselves once more. That was what made an Auror. They were tired, injured, had lost a friend,*

*and were in truth afraid, but still they carried on. They would always fight on, and that was why the British Aurors were the most respected in the world.*

*“REDUCTO!” bellowed three of them at once. The spells blasted the door off its hinges. The Aurors stormed inside. It was only the outer room, where the secretary worked. It was a small room, but it was filled with Goblins, which were obviously injured and bound, but seemed to be alive.*

*Kingsley rushed to the nearest goblin.*

*“Are you alright?” he asked, releasing the banker from his bonds.*

*“I’ll live,” coughed the goblin. “He’s in there.” The creature pointed to the doors that led to the manager’s office. “He took the boss and went in there. That was ten minutes ago. We tried to hide him, but he tortured us until we told him. We couldn’t help it, sir.”*

*“It’s okay,” Kingsley comforted the creature. “Keaton, release them, see to the wounded. Have someone bring in back up and healers. I’m going in.”*

*“We’ll all go,” protested Newman.*

*“No,” said Kingsley. “It could be a trap. Get backup. We don’t know how many are in there. We need more Aurors, and we are all tired. Get backup, that’s an order!”*

*Keaton nodded and Kingsley turned to face the huge jewel encrusted door. He pushed the doors open and slipped inside.*

*The room was mostly dark. One huge window behind the desk cast a bright white light onto the floor, but there were many shadows in the huge office. Kingsley could see the desk with its back to the window. A jewel-encrusted lamp was switched off on one side of the desk. Beyond it he could see a cabinet, which he suspected contained alcohol and around the edges of the room he could see cabinets containing all manner of riches, art and artefacts. The room seemed to embody wealth and power. Kingsley wouldn’t be surprised if the room itself was made of solid gold. Kingsley couldn’t even see the walls as the shadows hid them. By the desk was a large armchair. Kingsley pointed his wand ahead of him and crossed over to the desk. The seat was facing away from him, towards the window. Kingsley rounded the desk and approached the chair. He put on hand on it and spun it to face him.*

*He gasped inwardly at the sight that greeted him. An elderly goblin was sitting in the chair, a look of horror on the face of the dismembered head, which was resting in the lap of the headless creature. Blood had leaked out of the neck and dribbled over the goblin’s shirt and suit, and then down onto the floor.*

*“Brings a whole new meaning to the phrase ‘it’s my neck if something goes wrong’, doesn’t it?” said a voice from the shadows. Kingsley whipped around. He couldn’t see anything,*

*but the voice was real. It sounded so young, clearly not a man. Somewhere between fifteen and twenty.*

*“Who are you?” said the Auror.*

*Kingsley waited for a few seconds before he noticed movement in the shadows. He watched in astonishment as a boy stepped out of the shadows.*

*He was dressed all in black, from head to toe. He had a thick black cloak which came over the top of his shoulders, right to the floor. Beneath it, Kingsley saw a chestplate of armour similar to the one he was wearing. The handle of a sword was visible over his right shoulder. The boy was fairly short with raven black hair and startling green eyes. He looked so familiar. He looked like a good friend and colleague, a colleague whose son had disappeared a few months back.*

*“Harry?” asked Kingsley.*

*“The very same,” said the boy bowing slightly.*

*“What’s going on? Where have you been?” asked the shocked Auror. Had he found James’ son? What was he doing here, of all places? He had heard rumours of the Dark Knight. Kingsley had thought that he would be here. maybe he was. Had he kidnapped Harry?*

*“Harry, come on,” said Kingsley. “Let’s get you out of here.”*

*“I’m perfectly happy here,” said Harry coolly. “Though perhaps it is time to leave. I wouldn’t want to keep my Master waiting.”*

*“What are you talking about?” asked Kingsley.*

*“Surely you’ve worked it out?” said Harry, patronisingly. “Surely you know about the Ministry’s little covert payments sceme? You must know the significance of the names in this file?” the boy held up a green loose-leaf file, marked with the Gringotts insignia.*

*“I know what it is, but what are you doing with it?” asked Kingsley. Harry Potter sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. Kingsley was sure the boy wore glasses in the last picture Lily and James had of him, but he didn’t have any now.*

*“Think, Auror,” said Harry coldly. “You’ve gotten past my friends outside, so you clearly have brawn, now use your brain.”*

*“You’re with them,” said Kingsley, a sinking feeling filling his stomach. “You’re the Dark Knight.”*

*An evil grin spread over the face of the fifteen year old boy. He dropped the file and slowly raised both hands in front of him. Slowly, icily, he clapped once, twice, three times.*

*“Why?” stammered Kingsley in shock. How could a boy so young be the Dark Knight? It wasn't possible. No one was so vicious at this age. Voldemort would never trust someone so young as he did the Dark Knight. It couldn't be true. James' son. No!*

*“Many reasons,” said Harry matter-of-factly, picking up the file and placing it on the shelf next to him. “None of which someone like you would understand.”*

*“What do you mean?”*

*The boy opened the front doors to the chest, revealing a line of bottles. Kingsley recognised the bottle he picked up as Firewhiskey. The boy poured himself a glass under the gaze of Kingsley, who still couldn't bring himself to raise his wand-arm from where it had fallen limp at his side. The boy offered the bottle to Kingsley as if he hadn't a care in the world. He had a sword on his back and the goblin had no head. He must have killed the goblin. The boy was going to go down for murder; how could he be so calm and remorseless? Kingsley refused the bottle and Potter put it back.*

*“Because you are conditioned not to think,” said Harry plainly. He sipped at the whiskey and shook his head at the flavour, shivering slightly. He didn't cough, but he was clearly in discomfort. Probably his first time with that stuff. “You are trained to follow orders, even if you don't agree with them, correct?”*

*Kingsley nodded.*

*“If Crouch was to tell you to march to your death, you would do it. If you thought you would save lives, you would do it, wouldn't you? Don't answer, it was rhetorical, I know you would. You don't think, or maybe you do, but you lack the courage and conviction to act. If you can think, and as team leader you must have favour with the foolish Minister, so I guess that means you can't, but if you can, see if you can follow me. You are content to follow, because you believe that this country is good enough as it is. There is no real need for change. Whereas I and people like me, we see that the world is not good enough as it is. Take a look around, Auror. This country is falling apart and it always has been. The only reason it hasn't is because of people like my Master and Grindelwald.”*

*“Harry, I don't know what you've been told, but...”*

*“If you shut up and listen you will,” said Harry icily. “At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the population boomed. Better healthcare amongst the Muggles, better sanitary facilities, et cetera, caused the Muggle population to boom. Their numbers increased exponentially and naturally, the numbers of Muggle-Born witches and wizards grew as well. Wizards were once in almost equal numbers to the Muggles.*

*“As you know, any Muggle-Born witch or wizard is identified the first time they perform accidental magic. Memory charms are administered and the child is watched and noted so that they receive a letter when they turn eleven. Now this sudden influx of Muggleborns chokes the system. We can't cope with the numbers. The system was pushed to its limits. And then we get to*

*graduation. Muggleborns graduate, and then what? They either go off to become doctors or lawyers in the Muggle world, completely undermining their Magical education, or they join wizarding society. Here is another problem. Families disown them, treating magic much as they did in the Dark Ages. So what happens? They scrounge off Ministry benefits. Money that should go to bettering Hogwarts, bettering our nation, is spent on those lazy little shites, whose good-for-nothing parents deserted them for being what they are. Do you have any idea how much money is wasted on Obliviators because Muggleborns don't know how the world works? They get into all sorts of messes where a wizards know better. So much is wasted, and then they marry and have children and the genepool of purebloods is diluted. Slowly but surely they are exterminating us. In one hundred years there will be no purebloods, is there no pride left in Wizard-kind?"*

*"And how does what you are doing help?" asked Kingsley.*

*"We keep the numbers down," said Harry. "We restore pride to the pureblood nation. Inbred as they might be, but they still marry pureblood and that preserves the genepool. We are much like pest control, when you think about it. And the proof of our effectiveness is there for all to see. Think about it; during the short time Grindelwald was killing off Muggles, what happened? Wizards stayed out of the war, for the most part, except of course for the Grindelwald saga campaign, of course, but we kept ourselves to ourselves. No Muggles were taken to Hogwarts then because of the war. We couldn't take Muggleborn children away from families, or show ourselves to Muggles as demands for magical aid to the war would swamp us. Between 1941 and 1945 Hogwarts grades went up, and the pureblood families grew and grew. Take the Blacks and the Weasleys for instance; they have a lot of children. Arthur and Molly have seven I believe and the Black Family Tree is huge. Up until 1940, the average number of children in a family was 2. The generation that graduated around that time now have large families of pureblooded wizards and witches. During the Sixties and early Seventies, the trait continued; fewer Muggleborns came to Hogwarts and the dying Purebloods repopulated themselves. But now we are getting sloppy once more. More and more Muggles are entering Hogwarts; the average number of purebloods per year is down to six. We are being forced out and if we don't fight, Purebloods are going to die out. Ever heard of the Dartmoor pony? Tiny little ponies that are part of the scenic beauty of the area. Over the years, farmers have introduced loads of different breeds and the inter-breeding has resulted in the near extinction of the Dartmoor pony. Once they're gone, they can't come back, never ever. So now the National Trust raises money to preserve them, to keep the heritage of the moors. Is that wrong?"*

*"No, but..." began Kingsley, but Harry cut him off.*

*"And that is no different to what we are doing. We are ensuring the survival of our race. You may well be thinking, 'oh, but there will still be wizards and magic'. Well, there will still be horses on Dartmoor, but the status, the prestige, the symbol of everything the moor stands for would be gone. It is about conservation of the land, but they are still killing off the ponies who are a part of the land, and something has to be done. Same principle here. We are conserving our species, as well as cleaning up a flawed system of government which, if nothing is done, will collapse on itself in a few decades anyway."*

*“How do you justify torture?” asked Kingsley. The boy was hopelessly deluded. Voldemort must have brain washed him. He was reguritating all that he had been taught.*

*“A means to an end,” said Harry, without batting an eye. “We discourage them from coming to Hogwarts. We remove those who stand against us. Check the records, most of those we kill have links to our world, though they are Muggle. Have you ever met my aunt and uncle? People like them, who treat us like dirt because we are different, are all over the country. We cleanse the way for our own survival. It’s not like we want to destroy the world for the hell of it. This isn’t some b-movie where the villain wants to destroy the world for no good reason, ignoring that fact that if he blows up the world or unleashes a killer virus he will kill himself as well. We have a cause, and one worth fighting for, and we plan to live to the day when we don’t have to fear Muggles, and where Wizards are given the respect we deserve.”*

*“You are insane,” snapped Kingsley. “Don’t you see that what you’re doing is wrong? Don’t you know how sick you sound? Come and see your mother. They’ve all been sick with worry.”*

*“I have a job to do. I am doing this for them,” said Harry, putting the glass down and picking up the files again. Kingsley eyed the file carefully. Inside was a list of every undercover Auror, every informant the Ministry had. It had to be destroyed.*

*“Your own mother is Muggle-Born,” said Kingsley. “You don’t want her dead?”*

*“We all have our choices in life,” said Harry. “They chose to side with Dumbledore and the Muggles. They may wish to flush our society down the toilet, but I am proud to be a wizard. If they aren’t, then they can die with the rest of the Muggles.”*

*The boy was insane. He had to be stopped. He had already killed the goblin. If Kingsley could bring him in alive, Dumbledore might sway a vote of insanity. After a few months in St Mungo’s, he should be happy as ever.*

*“But enough talk,” said Harry. “I have a deadline to meet.” He strolled casually towards the fireplace. Kingsley moved to stand in his way.*

*“Let me pass,” said the boy calmly.*

*“You know I can’t do that,” said Kingsley raising his wand. He glanced down briefly and realised he was holding his second wand and his primary wand, the one that had brought him through Hogwarts many years ago, was in his holster. He had picked up the wrong one after his duel with the Death Eaters. He had been too tired to check which was which. Still, it should not matter; this was only a boy after all.*

*“I’m going to count to three,” said Harry in a bored voice. “One...two...”*

*Kingsley prepared himself. The boy couldn’t do anything to him. He had only three complete years of schooling, he was certainly no match for an Auror. But then again, what of the*

*rumours? If he even was the Dark Knight...what if it was a bluff and he wasn't the Knight. Too late to contemplate that now, he had to bring the boy in, preferably alive.*

*"Harry, don't! I'm warning you!" said Kingsley firmly, aiming his wand.*

*"Three." Harry sighed and shook his head. "So be it." Kingsley never saw it coming. The boy moved so fast he couldn't react. In a flash of steel, the boy had grabbed the sword from over his shoulder and swung it, slicing Kingsley's second wand cleanly in two, then, spinning again, he slashed at Kingsley's arm. The sword left a deep yet clean cut in his right tricep. Kingsley clenched his teeth, determined not to let his pain show. He clutched his arm in pain as blood flowed between his fingers.*

*With a flick of his wand, Harry launched Kingsley across the room. The Auror slammed into the double doors, which held, but bent slightly under the impact. Kingsley landed on the floor hard and glared up at the boy, who stood calmly by the fire. Kingsley was up on his feet in an instant, his primary wand drawn.*

*"Expelliarmus!"*

*Harry sidestepped easily, and levelled his own wand at Kingsley's throat.*

*"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked. "I'm in a rush and more than happy to just leave."*

*"Stupefy!" Kingsley sent the stunner right at the boy, who sidestepped. Next thing Kingsley knew, two more spells were zooming towards him. The Auror dived to the side as the curses smashed into the shelves, spreading their contents over the floor. He rolled and was back on his feet in a second, only to find that the boy was right in front of him, less than two feet away. Kingsley hardly had time to react before the boy's foot connected with the side of his face.*

*Two more kicks were delivered to his stomach before the boy spun on his heel and tried to deliver a final spinning kick to his chest, but Kingsley managed to get an arm up to block another abuse. He was tired and aching from earlier, and this boy was immensely fast. Kingsley managed to block another kick, dropping his wand in the process, and then attempted a punch of his own, all thoughts of not hurting a child long forgotten. Potter spun away from the punch, kicking him in the back of the knee as he went. Kingsley fell to his knees. Before he could rise, Potter had the thin blade of a sword pressed firmly against his throat.*

*"Remember, Auror," said Harry icily. "I gave you the chance to live. You chose to be here. You chose to die." The blade withdrew, as Harry pulled it back. Kingsley's hand crept to his thigh, where his remaining weapons were holstered. Harry raised the sword high above his head, ready to swing. Kingsley's fingers closed around the cold metal in the holster. He opened the button that held it in place and withdrew the weapon an inch. As the sword came hurtling down towards his neck, Kingsley summoned all the strength he had left. "Stupefy!" Scotty's stun baton on his thigh sprang to life, and Kingsley brought it up to meet the blade. The impact sent a shower of red sparks in all directions. Kingsley summoned enough strength to rise to his feet,*

*using his height and strength to force the sword away from his body. Despite his disadvantage in terms of height, Harry Potter showed no sign of fear. He kept the pressure on the sword, pressing it towards Kingsley's chest, who tried to force it away from him.*

*"Interesting," said Harry, "Inadequate, unexpected, but interesting."*

*Kingsley kept his eye on the blade; it swung out for the right and then back toward his body. Kingsley moved the baton to block again. He parried one attack and then the next, thanking Merlin for the fencing he had done when he was young. The boy had two hands on the sword, while he held his baton in one. His wand was lying on the floor a few feet away, but he dared not take his eyes off Potter.*

*Just then, Harry lunged. Kingsley parried the attack and as Potter's momentum carried him past Kingsley, the Auror dived for his wand. His fingers wrapped around the handle, and he got back to his feet just in time to block another attack. Kingsley moved the baton up to parry and scooped it around, forcing the blade of the sword into the wall. Keeping the sword from moving with the baton, he aimed his point blank at the boy and fired a Blasting Curse straight into the boy's chest.*

*Harry was launched across the room and landed next to the fireplace, leaving the sword imbedded in the wall. He was up in a second, a look of pure rage on his face. The sword was still stuck in the wall to Kingsley's left. Harry summoned it to him and continued to move, his legs stepping carefully over each other, keeping his body sideways-on and his wand level. Both combatants had their wands ready and began to circle. Kingsley watched Harry as they moved, keeping his eyes on his wand and sword. He seemed to be willing Kingsley to make the first move. They had moved one hundred and eighty degrees, and Kingsley now had his back to the fire, Harry's to the door. It was then that Kingsley saw movement behind Harry. Someone familiar had just slipped through the broken door. Kingsley froze as he saw Keaton pull out a wand. Too late, Kingsley realised what was about to happen.*

*"SON OF A BITCH!" screamed Keaton, running forward. Potter didn't even turn. He just spun the sword under his own arm, so the blade was facing out of his back. Keaton ran straight into it, impaling himself on the sword. There was a moment when Kingsley thought it might not be too bad, but then a look of pain crossed his face as Keaton gasped for air. He coughed and his mouth was suddenly full of blood, coming up from within. Emotionlessly, Harry turned to see the dying Auror behind him. He pulled the sword out of Keaton's chest, and with nothing left to support him, Keaton fell to his knees, his hands grasping at the gaping wound. He gasped for breath, staring at Kingsley, his eyes pleading for help. He managed three more breaths, before his eyes rolled upwards, into his head, and he keeled over, his head hitting the floor with a sickening thud.*

*Kingsley dived forward while Potter's eyes were still on Keaton, unleashing two curses as he went. Harry conjured the same small turquoise shield Kingsley had seen outside, and batted both curses away, replying with one of his own in the same movement. Kingsley jumped the curse, firing another in midair. Potter spun away from the curse, bringing his wand down in a slashing movement, unleashing a purple ribbon of light at Kingsley, who dived to the floor. He*

*had to roll as three more curses abruptly hit the floor where he had lain a second before. Kingsley rolled into the shadows, narrowly avoiding Potter's curses.*

*Once he was back on his feet, Kingsley summoned a book off the shelf. The huge tome flew towards Harry who blasted it in mid air.*

*"Cute trick," said Harry, "but two can play at that game." With a flick of his wand, something was flying towards Kingsley. He was about to blast it when he realised what it was. Kingsley was nearly sick on the spot as he caught Harry's missile. The Auror found himself looking down into the vacant eyes of the severed goblin head.*

*Kingsley tried again, launching the bottle of fire-whiskey at his opponent. Lazily, Harry blasted it, but he was not prepared for what would happen. His spell caused the flammable alcohol to explode into a huge fireball. Kingsley took advantage of the flash by moving swiftly amongst the shadows, so that Potter thought he was still in one corner, when he was in fact in another. As expected, Potter fired a curse blindly through the flame into the wrong corner, while Kingsley replied with one of his own from his hiding place in the shadows. Potter was blasted across the room and landed on his front.*

*He sprang back up to his feet, genuine anger burning in his eyes.*

*Kingsley decided to end it. "Paralysio!" he roared, sending the Paralysis Curse at the boy. A body bind was too good for him. Harry's hand moved behind his back and he muttered a spell. When the hand re-emerged, he seemed to be holding a ring of sky blue light. The boy stepped to the side, scooped the curse up in the ring and in one movement hurled it back at Kingsley. It took a second to register what he had just seen. The circle of blue light had collected the curse. Potter had held the ring with a ball of pink light that was Kingsley's curse inside it, for less than a second before returning it to sender. It looked like the planet Saturn as it zoomed towards him. It moved very quickly across the air, hurtling towards the Auror. Kingsley raised a shield, but it did no good. As the combination of curses hit the shield, the blue ring disappeared, along with the shield. Kingsley took the full force of his own Paralysis Curse to the chest. He was launched backwards six feet, landing on his back. He was unable move a muscle. He tried to raise an arm, but found he couldn't move other than to blink and breathe.*

*Suddenly Potter was standing over him. "Bet you weren't expecting that. My own little concoction. Now, I am going to do something I don't normally do. I am going to let you live. I want the old man to know what happened here, today. I want him to know who I am, and who his enemy is. I want him to know I am the Dark Lord's number one, and I want you all to know that death is coming. They picked the wrong side."*

*With that he picked up the file from where he had dropped it and started towards the fire. Before he reached it, there was movement to Kingsley's right.*

*"Incendio!" coughed Keaton. With his dying breath, Keaton incinerated the files and half of Potter's cloak.*

*“Bollocks,” muttered the boy, glaring at Keaton’s fallen body, which lay in a pool of blood. If he had not been dead, Kingsley was sure that Keaton would have felt Potter’s wrath in the form of the Cruciatus Curse. As it was, Keaton was dead and Potter had nothing to vent his frustration on; nothing except Kingsley.*

*The Auror watched in horror, as the boy advanced on him, his wand aimed at Kingsley’s chest. Kingsley stared helplessly up into a pair of unforgiving green eyes. His mother’s and sister’s sparkled, where as his seemed duller, yet they burned with rage. Harry levelled his wand at Kingsley’s throat.*

*“CRUCIO!” hissed the boy. Kingsley’s may not have been able to move by himself, but the intense pain of the curse caused his muscles to spasm. His body thrashed uncontrollably, as pain surged through every nerve in his body. He was determined not to cry out, but the pain penetrated every corner of his mind.*

*CRASH!*

*Suddenly the pain was gone. From the tinkle of glass and the sudden gush of wind, he was sure the window behind the desk had exploded inwards. Glass rained down around the desk and remains of the manager. Kingsley was lying flat on his back, and all he could see was the ceiling. Judging by the movement of the shadows, he was sure there was an Auror on a broom outside the window.*

*“Stupefy!” shouted a familiar voice.*

*Potter dived to the side, out of Kingsley’s field of view. A flash of red was reflected of the ceiling. He heard Potter shout some words, followed by the roar of flames as the boy disappeared into the fireplace. Kingsley hadn’t managed to hear the destination.*

*The next thing Kingsley saw was James Potter, kneeling over him.*

*“Who in the name of Merlin was that?” asked Potter.*

The image of Harry Potter standing over him, the malice in his eyes, was something Kingsley would never forget, nor the look on Keaton’s face as he died. The boy had been a monster. But apparently that was all behind him. Apparently this was not even the Harry Potter he had fought. In the aftermath of that event, the boy’s name had become synonymous with death. In the following week, nine of the names on the list were found dead. Harry must have been able to remember some of the names, enough to remove a few.

The boy stared at each of the Aurors in turn, expectantly.

“Harry Potter,” said Kingsley. “The purpose of today is to find out if you are safe to be re-entered into society. We’re all friends here, and members of the Order. As such you are to be perfectly honest and tell us everything. Security arrangements have been made so that the truth

will not go beyond these four walls and the Headmaster. Please be honest. Sitting with me, in case you don't know, are Alastor Moody..."

"Mad-Eye," the boy acknowledged him. Kingsley was a little surprised that this stranger, apparently from another universe, knew exactly who they were. He managed to keep his surprise from showing.

"Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"And member of the Wizengamot," finished the boy.

"We did not have all the facts at that time," said Amelia defensively. Was he still bitter about his trial? Kingsley had detected a tone of anger in his voice, but it was a controlled anger. On reflection, if he had been sentenced for something he didn't do, and mocked in front of the country's press, Kingsley would also be far from happy. But if the boy was angry and impulsive, then with his skills, he would always be a danger to those around him.

"And lastly we have..."

"Dawlish," the boy finished. "The last time I saw you, you were lying unconscious in the head's office after you foolishly tried to arrest him. Still a bodyguard for the Minister?"

Dawlish gave the boy a bemused stare before replying. "I have never been on protection detail and I don't intend to either."

"Fair enough," said Harry shrugging. "I certainly wouldn't give my life to save Fudge." So the boy knew them all, or at least he knew who they were. Had he had past encounters with them in his world, if that was even true? Kingsley made a note on his parchment to ask the boy later.

"Mr. Potter," said Amelia Bones. "The Ministry is under enormous pressure to detain you, and there are calls for your execution. Rest assured we will not execute you; we are here to assess whether you are still a danger to our society. Before we begin, I would like to make sure I have the chronology straight, okay? We are told by your Headmaster that you were born in another dimension. Your parents were murdered by You-Know-Who..."

"Voldemort," the boy corrected. "You're head of MLE; if you don't have the courage to say his name, how can you expect to fight him?"

"That's not the issue here," said Amelia coldly. "As I was saying, your parents were murdered. You mentioned at your trial that you were raised by your mother's sister and her husband, Mr. Vernon and Mrs. Petunia Dursley. You came to Hogwarts when you were eleven. Your godfather was Sirius Black, whom you never met until your third year. He died last summer. On August 30th this year you were involved in a three-way duel with Dumbledore and You-Kno... Vo... Vol... Voldemort, during which you were accidentally transported to this world, where you were subsequently arrested by Frank Longbottom. Is this all correct?"

“Pretty much,” said the boy.

“You then escaped and returned to Grimmauld Place, where you believed the Order to be residing, but in fact was V...Voldemort’s stronghold. You then participated in an attack on the train...”

“I did not participate...I just...” interrupted the boy.

“We’ll get to that,” Amelia cut him off. “I am just getting the timeline sorted. You attacked the Hogwarts Express, ordering the execution of a passenger and then turned on your own people, resulting in the arrest of four Death Eaters. You escaped, leaving a message to meet Albus Dumbledore. You were captured and then brought before us. Is that correct?”

“More or less,” said Harry. “But I did not murd...”

“We’ll get to that,” repeated Amelia, cutting him off. “This is all a little hard to believe. Out of respect for Albus Dumbledore, we are giving you this opportunity. Were it not for him, you would have been confined to Azkaban without trial. Now, I concede that this story would explain your behaviour since you got here, but we have many points to clear up, and we need more proof than just your word. Do you consent to the use of Veritaserum?”

The boy paused to think for a second. Kingsley could tell from his face that he didn’t really want to do it, but something told him he had to. At length, he nodded. Dawlish rose from his chair and administered the potion, by pouring three drops onto the boy’s tongue.

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As the ice cold liquid touched Harry’s tongue, he felt a shiver go through his body. He had no wish to submit to this potion, but it would help his case. He had many private thoughts, many that no one knew about, and he would not be able to stop himself giving them away. But he was with the Order here, so they would be responsible, wouldn’t they?

Harry swallowed. He felt an icy sensation spread throughout his body. As it reached his head, he felt a wave of light-headedness sweep over him. He imagined that this was what it felt like to be drugged up on whatever one could buy on the streets of Britain now-a-days. His balance was slightly affected, and he felt his head loll to one side. He felt slightly disconnected from his senses. He registered what he was seeing nearly a second after his eyes had seen it. He seemed so groggy.

“We need to see if the potion has worked,” said Dawlish. His voice seemed to have slowed slightly and it echoed off the walls. Harry’s rational mind told him it was just the potion, but it was very disorientating.

“Name.”

“Harry James Potter.”

“Address.”

“Number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey.”

“Who was the last girl you kissed?”

“Cho Chang, Ravenclaw,” he answered without hesitation. Did I really just say that? He wondered to himself. He hadn’t meant to, it just happened. It just came about before he even had the chance to think.

“Really?” muttered Moody, making a quick note on the parchment in front of him.

“Not in this world,” said Harry quickly. So he did still have some control over his voice.

“Are you from another world?”

“Yes.”

“Are you a Death Eater?”

“No.”

“Are you, or have you ever been in the service of the Dark Lord?”

“No.”

Harry had no control over his answers, nor the questions. He couldn’t stop himself. His head was spinning, but it seemed to be going alright. He had told them he was not evil, under Veritaserum. It might be okay.

Just then, the questioning took a turn for the worse.

“Have you ever used an Unforgivable Curse?”

“Yes.” He sounded as if it were the most natural thing in the world. His voice gave no trace of pride nor regret, but inside the guilt was eating at him.

There was a pause as the jury contemplated his answer. Oh no! They would find out about Bellatrix. He’d end up in Azkaban. No one would believe him. It would all go wrong!

“Which one?”

“The Cruciatus Curse.”

“On whom?”

“Bellatrix Lestrage.”

“You mean Bellatrix Black?”

“No. In my world she is married.”

“So you did it in your world, before you came here, being of sound mind and not under duress from other Death Eaters?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?” growled Moody.

“Yes,” said Harry instantly. His head was spinning and it was hard to follow the conversation.

“How many and whom?” came the next question, though Harry wasn’t sure who had asked it.

“Three,” said Harry. Now he was in trouble. His heart sank and his stomach tightened, but he could not stop his answer. “The Death Eater who attempted to break me out of St Mungo’s. The witch who runs the sweet trolley on the Hogwarts Express - I ordered her execution - and the Auror, Scholes, who was torturing me.”

There was a frantic scribbling of notes by all of the officials in front of him, before Madam Bones spoke up again.

“Here is the problem, Mr. Potter,” said Amelia Bones. “You admit to using an Unforgivable. We can discount the other crimes committed here by our Harry Potter, but you are still guilty of using that curse, which carries a life sentence in Azkaban. Now, we can just about understand your motives behind the three killings, though we will come back to the train incident later, but you have still used the torture curse, and that is inexcusable. You admit you did it of your own free will. Explain why you did it.”

“She murdered Sirius. I watched her. I lost control, I flew into a blind rage. She tried to run, and I followed. I was so angry. I never had parents, and she had taken my Godfather from me. I hated her so much. I caught up with her and...I couldn’t stop myself. The curse didn’t even work. I can’t enjoy causing pain. I’m not evil. The curse worked for less than a second before she was on her feet.”

“I see,” said Amelia. “What is there that stops you flying into a similar blind rage here? How can I be sure you won’t use the curse again?”

“You can’t” answered Harry without hesitation. In his mind, he was panicking. He had used an Unforgivable and they might jail him for it. They had already accused him of murdering the Trolley-Witch. They weren’t going to let him off!

“So you have a criminal record?” asked Dawlish.

“Yes.” Oh, this just keeps getting better, he thought sarcastically to himself.

“Explain.”

“Two violations of the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry. A House-Elf visited me and did a Hover Charm in my home and I received a warning. Three years later, Dolores Umbridge sent Dementors to my house. I was telling people of Voldemort’s return and the Ministry tried to hush it up. To discredit me, she sent Dementors. I cast the Patronus Charm to defend myself and my cousin. I was nearly expelled for using the charm in self-defence.”

“In such circumstances, you are allowed to use magic,” growled Moody.

“Minister Fudge thought me and Dumbledore were creating a rumour about Voldemort to unseat him from power. He tried to discredit us. He wanted me expelled. Luckily, Dumbledore got me off.”

“If Fudge is the Minister, where is Mr. Crouch?” asked Kingsley.

“He’s dead. He was murdered by a Death Eater over a year ago.”

“You have had your brushes with the law, haven’t you?” muttered Madam Bones as she frantically scribbled notes on the parchment in front of her.

“Tell me about the Hogwarts Express incident last month,” growled Moody.

Harry’s heart sank, but he was unable to stop himself. Without a second’s hesitation, his lips began to move as he launched into the tale. Harry knew he was in trouble. They knew he had a criminal record in both worlds. They knew he didn’t like the Ministry in general and that he had used an Unforgivable. They knew he had attacked the Hogwarts Express, and killed the trolley-witch, not to mention the Death Eaters in St Mungo’s. He had escaped custody and become a fugitive, in addition to attacking a Ministry worker during his escape and killing an Auror, even though it had been a corrupt Auror. Corrupt, Scholes may have been, but he was also the jury’s colleague and possibly friend. That would not help his case.

The questioning seemed to last forever; they covered most of his life. His early confessions regarding an Unforgivable and his criminal record seemed to be a bit of a black mark. He would undoubtedly be called to answer for them sooner or later. Dumbledore was famous for giving second chances; the Ministry were not and Moody definitely was not.

Two hours later, Harry was released. He was given a potion to flush the Veritaserum from his veins. Ten minutes and a trip to the bathroom later, Harry was feeling better, but very tired. The questioning had been very tiring, probably because of the potion. They had started off with questions about his crimes and then his abilities. Moody in particular sounded very doubtful that his new found talents could be controlled. ‘You can’t change what you are, laddie,’ he had

said. From there they went onto his health, and the dreams he had been having. When he mentioned the dreams from the other Harry's memories, he had been asked that if he remembered too much, would he snap and join Voldemort again. Harry had told them that since Voldemort took everything from him, he would never join him, ever. They discussed briefly his combat experience in the Department of Mysteries, and Sirius Black's escape from Azkaban. Harry had a feeling that the guards would be advised to check on the inmates for Animagus abilities. He wasn't asked much about his adventures, only the fight in the Ministry. He had discussed the Weasleys and his friends. He discussed the hostility with Malfoy and of course his article in the Quibbler. He had named names again, giving them everyone who had been at the re-birth and the Department of Mysteries. Some of them were dead in this world, but most survived. They had grilled him thoroughly on the trolley-witch and though it had been hard, Harry believed he had won them over. As Moody put it, 'as Aurors we have had to make such decisions. I can understand what you did; it was the logical choice, but what gave you the right to make it?' Harry couldn't answer: he did not know.

The results would be published in a few hours, but he was not required to stay for them. The potion had tired him out and he was absolutely spent. As he got back to the Room of Requirement that evening, Harry was so tired he simply crashed into a large comfy bed which appeared on the shore of his little beach and fell asleep in all his clothes.

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### ***HARRY POTTER CLEARED!***

*A mere four days after the news broke that the Dark Knight, Harry Potter had suffered amnesia after an attack in Devon, Rita Skeeter, special correspondent, can exclusively reveal that the boy had been cleared of all charges by the Ministry of Magic. After an extensive interrogation by Head of Magical Law Enforcement Amelia Bones and Master Aurors Moody, Shacklebolt and Dawlish, Harry Potter has been cleared of all charges. He will receive no punishment for the sixty-nine cases of using an Unforgivable Curse and forty-five counts of murder. In a statement issued hours ago by the Minister of Magic, Harry Potter is pardoned and released, but under heavy watch.*

*"The boy is to be monitored twenty-four hours a day," said Minister Crouch. "His wand has been tapped so that every spell he utters is recorded instantly at the Ministry. If he puts a toe out of line, he will stand trial for every one of his past crimes. He is subject to a monthly review by a Legilimens to check for any sign of the returning darkness. The boy's past speaks for itself and we are taking no chances. He is free to go, but will be constantly monitored. The safety of the public is our top priority."*

*Questions have been raised about the truthfulness in the claim of amnesia, but after interrogation by a Legilimens and through the use of Veritaserum, the story has been verified. Questions have also been raised about Mr. Potter's return to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and*

*Wizardry. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore was unavailable for comment, and no statement has been issued. Legally, Potter was never expelled and could return, but that decision will lie in the hands of the Headmaster, the Head of Gryffindor House Minerva McGonagall, and Potter's parents, assuming the Wizengamot do not deem him a danger to society. The Wizengamot has the authority to overturn the decision of the Ministry of Magic, and Mr. Potter may still find himself under arrest.*

*Dumbledore has long been known for his unorthodox methods and this reporter, for one, would not be surprised to see the Dark Knight back in classes within a week. The moral debate over this is staggering. Would any sane parent want their child to be taught alongside a mass-murderer? It is irresponsible to expose the innocent, our children, to the kind of person who would commit murder as freely as Potter once did. This did not seem to bother Headmaster Dumbledore when he hired the half-giant Rubeus Hagrid, who was later dismissed as a teacher for setting a Hippogriff loose on a student. The father of the student in question and member of Hogwarts Board of Governors, Lucius Malfoy, gave this statement.*

*"We the board of governors have long felt that Dumbledore's decisions are bordering on insanity and in the interest of the students, we are ready to step in should the need arise. The incident with Draco Lucius Malfoy's son and the Hippogriff was a direct result of Dumbledore's negligence and the employment of an unsuitable teacher. The board will not make the same mistake twice and will gladly step in to protect the students, even if it means denying Mr. Potter a proper education."*

Rose slammed the article down in disgust. Lucius-bloody-Malfoy. How could the world not see that he was a Death Eater? The man was downright vicious. It was his gold, nothing else. There should be a law against slimy bastards like him. Looking around the Great Hall, she noticed that almost everyone else was avidly reading the *Prophet*. As usual, the stares and glares were coming thick and fast. From what she had overheard, they would be in for a long ride. She had heard about Hannah Abbott's outburst at her mother and knew of ten more students who had lost a member of their immediate family to Harry. She knew it was a lot to ask them to forgive him, but she wished they would. And Crouch was keeping him locked up like a dog. He would practically be wearing a collar, have his wand tapped and everything. They were treating him like a...criminal. Couldn't they see that he had changed? No, they couldn't, because no one could tell them the truth. Damn all this secrecy!

Tuesdays were always the busiest breakfasts for two reasons. One, because it was spaghetti hoops and hash-browns day rather than baked beans and waffles, and secondly, every sixth and seventh year had a lesson period one, so everyone was at breakfast. The hall was alive with chatter, each discussing their own Harry-Potter-conspiracy theory. She heard the names Butlins, Black Noel and Gringott's being mentioned. When Harry did re-emerge, he would not be met with welcome arms. Even Ron was discussing what his father had told him about the

Butlins incident, and how he had had to put the holiday park right again. He was supposed to be on their side, part of their crew, but since Ginny and Rose couldn't tell him anything, he had decided that it was all a conspiracy. Not even Fred, George or Percy knew anything, so why he had the right to sulk and spread rumours was beyond Rose.

"Can I have your attention please," called the Headmaster above the chatter, which dwindled away in a few seconds. All eyes turned to face the old man. "There will be a meeting tonight for all Gryffindors in the Gryffindor common room at seven o'clock. It is very important that all Gryffindors attend. Thank you. Have a nice day."

As the student body assimilated that information, Rose cracked a smile. It had to be about Harry. Was he to return to Gryffindor Tower? He was pardoned, so now he could return to school and everything could be normal again. Rose took one look down the table, and it was clear that others had come to the same conclusion she had. Suddenly a hand landed on her shoulder. She turned to see Hannah Abbott leaning over her, a vicious glare on her face.

"Just keep him away from me," she hissed.

Without a further word she stalked off towards the door. The girl seemed livid, but it was understandable. Rose only hoped that time would heal her wounds. She watched the Hufflepuff reach the doors, but then something extraordinary happened.

As she reached the doors, a wall of pink light appeared over the threshold. Hannah was launched off her feet and thrown back a good ten feet, landing on the cold hard floor, and sliding a further few feet before coming to a stop. She lay still for a few seconds before the whole hall erupted into gasps. Suddenly the huge wooden double-doors to the hall slammed shut, and the wall of pinkish light descended over the doors. With another bang, the back door that the staff used slammed just as hard and was again covered by the pink light. The stained glass windows that ran along the east wall were also covered by the barrier of light, as was the owl entrance. Every entrance and exit was blocked by the light. A wave of panic spread through the students and the screams and shouts became louder and louder.

Suddenly the whole room filled with a sick laughter. It was deep and booming, and seemed to reverberate off every surface in the hall. It sent a chill down Rose's spine. It seemed to be coming from all around them, a single, evil laugh, magically magnified. The manic laughter was deafening and many students clasped their ears in discomfort.

The hall erupted in panic as the laughter died away. Those nearest the doors ran to them, only to be thrown back, knocking students in all directions, like ten pin bowling. Cries of 'we're trapped' and 'let me out' came from all directions as panic set in.

"SILENCE!" called a voice. Professor Dumbledore's voice was not magically amplified, but it may as well have been, for every student in the hall froze at the sound of his booming voice, which seemed to echo off the walls just as the manic laughter had done seconds before. "Please return to your house tables and sit in your year groups. Heads of House please do a head-count."

It took nearly a minute before everyone was arranged into his or her year-groups. Rose and Ginny sat opposite each other, with Ron and Dean on their right, and the rest of the fifth years to their left. McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick and Sprout came down the aisle, counting as they went.

“Slytherin?” called Dumbledore from the head table.

“All here,” replied Snape from the other end of the hall.

“Hufflepuff?”

“All present,” Sprout called back as she reached the end of the table.

“Ravenclaw?”

“Yes, all accounted for,” squeaked little Professor Flitwick.

“Gryffindor?”

“Albus, we’re missing eight students!” called back McGonagall, her voice betraying a note of panic. A rush of whispers went around the hall, before they were silenced with several loud bangs generated by Dumbledore’s wand. Rose felt her stomach tighten. Who was missing? Was one of her friends in danger? What was going on? Were they trapped? Questions flew into her head.

“Who are we missing, Minerva?” asked Dumbledore, striding down the aisle towards them.

“Hermione Granger, Colin Creevey, and the entire first year boys dormitory,” replied McGonagall.

“Does anyone know where they are?” Dumbledore asked the Gryffindors. No one seemed to know, and no one spoke up. There was absolute silence in the room.

Everyone else was watching the Headmaster intently, but Rose spared a quick glance at her mother, just in time to see her take an old and tattered-looking, piece of parchment from inside her robes. Rose smiled knowingly to herself. There was a rumour at the school that she had a sixth sense, as she seemed to know if people were near and where people were. In truth, she simply had the Marauders’ Map, a very useful rule-breaking toy that she had confiscated when Sirius had tried to give it to Rose. She had not given it to Dumbledore but kept it herself and used it to make sure that people didn’t skip Potions and no one was following her.

Rose’s thoughts were brought sharply back to the missing students. Hermione and Colin were both prefects and there was a high chance that they were telling off the first years for something or escorting them somewhere. Rose watched as her mother carefully regarded the map, which lay out of sight in her lap.

“They’re in Gryffindor Tower, Albus,” she called. There was a slight murmur as the students tried to guess how she had managed to guess that. Tomorrow, everyone would think she was a psychic.

Dumbledore nodded and started down the central aisle towards the door, which had stopped glowing, but remained firmly shut. He withdrew his wand as he approached. Rose didn’t catch the incantation, but an orange light shone out of the Headmaster’s wand and rocketed towards the door. It never hit, because just as it reached the door, the wall of pink light returned. The orange spell bounced cleanly off with a sharp click, flying back towards the Headmaster, who conjured a shield just in time. Unperturbed, Dumbledore tried another spell. The whole door glowed white for a second, but when the white glow faded, the pink light remained perfectly intact. He tried two more curses, each as ineffective as the first.

Whispers started again, that the old man couldn’t get them out. Panic was starting to set in; they were trapped and they all realised it. Dumbledore was supposed to be the most powerful wizard in centuries, and if he was trapped, what chance did anyone else have? The sinking feeling returned to Rose’s stomach. They were well and truly trapped. Maybe her father could get them out from the outside.

“Albus!” the Potions Mistress suddenly called. “There are intruders in the castle.” A gasp went up at the statement, and Rose even thought she saw the old man pale. “I count five of them. We have to get the Gryffindors back.” Dumbledore nodded and marched to the fireplace, demonstrating speed most would not have thought possible of him. The fireplace was burning brightly on the wall next to the Slytherin table. From the huge marble mantle-piece, he picked up a pot of powder and threw a handful in.

“Gryffindor Tower!” he shouted. *Of course! They could Floo out,* thought Rose. They weren’t trapped after all. Rose felt relief wash over her. The flames turned green and Dumbledore stepped into the fireplace, but nothing happened. A second later, the flames turned back to their natural orange. With a yelp, the Headmaster jumped out of the fire and quickly extinguished his robes, which had caught fire. Rose was sure she heard a snigger coming from the Slytherin table.

Dumbledore grabbed an ornament from the top of the mantle and muttered a few words. The figurine glowed blue for a second before returning to normal. Dumbledore then tapped it with his wand again.

“Activate!” There was a flash of blue light as the Portkey activated, but once again, the Headmaster found himself back where he started. He was just as trapped as the rest of them.

“Are we trapped?” squeaked a voice near the front.

“The Headmaster will get us out of here,” Sprout reassured the student who had spoken. Dumbledore smiled kindly from where he stood.

“There are many worse places to be trapped than in the Great Hall at breakfast time,” he said kindly. “And think of it this way. If we cannot get out, they cannot get in. We are perfectly safe. Our main priority should be to get the trapped Gryffindors back.”

The student smiled weakly and Rose was fairly sure he did not believe the Headmaster. Unperturbed, Dumbledore picked up the Floo pot once more.

“Kingsley Shacklebolt!” he called, throwing a handful of floor powder into the fire. A second later a familiar head appeared in the fire.

“Albus, we are a little busy at the moment,” said Kingsley hurriedly. “Devonport Docks are under attack, they have nuclear submarines there; we’re about to deploy the fifth team, is this important, because you’ve picked a hell of a time!” Kingsley must have been under a lot of stress to talk like that to Dumbledore.

“Hogwarts has been breached,” the Headmaster informed him, with just as much urgency in his voice. “We are trapped in the Great Hall, despite my sincerest efforts. There are only five of them, but we cannot get out. However, there are students loose in the castle, and I have no way to reach them.” The agitation faded from Kingsley’s face, and his eye widened.

“I’ll redirect the fifth team to Hogwarts,” said Kingsley quickly. He swore to himself, much to the amusement of those students close enough to hear. “This was obviously timed to distract us. It’s all gone to hell down there, Albus. Royal Marines Commandos are firing at both sides with machine guns, Death Eaters are killing indiscriminately, we are trying to save lives, but it’s all one big mess, not to mention there are five submarines with nuclear reactors, one of which is even armed with nuclear missiles. If Voldemort gets his hands on nuclear material...” Kingsley trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

“Contact our *friends*,” said Dumbledore. “Take whoever you need, just get a Hit Squad to Hogwarts as fast as you can.”

With a pop, Kingsley’s head was gone from the fire, leaving those who had heard with a lot to think about. Rose could hear whispering as Muggleborn students tried to explain to those from Pureblooded families exactly what submarines, machine guns and nuclear bombs were. Rose already knew and her mind was surging forward. Voldemort was attacking Muggles as a distraction. This wasn’t a full-scale attack on Hogwarts. If he only sent five people it was for a reason; they were looking for something, or rather someone: Harry.

“Is this about Harry?” whispered a voice opposite her. Ginny had been thinking about it as well. Rose nodded.

“It must be. If he only sent five it is not an invasion.”

“But how did he know Harry was here?” whispered Ginny.

“Malfoy,” said Rose. “Who else?”

“You’re probably right. Do you think Harry will be safe? Hardly anyone knows about that room.”

“I hope so,” said Rose, though she was far from certain.

“Aurors are on their way,” Dumbledore announced to those too far away to hear his conversation. “We should be out of here in an hour or so. Please just talk amongst yourselves while we wait.”

He threw another handful into the fire, calling ‘Gryffindor Tower’ as he did so. A second later, a head appeared in the fire.

“Yes, Professor?” asked Hermione Granger.

“Miss Granger, the castle has been breached and everyone is trapped in the Great Hall. There are intruders in the castle and they will most likely check the common rooms first. Don’t say a word to the others with you. Stay in Gryffindor Tower. Block the entrance and do not leave until someone comes to get you. Keep your wits about you, Miss Granger. This is very real.”

Hermione gaped like a fish for a few seconds, before nodding. Rose knew that she was not prepared for this. Her life revolved around books and theoretical magic, not putting it into practice. She knew a lot of spells, but Rose doubted she was much of a dueller.

“Good luck, Miss Granger,” said Dumbledore. Then her head was gone.

It was only another minute before a voice called, “Albus.” Kingsley’s head was back in the fireplace. “The strike teams can’t get in. The doors and windows are all covered by a barrier of some sort. We even tried the owl entrance. It’s all locked up. Gringott’s curse breakers have been called, they’ll be there in half an hour.”

“In half an hour, the Gryffindors will be dead,” said Snape, who was a foot behind the headmaster, keeping an eye on Slytherin and an eye on the conversation in the fire. He had not said a word since the siege had begun.

“Is there no other way into the castle?” asked Kingsley

“There are several secret passageways, but each is blocked. There may be more but they are as illusive as the Chamber of Secrets,” said Dumbledore.

*Chamber of Secrets?* Something clicked in Rose’s mind. She remembered Harry telling her about Tom Riddle, and who he was before he became Voldemort. He had mentioned the Chamber, hadn’t he? The Chamber did exist, but only Harry knew where it was. Only Harry...*Harry!*

Rose was on her feet in an instant, almost running towards the Headmaster. She reached him in a few paces and stood on tiptoe to whisper a single word in his ear:

“Harry!”

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Harry had just stepped out of the shower. The warm water had refreshed him a lot, having spent the entire morning sleeping. Shaking the weariness from him, he emerged with a towel wrapped around his waist. As he pulled on his underwear and usual black army-style combat trousers, it occurred to him that there was no lock on the door of the Room. It would be quite embarrassing if McGonagall walked in to find him literally with his trousers down.

He towel dried his hair and put on a belt, before attempting to style his hair. As usual, it was a fruitless endeavour and his hair looked much the same as it had before. He made a mental note to ask for some gel from Milton’s Muggle Marketplace in Diagon Alley, to see if that could do anything for him. He was getting too old to be a ragamuffin. He needed to have a little pride in his appearance, because if he wasn’t happy with it, how could any girl ever be?

He strapped the wrist support back around his injured wrist. It was feeling better on the whole. He still didn’t dare use it for anything other than eating and drinking, just in case, but it didn’t ache anymore. Madam Pomfrey had stopped giving him painkillers and bone-strengthening potions, three days before and so the grogginess he had felt for the last fortnight was gone. He had acquired a tan over the last fortnight: one advantage of having customised the room to a beach house in the Caribbean.

Harry stood topless before the mirror, staring at his reflection, wondering how others saw him. Was he a ‘fit’ guy or was he a ‘minger’? Did he make girls stare or vomit? His hair was unruly and he was probably one of, if not the shortest boy in the sixth year. Up until September, he would have definitely said minger. He had been short, scrawny and a ragamuffin, but now he was muscle-bound and had lost the glasses. He no longer wore glasses or contacts and his hair was shorter, less messy. He was still a midget, and still had his scar. It was that scar that would identify him. He would always be the Boy-Who-Lived. Girls would just want to be able to say that they had shagged the Boy-Who-Lived, rather than want to be with Harry. That would be his curse forever. No one even had the slightest idea what it was to be him. No one understood. Sometimes, he longed to meet someone who had been through exactly what he had, someone who truly knew what it was to be alone. But there was no one in this universe, or his own, who had the slightest idea. It looked like his dream would never come true. Was he doomed to be alone forever?

“Harry Potter!” called a familiar voice. Harry whirled around, expecting to see the Headmaster enter the room. Instead, a fireplace had materialised in the middle of the beach. Floating amidst the flames was the head of the Head. Harry approached the fire.

“Yes, Professor?” he asked, drying his hair with a towel as he knelt before the fire.

“Harry,” whispered the Headmaster. There was a tone to his voice that was urgent and almost fearful. It sent a shiver down Harry’s spine. The headmaster was never afraid. What was going on? What had happened? Not in a million years would he have predicted the answer.

“Hogwarts has been breached. Aurors can’t get in and the rest of us are unable to escape the Great Hall. There are students trapped in Gryffindor Tower, and we have no means to reach them.”

“Is this about me?” asked Harry, feeling a surge of guilt welling up in his stomach.

“We are unsure,” said the Headmaster gravely. “We can discuss motives later. At present the safety of the students is all I care about. I need you to protect them. Can you manage it?”

“How many of them?” asked Harry, wandlessly summoning his wand and sword from their place by the hammock. He just hoped his wrist was up to the task. He had no choice: he could not stand by and let the students die. For all he knew they could be his friends. He had to try.

“We believe there are five of them.”

“Anyone we know?”

“No,” said the Headmaster. “Hurry, Harry.”

“What am I supposed to do when I find them?” asked Harry. “Barricade us all in, or try to reach you? If you are trapped, what hope do I have?”

“The intruders are responsible for the wards; they may be able to remove them. At present all doors and windows are blocked. Do whatever you feel is best, but the safety of the students is all that matters.”

Something stirred in Harry’s mind at the words ‘doors and windows’, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. He found it hard to believe that Hogwarts could be so easily brought to its knees. Why did Voldemort not invade now? Hogwarts was effectively prison. He could invade easily and be done with it. Why only send in five? They had to be after Harry. They must be assassins, bounty hunters. It was all his fault.

“This is about me, isn’t it?”

“This is not a full scale assault. It is a strike team; I believe they are indeed looking for you. It is likely they are a team of bounty hunters, trying to collect the bounty placed on your head by Tom. After the article this morning, they must think you are back in Gryffindor Tower. There are eight students trapped up there. I have instructed them to barricade the door, but I fear it will not be enough. I know you are not yet fully healed and you don’t wish to fight, but I must ask you to help. There is no one else. Please put this guilt out of your mind and concentrate. We need you.”

“Okay,” said Harry firmly. He had no choice. He was the only one who could. “What’s the password to Gryffindor Tower?”

“Devil’s Snare,” replied Dumbledore with a small smile. “Good luck, Harry.”

With a pop, his head was gone. Harry took a moment to compose himself. Who was trapped? Was it a friend of his? Would he get there in time and what good could he do? He hoped his wrist was up to the job of wielding a wand and sword or this would be a big problem. Pulling the support tight around his wrist for added support, Harry pulled on a shirt, not even bothering to button it up. He snatched up his sword and tucked his wand into the belt loop on his combats before darting out of the door.

Harry Potter was about to make his first strike for the Light.

Along the corridor and down the stairs to the sixth floor, Harry ran. Every window he passed had its shutter closed, blocking out the light and bathing the corridors in shadow. His feet could have carried him blindfolded to the common room, but today he had to keep his wits about him. Hugging the shadows, Harry made his way as quietly as he could up towards the common room. His eyes darted along the wall, and through the shadows, looking for any sign of an intruder. He tried to keep his footsteps as quiet as possible and stopped every few paces to listen. As he turned away from the edge of the castle almost all light faded and he found himself staggering through near darkness, not daring to light his wand in case it gave him away.

He was halfway down the passageway when he came across the first of the intruders. He was twenty feet from the end of the corridor. At the end was the main staircase. He needed to go down one floor to get to the right corridor. He was hurriedly rushing towards steps when a figure appeared at the landing of the stairs. Harry immediately slipped into the shadows, and tiptoed forward, hugging the wall. He crept closer, trying not to make a sound. From ten feet away, he could see the figure quite clearly. The man wore a long black cloak with his hood up. He wondered briefly if it was Voldemort. No, he didn’t think so. He couldn’t feel whether it was or not, but the figure didn’t move with the grace that Voldemort did, he was too short, and this was supposed to be a team of bounty hunters. He wondered briefly if it was a Dementor, but as he could hear footsteps, he knew it was walking, not gliding, and he didn’t feel cold or hear screaming.

The figure had come up the steps from a floor below, paused at the end of the corridor, and glanced down the passage. Harry felt a chill go down his spine. It was almost as if the figure was staring straight at him. Harry’s hand tightened around the wand, but then to Harry’s relief, he looked away. He turned and looked back down the stairs. Harry watched in horror as a second figure, dressed identically to the first, appeared at the end of the corridor.

“Is this ze right floor?” hissed one in a cold voice. Harry paused. The accent sounded familiar. It was almost the accent that Victor Krum spoke in. Harry was sure it wasn’t the Seeker, but it was probably a Bulgarian, or from somewhere around there. Hungary or Romania perhaps? Was it Karkaroff? He had had that kind of accent. He was a Death Eater in Harry’s world, who had given up names of other Death Eaters in exchange for his own freedom after Voldemort fell. He had been too scared to return, but had not left Voldemort until after he had fallen. Since Voldemort had never fallen here, Karkaroff was probably a Death Eater in this universe.

“I zink ve need to go up vun more,” came the reply, in a similar accent.

“No,” said the first. “Ve are too high. Ve go to fifth floor, zen to Fat Lady at end of corridor.”

“Zis place iz ze damn laberinth!” growled the second figure.

They were heading for the Tower. Harry braced himself. He could not allow them to get to the Tower. He was still hidden and had the element of surprise. If he surprised them, there was a chance that he could take them both. If he couldn't, then at least they were far from the common room. Keeping to the shadows, Harry crept nearer, until he was only a few feet away. He could practically reach out and touch the nearest one.

“Vat floor are ve on?” asked one. Harry slowly, silently slipped his wand out of the belt-loops of his trousers.

“I don't know,” replied his companion. “You go up vun, und I go down vun. If you find it, shout.”

Just as Harry was about to fire the first spell, the two figures split up, one going up and one going down to the fifth floor. Harry waited until the figures had disappeared before darting out of the shadows. As quickly and quietly as possible, he slipped down one flight of stairs and into a fifth floor corridor. His heart was pounding in his chest. He waited for a few seconds, to make sure he had not been heard. Once again taking refuge in the shadows, he crept after the figure in black. Staying in the shadows, he followed the figure until he was clear of the staircase. After about twenty paces, Harry decided that it was now or never. The man was alone and Harry could not allow him to reach the Tower. Taking a deep breath, Harry charged forward.

The figure must have heard him coming, for he turned to face the incoming attack. Harry just had time to see the look of shock in the man's eyes before he jumped, slamming his right foot square into the chest of the man. Harry landed on his feet, while the man slid away on his back. Harry levelled his wand at the man and was about to fire the first spell when he noticed that the man's hood had fallen down as he had hit the ground, revealing a thin, pale man, who looked quite ill in Harry's opinion. He was deathly pale, with sharp, dark eyes, and a spiky head of dark hair. The man shot a glare of daggers at Harry before rising to his feet. Rising is a good word, for the man didn't climb, he simply seemed to float back up to his feet. A vicious grin swept over his face.

“Potter,” sneered the heavily accented man.

Harry didn't even reply. He levelled his wand, but before he could even fire a spell, a hand closed around his wrist. The man had closed the gap of ten feet between them in less than a second. His speed was phenomenal. Harry didn't even have time to realise he was trapped before a hand smashed into his stomach, knocking the air out of him. Harry doubled up, holding his stomach, gasping for air. He was vaguely aware of his feet leaving the ground, and the man lifting him above his head, and a brief sensation of falling, before his back slammed painfully

into the wall. He lost his grip on his wand and sword as he bounced off the wall and landed face first on the cold hard floor. He coughed and his mouth was suddenly full of blood. He was bleeding internally. The man's speed and strength was inhuman. He had thrown Harry fifteen feet into a wall. As Harry struggled to his feet, the man covered the distance between them before Harry could say "Accio". A hand closed around his throat forcing him back up against the wall.

There was a second's pause before the man yanked him away from the wall by the neck and, with one hand, threw Harry across the width of the corridor, slamming him into window. The glass cracked behind but didn't break. Harry fell to the ground with a thud. His head was throbbing, his entire body ached, his wrist was starting to protest and, to top it all, he had landed on his funny bone, and his elbow was tingling. Spitting out a mouthful of blood, Harry managed to stagger to his feet, using the wall for support.

"Come on, boy," snarled the man, beckoning Harry to attack him. "What are you waiting for?" Harry wandlessly summoned his sword to him. The blade leapt from the scabbard, which he had dropped in the struggle, and into his outstretched hand. Harry could feel the anger and the desire to kill bubbling in his stomach. The darkness was rising in him. The combat was drawing it to the surface.

Harry suppressed the desire to kill and raised the sword, ready for the next attack. The man moved slowly forward. Harry waited until he was in range and then moved. As the man threw a punch, Harry sidestepped, slashing at the man's thigh with the sword. To his satisfaction, he saw a thick red line appear across the man's leg as the fabric split. The cut had been quite deep but not fatal. The man hardly seemed to notice. He took it in his stride and turned to face Harry again without flinching. As Harry glanced down, the blood coming from the man's bleeding thigh was almost black. It was a very dark red, as if starved of oxygen. He had seen it before, but only on the bodies of the dead.

"That was a new cloak," snapped the man angrily. In the blink of an eye, he rushed at Harry. It was too fast to do anything. The man slammed him into the wall with his hand around Harry's throat. Harry lost his grip on the sword as he tried to struggle. He tried to claw the hand away from his throat as the air was crushed out of him. He didn't have the breath for a spell.

Harry struggled, but the man's strength was too much for him. The man slackened his grip, letting Harry fall to the floor. Coughing profusely, Harry realised that his situation was hopeless. The man was too strong, too fast. Harry couldn't fight him. His sword lay on the floor when he had dropped it, along with his wand. Harry summoned his remaining strength and tried to get the sword. He took two steps before falling to his knees.

The man seemed to find this very amusing. Harry crawled on his hands and knees towards where the sword lay. A little further! Just a bit more! On his hands and knees, with the man standing over him, laughing, Harry moved slowly and painfully. All he concentrated on was getting the sword. He stretched, reaching out with his right arm. He felt a great wave of relief wash over him as his fingers closed around the handle.

“Vat you gonna do vis zat?” sneered the man. Harry ached all over from the beating. He had no strength left to fight the rising darkness. With all his remaining strength, Harry spun and thrust the blade into the man’s stomach, letting loose a scream of rage of his did.

The man took two paces backwards, his hands flying to the handle of the sword, which was sticking out of his stomach. As Harry picked up his wand and struggled to his feet, the man gave him a bored look and calmly pulled the blade out of his stomach.

Harry gasped as the man shrugged off a blow that would have killed, or at least vanquished, any normal man. He seemed completely unfazed after just being run through.

“What the hell are you?” growled Harry, keeping his wand hidden. In response, the man threw the sword at Harry’s feet with a clatter. As Harry watched, the man’s features changed before his eyes. His eyes turned into a blood red colour, with black pupils, similar to Voldemort’s except that Voldemort had slits for pupils like a snake, whereas this man had dots. The man’s fingernails grew by nearly an inch, as did his teeth. Harry gasped as he stared at the man’s fangs.

Vampires!

“Bollocks,” gasped Harry, as the vampire charged forward, knocking Harry off his feet. He was picked up in a rugby tackle and slammed into the nearby trophy cabinet. Harry crashed to the ground and covered his head as a shower of broken glass rained down on him. The wooden support beams for the glass cabinet were all splintered around him and digging into his back.

A hand closed on the collar of the shirt that hung loosely from his shoulders.

“Had enough, yet?” sneered the vampire. “You’re lucky I’m not allowed to kill you, boy. The Dark Lord wants that pleasure for himself.” Harry didn’t reply. He did the first thing that came to mind. He grabbed the nearest trophy and slammed it into the vampire’s head. With a scream, the vampire released him and backed up a few paces, clutching its head. A little bit of steam was coming from where the trophy had hit. The beast was cursing in very fast Romanian. Harry hadn’t a clue what he was saying, but it can’t have been polite. Why was he burned? Harry glanced down at the trophy. Of course...silver! Vampires are allergic to silver! Harry picked up a silver trophy in each hand and got to his feet.

“Come on,” he called to the vampire. The vampire charged, and Harry swung the trophies. One connected with the vampire’s arm, batting him away from Harry’s chest. The second came down on the back of the vampire’s neck. The killer screamed as smoke rose from the back of his neck. Harry didn’t waste time; drawing strength he didn’t know he had, he swung again, but the vampire was too quick. He grabbed both of Harry’s wrists and twisted them until he couldn’t hold onto the trophies. Harry dropped them, crying out in pain as his wrists, including the injured one, were twisted. He hoped his right one didn’t snap again; it still wasn’t perfectly healed and was taking a lot of punishment.

The vampire released him and delivered a punch to his stomach, which sent him careening through the air. Harry landed on his back. *Okay, he thought, silver worked, I don't have any garlic; what else works?* He had yet to cover vampires in Defence lessons. He only knew what worked in Muggle horror films. Dudley had bought one over the summer—*Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Maybe it was just because he had been grieving, but the lead actor, playing Dracula, looked ever so much like Sirius. He knew from that film that the trusty stake and mallet, were an option, but did he really want to kill the thing?

By luck, Harry had landed next to his wand. He grasped it tightly and aimed at the vampire, who was charging towards him.

"REDUCTO!" he screamed. The vampire hit him just as he finished the spell, knocking his wand to the side and sending the curse veering off in completely the wrong direction, hitting the window to Harry's right. The glass shattered and the wooden shutter was blasted to pieces, raining splinters down to the floor. A pink light seemed to cover the window, preventing anyone from entering or exiting, but it didn't stop the light. Sunlight filled the room, bathing Harry in light. The vampire immediately let go and withdrew, cradling his blistered hands and screaming in pain. Harry sat up and, taking the initiative, aimed a similar spell at the next window. Again, it shattered, bathing the screaming vampire in sunlight. Harry crawled to his feet, picking up a wooden support beam from the trophy cabinet. He snapped it over his knee, so that one end was pointed. Then using all his strength, he brought it crashing down into the vampire's heart.

There was a scream and the vampire dissolved into dust.

Harry stared down at the spot where the vampire had lain seconds before. There was no body, no sign of the dead man. In a way it was better, as he didn't have to face the life he had taken. In a way, the vampire was already dead, so did it matter that Harry had killed him? Had he given the soul of the man inside the vampire peace? A vampire wasn't even human. *But neither is Remus, and he is a good man,* said a voice in the back of his mind. In truth, Harry didn't feel anything after killing the vampire. He could feel the anger bubbling beneath the surface, and tried to calm himself. He could debate vampire rights at a later date. He had to get to the Tower. There were still four more vampires loose in the castle.

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*BANG!*

*CRASH!*

Something was trying to force its way through the barricade. Hermione Granger had levitated two sofas, a wardrobe and an armchair to block the portrait hole, but they didn't seem to be holding. Whatever was on the other side was forcing its way in, and not with magic. There was a scraping noise as the legs of the furniture slid over the floor. Something was forcing its way in. God, it was strong! Hermione and Colin, being prefects, had their wands ready, aimed at the shaking furniture that was their only defence against the intruders on the outside.

The prefect turned to glance at Colin Creevey. He was a year younger but still a prefect. The pair of them had had to talk to the first year boys regarding their antics with Fred and George Weasley's infernal sweets. It had gotten quite out of hand, especially when they had slipped one of their laughter tonics into the drink of a second year who happened to be allergic to some of the ingredients. She had spent four hours in the infirmary after her skin turned into one huge rash. This kind of behaviour was unacceptable and could have ended up costing Gryffindor house-points. That was not going to happen on Hermione's watch. As such, Hermione and Colin had taken the responsibility of talking to them. She didn't want to inform McGonagall for fear of losing House points. She and Colin had detained them as they left for breakfast this morning. She had thought of asking Ron Weasley, her fellow sixth year prefect, to help her, but she knew he would make an excuse and not do anything. The boy was as good as useless, especially last year, when it came to disciplining his brothers. Hermione and Colin had been half way through the lecture when the Headmaster had called on the fireplace.

Her mind was thinking quickly as she waited. She kept thinking of hexes and curses she could use. She had given Colin a few but wasn't sure if he could manage them. She knew plenty and was sure they would work. But she had never been in a situation like this before. She hoped she didn't let anyone down. Her palms were sweating over her wand, which was slick in her grip. Her breathing was fast and erratic; she was scared but making her best effort to think clearly. Colin was on the other side of the room, hiding behind an armchair with a clear retreat path to the dormitory steps. There was a good chance that they would have to retreat. She was good, she knew that, her OWL results were straight O's, but she had no experience of this kind of thing. She was an academic who wished to become a teacher after her graduation. She wasn't a field type person, and certainly not an Auror.

Where was the help that Dumbledore had said he was sending? He had said that they were trapped inside and Aurors outside, so who was coming?

*CRASH!*

Half the barricade fell away under a tremendous impact. Hermione could see a figure moving through the gap. It was too small to climb through, but the figure could be seen moving on the other side. Whoever it was, was tall and thin and continued to hammer against the blockade with its arm. Whoever it was, it was as strong as an ox.

"Ready, Colin?" hissed Hermione, trying to keep her voice level. Inside she was terrified, but she tried to keep a calm appearance, if only for Colin's sake. She was a prefect and was supposed to remain calm under all circumstances.

"R...Ready," came the hoarse reply. He sounded like she felt, but she would not let on. The first years were up in the seventh year dormitory. They had been told to lock the door and only open it for her and Colin. If they had to retreat then they could lock themselves in that room. Most of the seventh year boys had brooms so they could fly out of the window if needs be. No! They couldn't; the windows were sealed by the magic. Damn! Why hadn't she thought of it earlier? They were trapped! No time to amend it now. Their only way out was to fight.

*CRASH!*

The barricade gave way and the sofas crashed to the floor with a tremendous bang. Two figures emerged from the darkness and stepped lightly into the room. They wore long black cloaks, which seemed to cover them completely, leaving no skin visible. For a second, she thought they were Dementors. She had read about them in books and the *Prophet*. They were supposed to be indestructible and evil. It took another second of rational thought to realise that she didn't feel cold or sad so they couldn't be Dementors. They must be Death Eaters.

Her wand arm was visibly shaking and she had broken into a cold sweat. These men were here to kill them. They were going to die. Where was the help Dumbledore was sending? They wouldn't arrive in time. They were going to die. The thought repeated in her mind over and over as the figures stepped closer to her. After a second's pause she managed to compose herself enough to fire a spell.

*"Stupefy!"* cried Hermione, unleashing a jet of red light, which rocketed towards the first intruder. Hermione must have blinked, as both figures sidestepped so quickly that Hermione didn't see them move. Their speed and strength was phenomenal. The curse impacted on the wall, and faded into nothing.

The spell may have missed, but it gave her the confidence to try another. Hermione unleashed a second curse, just as Colin did the same. Where the hell was the help Dumbledore had promised? This time, the first intruder didn't sidestep. He kept calmly walking towards Hermione. The spell hit him square in the chest, but he didn't seem to feel it. Hermione gasped as her spell failed. *Her* spells never failed, and certainly not one she had learned two years ago. What kind of man could take a stunner to the chest and keep on coming?

Hermione raised her wand for another strike, but she wasn't fast enough. The intruder lunged forward so fast that Hermione didn't have time to even get the spell off. An icy cold hand clamped around her wrist. She found herself looking up into a pair of cold, yet mismatched eyes, which seemed to fill a cold white face, with fangs protruding from lips pulled back across razor sharp teeth into a wicked smile. *Vampires!*

"Vere iz ze boy?" hissed the vampire, wrapping his bony fingers around her throat. He had long black hair that came down to his shoulders. He was deathly pale and had a long thin face. One eye was white, and presumably blind, while the other was blood red with a small black dot for a pupil. He looked to Hermione like the Muggle rock star her next door neighbour was a fan of, Marilyn Manson. There was a yelp as the second vampire grabbed hold of Colin by his throat, spinning him to use as a human shield. It also meant that his teeth were inches from Colin's neck. Was he going to bite him? Colin looked absolutely terrified. He strained to get his neck away from the vampire, but its grip was too strong. Its razor sharp teeth were almost touching Colin's neck.

"Let him go!" Hermione cried at the vampire, who seemed not to hear her.

“Vere iz ze boy?” repeated the Marilyn Manson look-a-like, tightening his grip on Hermione’s throat. “Tell us, or zis vun vill suffer for your silence.” The second vampire lowered his hood. His hair had been bleached with peroxide and spiked up with gel. He was clearly the youngest of them, or had been when he became a vampire. He had a vicious tint in his eyes, and Hermione could see that he wanted nothing more than to bite Colin. Poor Colin was on the verge of tears. The vampire was so close he could probably feel the monster’s breath on his shoulder.

“Now, Vasily?” hissed the Vampire, with spiky hair, licking his lips.

“Not yet,” came the reply. Spiky dragged Colin from his point of cover and hauled him nearer to Hermione, where she could see the fear in the young prefect’s eyes even more clearly. They had their backs to the portrait hole, and were coming closer. Hermione struggled to breathe as the Vampire tightened his grip on her neck.

Hermione was desperately trying to recall her advanced reading. Vampires; which legends were true? Stakes, well she didn’t have any. Garlic? She didn’t have any. Sunlight? All the window shutters had slammed shut ten minutes ago. She had a cross! She wore a pendant around her neck, with a cross on it. It was a relic from her pre-Hogwarts days when she had believed. But crosses didn’t work. They were just superstition. The mistake came because most crucifix pendants were made of silver...SILVER! Hermione grasped her pendant and pressed it firmly to the vampire’s cheek. The creature screamed with pain and released her. Hermione fell to the floor, picking up her wand as she landed, and levelled it at the vampires. Spiky was still holding Colin, and using him as a human shield, while Marilyn, who had held Hermione, was still screaming, clutching his face with his hands.

“BITCH!” he swore. As he lowered his hands, Hermione could see an ugly red burn in the shape of a cross on his cheek. Thinking quickly, Hermione cast an engorgement charm on the cross, making it nearly six inches long. The silver might be of help. She held it up towards the vampires, trying to ward them off with it.

“Vat do you think you’re going to do vis zat, girl?” sneered Marilyn, advancing on her. “Vun last time, vere is ze boy?” What boy? What was he talking about? Who was he?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Hermione coughed. She found speaking painful and her throat ached from being choked. She coughed again, and massaged her throat with her spare hand.

“Ve know he iz in Gryffindor Tower,” sneered the Vampire. He turned to the other vampire. “Nicholei, you may drink.”

“NO!” shouted Hermione.

The blond vampire gave Hermione an evil stare before lowering his mouth slowly towards Colin’s neck. Colin tried to turn away but the vampire was too strong. He thrashed in the monster’s arms, but he could not escape. It was hopeless: he was going to die. Luckily for Colin,

the vampire never got to bite him. As the teeth neared his flesh, the vampire exploded into a shower of dust.

Hermione gasped in fear as the dust cleared. The Vampire may be dead, but something far worse had taken its place: Harry Potter.

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As Harry reached the Fat Lady, he found to his horror that it was open and there were voices coming from inside. *God, I hope I'm not too late*, thought Harry desperately, drawing one of the two stakes he had made. Suddenly there was a scream from inside the room. Harry stepped over the threshold and breathed a sigh of relief as he took in the room. It hadn't been a student who had screamed, it had been the vampire. Harry's heart skipped a beat when he saw who was in the room. It was Hermione. She looked so...different. Her hair was still bushy and her eyes sharp. Her uniform was pristine and the prefect badge shone from her chest. But there was something about that just seemed different. Maybe it was just that Harry knew this was not his Hermione, but she seemed different. Across from her, in the arms of a vampire, was Colin Creevey. There was no sign of a camera, but then again he didn't have Harry as a role model in this world. He looked much the same as he usually did, except that he was white with fear. The vampire's teeth were dangerously close to his neck. There were two Vampires in the room, both of which had their backs to him. He had to act now before Colin was bitten. He approached on tiptoe trying not to make a sound.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Hermione protested.

"Ve know he iz in Gryffindor Tower," announced the vampire. Harry was tempted to say that he was right behind him, but he didn't dare give up the element of surprise, remembering all too well the trouble the last vampire had been. This was no place for humour. He crept closer to the vampires, withdrawing one of his homemade stakes from his belt as he did so. He had made it from the upright support beam of the trophy cabinet, which he had sharpened with his sword.

"Nicholei, you may drink!"

The second vampire, which held Colin Creevey began to lower his fangs. It was going to bite him. Harry knew it was now or never. Summoning enough will to overpower his disgust at killing, Harry thrust the stake with all his strength into the back of the vampire. There was a slight whoosh as the vampire exploded into a cloud of dust, which seemed to evaporate in seconds. All eyes turned to face Harry, who raised the stake to point it at the second vampire. A look of surprise appeared on the monster's face for a second before it was replaced by a sneer.

Harry withdrew his sword, holding it in his stronger yet injured hand and the stake in his left. The vampire stared levelly at him for a few seconds, standing perfectly motionless. Harry stared unblinkingly back, looking for any sign of movement. He knew from experience how fast these creatures could be. The monster's eyes seemed to have no life behind them, just a mass of deep red blood. Harry twirled both the sword and the stake around his wrists twice before stepping forward.

“Grab Colin and go!” he ordered Hermione, without even looking at her. She stood frozen to the spot, shaking with fear. “Hermione! Move! Get out of here!” shouted Harry. With that he lunged forward, swinging the sword as he went. He felt the anger grow inside him, as the instincts of the killer took over. The vampire easily ducked and spun, bringing his leg around to sweep Harry’s legs out from in front of him. Harry jumped aiming to land heavily on the vampire’s leg and break it, but the vampire was too fast. Harry landed on the floor again and had to immediately duck the incoming fist. Harry rolled to the side and came back up onto his feet.

He could feel the anger in him trying to get out. The inner darkness that had led him to kill at St Mungo’s was boiling in his heart, trying to break free. *No! I will not let it win!* Harry suppressed it as much as he could. He would not succumb to the other Harry’s fate. He was not a murderer!

Harry only had a moment to try and fight the darkness before the vampire struck again. It surged forward towards him in a blur of motion. Harry ducked to the side, swinging the sword in the same movement. The sword just clipped the ribs of the vampire, which hissed in pain. As Harry turned to face it, the monster moved again. It lunged at Harry, driving its shoulder into his bare stomach. Harry was launched off his feet, and both his weapons were knocked from his hands. Harry landed on top of a glass-topped coffee table, which shattered under his weight. His entire body complained with every movement. Several pieces of glass dug into his hands as he tried to free himself from the ruins of the table. He glanced down to see a small pool of blood seeping out from under his hands. His palms stung, and his hands were ripped to shreds. As the vampire lunged again, Harry grabbed his wand, struggling to maintain his grip as the blood made it slimy.

“*Lumos Solem!*” a beam of bright sunlight erupted from his wand, hitting the vampire in mid-air. The monster roared in agony as a gush of smoke appeared over the burned shoulder. The vampire screamed and tried to cover its face with its hands. Harry rolled to the side to avoid it landing on him, and picked up his sword and stake in the same movement. The vampire was on its feet again, a huge burn on his chest, as well as the cross-shaped blister on its cheek courtesy of Hermione. The beast moved again, but not at Harry.

Instead of coming at Harry it moved towards Hermione, who was too terrified to move. In a single motion, it was behind her with its arm around her neck. Hermione was a human shield, and the vampire’s teeth were dangerously close to her neck.

“Drop ze veapon, boy,” sneered the vampire. “Or zis little bitch vill die.” The vampire gave Hermione’s neck a sharp turn to prove his point, causing Hermione to cry out in pain. With its strength, the vampire could snap her neck like a twig.

“Let her go!” said Harry. He wasn’t fast enough to free her before the beast killed her. Pleading with it was not something that Harry believed would work, but he had no choice. It would kill Hermione without a second thought and Harry couldn’t bear to lose her. “It’s me you want. Let her go!”

The vampire sneered at him again and hissed, "Drop ze sword!" It tightened its grip on Hermione's throat to make it obvious to Harry that he could not help her.

Harry looked from the vampire's cold yet mismatched eyes to Hermione's wide terrified gaze. It would kill her no matter what for the burn she had given it on its cheek. It would not allow the insult to go unchecked. Hermione wouldn't leave the room alive if he gave in. He had to get her out. But how? The vampire was too fast. He couldn't get a spell off fast enough and even a sunlight spell would not kill it quick enough. Harry stared at Hermione then at the vampire; the situation seemed hopeless.

Suddenly an idea came to him, one that frightened him, but he could see no other way. He had spent his entire time in this world fighting it, but it was the only way he could see. It terrified him, and he had no idea if he could ever recover from it. It went against everything he stood for, everything he believed in and everything he held dear. He had to let the darkness take him. He had to let the other Harry's instincts take over. The cold-blooded killer would know what to do.

He had no choice. He was caught between two evils, one inside and one outside. Harry sighed, not knowing what would happen. As much as it disgusted him, he had to do it. Harry forced himself to relax. He took several long, deep breaths. He felt the darkness inside boil over the pit he had confined it to. It rose through him like a storm. He felt a rush of power and aggression he had never felt before. Evil was not without its power. Rage seemed to pump through his veins, unlocking new spells. Harry could suddenly visualise a handful of Dark curses with their incantations written down. His mind seemed to fade slightly, almost like being drunk. He felt slightly light-headed, and as he moved he seemed to do so in slow motion. He seemed to be moving before his brain even registered that he was, just like he had under the effects of Veritaserum.

Harry seemed to have no control over his actions. It was almost like watching a film, or having a vivid dream. It reminded him of how the Imperius Curse felt, except that it wasn't telling him to do it, it was doing it all by itself with his body. With a flick of his left hand, the stake was launched at the vampire. Only the top half of the vampire's head was visible over Hermione's shoulder. It was a tiny target to hit, but Harry's aim was true. The wooden stake embedded itself in the vampire's skull, causing it to scream in pain. It stumbled backwards, releasing Hermione and stumbling over a footstool. The beast roared in pain as it yanked the stake out of its forehead, revealing a hole nearly an inch in diameter which was bleeding dark red blood that appeared almost black. Harry moved instantly, unable to stop himself. He stabbed the vampire in the chest with the tip of the sword, earning another scream from the injured and enraged beast, which fell to its knees in agony. He spun on his foot, withdrawing the blade from the vampire's body as he did so. As he spun, he swung the blade with all his strength. As he came full circle, the blade sliced cleanly through the neck of the vampire, slicing its head clean off. Both parts of the vampire dissolved into dust with a small whoosh. The head was dust before it even hit the floor. As he spun he sheathed the blade in one fluid motion.

Harry finished the spin facing Hermione, the sheathed sword held firmly in his right hand at his side. She was watching him with wide eyes. Her mouth opened and closed, as if she was

trying to find the words. Harry stepped closer to Hermione. She looked so similar, yet so different from the Hermione he knew. He felt a rush of emotion at seeing her. She had been his best friend for five years, and a rush of what can only be described as love surged through Harry. He felt it surge through every cell in his body, displacing the darkness, which still bubbled in his stomach. He felt the darkness recede inside him. The light-headedness had gone. His muscles relaxed and he felt as close to normal as was possible when he ached as much as he did. He had taken a beating from the vampires and he was all too aware that there were still two left.

Hermione seemed to recover herself slightly, as she stopped shaking. Harry's eyes were instinctively drawn to her wand, which she was still aiming at him. He just hoped she didn't start to try to hex him, as he didn't want to have to stun his friend.

"Are the others upstairs?" asked Harry, tucking his wand and stake back into his trousers.

Hermione stood frozen for a moment. Harry was ever more aware that they didn't have time. There were more vampires in the castle. Three down. That meant there were two more. Harry didn't know where they were and wasn't even sure if he could take another vampire. If he did, he would need to let his instincts take control. This scared him, as he knew all too well how hard it was to push the darkness aside once he had allowed it to take over. He was sure that if he had not come face to face with Hermione, his best friend, he might not have been able to push the anger aside. Moody had been right to ask at the inquiry yesterday. What was there stopping him succumbing to darkness again? Surely there was a way to control this power. He made a note to ask Flamel, who was the mind magic expert, about it.

"Hermione!" called Harry trying to break her stupor. Her eyes ceased to be vacant, coming into sharp focus as she raised her wand to point it at Harry's throat. Harry's first thought was to disarm her, and it took a lot of restraint not to resort to violence. He wanted her to trust him after all, not fear him even more.

"You can put that away," said Harry, trying to sound calm, but glancing quickly towards the portrait hole. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"Stay back!" said Hermione in a shaky voice. Her wand arm trembled slightly. Harry felt a little hurt at her response. She believed he was still a killer. On reflection, she was unlikely to think anything else, but the fact that it was Hermione, one of his oldest friends, saying it, made it hurt more.

"It's okay," said Harry calmly, raising both his hands as if surrendering. "I'm here to help you. Dumbledore sent me."

"I don't believe you!" said Hermione, keeping her wand aimed at him. Harry realised that he had no hope of convincing her, not in the amount of time they had. They had to hurry. He decided to try logic instead.

"Your barricade has been destroyed," said Harry pointing to the door. "If you hex me, you will be completely on your own. There are vampires out there and they are not the friendliest

of creatures. We both want to live through this, so for the moment we want the same thing. Think about it; you need me.”

“I don’t trust you!” snapped Hermione. “I know your mother lied to us. There’s something you’re not telling everyone.”

“Perhaps,” said Harry skirting the question. “But I’m here, and I *am* the only hope you have, so are we going to stand here all day and argue or are we going to get you to safety?”

Hermione stood glaring at him for a few seconds, before coming to a decision. “Fine,” she muttered. “But I still don’t trust you.”

“In your shoes, I wouldn’t trust me either, but we can discuss that later. Where are the others?”

“Seventh year dorms,” said Hermione.

“Get them down here,” instructed Harry. “Both you and Colin can cast sunlight, can’t you?”

“It’s a rudimentary skill,” said Hermione, affronted. Harry managed to hide his amusement at her response. She was really uptight and reminded him of McGonagall. So this is how she would have been back home had he and Ron not ‘had a bad influence on her’, to quote Ron.

“Good, keep your wands out,” said Harry. “At any sign of movement, fry the bastards.”

Hermione turned and disappeared up the stairs, leaving Harry to guard the entrance. He found he was smiling to himself as he waited. Hermione was so different here. He remembered Ron saying that he thought he and Harry had had a bad influence on her. Harry didn’t really think so, but now he saw her free from the influence of himself and Ron, he knew Ron had been right. She seemed to have the same grasp of spells from books, but Harry could see in her eyes that the defiance was not there. She had no battle experience; the fight was not in her. She probably had no ties to the Order in this world. His friends back home really were unique. *It just goes to show that it really is our choices and experiences, not our blood and DNA that makes us what we are.*

Harry’s thoughts turned back to the Great Hall. Every door and window was sealed. The fireplaces were working for communication, but if Dumbledore was talking to Hermione rather than Flooing to her, it was safe to assume the fires were blocked. Apparation was impossible and Dumbledore was certain to have tried a Portkey. Fawkes could probably get in, but he could only take one, maybe two people at a time. Anyway, Harry getting in wasn’t the issue; getting everyone else out was the problem. He thought back to what Dumbledore had said, ‘*every door and window is covered by a pink barrier of light*’. He had seen these barriers as he had fought the first vampire he had met. They were only over the windows and doors, but not the walls. An insane idea formed in Harry’s mind.

At that moment, Hermione and Colin reappeared at the bottom of the stairs, each holding their wand out in front of them. Behind them were several small figures in black robes. They must be the first years. Harry suppressed a smile as he noticed that there was a camera hanging from a strap over Colin's shoulders. At least here he wouldn't be taking Harry's photo.

He still had two wands aimed at him, but made no effort to defend himself. He had a silver trophy in one pocket, two stakes tucked into his combats, a wand in one hand and a sword in the other. Hardly the picture of innocence, but there was no time to worry about appearances.

"You're..." stammered Colin, his wand arm visibly shaking.

"Not going to hurt you," Harry finished for him. "Okay, listen. There are at least two vampires still out there. Everyone else is trapped in the Great Hall. What I want to do is get you all down to the Hall."

"I thought all the doors and windows were sealed," said Hermione, sounding unconvinced.

"There are more ways to enter a room than through a door," said Harry. He said it more to reassure her than in earnest. He had a fairly good idea what he was going to do, and could see no reason why it would not work. What he didn't know was how he had come by the idea. He had been thinking it over while he waited for Hermione and Colin to come back. The idea had just popped into his head, followed by a memory of how he had used it before. It was not the sort of thing he should know. It was just a few images; a page of a book, and a few flickers of a Potions laboratory. He could picture the page clearly in his mind. He didn't recognise the memory and on reflection, did not want to. He didn't dare try to imagine what the other Harry had done with the knowledge. He also did not want to tell Hermione about it. She was not the person he trusted, and the thought of causing damage to school property, which he intended to do, would not sit well in her books.

"What are you planning to do?"

"Build my own door," said Harry impatiently. "Look, there are two more out there. Aurors can't get in and it is only a matter of time before they find us. You have two choices. One, come with me, get back to the rest of the school and live. Two, you stay here, barricade yourselves in and hope a few chairs piled up will stop them, because I won't hang around." It was a bluff. He would never leave them, but he had to convince them to come. He just hoped Hermione couldn't see that he was lying, or call his bluff. His image as a murderer must have reinforced the idea that he would happily leave them to their deaths, as Colin lowered his wand.

"Fine, we'll come with you."

"Colin!" snapped Hermione, glaring at Colin.

“We don’t have time to argue,” said Harry, saving Colin from a lecture from Hermione. “I’m leaving now, anyone who wants to see their friends again, come with me. Anyone else, God help you.” With that he turned and marched out of the portrait hole, hoping his bluff had worked.

It had. Seconds later, Colin Creevey emerged from the common room, six young Gryffindors behind him, and Hermione bringing up the rear, looking thoroughly unconvinced.

“Colin, Hermione,” said Harry, lowering his voice. “If anything moves, blast it with sunlight. Colin, take this,” he handed Colin one silver trophy. “It’s silver. If anything gets too close, whack it with this. Hermione has the necklace. One of you stay at the back, the other behind me. No one make a sound. Understood?”

They all nodded, their eyes wide in terror. Harry glanced down the dark corridor. Was allowing them to leave the best plan? There were still two vampires out there. If any of them got hurt it would be his fault. They were vulnerable in the open. But if they barricaded themselves in again, no one would win. This way Harry could free those trapped in the Great Hall, but possibly at the cost of one of the student’s lives. Would it be better to leave them in the common room and go himself? But what if a vampire came back? They would be defenceless. No, this was the best option, albeit a risky one. The hallway was in shadow with the shutters closed around the windows. Tiny slits of pink light came through the slats in the shutters, casting a dim light on the floor. Harry could not hear a sound, except for the rapid beating of his heart. It was an eerie silence that filled the corridors as Harry cautiously began the trek back to the Great Hall. His eyes were adapting to the gloom, his hearing becoming more acute. He listened avidly for any sign of an approaching creature. As they reached the first turning, Harry gestured for them all to stand against the wall. He slowly peeked around the corner, checking it was clear. Satisfied that there was no one there, Harry stepped out into the corridor.

His heart was thumping in his chest. His stomach was tight and his breathing rapid. It was not only his life on the line, but those of his friends, and the innocent. Those creatures had come for him, and now eight more students were in danger. Even in this world, those close to him would suffer. Every few paces he glanced back to make sure everyone was together. His footsteps were light, but they seemed to echo in the gloom. He was certain that any vampire would hear him coming a mile away.

Every yard seemed like a mile as they crept through the gloom, none daring to make a sound. The lives of the others was the only thing on Harry’s mind. Images kept forcing their way into his mind, of his companions lying lifeless at the feet of a vampire with blood smeared across his lips. He quickly shook the image from his mind.

To Harry’s relief they reached the top of the stairs without obstacle. They needed to descend two floors and there was no cover on the stairs. Harry decided that the best way was to go one at a time and run. If they all ran it would create enough noise to alert the entire castle to their presence. If they all walked, they were exposed for too long and one blasting curse could finish the lot of them.

“Okay, listen,” Harry instructed. We need to go down two floors. We are going to have to run. I suggest we go in pairs, two floors at a time. I’ll go first with you,” he gestured to a first year. “We’ll go down two floors to that corridor there and hide in the shadows.” He pointed to a corridor leading off the stairs, two floors beneath them.” From there we head to the main staircase and go down to the hall that way. Hermione and Colin can cover us from here. If you see anything, blast it with sunlight. We go in twos. The first pair will come with me, Colin, you go with the second pair and Hermione will go with the last. Okay?”

He received several nervous nods. We have to hurry,” said Harry. “If we wait, we could be found.” He reached out and gently grasped a first year’s hand in each of his. “Ready?” he asked, giving the boys an encouraging smile. He quickly glanced around before starting their run. It took less than ten seconds to reach the darkness of the corridor. Breathing heavily from the stress of their situation, Harry and the boys slipped silently into the shadows.

“You okay?” he hissed to the boys. He got nods in return.

He glanced up and down the stairs making sure they were clear, before he stuck his head out and nodded to Hermione and Colin, who were at the top of the stairs. Two boys sprinted out from behind them, and ran down the stairs, with Colin one step behind. Harry watched them, his heart thumping.

Please don’t let the vampires be near here! he prayed silently.

Just then tragedy struck. One of the boys put his foot through a trick step. With a squawk, the boy fell on his face. The other paused to help him up. Harry didn’t think; he charged forward to the aid of the boy. “Keep going!” he hissed to the boy who still stood. Colin and the other boy continued into the shadows, rushing past Harry to join his friends. Harry reached the fallen boy in three seconds flat, one floor above where he had started. He fell to his knees and grabbed the boy by the arm, pulling him back up. He had fallen on his face and had a cut above his right eye. His eyes glistened with tears.

“I’m sorry,” sobbed the boy.

“It’s okay,” Harry whispered. He pulled the boy up, bringing his feet clear of the step. “I should have mentioned those. Sorry.” The boy tried to smile, but suddenly his eyes grew wide with fear. Footsteps could be heard coming down the corridor. They were one floor below Hermione, one above the other boys, and they were trapped. Harry glanced down the corridor. They were heavy boots, by the sound of them. It was a vampire. They couldn’t move, as they would be seen. Harry grabbed the boy and dived behind a suit of armour, holding the boy in his arms, with one hand over his mouth. He saw Hermione quickly retreat into the shadows above him and the boys below do the same.

Harry dared not breathe as the footsteps came closer and closer. They sounded as if they were right on top of him. The vampire was just on the other side of the armour. Harry held his breath, trying desperately to quieten his heart. To his horror, the vampire paused on the other side of the armour. Harry could hear the monster’s breathing as the creature paused. Harry had

no idea what it was doing. Had he smelt them hiding here? Why had he stopped? Harry then noticed to his horror, that there was a smear of blood on the step from the boy's eye. The boy was bleeding! The smear was right next to the vampire's boot. Vampires could smell blood. *Jesus!* If it looked down it would know they were here. Harry's hand crept to the stake, which was tucked into his combats and gently pulled it out. Just then, the vampire spoke.

"Up or down?" he muttered in heavily accented English.

Who was he speaking to? Was there someone else there? Harry didn't dare to poke his head out and look. After a second's thought the vampire moved. The footsteps became quieter as the vampire began to climb the stairs. Harry released the breath as he was holding. Harry felt a rush of relief sweep over him. The vampire had passed him by. They had gotten away with it. Suddenly, he realised something terrible: the vampire was heading straight for where Hermione and the others were hiding. He couldn't fail to see them. He would notice them as soon as he got to the top of the stairs. There was nowhere to hide in the corridor. Hermione was trapped. Harry made a quick decision, a rash decision, but he couldn't think of anything else.

"Stay here," he whispered to the boy. "When you get a chance, run!" Harry didn't wait for a reply; he stepped out of his hiding place.

"Hey! Arsehole!" he shouted at the vampire. The creature spun on his heel, turning to face Harry. His lips were pulled back across his teeth, as a vicious smile formed on his face. "Looking for me?" spat Harry, his hand grasping the silver trophy, which was in his pocket.

The vampire lunged at him with speed Harry had expected, but could not match. Harry swung the trophy with all the speed he could muster, hoping for a hit. Luckily, the trophy clipped the creature's shoulder, causing it to hiss in pain, and for steam to rise from its burned shoulder. Harry instantly dived at the creature, driving his shoulder into the beast's stomach in a rugby tackle.

"Hermione! Run!" he shouted, as he and the monster tumbled down the stairs. "Get to the Great Hall as fast as you can! Run!"

A few seconds later, three pairs of feet rushed past him as he slammed his fist into the vampire's face. Hermione and others sprinted down the stairs and disappeared into the shadows, four floors below them. She was taking a different route, and probably a quicker one, than where Harry had planned. Harry hoped they didn't meet the last vampire on the way. But he had to stop worrying about that and focus on the problem at hand. The vampire had recovered from his burn and, with a single punch, launched Harry into the air. Harry landed on his back on the steps, his spine crying out in pain. He slid head first down a few steps before rolling backwards, back up onto his feet. He wandlessly summoned his sword, which he had dropped as he had dived at the vampire, back to him. He detached the scabbard and threw it at the vampire, who effortlessly caught it. It was an inhuman catch, as the scabbard was flying so fast. The vampire sneered and dropped the scabbard over the banister. Harry didn't even hear it hit the ground before something smashed into the side of his face. In one fluid motion, the vampire had picked up the trophy and surged forward. Harry didn't have time to swing before the same trophy he had used on the

vampire smashed into his left cheek, drawing blood and sending him against the banister. His spine hit the railing hard, causing him to cry out in pain. That was twice in ten seconds he had landed hard on his back. Blue dots appeared in his vision from the impact. His head was spinning and he couldn't see straight. Suddenly the vampire's forearm was across Harry's throat, choking the life out of him, while the other grasped his sword-arm, preventing him fighting back.

The beast hissed something in another language, presumably Romanian or whatever language they spoke there. Harry did not know. He was bent backwards over the banister, his spine bent at an unnatural angle, his toes only just scraping the ground, the rail in the small of his back and his head well over the side. It was a four-floor drop and it would certainly kill or at least cripple him if he fell. The vampire's other hand was closed around Harry's sword arm. The vampire viciously slammed his wrist into the banister, causing him to lose his grip. The sword fell over the banister and tumbled down into the darkness.

His vision cleared a little, and he was able to see his attacker. To his horror he saw the vampire's face getting nearer, his teeth bared. He was going to bite! The teeth came nearer and nearer. Harry could feel the creature's cold breath on his skin, causing the hairs to stand on end. He could smell the vampire's putrid breath. In desperation, Harry did the only thing he could. He grabbed the vampire by the lapels and threw himself backwards. The next Harry was aware of he was airborne. He had dragged the vampire over the banister. They fell together, faster and faster. He just saw the vampire's eyes widen in shock as they fell. The vampire clung desperately to Harry's open shirt. Suddenly there was a ripping sound and they fell apart as Harry's shirt was torn in two, but fell none the less. The floor hurtled up to meet them. The fall alone would kill him.

Harry was too groggy to stop it; the darkness inside him boiled over, and instinct took over. He twisted in mid air, his wand pointed towards the ceiling.

"Arachnis!"

A thin cord shot out of this wand, zooming towards the ceiling. The cord struck the underside of a balcony on one side of the stairwell, and stuck fast. The cord snapped taut, but stretched under his weight like a bungee, bringing his descent to a quick halt, but leaving the vampire to his fate. Harry cried out in pain as his right arm was snapped taut when the magical cord halted his descent. Harry was left swinging topless from the cord a few feet above the ground. He was saved in the nick of time. The vampire had not been so lucky. It hit the ground with a sickening crunch and lay still. It occurred to Harry that every time his instincts seemed to take over, it was usually in the act of self-preservation. It seemed to happen when he was really tired, like after his escape from the Ministry or when he had been drugged in St Mungo's. It must be his conscious mind keeping it at bay. Again, he made a note to ask Flamel about it. He didn't stop to think, as he didn't have time. Who knows what had happened to the others? He grasped the sword in his right hand. The wrist-brace made it uncomfortable to hold, but Harry put that aside.

"Finite Incantatem," he coughed, and the cord disappeared. He dropped the last few feet to the floor, where the vampire lay, moaning in pain. It was still alive, but its back was broken. It

couldn't move. Harry didn't dare to hesitate. If he did, he might feel pity for the vampire and might not be able to do what he must. He had to act on impulse, or he might never do the job. Not allowing himself time to think, Harry slashed the sword across the throat of the vampire, severing its head which, along with its body, dissolved into dust.

"Four down, one to go!" muttered Harry. He spat out a mouthful of blood. He was bleeding internally and coughing up blood, which was smeared around his mouth, making him look like a vampire in his own right. His right cheek was bleeding from where the vampire had hit him with the trophy. Blood was flowing down his cheek, neck and torso. He was covered in small scrapes and cuts from being put through a glass table and display cabinet. His left eye was swollen from a punch he had received from the first vampire. He no longer had a top. All he wore was his black combats, a wrist support and trainers. He picked up the scabbard and sheathed the sword. He held it his left hand, while he held his wand in his right. He ached all over but knew he could not stop. He set off at a run in the direction of the Great Hall, dreading what he might find on the way.

Caution and secrecy had had their day; haste was now all that mattered. He turned left then right as he sprinted towards the Great Hall, his eyes peeled for movement. Much to his surprise he reached the Great Hall unchallenged, and to his relief he found the others outside. The first-years were sitting down huddled together, while Colin and Hermione were trying different spells on the wall of pink light that covered the door. One first year was shining his wand at the door to give them light. Harry noticed that the light didn't penetrate the barrier and the handles cast no shadows and remained in darkness. All of them pointed their wand at Harry as the sound of footsteps approached. Harry blinked under the effects of the Lumos spell, which was shining directly into his eyes. They lowered their wands slightly as they recognised him, though Hermione kept hers aimed at him.

"We can't get in," announced the first year who had his wand out.

"I know," panted Harry, resting his hands on his knees and leaning forward. He spat out another mouthful of blood, much to the disgust of Hermione, and took a few deep breaths. Wiping the mixture of sweat, dirt and blood from his forehead, Harry stood up straight.

"Did you catch the registration plate of the lorry?" asked Colin, causing Harry to smile. The purebloods amongst them looked confused, while the others, except for Hermione stifled a smile.

"It was the whole damn motorcade that hit me," muttered Harry. He could feel the blood flowing from the cut on his cheek, as it started to dry on his chest.

"Colin, hide in the cupboard over there," said Harry, pointing to the same cupboard he and Hermione had hidden from their past selves during the adventure with the Time-Turner a few years ago. "All of you, inside. You don't open this door for anyone but the two of us. Hermione, come with me."

"Where are we going?" asked Hermione immediately.

“To get a key,” said Harry.

Harry made sure they were all inside, gave instructions not to open the door for any reason until Harry came to get them, and closed the door before turning to Hermione.

“Let’s go,” he said simply, before setting off at a jog in the direction of the dungeons. He went over the formula in his mind. He could visualise the words on a page of printed text. He had seen it before, or rather the other Harry had. He could envision the mixture at each stage. He couldn’t help but wonder how many lives this piece of knowledge had claimed. More to the point, how could he remember it? It wasn’t really an instinct. It was just an image. A fragment of a memory, like his dreams. Harry jogged quickly but softly with Hermione in tow down one flight of stairs. They were now underground, in the dungeons. The darkness was absolute down here, with no windows. *Just the sort of place Snape would inhabit*, Harry thought viciously. He was used to the corridors being lit by torchlight. He wondered briefly if the dungeons looked any different under his mother’s rule. He ignited his wand, and held it up.

“Where are we going?” whispered Hermione.

“Potions office,” said Harry simply.

“Potions won’t help,” said Hermione in a patronising tone. “There is nothing to consume a potion. It is just a barrier.” Harry smiled to himself. Same old Hermione.

“Trust me,” said Harry, increasing his pace. “Anyhow, we are not making a potion. More of a cocktail.”

“What?” asked Hermione. Harry could see her mind working as she tried to decipher his riddle. It reminded him of his Hermione. Things weren’t so different here.

They arrived in the Potions Lab a few minutes later and, unsurprisingly, found it empty. Harry proceeded through to the office where he had been forced to learn Occlumency. The office was completely different. Harry found himself smiling as the familiar, yet unfamiliar, room came into view. The light from his wand revealed a much more pleasant room, yet still full of potions and ingredients. There were pictures of himself and Rose in frames on the dresser. She had nothing recent of him, though there was good reason for it. She had made no move to hide pictures of Harry. She had always loved him, despite what Harry had done. He lit a few torches to give them light and extinguished his wand. There were paintings on the wall, a kettle in one corner and a wardrobe against one wall.

“What are you smiling about?” asked Hermione.

“Nothing, just a memory,” said Harry. He crossed to the desk and picked out a cauldron. He didn’t care which one, and it wouldn’t affect his recipe. He couldn’t help but wonder where the other Harry had learned this. He opened the cupboard, which was his mother’s private supply of ingredients. He picked up three bottles, two of which contained a clear liquid and one that contained a thick, green goo.

Harry poured all three liberally into the cauldron.

“Not a precise potion,” noted Hermione, giving him a cynical glance. “Your mother would have a fit if she saw you doing it so roughly in class.”

“Probably,” smiled Harry. He could imagine Snape’s reaction if Harry was so careless in his classes. “But this doesn’t need to be precise and I don’t have time to fanny around.” He stirred the ingredients together and they turned into a thick dark green sludge. “Do you know what this is?” asked Harry trying to make conversation.

“I can read the bottles, but I wouldn’t want to guess what that mess is,” she glanced disapprovingly at the green sludge. Using his wand, Harry lit a fire under the cauldron, and used a warming spell on the cocktail. He then turned to Hermione and began his explanation.

“When these three ingredients are combined, they form two products; one is the useless green precipitate that is making this so yucky. The other is far more useful: Glycerine. When I add this, which is…”

“Guano, I know,” interrupted Hermione. Harry added the guano and stirred again.

“Yes, which is rich in nitrates, it will react, forming a sky-blue liquid called nitro-glycerine. You can see where this is going, can’t you? Pass me the gauze please.” Hermione was clearly thinking, but she paused to pass him the sheet of fabric.

“You’re making a bomb?” she asked.

Harry nodded. He poured the thick contents of the cauldron onto the fabric. He then pulled the four corners together and held it over another cauldron. He squeezed the sticky mass of ingredients until a sky blue liquid started to seep through the fabric. The gauze filtered the sediment from the mixture, leaving pure nitro-glycerine in the cauldron. The cauldron was soon half full of nitro-glycerine.

Harry then pointed his wand at a chair and uttered the Reductor charm. The chair was immediately reduced to sawdust.

“Nitro-glycerine plus sawdust equals dynamite,” said Harry as he mixed the sawdust into the explosive. This made it much thicker and almost solid. From there Harry emptied it into a Thermos Flask he found on the desk.

It was now ready; all he had to do was set fire to it and it would explode. Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked distinctly uneasy at the sight of explosives.

“What are you planning to do with that?” Harry didn’t want to answer, as she would try to stop him.

“Come on,” said Harry, moving to leave.

Together they ran back to the Great Hall.

The lack of the final vampire was disconcerting to Harry. He didn't like not knowing where his enemies were. He ordered Hermione to go and hide in the closet and cover her ears. As she disappeared, Harry walked to the left of the door, still complete with its pink shield. Harry wasn't willing to take the chance that the shield might save them.

He walked to the left and then around the corner. The wall on his right was the side wall to Great Hall. About halfway down was a fireplace, where the wall would be at its thinnest due to the chimney. Harry had to guess where half way was, but he was confident he was right. He dared't think of the trouble if he got it wrong. He only had one bomb.

Using a Sticking Charm he stuck the Thermos Flask to the wall. He had no fuse, so he removed the lid and would have to incinerate it to set it off. Satisfied that it was placed correctly, Harry ran back to the door, and fired a few loud cracks from his wand. Light had not passed through the shield, at least magical light had not; Harry just hoped sound would.

"Hello!" he called into the door.

There was a few seconds pause, before a familiar voice answered, "Hello?" Dumbledore had heard him. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He glanced around to make sure that the elusive final vampire had not been attracted to the sound of the bangs. Satisfied, he turned back to the door.

"Professor," he called. "It's me. The Gryffindors are safe. They're with me."

"Are they all right?"

"More or less," called Harry. "I'm going to try and get you out. Get everyone away from the fireplace by the Slytherin table. Stand well back. You have sixty seconds."

There was a pause. Harry hoped the Headmaster would not start to question him, as they didn't have time. They needed to do this quickly.

"Very well," came the reply.

Harry walked back around to the bomb, counting down from sixty in his head. He hoped that everyone was far back enough not to get hurt. He also hoped that the bomb was powerful enough to make a hole and that the castle wasn't going to protect itself. So many things would go wrong with this. He took refuge behind a statue, twenty feet from the bomb. He hoped it would shield him from the fireball and the debris.

Funny, he thought to himself. I'm going to destroy more of Hogwarts in a day than Voldemort has in twenty years.

Harry hoped that Dumbledore had gotten everyone back. If anyone was too close, they might get burned or worse. To the left of the bomb there was a large tapestry; beyond that was where Harry was hiding. He hoped it was safe enough where he was. He glanced around to make sure he was alone. As his mental countdown reached zero, he levelled his wand at the Thermos Flask. He took a deep breath, praying that no one would get hurt. It was now or never.

“Incendio!” he hissed.

BOOM!

The wall erupted into a cloud of dust and a huge ball of fire. Debris rained down all around Harry and his ears felt fit to explode. The fire was unbearably hot. He could feel the heat on his exposed chest and arms. His hands were clutched to his ears, which were ringing from the explosion. Dust and rubble filled the corridor, and lumps of flaming debris littered the floor. As the debris stopped falling, Harry emerged from his hiding place, clutching his ears. The fireball had set the tapestry alight and it was burning at the bottom. Smoke filled Harry’s lungs, making him cough and splutter more blood. Harry stepped into the dust. He could see light shining from within.

He had blown a hole in the wall, but not large enough to get through. He heard a few shouts of Reducto from the far side. The teachers were making the whole bigger. He had to get the others quickly before the sound attracted the last vampire. He staggered back to get the others from the cupboard. He opened the door, and they poured out. His ears were still ringing from the blast and he could hardly hear a thing. His head was spinning and his face bleeding.

He led them to the hole in the wall. By now, it was big enough for them to crawl through.

“Stop the curses!” Harry shouted. He had no idea how loud his voice was, as he was having trouble hearing. “We’re coming in.”

Colin Creevey went first. Harry stood on one side of the hole, helping the others through and trying not to be sick. He helped two of the boys through before he got to Hermione.

“Looks like I was wrong about you,” she said softly as he passed. Harry hardly heard her, but her meaning was clear. He smiled and nodded his thanks.

“You won’t be the last,” he muttered to himself as she disappeared. She scuttled through to the Great Hall. Harry made sure they got through one by one.

He was just helping the last of them through the gap when there was a crack above him. The support beam for the flaming tapestry had snapped. The curtain of flame fell towards the floor. Harry instinctively grabbed the boy who was just entering the hole by the neck and yanked him out of the way before the wall of flame landed across the gap. There was a scream from inside the hall. Harry and the boy were trapped on the outside, with a vampire at large.

The entrance was blocked by fire. Harry could see movement from the hall. He had no idea what spell extinguished fire. There were shouts from inside the hall, and a few jets of water squirted onto the fire. The heat was tremendous and the water was turning to steam. Harry looked around, trying to find inspiration. How could he get the fire out? Water didn't seem to be working. He didn't have a fire blanket or anything like that. If he couldn't get the fire out, he had to cross it. He was half-naked and it would burn him and the boy if they tried anything. Suddenly he had an idea. He summoned a cloak from the cloakroom, one that would cover his head as well, and put it on. Using his wand, he doused the entire cloak in water. He then picked up the boy and wrapped the cloak around both of them. Harry then took a deep breath, trying not to choke on the sooty flames. He then marched quickly into the flames.

His skin felt like it was on fire. The smell of charred flesh and hair entered his nostrils. He continued to move through the hole, trying to ignore the burning in his legs. He could feel his blood boiling and his flesh burning. He clenched his teeth, determined not to cry out in pain, as the flames licked his legs. He emerged on the far side, his cloak steaming from the water and flames. Coughing up more blood, Harry parted the cloak and released the boy, who ran forward, coughing and spluttering to join the others.

Harry coughed, trying to force the soot and ash from his lungs. He doubled up and was nearly sick. Everyone seemed to be talking in groups about the explosion. The Gryffindors were being checked by Madam Pomfrey, for their injuries, while the rest of the school were pointing and whispering about the new 'door'. No one seemed to be paying him attention.

"Your attention, please!" called Dumbledore above the racket. Harry glanced around at the students who filled the hall. He could see a few familiar faces amongst them. The Weasley hair made Ginny and Ron easy to pick out, and Rose was with them. Harry felt really hot in the cloak. He ached all over and the wool of the cloak was irritating his numerous scratches, but he found that he was afraid to face his friends. He didn't want to take the hood down. He was a killer and he didn't want to be seen like this. He had wanted to see his friends ever since he had arrived, but he didn't want them to think of him as a killer. Ron wouldn't trust him, Hermione was still doubtful. Their bonds of friendship were what had kept him going all these years, and now he no longer had them.

Ah, but he had something else. He glanced briefly at his mother, whose eyes were avidly fixed on him. She looked like she wanted to run to him, but was restraining herself. Her eyes were full of worry. Harry's face was hidden by the shadow of the hood and the cloak covered his entire body. He gave her a small nod to reassure her.

"Please remain calm," said Dumbledore once silence had fallen. He glanced over at Lily who raised a single finger, signifying the number of remaining Vampires. "Teachers, please check the entire castle, moving in groups of two. There is still one intruder out there. The rest of you please wait here. Finish any breakfast you may still wish to have and we will have you back to lessons as soon as possible." Harry wasn't listening. As the Headmaster had been speaking, he had been pulling a large shard of glass out of the palm of his left hand. He scooped some ice out of an empty jug of pumpkin juice and pressed it to the wound.

Harry winced in pain as he pressed the ice to the cut. It was deep and blood was dripping onto the table. Harry sank onto one of the benches. There were several spaces on either side of him, as most students were standing in groups, discussing the explosion. Harry glanced up at his mother again, who was still watching him intently. Harry looked away, but as he did, his eyes fell on someone else who had been watching him.

Draco Malfoy glanced from Harry to his mother and back again. His eyes widened in comprehension. Draco Malfoy knew who the cloaked figure was. No one else seemed to be paying him any heed; not yet, at least. He was dreading the moment when he would have to lower his hood. Pressing the ice firmly into the palm of his left hand, Harry picked up a chicken dipper from the table and dipped it in barbecue sauce before biting the end off. He hadn't eaten for hours, and was famished. Harry chewed the dipper slowly as he watched all the teachers except for his mother and Dumbledore extinguish the fire and march out into the darkness. He hoped none of them got hurt and that they could break the wards that had bound them so easily. It made Harry uneasy to think that the castle could be captured and breached so easily, but then again, being dead, or rather undead, vampires could slip through the wards.

“Who the hell are you?” sneered a voice.

Harry looked up to see Draco Malfoy standing over him. The boy was standing tall in his Slytherin robes, with the coveted P shining from his lapel. Harry stared from the shadow of his cloak into Malfoy's eyes. Harry was sure he had worked out who he was. Why was he making a scene? Looking around, more and more eyes turned to look at the cloaked figure who sat at the table, dripping blood all around him. He noticed his mother start forward, but Dumbledore stuck out an arm to block her. He must want Harry to show himself. But why was Malfoy doing this? He must have an ulterior motive. He wasn't stupid; he must be using that Slytherin cunning of his. Harry could worry about Malfoy's intentions some other time. Right now, he needed a healer and a cup of tea.

Harry rose slowly to his feet. It seemed that every eye in the room was glued to him. It was time to face the music. Everything that the other Harry had done would be laid on his shoulders; every ounce of anger he had caused would be directed at Harry. Slowly, he raised two blood-covered hands, dripping drops of blood to the floor in the process. Harry Potter had returned to Hogwarts.

With a deep sigh, Harry lowered his hood.

Pandemonium isn't a strong enough word for what happened next.

~~~~~ Chapter X ~~~~~  
**From the Ashes of Despair, a Hero Shall Rise**

*“It’s all wrong. By rights we shouldn’t even be here, but we are.  
It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo; the ones that really mattered.  
Full of darkness and danger they were.  
And sometimes you didn’t want to know the end.  
Because how could the end be happy?  
How could the world go back to the way it was,  
when so much bad had happened?  
But in the end, it’s only a passing thing, this shadow.  
Even darkness must pass.  
A new day will come.  
And when the sun shines through, it will shine out the clearer.  
Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something.  
Even if you were too small to understand why.  
But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now.  
Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back only they didn’t.  
They kept going. Because they were holding on to something.”*

*“What are we holding on to, Sam?”*

*“That there’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo.  
And it’s worth fighting for.”*

*Samwise Gamgee (Sean Astin) ~ Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*

*Harry rose slowly to his feet. It seemed that every eye in the room was glued to him. It was time to face the music. Everything that the other Harry had done would be laid on his shoulders; every ounce of anger he had caused would be directed at Harry. Slowly, he raised two blood-covered hands, drops dripping to the floor in the process. Harry Potter had returned to Hogwarts.*

*With a deep sigh, Harry lowered his hood.*

A sickening blend of gasps, screams and curses rang out around the hall as Harry lowered his hood. His picture had been plastered over the *Daily Prophet* and not a single soul in the room failed to recognize him. Harry felt what was left of the blood in his veins rushing to his head. His eyes darted from student to student as they surveyed him. He was struggling to remain conscious, but as he was covered in blood and half-naked, he was still an intimidating figure. In his current state, he looked like a figment of a nightmare thankfully forgotten in the morning. He ached all over and was beginning to feel light-headed, presumably from blood-loss. He hoped he didn’t pass out. His head was starting to pound.

Everyone seemed to back away from him, pressing back against the tables. Those at the back craned to see while those at the front pushed to get away. Did they honestly think he would start throwing curses left and right? These were his friends. He knew he should expect this, but it hurt none-the-less. He was standing in the middle of a circle within the crowd, in which the clearing had doubled in size since he had lowered his hood. No one seemed to be able to find the words. Some reached for their wands, some tried to hide behind the person in front. Harry’s eyes

fell on Hermione, who stood perfectly still not six feet away. While others backed away, she stood perfectly still watching him, her expression one of concern, though Harry could not tell if it was for him or about him. Was she frozen in fear or had he really won her over? He wasn't sure. The only other student, aside from Rose, Ginny and Hermione not to back away was Malfoy. He did not seem at all scared. He was standing not five feet away, giving Harry a calculating look. The slimy Slytherin was planning something, Harry was sure, but Harry didn't have time to worry about that now. Not too far away was Ron. Harry looked on in sadness as Ron looked at him with a mixture of terror and anger. He was tall enough to be visible but he was clearly not keen on coming any closer. Seeing his best friend like this was a serious blow to Harry. Ron had always been there for Harry in hard times, except during the first task, of course, but they were still friends. With Ron against him, Harry felt more alone than ever.

Rose and Ginny stood together to Harry's right. Rose's eyes were darting around taking in the same sights that Harry was, probably thinking along the same lines. They both reached the same conclusion. There was as much hatred today as there was two months ago before he arrived.

"MURDERER!" screamed a voice. Harry turned slowly, his muscles aching with every movement. At the front of the circle stood Hannah Abbot, her eyes blazing with anger; tears streaming down her cheeks. Her wand was drawn and levelled at Harry's bare chest. Harry felt the desire to grab the wand, to defend himself, but he had not the energy nor the will to do so. He would not strike a friend. Hannah stood just three feet away, her wand extended at Harry.

"Drop your wand!" snapped Rose. In less than a second Hannah had two wands aimed at her as Rose and Ginny came to Harry's rescue. Harry glanced at Rose, appreciative of her help, but he did not want the situation to escalate. The more people who had their wands out, the more chance there was of violence breaking out. However, the situation was indeed escalating faster than anyone could stop it.

"Hey!" shouted Justin Finch-Fletchley, coming to the aid of his housemate and friend by aiming his wand at Ginny.

"That's my sister!" shouted Ron quickly, pulling out his own wand and aiming it at Justin. Harry knew that Ron was impulsive and was quite likely to set it all off. However, even he hesitated when Ernie Macmillan pressed his wand into the back of Ron's neck. Seamus' Irish fire sprang to life, and soon there were twenty wands aimed at each other. In less than ten seconds, the conflict between Harry and Hannah had spread to twenty others, bringing two Houses, normally friends, into chaos.

"Well here's an irony," mused Harry, turning to face Hannah. "Not a single Slytherin involved." He was more concerned for the safety of Rose than he was his own. If someone got off a spell, it would erupt into a full-blown battle. He glanced over at Malfoy, who seemed to be highly entertained by the proceedings. The blond was staring at him, a smile on his lips. It wasn't a smirk, but there was something about it that told Harry the Slytherin was up to something. Harry glanced at his mother, who was moving towards him. The last thing he needed was to give

the image that he was being protected by a bureaucracy; that only made him seem more guilty. Hannah's wand was six inches from his nose and his mother was at least ten feet away.

He raised a hand, gesturing for her to stop. She glanced at him and then at Rose, Hannah and then back to Harry. She clearly wasn't happy with the situation. Her wand was in her hands. Dumbledore also had his in his hand, but was making no move. He was looking at Harry with an unreadable expression on his face. His expression was unclear, but his intent was like crystal – he clearly wanted Harry to resolve this on his own. For once, he and Harry were in complete agreement. He repeated the gesture to his mother. Lily took another step forward before Dumbledore held out an arm to block her. Harry knew his mother was reputed to have a fiery temper that had all too often been directed at her husband in his youth. He hoped she would not snap at Dumbledore and cause a problem here. Harry was relieved to see her glance at Dumbledore. The old man shook his head and luckily, she backed down. It went against every maternal instinct to leave her son and daughter in a situation like this, but she managed it.

Harry turned to Rose and Ginny. They were standing amongst a spider's web of wands. Half the fifth, sixth and seventh years present had their wands aimed at someone, while the younger students tried to get out of the way of a possible firefight. Rose's safety was his first concern, with Ginny's a close second. He had to deescalate the situation as quickly as possible, even if it meant exposing himself to more danger. His wand was in his pocket and his sword in the cupboard in the entrance hall. He was as good as unarmed and had no intention of resorting to violence. He had never really been friends with Hannah, but he certainly did not wish to hurt her.

"Rose," said Harry calmly, looking straight at his sister. "Put your wand away." Rose glanced from Hannah to Harry and then back, but made no move to lower her wand. "It's okay, Rose, just put your wand away. You too, Ginny." The girls looked at each other for a second before lowering their wands. Harry was grateful that everyone was doing as he said, otherwise this could all go pear-shaped. "Justin," he said addressing the man with his wand to the back of his sister's head. He knew a threat would do no good as he was trying to show that he had changed. Politeness seemed to be the way forward. Just like Dumbledore, he needed to appear clam and at ease with the situation, no matter how dangerous. "Are you planning on hexing an unarmed girl?" Harry stared calmly into the eyes of the Hufflepuff who held his wand to Rose's head. He thought for a second before lowering his wand. Over the next ten seconds almost everyone lowered their wands, even Ron under the fiery gaze of Ginny. The only exception was Hannah.

"That's better," said Harry. "Let's not forget you're all friends, here. This is just a misunderstanding and violence is not going to solve that. So, let's all remain calm. Now that it's just you and me, Hannah, what are you planning to do?"

"You..." was all she managed to get out. She was seething with anger. "My mother was innocent. My Aunt and baby cousin were innocent and you killed them like they were nothing."

"Hannah," said Harry, holding up his hands, showing her that he was unarmed. "I have no memory of ever meeting your mother, let alone hurting her."

“But you did!”

She was livid and emotional. It would be all too easy for her to do something very stupid in this state. Harry himself had done it many times. She could snap at any moment. It was only now that Harry realised how precarious his situation was. While he doubted that she could manage an Unforgivable, she could still hurt him and in his current condition a less severe curse could do serious damage. He hoped Dumbledore could block a curse if she did decide to strike, but he didn't want to count on it. He needed to talk her down. He knew he wasn't the most sensitive person, and girls utterly baffled him, but he had to try.

“It seems I did,” said Harry softly. He considered an outright apology, but she would just think that he was patronising her. No Reparo charm could mend this situation. “By all accounts I am guilty. I'd like to say I'm sorry for your loss but we both know that you would never believe me. There are many in this room that have suffered on account of who I used to be. Many who would dearly like to see me dead, but is that justice, Hannah?” It wasn't Shakespeare, but he hoped it would make its point. If he continued to call her by her first name, it seemed more intimate and would hopefully prevent her hexing a friend.

“Revenge and justice are two very different things, Hannah,” he continued, taking a step closer until the tip of her wand almost touched his nose. He stared not at her wand but at her eyes. “Two wrongs do not make a right. This will not help you. Killing me will not help you. Let us assume you are indeed capable of the Killing Curse. You kill me, but what happens next? Do you think it will make things easier? It will not give you your mother back. All it gives you is guilt.” Harry knew the truth of his words. He remembered how he had felt after he had used the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix. It ate away at him. Not only was he trying to save his life here, but he also wanted to spare Hannah the feeling he had felt after he had done an Unforgivable thing. “Trust me, I know,” he continued. If he kept his words this emotional, he might get through to her. “I lost someone close to me once. I took action against his killer; I used an Unforgivable. The pain doesn't go away, it grows, and you have guilt to make it even worse. You will live on, knowing that you are no better than I am. You are the same as me. But now you have used an Unforgivable and you feel no better. You will not be satisfied with just me. You will want revenge on every Death Eater in the country. You will seek them out and kill them one after another until one day you look in the mirror and you realise that you are no better than the Dark Lord himself. You have become the monster you tried to destroy, and it all started with one curse you made here, today. So, Hannah, what are you going to do?”

“You deserve to die,” said Hannah, her arm shaking. Harry could see that she was thinking. His words had had some effect. She was questioning herself. She still wanted to hurt him, to avenge her mother, but rationality was beginning to calm her.

“I do,” said Harry softly. “And worse. But what gives you the right to be my judge, jury and executioner? Do you want to end up in Azkaban, with a Dementor as a guardian? It doesn't have to end like this, Hannah.”

Slowly, shakily, Hannah glanced from her wand to Harry. Tears streamed down her cheeks, now streaked with mascara. She sighed deeply, her eyes closing and her bottom lip

shaking. At last, she lowered her wand, allowing her arm to hang limp at her side. Harry sighed a breath of relief. He wasn't sure his speech had worked. He felt a little bad for putting her through a psychological assault, but it had worked out in the end and he had given her a lot to think about. She dropped her wand to the floor with a clatter that echoed around the room. She turned to face Justin, who was standing right behind her, burying her face in his chest and crying into him. Harry saw Justin shoot him an appraising glance before wrapping his arms protectively around Hannah and whispering into her ear.

Suddenly Harry felt something rising in his throat. He doubled up in pain, coughing painfully. His throat felt like it was full of razor blades as his mouth filled with blood. He spat out a mouthful, falling to his knees. His mother was at his side in an instant. He felt her cool hand on his sweaty back, concern etched all over her face.

"Headmaster," came a familiar drawl. Harry glanced up as Snape entered the room with Professor Grubbly-Plank beside him. Snape's hair looked ruffled, as if he had been in a fight, which he probably had, for between them they held the bound form of the last vampire. He was young, not looking more than sixteen. He was as straight as a plank, presumably under a Full-Body Bind from both professors and bound with rope in addition. His mouth was moving, but no words came out. Harry assumed his was under a Silencing Charm. Beneath the charm, the vampire was screaming. Harry was no expert in lip reading, but some of the profanities that came from its mouth was all too clear.

The professors threw the vampire roughly to the floor in front of the Headmaster. Harry got to his feet with the help of his mother. He had one arm around her shoulders as she supported his weight. He could see his blood staining her robes as she held him up.

"Take him to the Ministry as soon as the outer barriers are down," said Dumbledore, addressing Snape as calmly as ever. "Well done, Severus. Gringott's curse breakers are on the way and should arrive momentarily. Please inform me when the barriers have been broken." As Snape dragged the vampire away, Dumbledore turned to address the rest of the school. "Morning lessons are officially cancelled," he announced. He was greeted by cheers from around the hall. "Lunch will be served as normal; until then, your time is your own. Afternoon lessons will continue as scheduled." As the groan died down, he turned to face Harry. He spoke in a voice just as loud so everyone could hear. "We are indeed grateful of your efforts today. I believe that several young Gryffindors owe you their lives. I would like to personally thank you." He extended a hand towards Harry. He knew Dumbledore was doing it all for show, but he couldn't not accept it. Harry raised a blood covered hand and shook the Headmaster's. Dumbledore clenched his fist afterward and muttered a few words. When he opened it, all traces of blood were gone. He turned back to Harry, and said kindly, "And now, I believe we should get you to the Hospital Wing."

If Harry had any blood left in his veins he would have been blushing furiously as he was helped from the Great Hall through the hole he had made a few minutes earlier.

Draco Malfoy was in a rather good mood this morning. He was sitting on one of the long leather sofas in front of the fire in the Slytherin common room with his feet on the table and a drink of ice water in his hand. There was a small smile on his face as he stared into the flames, his mind a million miles away. The flickering flames reflecting off his eyes gave him a chilling appearance with his narrow features and dazzling white teeth. It was almost ten o'clock and the common room was full of students, though none dared to come near him. Lessons had been cancelled and everyone was enjoying some time off, except for Draco, whose mind was still working furiously.

On the whole, it had not been a bad day. He had had a good night's sleep and breakfast had been better than usual. Then came the minor inconvenience of being incarcerated in the Great Hall. Not that it worried him. If it was the Dark Lord's assassins, which he had been positive it was and had been proved right, then they would not dare to harm a Malfoy. His only worry had been that they might ruin his plans of aiding Harry Potter. He needn't have worried; the former Gryffindor was one of the most lethal men on the planet. The more Draco thought about it, the more he believed he had been right about Potter's reasons for being here.

If the Dark Lord wanted to have him killed he could have sent an army. Dumbledore wasn't strong enough to defeat him anymore. A few decades ago he might have been, but age had taken its toll on his strength and his sanity. Father always said that Dumbledore was the worst thing that had happened to this school. No, Draco was sure Dumbledore was no longer a match for the Dark Lord. If he had wanted to, the Dark Lord could have entered Hogwarts, killed Potter, killed Dumbledore and taken over, but he had only sent five vampires to do the job. Five vampires versus Harry Potter - Draco would put his money on Potter every time. It was not a challenge for Potter. The Dark Lord was giving the appearance of trying to kill him, but not actually tried. Potter must be a spy for the Dark Lord. Draco smiled as he reached his conclusion. Also by telling the Abbott girl that he had lost someone close to him once, and that he used an Unforgivable proved he had not totally lost his memory. It was a trick - the Dark Lord still wanted Harry in place, but he gave the appearance of trying to kill him after he received the message from Pansy's father. If Pansy's father was out of the loop and Draco's own father, yet Draco himself knew, that put him on the playing field, so to speak.

Naturally, he could not openly speak to Potter in the Great Hall; that would compromise him as well as mark Draco out as trying to befriend him. No, he needed to be subtle, stealthy and otherwise Slytherin about it. His time would come - patience was the right course. Soon, he would get to speak to Potter and then his father would finally realise his potential when he emerged on the right hand of the Dark Knight, able to order his father to do his every bidding. His smile widened at the thought.

Draco knew he had to wait until this attack blew over. At present all sorts of rumours would surround Potter and he would be watched. He needed to be alone with him, but to rush into things might ruin everything. Pansy had nearly ruined it, but the Dark Lord and Potter had been prepared for that. One stupid girl would not ruin it for them. Draco was also concerned with how to approach him. If Potter thought he was compromised and that Draco might give the game away, he would not hesitate to kill him. He had to tread carefully.

Suddenly two hands landed on his shoulders and began to gently massage his shoulders.

*Speak of the devil*, thought Draco bitterly. He sighed and allowed his head to fall backward onto the back of the sofa. Sure enough his eyes fell on the pug-like face of Pansy Parkinson, who was standing behind him massaging his shoulders. She was giving him that loving look he despised, but she also looked quite pleased with herself. Draco kept his face neutral but inside he was screaming. Did she not see how stupid she had been? She was spiteful but stupid and that was a bad combination at the best of times.

“What are you thinking about, Draco,” she cooed softly in his ears.

“How some people are too stupid to live,” said Draco absently, staring back into the fire.

“Anyone I know?” asked Pansy. Draco shot an irritated glance at the fire before replying. He considered telling her to piss off, but then decided that her predictable stupidity could come in useful later. He decided to appease her for now, within reason.

“Now that would be telling,” said Draco, a false smile spreading over his face as he stared back up at her. Draco sighed inwardly and braced himself for the inconvenience to come, as Pansy lowered her lips down to his. His mind was trying to think of an excuse—it was too bad that men could not get away with ‘I’m washing my hair’, or ‘I have a head-ache’. Women had it easy.

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The door opened with a creak as a figure in black robes and a white mask entered the room. The figure immediately dropped to his knees, crawling the last ten feet on all fours before kissing the hem of the Dark Lord’s robes. Voldemort stared down at the man, anger burning in his eyes. This man’s stupidity could have ruined everything, but as luck would have it, he had trained Potter better than that. Voldemort was well aware of the backstabbing that went on among his ranks. He normally turned a blind eye as long as they remained useful to him, but this man’s little stunt could have caused a major problem, and now he would suffer for it.

“Rise, Parkinson,” he said softly, his voice lined with anger. His hand seemed to itch with the desire to use his wand. He could feel the anticipation building in his body, the desire to feel the rush of power that came with the Cruciatius Curse. However, he kept his anger in check with icy precision and stood motionless as the man stood and removed his mask.

“You sent for me, my Lord,” said the man, bowing. Voldemort didn’t need to be a Legilimens to see the fear on the man in front of him. He suppressed a smirk at the ease at which he could scare a man. Fear, respect and power all marched hand in hand.

“I did,” said Voldemort softly. “Tell me, Parkinson, do you believe that you could run my army of Death Eaters better than I could?”

“M...Master?” stammered Parkinson, his eyes wide in terror. He had broken into a cold sweat. He knew that Voldemort knew all about him. Voldemort did not say it outright, preferring to allow him to wallow in fear. He watched in satisfaction as the man squirmed in front of him.

“Do you believe your orders supersede mine?” asked Voldemort, advancing on the snivelling Death Eater.

“I...I would n...never betray...” The man was so scared he could not string a sentence together. Voldemort still found it amazing that such a cowardly, moronic fool could be useful. But useful he was, and as such he would not be killed, not today.

“Silence,” hissed Voldemort, ending the stammering. His voice was no more than a whisper, but carried such venom that no man would question him. The anger in his voice was more effective than a shout, and could reduce a grown man to tears, a stage that Parkinson was drawing closer and closer to, and Voldemort had not even touched his wand yet.

“When news first reached me that Potter had defected,” said Voldemort, “I gave the order that he was to be found, but no one was to make any move of any kind without my approval. Do you know why, Parkinson?” Voldemort watched in satisfaction as Parkinson gaped. He knew he had absolute power over him. He could dictate whether he ever left this room. He could control his every move through fear or the Imperious Curse. This was utter power.

“Because y...you wish t...to have the p...pleasure of killing him y...yourself?” stammered Parkinson, his lips shaking with every move. It was partially true, but there was another reason, one that took priority over his desire for revenge. He was not stupid enough to tell Parkinson of his plan, but he would make an example of him. No one was to overstep the mark again. Lord Voldemort demanded absolute obedience from his followers.

“One reason, Parkinson, yes,” said Voldemort icily. “Yet in the *Prophet* there was an article this morning detailing an attack on Hogwarts by five vampires, the Tyr Brothers to be precise. Would you know anything about this, Parkinson?” Voldemort fixed him with an unblinking stare. His red eyes burned with venom as he glared at the snivelling man. Voldemort knew he was responsible. Would he be brave enough to admit to it, in which case Voldemort let him off, or would he be a coward and lie? It was a documented fact that it was impossible to lie to Lord Voldemort. Would Parkinson try, knowing the price if he was discovered? Voldemort enjoyed toying with a man’s emotions, enjoyed the sight of a man utterly crushed by his own guilt and fears

“Master...I,” began Parkinson.

“Yes or no, Parkinson?” repeated Voldemort. Parkinson glanced around the room once before bowing his head and muttering a single word.

“I didn’t hear you, Parkinson,” said Voldemort icily.

“It was me, Master,” said Parkinson, staring at his feet. Voldemort was mildly surprised at the answer. He had been expecting and indeed hoping for a lie and a protest that he was loyal. That was how it usually went with Death Eaters, and he had been looking forward to punishing the man before him. “I sent the Bounty Hunters after Potter,” continued Parkinson. “I thought if I could deliver him to you...” he trailed off. Voldemort felt his anger growing. He glared at the man before him. He had been willing to let him go earlier, but the desire to feel the rush, the need for power was too much. Hand tingling, Voldemort drew his wand and pointed it at Parkinson.

“*CRUCIO!*” he hissed. A smile spread over his face as the adrenalin surged through his veins. His body was alive with magic as anger penetrated every corner of his mind. Parkinson’s screams filled his ears like a symphony. Voldemort embraced the feeling, revelling in the rush. Reluctantly, he removed the curse after twenty seconds. Parkinson was no good if he was insane or too badly shaken.

“I gave orders that the boy was not to be touched,” said Voldemort. “Do my orders not apply to you?”

“Master, please,” begged Parkinson, as he tried to struggle back to his feet. Voldemort knew a pathetic excuse was coming, but he managed to hold his anger long enough to listen. If Parkinson lied again, he would be punished again. “He had betrayed you. I only served to please. I wanted to bring him to your justice.”

“The boy will get justice,” said Voldemort. The fool had no idea what was happening around him. “But not yet. For the time being he remains useful. You are fortunate that your assassins failed, Parkinson. In future, you will be more loyal, will you not?”

“Yes, Master,” said Parkinson, who had made it up onto his knees. He was shaking as he knelt before Voldemort. The Dark Lord glared down at his disciple. He debated whether or not to torture him again. Reluctantly he decided against it; he had work to do.

“Get out of my sight,” said Voldemort. “Tell no one of what you have done, nor what happened today. I will know if you do, Parkinson.”

“Yes, Master,” said the man as he hurried towards the door. Voldemort watch the door close. Part of him wished he had called him back and subjected him to more pain, but the rational part of him knew he had work to do. With luck, Potter would have proved his worth. He would hopefully burrow right into Dumbledore’s little gang. He would gain their trust and go where they would go. That would come in useful when Voldemort paid a visit to the Ministry. Potter didn’t know it, but he was just as useful today as he ever was.

But that was all in the future. Firstly he had to blind the Aurors. His plan was all falling into place. His newly acquired toy would aid them greatly. No one expected it from him. To be honest, he felt dirty using it, as if he were dishonouring himself in using such a *Muggle* weapon, but the time for half measures was over. Thanks to one unknowing Unspeakable, who had stumbled upon a well-guarded secret in the depths of the government, Voldemort knew that the

Muggles were not as oblivious to the Wizarding World as the Ministry believed. It angered him that he had been so close to this little operation all those months ago when he had lost Harry, and had never realised it. Lucius' research into Devon had been more useful than even he realised. But it had moved now, and where to was still a mystery. But there was still time to find it. The Muggles were indeed clever; they were stronger and had more knowledge than he had suspected. That served him well, for the success of his Halloween plan would plunge the Muggle and Magical worlds ever closer to the brink of war. Once he held the power, he would lead the Magical world in a rebellion and take its rightful place as the dominant species on the planet. The defection of Harry Potter had caused his plans to accelerate. Parkinson's idiocy with the vampires did have one unforeseen benefit. One strike team of Aurors had been sent to Hogwarts, not Plymouth, which had made the battle easier, and given his new friend more time to complete his theft. It had acted as a distraction, and had in fact aided his plan, not that Parkinson would ever find out.

Voldemort glanced at the grandfather clock to his right. It was time to check on Lane's progress. He must have it ready by Halloween.

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"Look into my eyes, Harry," Professor Flamel's soft, soothing voice filled the room. Harry stared unblinkingly into the old man's pale blue eyes, trying desperately to keep his face neutral and his mind closed. He could feel the subtle tickle of Legilimency as his tutor entered his mind. Harry managed to fight every instinct that told him to look away, to break the connection, and stayed perfectly still. He could feel Flamel gently probing his memories, and made no effort to block him. The object of the exercise was to hide certain memories while allowing him to view others. Harry's Occlumency training was progressing, but very slowly.

Six days had passed since the vampire clan had attacked Hogwarts. It was now the twelfth of October and the air outside was beginning to turn cold. His wounds had all healed, but Harry was still spending most of his time in the Room of Requirement or his mother's quarters. Every time he left to get a potion from his mother or to get some fresh air, he ended up receiving dark glances from everyone he met. Logic told him that hiding was not the answer, but it was by far the easiest solution and so Harry stuck with it. The only people he had really seen were his family and Ginny. Apparently, Hermione had asked how he was and asked Rose to pass on her thanks, but that was about it. Not that Harry minded, on the contrary, as much as he wanted to see his friends, he also did not want further attachment. Still plaguing his mind was the thought that he would have to eventually walk away from this world and all who dwell in it. Harry stared into Flamel's eyes, while trying to force these horrid thoughts from his mind.

Since he was not connected to the Voldemort of this world, there was no back door into his mind. Harry continued with his Occlumency, but now that he was not being bombarded every night as well as being battered by Snape every day, he was beginning to make progress. He could just about force Flamel from his mind when he used the actual spell and overtly forced his way into his mind. The subtler methods were much harder and Harry was completely baffled, but Flamel was ever so patient. It occurred to Harry that he was effectively being taught to lie properly. Should he succeed, he would be able to allow someone to probe his mind, hiding

memories without even appearing to do so. He would be able to lie to a professional Legilimens and get away with it. Not something one generally teaches to schoolchildren. But would Flamel teach him everything? Only a fool gave out a code he himself was unable to break. Flamel would not teach him everything. He needed Harry to be able to lie to Voldemort, but still be able to tell if Harry was lying himself. Such was the way of the world.

As Flamel tried to access a thought that Harry was trying to block, Harry instinctively shut his mind, forcing Flamel out with a tremendous push. He broke the eye contact and looked away.

“You are progressing,” said Flamel kindly, as Harry turned back to face him. “But you must try to be less heavy handed. In forcing me out, you are showing that you have something to hide. Subtlety is the key, Harry. Against me that does not matter, but against Voldemort, you would have told him that you know something important, and he would extract it one way or another.”

“I’m sorry,” muttered Harry. He knew that was true and exactly what methods Flamel was referring to. He was getting frustrated that he was so inept at Occlumency. Thoughts kept coming into his mind as he tried to clear it. He would concentrate on the sound of the waves to relax and clear his mind, but then thoughts came surfing in.

“No need to apologise,” said the old man. “You have made excellent progress. The subtler forms of Legilimency are not supposed to be easy. I am astonished that you have done so well under your stressful circumstances.” Harry smiled slightly. He had never received a compliment from Snape. He needed small compliments along the way. Sometimes, defiance alone was not enough. Coercing him was not usually effective, as Dumbledore had found last year. Flamel’s methods worked much better. He had taught Dumbledore in the old days; now he was teaching Harry. Flamel had contributed a lot over the years.

“I have a lot of motivation,” muttered Harry, not wanting to sound arrogant. As much as he liked the occasional praise for what he had actually done himself, he was not very good at dealing with it.

“As you did last year with Severus,” said Flamel. “But something has changed, not about the lessons, but about you.”

“This time I actually want to learn,” said Harry. He knew it was true and as much as he wanted to blame Snape – and in some ways still did – he had to admit it was his lack of practice that had caused him to fail. Even Hermione had seen it.

“And that is partly why you are succeeding,” said Flamel. “Coercion would never work with something as subtle as Legilimency. It requires peace of mind, not one full of resentment and emotion.” Harry knew this to be true. From what Flamel had told him, his hatred of Snape had filled his mind even when he tried to clear it and that was how Snape had managed to break in. “Now, when you are ready, we shall try lying once more. Remember - distance yourself from emotion. It does you credit, but it is ever so easy to spot.”

Harry took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind. He concentrated on the waves, trying to put aside all feelings of love, hate and fear. He closed his eyes and took another deep breath before opening them. He stared directly into Flamel's eyes.

"Are you a Gryffindor?" asked Flamel, staring straight into his eyes. Harry concentrated hard on the waves, relaxing. Throwing aside all emotion, Harry answered.

"No," lied Harry, maintaining the eye contact. He tried to calm his heart, tried to relax.

"Do you speak French?" *Be calm! Relax! Clear your mind! No emotion!*

"Fluently," said Harry, trying to keep his mind absolutely clear and his face blank.

"Do you have a sister?" What? I...Rose...an image of her face filled his mind and then an image of Dudley. Emotion washed over him and his mind went to pot.

"I..." Harry began to stammer, he broke the eye contact and blinked a few times. "I don't know."

Flamel blinked and leaned back in his chair sighing deeply. Harry was sure he was no longer Legilimising him. He didn't know if Flamel was disappointed, angry, or what. Harry couldn't get the image out of his mind.

"You were doing much better," said Flamel slowly. He seemed rather thoughtful. He paused for a few seconds before continuing. "But the personal question stumped you, didn't it? The question about your house was near perfect. Had I not known you were lying, I would not have been able to tell. When it came to speaking French, you strayed from a yes or no answer and I could see that you were lying. At this stage, stay to simple yes and no answers. If you have to extend the answer, your mind is doing more work and it is harder to conceal. Yes and no are short and simpler to conceal. The personal question really did unseat you. You had a strong emotional reaction to the question, which again causes the mind to do work and hence I could see you were flustered. Occlumency will keep that at bay, and allow you to lie."

"I wasn't just trying to lie," said Harry, gazing into space. "I honestly don't know the answer. Up until September I didn't and now I do, but she's not my real sister, but she is real and I do care about her, but I don't know...I'm rambling." His mind was awash with emotion. He had to leave, he knew that, but he was beginning to enjoy life here. He was beginning to see Lily and James as his real parents.

"Do you love her?" asked Flamel frankly. Harry glanced up, caught off guard by the question. He was not used to being asked such personal questions. He was very touchy about his feelings, and did not feel comfortable telling Flamel about them.

"Why do you ask?" he managed to get out.

“Why do you not answer?” replied Flamel with infuriating calm. “An adopted child is still part of the family, as they all love each other. If you love her, and accept it, then yes, you are part of their family.”

“But I have to leave eventually. I know that it will hurt her when I do...”

“But you are scared to love her in case you get hurt as well?” asked Flamel. Harry was taken back. Was he so transparent? Yes, he didn’t want to get hurt; he didn’t want her to get hurt either. He didn’t know how to feel, how to react. His mind was a mess of emotion.

“All this from Legillimency?” asked Harry, raising an eyebrow. “I thought it wasn’t about reading minds.”

“That conclusion was based on simple observation,” said Flamel with a smile. “I have seen the way you look at her, talk about her. I can see how guarded you are. The signs are there for all to see. You are feeling a connection to them, Harry. It is only natural. I have seen inside your mind, I know that they are what you have always dreamed of. You are scared of allowing yourself to love them in case they reject you. Do you not see that they are real and willing to accept you? This blockage is all in your mind.”

“But I feel like an intruder, trying to steal her from the other me. He could be out there somewhere. He is her real brother, and I still feel like an outsider looking in.”

“You are more real to them than the face in the papers. They *will* love you,” said Flamel softly. “If you let them.”

“But then they’d be in danger,” said Harry. “It’s always the way.”

“They already are,” said Flamel. “It is not something we would wish for, but they are already targets. Your mother is a Hogwarts professor, your father an Auror; both are publicly known to support Dumbledore. Your parents had escaped Tom’s wrath three times before you were even born.”

*“Have thrice defied him,”* muttered Harry. If Flamel heard it, he ignored it.

“Facing the truth is always like this,” said Flamel. “First you have to accept that your argument is not real and all in your mind, it is nothing but your fears. Then you say you are doing it for the sake of others. Lastly, you find someone to blame. Anger is always the last hiding place, before acceptance.”

“And who am I supposed to be angry at?”

“Myself, Albus, Tom, the other Harry, take your pick,” said Flamel. “It is an irrational anger. It always is. Anger is the final hiding place, and only those of us who can see beyond it can accept who we are.” Harry had no idea what Flamel was trying to get at. He distrusted all

psychology. He did not believe that the mind could be explained in words or in a book. *Flamel was an expert, thought Harry, but there was much he did not know.* No two minds were the same.

“Distancing yourself from them doesn’t make them any safer,” continued the professor. “It will only make you more vulnerable. You have been spending a lot of time with them recently, have you not?” Yes he had been, but that didn’t mean that Flamel’s psychoanalysis was right.

“I had no say in the matter,” said Harry. “I couldn’t leave.” Hang on! Why was he protesting? He had enjoyed his time with them and he was beginning to accept them. He did want a family, so why was he arguing with Flamel? He agreed with him, so why did he protest? Suddenly, Harry realised that he was indeed following Flamel’s theory. The argument was all in his mind. He did agree and he did want to be part of their family. But he couldn’t. Rose was in danger. She was too young and he had no right to bring danger onto her. Step two: he was doing it for others. Flamel was right. Harry felt a touch of annoyance that he was so easy to psychoanalyse. He didn’t like the idea that he was simple minded.

“But you did not hide from them,” said Flamel. “You opened up, ever so slightly and it is happening more and more isn’t it? Every second you spend with them helps.”

“How?”

“Your mind,” said Flamel. “You are calming down, opening up, accepting the changes that are happening around you. When we first met, you were angry, vengeful, grieving and rather hostile. Now, you are calm, you are beginning to accept that they are your family. Being with them, having a home has done wonders for your mind, your magic and your humanity. Along with this, your power is growing. You can feel it, can’t you? I can feel it when I enter your mind.” Harry couldn’t tell if that was a compliment. There was a truth to his words, Harry knew that much but he felt so confused. He didn’t understand the mind as Flamel did. His feelings seemed so complicated.

“I still have to leave at the end of this,” said Harry in a small voice. “It will only hurt more in the end. Sometimes I feel that the pain is not worth it.” *There I go again. Why the hell am I arguing when I agree?*

“Not worth it? If you honestly believed that then you would not be as close as you are,” said Flamel. That was certainly true. “If you honestly did not want to know them, you would have kept your distance. No, Harry, you want a family so badly that you are accepting them, despite what you know to be true. Love and emotion overrule logic and common sense. You are having an emotional reaction.”

“But I am not their real son,” said Harry. “He is still out there somewhere. I can pretend to be a reformed him in the public eye, but not to them. I can’t replace their son.”

“You are their son,” interrupted Flamel, “Harry Potter as he should have been. Every time they read your name they wished that you had never left, that none of that had happened. To

you, that never happened; you are the embodiment of what they wished for. Just as they are your dream, you are theirs. You are not a second choice or anything like that. You must stop projecting your own fears of inadequacy onto them. They will accept you. The sooner you accept this, the better it will be for everyone.”

“The sooner I finish off Tom, the better it will be for everyone,” said Harry hotly, bringing a sharp end to the topic. He was beginning to feel more and more frustrated by Flamel’s theories. Step three.

“And that is what we are trying to do now,” said the professor. *Finally, we are moving on*, thought Harry bitterly.

“Do you honestly believe I can do it?” asked Harry, staring his teacher directly in his eyes. He didn’t know how to tell if he was lying, and if he couldn’t perform Occlumency then Legillimency was out of the question, but he wanted to know.

“You are not the only one who can kill this Voldemort,” said Flamel without blinking.

“You are a master Occlumens,” said Harry, staring out his tutor. He had no idea if he was lying or not, but that was not the big problem with his answer. “And you didn’t answer the question.”

“True,” said Flamel, raising an eyebrow. “I believe you can do it. I believe that you and Albus alone have the power to face him. One can see irony in the fact that he gave you all this power, all this tutelage and now it is coming back to haunt him.” The old man chuckled slightly. This only served to anger Harry further.

“Well I’m glad you find it so amusing,” said Harry coldly. “This tutelage, as you call, it is driving me insane. I don’t know who I am anymore. I would never kill in the old days, but a few weeks back I left an Auror to die a painful death without a second thought. I killed four vampires a few days ago and I feel no guilt. I am sort of sick hybrid of the two of us, an ugly compromise.” He put his head in his hands. At the moment he hated himself almost as much as Riddle. He wished he could go back to Marge’s farm and stop himself from being transported here. But then he would never have met his parents or Rose. He didn’t know what to think. He just hoped Flamel wasn’t going to go on about projections of feelings of inadequacy.

“Your skills are just that, Harry: skills,” said Flamel. “You can use them to do good or evil and it is in that that you differ so greatly from the Harry that we knew. As for your morality, you are changing, growing up. You were kept out of the Order last year, and your sister and friends are still so. Do you think we do this to protect you from a fire, or to keep you safe? If only it were that simple. No, Harry, we keep you out to protect you from the harsh reality of war. Albus and I have to make decisions, harsh decisions, and the regret that follows is no place for a child. Not a month before you arrived, Albus and I made the decision to sacrifice an entire family, children and all, one of whom was due to start Hogwarts next year, for the greater good. Before you scold me, I can promise you I took no pride nor pleasure in it. My only saving grace was that we saved many more than six lives. We as good as killed them, and it is not the first

time that such decisions have been made. We have sent Order members on missions we did not expect any to return from. That is no place for a child; war is no place for a child. That is why we protect you, yet you all think you know so much and want to join.” There was no anger or disappointment in his voice, only regret. “My point, Harry, is that war is a vile business. You are, unfortunately, caught up in the middle of it. You have killed to protect and though you might not feel pity, you take no pleasure in taking life. You are better than our Harry. We discussed your family a few moments ago. Your whole perspective on life is changing. It is part of growing up. Your strict moral sense does you credit and it is in that that Tom Riddle met his downfall.”

“And the other me,” said Harry, shaking his head. He knew that Flamel was right. It seemed to calm him somewhat. He sighed deeply before continuing. “You are right. But what really shook me up last week was the fact that during the vampire attack, I had to rely on his skills, his power to save me. I was too weak to do it myself. I would have died and Hermione would have died if it were not for him. I don’t want to be in his debt, but I feel that way. I feel like nothing I do is my own any more.”

“It goes to show that out of pure evil, must come something good,” said Flamel, smiling slightly.

“It’s not that simple,” said Harry. Things never were simple when it came to his choices. “When I was falling I just...did it. I didn’t even think - I just sort of...did it.” Harry realised that he was not being clear. He took a deep breath, willing the right words to find their way to his lips. “I had never heard of the spell and then suddenly I had used it. I would have died without it. I had no idea about dynamite, but then I could remember reading about it. Words seemed to come to me. I could visualise a printed sheet of paper with instructions on. Then again when Hermione was about to be bitten. I had to let the darkness take me.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I can feel the anger bubbling in the pit of my stomach,” said Harry. “I can feel this...dark cloud over me. When I get angry, I can feel it bubbling. It is like...when Voldemort was sending me dreams down the link last summer, there was a time when I passed by Dumbledore and I felt this sudden urge to just lash out and hurt him. I could feel this...snake inside me. Then it sometimes seems to just take control, like when I was falling, it saved my life. But with Hermione, I willingly let it take me; I let Harry’s power overcome me. I relied on it to save her because I was too weak. It did work, but it was only her that brought me back. I remember doing it, and then I remembered her and me in my world, where we were friends, and I felt the darkness fade away. What really annoys me is that I know I need his power and his skill to win. I need him and I hate him.”

“Interesting,” said the old man, looking thoughtful. Her sat still for a few seconds; his only movement was the tapping of his fingers on his chin. Suddenly, his eyebrows rose into his hairline. “Dreams,” he said simply.

Harry shrugged, clearly showing he had no clue as to what Flamel meant. He did not usually speak in riddles as Dumbledore did, and this was definitely not the right time to start. Luckily Flamel elaborated.

“You mentioned dreams, and then you said you were falling and then you relaxed, is that correct?” asked Flamel, his eyes alight with understanding.

“So?”

“Your mind shut down,” he explained. “You were asleep when you had the dreams. Then later you were falling. You thought you were going to die and you panicked. When you panic your conscious mind again shuts down. Your conscious mind keeps this inner darkness at bay. When you are asleep, it comes to the surface in the form of dreams.”

“So why does my conscious mind fight it without me knowing it?” asked Harry.

“You mentioned that it receded when you saw Miss Granger,” said Flamel thoughtfully. “You thought about your friendship. I believe this love is what has helped you. It not only keeps you sane, knowing who you are, but it also strengthens your mind.” Harry was absolutely clueless. He understood the part about thinking of love and causing the darkness to withdraw, forcing it out with love, as it were, much as he had driven Voldemort out of his mind in the Ministry last year, but as far as the conscious and sub-conscious minds were concerned, he didn’t have the foggiest.

“I don’t understand,” said Harry brushing his hair back and resting his head on his hands. “What is this darkness? Why do I have these visions, this power?”

“I have nothing to base these ideas on,” said Flamel. “With the mind there are no rules. Every case is different, every mind unique.” *Oh, great, so this entire conversation has been in vain!* Harry was about to voice his opinion when Flamel continued. “My interpretation is that when his mind was ripped from his body, parts were left behind.”

“So part of him is in here with me?”

“No,” said Flamel. “What I mean is that you are experiencing Memory Echoes; echoes left behind when his mind or soul was ripped from his body. Your dreams are just echoes of what he did. Your skills are practically muscle memory. You can find your way home in the dark; this is little different from that. The darkness you spoke of, I believe is more of a mental block than anything physical. I believe that *he* associated those skills with anger. Anger would have fuelled his fighting, hatred his curses. He associated them so strongly that you are doing so as well, following the same mental pathways as he did.”

“With a slight detour through my conscience,” said Harry, beginning to understand. Flamel smiled, and nodded his head.

“As your mind touches these abilities,” continued Flamel, “You follow the same mental pathways. You can feel the anger and hatred that he felt when he used them. You feel the fuel of Dark Magic and I think it scares you.”

“It reminds me of when I tried to use the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix,” said Harry. A shiver ran down his spine at the memory. “It even gives me a headache at times.”

“Perhaps, just as Voldemort cannot bear to experience pure love, you find pure hate unbearable. That explains the pain that you felt from your scar in your world. You said that whenever he gets angry your scar hurts. I believe the Killing Curse to be truly beyond you.”

“So in essence, I have these powers inside me, but I cannot use them?” said Harry, suddenly feeling exasperated. “They have saved me and I kind of need them.”

“Occlumency teaches us to hide memories and suppress emotions,” said Flamel. “Obviously we are exploring many lines of Occlumency, but one in particular will help; suppressing emotion. The more proficient you become with Occlumency, the more you will be able to put aside the hatred that comes with the abilities to forge new pathways to these abilities. One day you will have full mastery over the dark powers that lie within you. You let yourself succumb to them to save Hermione and the hatred overpowered you; your conscious mind shut down enough for it to take control. I mean that only the most primitive, the most animal part of your mind was working and that used the anger to attack. In time, you will control it, rather than allow it to control you. In the meantime, the more time you spend with your family, the more you open up to them, the better it will be for all involved. You remember that your love for Hermione...”

“We’re not...” began Harry, cutting off his tutor.

“I did not mean anything by that,” smiled Flamel. “What I mean is that your love caused you to calm down and take control. If you open up to your family, and I mean voluntarily, for your own good, not because I told you to, it will have much the same effect. Remember what I said Harry, *you have to let them.*”

“Sounds promising,” said Harry. “But it all hinges on me being able to learn Occlumency.”

“Well let us get started then.”

For the next hour, Harry found it intensely hard to concentrate. One sentence was flowing over and over in his mind,

*They will love you, if you let them.*

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Harry Potter; his face filled Albus Dumbledore's mind as he drummed his fingers on the desk in his office. Fawkes sat on his perch to his left, head under wing and fast asleep. Around him the former Headmasters snoozed in their portraits. The smoking machine on the shelf was happily puffing away. The study was cool, peaceful and serene, a complete contrast to the Headmaster's mind frame.

It had been some time since Harry Potter had told Albus of his life in another universe. He had often thought about it, even going as far as to place his memory in a Pensieve so he could review it in its entirety later. It wasn't that he didn't trust the boy; it was just...he had this feeling about him. As detailed as the boy's story had been, it was also very ambiguous. There was very little useful information in his story. He had put more emphasis on the personal feelings rather than the details that would make the information useful. Over the last few days Albus had managed to extract more detail but it was a chore. Albus could appreciate that, after living through what the boy had, it was painful for Harry to relive it, but he was not cooperating fully. It was almost as if he was attempting a form of emotional blackmail. Up until then he had seemed utterly resentful of all sympathy. He didn't want pity, or anything like that, but then there was the story seemed to be entirely focused on emotion and pain. Either he wanted something or his mind had just snapped; after being tortured for three days, his mind was bound to be a little fragile. Maybe Albus was being too harsh. Maybe he wasn't up to anything, but the thought that Albus pondered most was the idea that in Harry's position, emotional blackmail was precisely what Albus would try to do.

But then there was the vampire attack. The Dark Lord had sent a group of Bounty Hunters after Harry, but only five of them. It was disturbing how easily they had penetrated Hogwarts and how easily they had locked the hall. There were artefacts in existence that could do it again. He had erected extra wards to prevent this. All magic artefacts over a certain power that were brought into the castle would raise an alarm. He just hoped Fred and George Weasley's contraptions didn't set them off. The added security was yet another reminder of the troubled times. He was brought out of his thoughts by a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Albus, leaning back in his chair. The door to his office opened and Nicolas Flamel stepped into the room. He looked a little concerned and his movements were slow. His eyebrows were furrowed in thought.

"Ah, Nicolas," said Albus, indicating a chair. "Please join me. How go your lessons with Harry?" Nicolas slid into a chair and settled himself before replying. He seemed to be trying to reach a decision. Albus had enough respect for his teacher not to probe him with Legilimency, that and he knew Nicolas would know instantly if he did and could easily hide things from him. As Nicolas hesitated, Albus could see a certain amount of concern on his mentor's face. He remembered the look from the days when Flamel had taught him in his far off Hogwarts days. Little Albus Dumbledore had been a bit of a troublemaker, a secret he had no wish to make known. People already thought of him as eccentric; that he could cope with, but a troublemaker was not constructive. There were very few people left who remembered Albus when he was at school.

“As far as Occlumency goes,” said Nicolas carefully, looking into Albus’ eyes, “He is coming along slowly. There is still a lot of work to do. He can repel an attack from his mind. He still has trouble hiding memories, controlling emotion, but he can lie convincingly under Legilimency as long as the question is not personal. Do not get me wrong, Albus, he has made progress, but it does not come naturally to him as it did to Severus.”

“I see,” said Albus. He was impressed that Harry had made such progress. This form of magic was not usually taught to people so young. Also, the he was a little relieved that if the need arose he could still Legilimise Harry. Only a fool gave out a code he himself could not break. The idea was for Harry to be able to hide from everyone else but him. “I get the feeling there is something else, Nicolas,” pressed Albus.

The elder man leaned forward placing his elbows on his knees and holding his head in his hands. After a second he looked up at Albus with a sigh. “Albus, I am worried about the boy,” said Flamel. “Obviously he doesn’t know I am here, so please do not tell him. He already has a deep mistrust of you, or rather your counterpart in his world. If he found out that I am here, he may retreat into himself again. When we first began he was highly concerned about what I got from his mind becoming public knowledge.” Albus nodded to his friend. He would keep this information to himself, unless it really was of vital importance and could endanger someone.

“I have just come from a lesson with Harry,” began Nicolas. “He mentioned that he could feel a great mass of hatred inside him. His words were ‘the darkness boiling inside me’. He mentioned that he still dreams of the other Harry’s attacks. He said that during the vampire attack, he had to rely on the other Harry’s abilities to survive. Now my interpretation of this was that when his conscious mind shuts down, for example when he sleeps and when he panics, the abilities come to him. The subconscious and most animal part of the brain functions and he will defend himself by using the muscle memory and instincts that other Harry left behind. I refer to them as Memory Echoes. Once his conscious mind takes over, he is fine.” Albus experienced a sinking feeling in his stomach. If there was still an ‘echo’ of the other Harry in Harry, it may be possible for him to revert to darkness. This was a worrying development.

“Is he dangerous, Nicolas?” asked Albus, gravely, “Is he going to have a Jekyll and Hyde experience?”

“I do not believe so,” said Nicolas. “I shall now put extra emphasis on suppressing emotional reactions and hiding them with Occlumency. My hope is to allow him to access these abilities without having to relax and let this anger take over. He finds it disorientating and even painful.”

“But it is not only that, Albus,” continued Nicolas. “I am worried about the boy’s sanity. I have seen enough of the boy’s mind to see what he has lived through. He has experienced as much pain and suffering as any of us. But there is something else now - his family. He knows he has to leave this world, but he is also beginning to love them. His mind is changing. This is the ultimate mind-screw, Albus. Your strongest Confundus Charm would seem trivial compared to what his mind is going through. Everything he has ever known has been turned on its head. The more time he spends around the Potters, the more control he seems to have over his mind, but he

becomes less sure of himself. The best time for Occlumency is just after he has spent some time with them. His magic is also increasing quite drastically. He is more powerful than we give him credit for, Albus. And the powers he got from our Harry, they give him strength but he hates the fact he got them from him. He hates himself for needing them. He believes – or rather believed – that his only purpose was to fight. Even now, he is at his best when the pressure is on, in a combat situation his mind thinks clearly. He is in his element when fighting. He knows this and it scares him because he thinks people will think that his only reason for living is to fight. Without that reason, people would just desert him.”

“Once again, the most important question is ‘is he dangerous?’“ repeated Albus.

“He is going through a very trying transition,” replied Nicolas. “Everything he has come to believe is being thrown into question. He has been alone for so many years without an adult caring for him, being utterly emotionally independent. Now he has a family and he has no idea how to feel and how to behave. Part of him misses the independence; part of him relishes the security. There are subtler aspects to this than being overlooked. He has never really had to answer to anyone before. He has never had to worry about taking a detention slip home to a guardian or a bad report card. He has never had to answer to anyone he actually loves. If Lily were to reprimand him I do not know how he would react. The Dursleys were always oppressive, teachers were just that: teachers, and Molly was always good to him. If someone he thinks he loves like Lily were to shout at him, I couldn’t say how he would react. It might hurt him and he may distance himself from them. He could rebel, not being used to anyone controlling him, Merlin knows, he resented you for trying to control him. If he feels threatened...”

“He could snap at Lily?” asked Albus, raising an eyebrow.

“That is a worst case scenario, and highly unlikely,” said Nicolas. “It is a point though. I recommended he spend time with them to calm himself, and to try and open up. He spent over two days as Voldemort’s prisoner and gave up next to nothing. He has always kept to himself, and now we are asking him to bare his soul. That is part of why Severus’ attempts to teach him Occlumency failed. He hated Snape for invading his private thoughts, and that anger, that emotion filled his mind so he couldn’t clear it. I am worried that if we push him he will just retreat inside himself.”

“What do you suggest, Nicolas?” asked Albus.

“Caution,” said Nicolas. “We need to give him time. He has to find his place within a family he has never known. Not only that, the other Harry is taking his toll on this Harry’s mind. Since he has been here, Harry has killed people, and the fact that it doesn’t bother him is clawing at his conscience. The comparisons to the other Harry are driving him crazy. He hates him, but he knows he got his strength from him. Those skills have saved his life and Miss Granger’s and he resents them and himself for it. He believes he was too weak to do it alone. I have tried to talk him out of it, but I daren’t push him. His mind is changing and it is quite vulnerable to impression at this time. He is beginning to stop feeling like an outsider looking in. The world is changing all around him, and he is changing. I have looked into his mind. Up until a few months ago, he was very closed to the world. He didn’t let anything show. Any form of pain and misery

he kept firmly inside. You saw him after he returned from Voldemort. He gave you a brief account of his life. He made no effort to hide embarrassing moments. He was utterly open for the first time in his life about his feelings.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I expect having Lily there helped,” mused Nicolas. “It could have been an attempt to be honest with his mother. One minute he is closed and the next he is open. He had been tortured and his mental state was fragile. I think he was so scared that he wanted a metaphoric shoulder to cry on, some emotional support, but he didn’t know how to ask for it, having spent so long alone. His sanity is cracking. He is lost Albus, and he needs time.” Time was the one thing they did not have.

“We do not have time,” said Albus slowly. He removed his half-moon spectacles and began to polish them on his robes. It was his nervous habit again. “Is he insane?”

“It’s not that he is or isn’t, it’s just that...”

“Yes or no, Nicolas?” asked Albus. He knew Nicolas was uncomfortable about breaking Harry’s confidence. He was a good man and Albus did not want to put him in this position, but he had to know. “I must know if he is dangerous.”

“He is not dangerous,” said Nicolas after a little deliberation. “Just vulnerable.” That did not answer the question, Albus noted. Nicolas was reluctant to answer, probably unsure of what Albus’ response would be. He wanted to protect Harry, just as he had done with Albus over a century ago. Reading between the lines, Albus knew that Harry was insane, that he didn’t know it and that he had the potential to be dangerous. Leaving him with his family was a risk. Albus was caught between Harry’s well-being and the Potters’ safety. He trusted Nicolas’ judgement. After a few seconds thought, Albus decided to go with his old teacher’s idea.

“Is there anything we can do for the boy?”

“At present, just give him space,” said Nicolas. “He needs to find his feet. Let him bond with his family, let him, for once in his life, feel what a family really is.”

Albus nodded. He was ever more aware that they did not have much time, but he needed Harry and under Nicolas’s advice, he would endeavour to give Harry the space he needed, but if push came to shove, he would call on Harry.

“As I requested earlier,” said Nicolas, “Harry must not find out about this conversation. It does not leave this room. I came to you in my capacity in the Order, but I still feel guilty about betraying him. If he found out I have betrayed his trust, he could retreat inside himself or snap at us. Remember, he does not know his sanity is cracking, to him he thinks he coping. He must not know what I have told you. I can Occlude my mind to prevent him finding out, but you must too Albus – not that I expect him to become a Legilimens any time soon, but we must be prepared.”

“Very well,” said Albus. “Harry will never find out about this conversation.”

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On All Hallow’s Eve, and still none the wiser to Flamel’s conversation with Dumbledore, Harry skewered a piece of chicken with his fork, deposited it in his mouth and began to chew. The food was up to its usual standard. The House-Elves had really excelled themselves. Harry also knew that tonight would be very busy as they had to put up all the Halloween decorations around the castle and particularly the Hall, as well as get breakfast ready, the rooms cleaned and cater for any curfew breakers on a bakery run. The venison terrine starter had been exquisite, and the Coc au Vin was just as nice. After the hostilities of recent days, it was nice to have some time to be with his family. Harry was still a little unsure of how to behave on these sorts of occasions. He found that every time he spoke he had to choose his words carefully. He didn’t want to accidentally swear in front of his mother, but also he still viewed these meals as formal occasions. He tried to be a polite and civilised as possible, though he had no experience of the like. If the Dursleys ever had a formal meal, he was always locked upstairs or made to wait on them.

*They will love you, if you let them.*

More than two weeks had passed since he had first heard those words, and they still had not left his mind. He had spent many restless nights thinking about them, about his family and about his friends back at home. He was going to have leave someone; who was it to be? The place he really belonged or the place he wanted to be?

With Flamel’s words at the front of his mind, Harry was sitting around a table in his mother’s living quarters. For once, the topic of conversation was not the war, or how to hide Harry. He was free now. Everyone knew and from what Rose had told him, there was still a deep mistrust, but no one seemed to be after his blood. Hannah had apologised to Rose, not that Harry felt she needed to. Harry glanced down at his hands. Madam Pomfrey had managed to heal nearly all of his injuries almost without trace. Only the large gash on his left palm where a piece of glass had been embedded had left a scar. He no longer needed to wear the wrist support as Madam Pomfrey had pronounced his wrist fully healed, though she had taken the time to reiterate yet again how dangerous it was to go out sword-fighting with a wrist that had been completely shattered two weeks before.

Today was one of the rare occasions when Harry’s father was not working for either the Order or the Aurors. Dumbledore had been kind enough to give him the night off. Part of Harry wished Sirius could have had the evening off as well. Harry had yet to properly speak to him. He had seen him in Dumbledore’s office once, but he really wanted to sit down and chat. Sirius knew the truth about him, but not what had happened in his world. Harry longed for the chance to speak to his Godfather.

“So how is your Animagus training going?” asked Lily, half way through the main course. Harry was awakened from his thoughts with a start and Lily had to repeat the question.

“I’ve apparently gone as far as I can until I find my form,” Harry informed them. “I don’t even know what I am looking for. Apparently ‘I’ll know when it appears’. Don’t know how I’ll know.”

“Oh, you’ll know,” said his father with a grin. “You’ll know,” he repeated with a wink. He obviously found something amusing, and Harry didn’t like not knowing what it was, though he didn’t push it. His father was playful, but he would never put Harry in danger. It couldn’t be too bad.

“How much duelling has Snape covered in Defence lessons?” asked Harry, changing the subject. He was beginning to think about trying to set up the DA again, or something along those lines. The thought had occurred to him as he read an article about an attack on some Muggles in Aberystwyth. The war was much further along in this world than in his own. Decades of fighting had left the combatants wounded and with little morale. Voldemort had spies in every corner of every room. Half of the school were being groomed to become Death Eaters, and not just the Slytherins. The more Voldemort made the headlines, the more families aligned themselves with him. As such, Draco Malfoy’s influence was growing. Rose had kept Harry abreast of what was happening during his time in the Room of Requirement. Neutrality was a luxury those in the upper years no longer had. They could side with Dumbledore, or with Voldemort. More and more were going to Voldemort. The need to be able to defend oneself was paramount. Harry had been thinking that if he could inspire a little hope in them, then perhaps, just perhaps, a few people might side with them. The Order were being backed into a corner. Crouch’s control was failing and they could all see it. Something had to be done.

“Severus teaches defence lessons, above the required standards for OWL and NEWT,” said Lily, taking a sip of her wine. “He refuses to acknowledge anyone to have any talent aside from his own house, but he has taught them enough.”

“It is Defence Against the Dark Arts and not just plain Dark Arts, isn’t it?” asked Harry. He had to make sure. He would never trust Severus Snape, let alone a Severus Snape he didn’t know.

“Dumbledore trusts him,” said Lily, placing her glass down and giving him a quizzical look. She was probably wondering if he hated Snape for a good reason, or just because his father and Sirius had.

“Dumbledore believes in second chances,” said Harry frostily. “I don’t, especially in this case. Do you think Snape would mind me sitting in on a practical lesson?” Lily looked doubtful, while James snorted in laughter. Rose seemed to be suppressing a smirk.

“I wouldn’t think he’d like that,” said Lily, shooting an exasperated look at her husband. “Severus doesn’t take well to people criticizing his teaching methods.”

“In my world,” began Harry, increasingly aware of how much he used that particular phrase. “We had a teacher who didn’t let us do the practical work. We started a secret club to teach ourselves practical defence and duelling. I was thinking of trying to encourage it here.”

“Severus would interpret that as a means of undermining him,” said James.

“Insecure people are always paranoid,” said Harry.

“You’d be turning the students into an army,” said James. “Reading between the lines, here. You would want them to be ready to march to the defence of Hogwarts?” That was fast. It was not Harry’s intention. He had no desire to put his friends in the line of fire. He just wanted them to be able to defend themselves. Though now that he mentioned it, it would be beneficial.

“Not as such,” said Harry. “I want them to be able to defend themselves. Writing two-foot essays on Werewolves is not the way to teach at this point in time. All lessons should be on practical duelling. If not, they need practice. We had everyone doing Stunners, disarming, and shields within a week. By the end of the first term, some of us were on to Patroni.”

“In their fifth year?” asked Rose sceptically.

“I learned mine in my third,” said Harry, receiving a raised eyebrow from Rose and James. “And yes, though not everyone managed it.”

“Granger?” asked Rose, with a smirk.

“Don’t mock her,” said Harry, fixing his sister with a piercing stare. The sentence came out a little more aggressively than he meant it to. She seemed a little shocked at his response, and he quickly softened his voice. He didn’t want her to fear him. He hadn’t been trying to scare her. “She just needs a push in the right direction,” he elaborated softly. “She’s a highly intelligent and capable witch. If you knew her as I did...she’s put her life on the line countless times to help me. I wouldn’t trade her for fifty Aurors. But yes, she did succeed with a Patronus.”

“You still want to teach students to fight, though?” asked Lily.

“Teamwork,” said Harry. “To show them that there are others who are willing to stand up and fight for what is right. To try and inspire a little hope in all the evil that’s going on around us. But that is all in the future. For now, I just want to sit in on one of Snape’s lessons. You never know, I may feel he is doing an adequate job, though I wouldn’t put money on it.”

“He’ll love another Potter in his class,” said Rose darkly. “Honestly, Mum, can’t you speak to Dumbledore about the way he treats Gryffindors?”

Harry tuned out from the conversation. His mind was full of memories of the DA. He could remember the very first session, the feeling of accomplishment as he saw how much they had improved as the weeks had gone by. He could see Hermione and Cho conjuring their Patroni and the room full of flying hexes and shields. Dumbledore’s Army; the name had only been a joke...hadn’t it? Had he expected them to fight from day one? No, of course not. He had not wanted them to come with him to the Ministry. He didn’t want them following him into danger. He hadn’t wanted Sirius to follow him into danger.

Harry took a sip of Sangria from his glass, before returning to his thoughts. Sirius was alive here. Harry felt an overwhelming desire to see him, to tell him he was sorry. Sorry for getting him killed, sorry for...everything. He had given up blaming Snape, and had finally accepted that it was his fault, and his alone.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Lily, bringing Harry back from his thoughts.

“Sirius,” said Harry plainly. “Sirius and Snape.” He couldn’t keep the smile from creeping onto his lips.

“Some things never change,” replied Lily, shooting a wry glance at her husband.

“All in good fun,” said James lightly.

“Unless you take it too far,” said Harry accusingly.

“Well said, Harry,” nodded Lily approvingly.

“What are you implying?” said James, clearly fighting back a playful grin. “Should we outlaw fun? Should we all be as boring as...something really boring?” Harry daredn’t think what he had been about to say. He had noticed his father’s eyes flit to his wife, though he had been wise to hold his tongue. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

Snape was one thing Harry had been meaning to speak to his father about, but had never found the time. Lupin had said that they had all been idiots back then, but he wanted to hear it from his father. He had never thought he would get a chance to understand why he had done it. He hoped his father would come out with an exonerating excuse that Snape had not known about, but knew it was a slim chance. But Harry had to know why. Had his father really been nothing but a common bully?

“But when is it right to dangle Snape in mid-air with his underwear hanging out in front of half the school?” asked Harry, fixing his father with a McGonagall-esque glare.

James raised an eyebrow, shooting an appraising glance at his wife, “Who told you about that?”

“Snape,” answered Harry plainly, his face a mask of neutrality. “As in my Snape; he put the memory in a Pensieve to protect it from me when teaching me Occlumency, or rather trying to. I may have...sort of... taken a little peek,” said Harry. Suddenly he did feel guilty about looking in the Pensieve. He daredn’t imagine if something like that had happened to him, what he would feel like. He hadn’t been sorry in front of Snape, but now confessing it to his mother, he did feel a little guilty. It was an invasion of privacy, after all.

“So old Snivellus is as bitter and twisted wherever you go,” concluded James, smiling to himself.

“Are you proud of yourself?” asked Harry accusingly. James’ smile melted from his face.

“Not especially,” replied James soberly. “He was an arse...git and he got what he deserved. He called your mother...names.”

“*After* you had hung him upside down,” corrected Harry. “She tried to help him. Please be honest with me, why did you do it? You said the only reason was that he existed. There has to be more to it than that. You can’t be a mindless thug.” That sobered James up. The smile vanished and a glimmer of guilt crossed his face. Harry could feel tears building behind his eyes. His father couldn’t be the spiteful imbecile Snape had always said. He was a hero, something to aspire to; he just had to be.

“In my world,” continued Harry, staring unseeingly at his plate and chasing a potato around the plate with a fork. There was that phrase again. “You died when I was one. I saw your name on a Quidditch trophy. Hagrid sung your praises when I first met him. All my life I was told how perfect you both were. I always thought Snape was just jealous. He hated me from day one, and I never understood why. I always thought he was just twisted, but then I saw the Pensieve. ‘It’s more that he exists, it you know what I mean’, Jesus Christ, Dad, why? I’d thought you were something to aspire to, but to see you as a common bully...it was like my whole idea about my parents came crashing down around me, as if everything I had ever been told about you was a lie. For the first time in my life, I wasn’t proud to be your son. Snape’s ultimate revenge worked. I even scolded Sirius and Remus about it...that was...that was the last time I spoke to Sirius. My parting words to him were ones of anger.” Harry put his head on his hands. He sighed deeply, not daring to look his father in the eye, partially because his own were starting to fill with tears. He wiped his eyes and looked up at his father. “I never thought I’d get a chance to speak to you about it. Please tell me why.”

“You would judge me on one event?” asked his father softly. Harry noticed that both the ladies were motionless, watching the exchange.

“No,” said Harry shaking his head. “But it was all I had. I had never known you; I had a few pictures and the word of mouth. I just wanted to be proud of you, and then I saw that. You weren’t as perfect as I had always believed.”

“We all do things we aren’t proud of,” said James levelly. “Your mother wouldn’t even give me the time of day until halfway through our seventh year. Looking back, I’m not proud of who I was. Your mother was absolutely right to keep her distance until I had calmed down. As for Snape, well, you know how Slytherins are. Surely, in your year you have Lucius Malfoy’s son, what’s his name...Darius or something like that. Snape’s mother was as deep into the Dark Arts as Lucius Malfoy, though i don’t know about his father. It was inter-house rivalry taken to an extreme, and yes, it did get out of hand. But we are past that now; we work together for the Order. Remus was right, we were idiots and it was the moment we realised that we were idiots, that we grew up. Does that answer your question?”

“I guess,” said Harry. “Having said it, I feel like I am being really pithy, and a little hypocritical. After all, I have hit Draco Malfoy on occasions, I’ve done things I am not proud of.”

“We all have,” said Lily. “That is how we grow up. We learn from our mistakes. As Nicolas always says, if we do not study history we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.”

“He also told me that history is the propaganda of the victor,” said Harry. “How will they look back on us in future generations? As the wizards who flushed our world down the toilet, or as those heroes who rose to the challenge in our hour of need? If Voldemort wins, in years to come, assuming he doesn’t destroy the world in the process of taking over, we will be depicted as rebels threatening their glorious way of life, and our names will have no more significance than Binn’s infernal goblin rebellions.”

“I thought opinion didn’t concern you,” said Rose.

“I was speaking generally, hypothetically,” said Harry. “I was just thinking about how lessons would be taught if Voldemort wrote the textbooks. A world where blood is all that matters, and anyone who resists is crushed. That is what would happen if we fail.”

“In his textbooks, we would be portrayed as the enemy,” said James “We would be seen as the terrorists, much as we see the Death Eaters now.”

“People would never believe it,” said Rose. “They couldn’t. Not after all the accounts of what Voldemort had done.”

“Harry believed I was bad after seeing one incident that portrayed me in a bad light, despite all he had been told by many more witnesses,” said James. *Good point*, thought Harry feeling ashamed of himself. It was one incident seen through the eyes of one witness with a serious grudge. It was stupid to have believed he was a thug. “And on that note, Harry, before you feel sorry for Severus Snape, think about this: a Pensieve holds *copies* of thoughts, not the real thing. Imagine if it spilled, you would literally lose your mind. No, a Pensieve allows others to view memories without Occlumency. It would not protect his memories from you. It was there to tempt you.”

“It was a trick?” asked Harry. Everything snapped into place. Of course! It had all been a trap. He had never taken out the memories of being beaten or any of those thoughts. Harry had even stumbled onto those. Snape had set it all up, the bastard! Harry had been so stupid. Yes, it may have happened, but it had all been a trick. He had fallen for Snape’s plot. God damn it!

“To get you to look, to make you hate me; to get the very reaction you had,” said James, shaking his head.

“He was so angry,” said Harry more to himself than anyone else. He could see that his father was right.

“An act,” said James. “He must have been jumping with joy that you looked in the Pensieve. It was clever - I have to give him that.”

“Let’s have some dessert,” said Lily quickly, changing the subject.

With a series of pops a group of House Elves appeared out of thin air and began to clear the plates. Harry sat, deep in thought, as a piece of Passion Fruit Iced Parfait was placed in front of him by an elf. They retreated with a series of pops and the Potters were alone again. Harry was just about to start when the fireplace burst into emerald green flames. As the flames disappeared, a letter fluttered to the floor.

Lily was the closest and rose to fetch the letter. From a distance, Harry could make out the curvy green writing he knew all too well. The letter was from Dumbledore, but who was it for? It must have been for Lily, for she immediately opened it and began to read. Her face was hard to read, but she finished reading quickly and turned to her family.

“Albus has been called to an emergency meeting with Crouch, Dawlish and the Muggle Prime Minister,” Lily informed them. “It was called at the Prime Minister’s request, and that isn’t supposed to happen so it is safe to assume something is wrong. There is an Order meeting tomorrow at eight o’clock. Harry, your presence is requested.” Harry felt a chill run down his spine. The Muggle Prime Minister? This must be bad. And why was it not supposed to happen? He remembered a conversation with Flamel in which he had asked whether Crouch reported to the PM. Apparently, it was a live and let live policy and they only made contact if something was wrong. This didn’t bode well.

“And me?” asked Rose.

“NO!” said Harry and his parents at once. He was not going to let her run in danger, not after the Department of Mysteries and the train.

Rose glared at Harry, before shooting a sulky look at her parents. “Why?” she demanded.

“You’re too young,” said Lily plainly.

“Harry isn’t of age,” she replied icily.

“Value your anonymity,” said Harry. “Once you’re on his list, you only come off when you are dead.”

“I’m not afraid,” said Rose stubbornly.

“Then you’re either crazy or stupid,” said Harry quickly. Couldn’t she understand how dangerous it was? War was no place for her. He had to keep her safe. *Christ, I sound like Dumbledore*, realised Harry with a shock. For once, they saw eye to eye.

“Are you admitting you’re scared?” snapped Rose, glaring at Harry.

“Yes,” said Harry plainly. “Anyone around me could be hit. I have enough death on my conscience without getting my friends, let alone my sister, killed. I can’t let you or them come with me.”

“That’s not your choice to make,” snapped Rose. “We are not afraid to die.” Harry rolled his eyes. She had no idea what she was saying.

“You don’t know what death is,” said Harry, turning away. “You may think it sounds heroic to say that, but nothing could be further from the truth. I’ve seen death, Rose, even before I came here. I’ve lost friends and colleagues because they got too close to me. There’s nothing glorious or heroic about dying. You are gone in an instant, bang, and that’s all there is to it. You’re nothing to him, and that’s how it must stay. It’s not your job to fight.”

“And you?” she pressed.

“It’s too late for me.”

“And you think it sounds heroic to say that?” shot back Rose in his own words. “The lonesome hero who works alone?” her voice dripped with sarcasm. When she spoke again, her voice was hard. “Wake up, Harry. You can’t do this alone. You fear him; you need help. You can’t stop me from fighting.”

“I can,” said Harry plainly, looking straight into her eyes. “And don’t try to intimidate me. Two people scare me, and neither of them is you.”

“Who is the other person you fear?” asked Rose softening slightly. Harry realised the answer was quite odd, but he was not going to lie. He had to be honest with this family.

“Molly Weasley,” said Harry, with a sad smile. Rose’s eyes narrowed.

“Be serious. Harry,” said Rose icily. She must have thought he was being sarcastic.

“I am,” replied Harry in an equally icy tone. “My sense of fear is all messed up. I’ve faced down things you’ve only seen in your nightmares, but show me a girl or a date and I’ll run a mile. And as for Mrs. Weasley, well, before I came here, she was the closest thing to a mother I had. She counted me as one of her own, looked after me; I was a Weasley for all intents and purposes. The Burrow was home to me and the idea her being angry or disappointed with me, and losing her...it scared me, all right? I’m not as cold as you think – I do feel pain; I do hurt.”

“But now you have a real family,” said Rose.

*Now I have a real family!*

*They will love you, if you let them.*

Harry felt a wave of emotion wash over him. His mouth was open, ready to argue, but words escaped him.

*I have a family!*

“But that doesn’t mean I should turn my back on my past,” said Harry at last, remembering what he had been about to say. “I am who I am because of what has happened to me. Besides, have you ever seen her scream at Fred and George? Better them than me.” He smiled slightly to himself.

Rose gave a small smile, breaking the icy look in her face. Harry realised that she really did take after her mother.

*Our mother*, he corrected himself.

“Rose, I can appreciate that you want to help,” said Harry genuinely. “I went through the same thing last year, but it’s better to let the adults take care of things. I interfered and Sirius was killed in front of me. I spent a fortnight in hospital because I thought I was capable of helping. I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but please stay out of this; you’re too young.”

“Voldemort won’t care,” said Rose defiantly. “He’ll kill me just the same.”

“ROSE-MARIE!” shouted Lily suddenly. “You are not coming, and that is final! And Harry, make no mistake, if it were not for Albus’ specific request, you too would find yourself barred from the meeting. End of discussion!”

“But...” began Rose instantly, but was cut off by a ‘listen to your mother’ from James.

Harry felt a flush of anger. Who was she to shout at him? He was old enough to take care of himself. It was his destiny to fight. She could not bar him from a meeting.

“You can’t...” he began, rising to his feet. Suddenly the anger left him as quickly as it had come. He found himself standing at the table. Had he really been about to lash out at Lily? What had come over him?

“I’m your mother, Harry,” said Lily. “I assure you I can.” Harry opened his mouth to argue. She had no right to control him. *Ah, but she does*, said a voice in his mind.

“Sorry,” muttered Harry sitting back down. He still felt a little scared by the fact that he had been willing to lash out at her. He sat swaying in his chair for a few seconds.

This was part of family life. This was what normal people and normal mothers did. They argue. *I’ve had my first family row*, thought Harry, suddenly feeling oddly pleased with himself. He found himself grinning stupidly at his reflection in his wine glass. His lopsided grin seemed to infuriate Rose who shot him another glare. She presumably thought he was gloating.

Being shouted at by his mother was a novel experience for Harry. He had never really known anything like it. There was Uncle Vernon, who shouted repeatedly, and Snape who could always be relied upon to insult him, but never before had someone so close to him shouted at him. Dumbledore had given him the disappointed look, and that had hurt. Lupin had told him that he shouldn't repay his parents' sacrifice by putting his life needlessly on the line and that had stung more. Molly had always been a mother hen to him. She had taken him in, but often looked past some of his more volatile personality traits. But now he had a real mother, and she *had* shouted. Harry wasn't sure how he was supposed to be feeling. His stomach was a mash of emotion. He felt a flash of anger, resentment, but at the same time fear. It was a novel experience; he felt a touch of excitement. Another thing he had noted was her words, 'you too would be barred from the meeting'. He had almost retorted 'what right do you have to bar me?'. He had never had a proper guardian before. There was no one to fear taking bad report cards home to, no one to tell him what to do. The school had rules which had to be met, or bent slightly, the Dursleys had to be endured, but for the last five years, Harry had been a free spirit, doing anything he wanted within reason. He hadn't got a note signed to visit Hogsmeade but had gone anyway. Now he had parents, people who *did* have authority over him. Although it was one minor downside of having a family, the pros far outweighed the cons. It was something else he was going to have to get used to. *'Get used to'? Am I planning on staying, then?*

"Anyway, Rosie," continued the Auror. "You have your hearing to get ready for."

"Hearing?" asked Harry instantly. He had heard nothing about this. "What hearing?"

"Lucius Malfoy has filed assault charges against Rose for what happened on the train," said Lily, almost spitting the Death Eater's name. She put her glass down a little more forcefully than usual and splattered a few drops of the red liquid over the white tablecloth.

"But wouldn't that admit that he was actually there and in the fight?" asked Harry. "He'd be arrested, wouldn't he? Anyway, he escaped with the others, didn't he? He's a wanted criminal." Surely Crouch wasn't as blind as Fudge, not with his hatred of the Dark Arts. It would go on record that Malfoy was there and that Rose had attacked him in self-defence. Surely that implied he was a Death Eater, didn't it?

"We are not that lucky," said James angrily. "Lucius Malfoy was definitely present on the train. He was also definitely stunned on the train, sent to Azkaban without a trial and then escaped. However, Lucius Malfoy is a very shrewd operator and a cunning opponent. Less than a day after he had escaped, he turned himself in to the Aurors."

"He what?" said Harry bewildered. What could he possibly have to gain by that?

"He claimed that he had been bewitched on the train and that when Voldemort attacked Azkaban, he was forced to come with them. Since the Death Eaters killed every Auror on Azkaban, there were no witnesses to the contrary. Malfoy told the Aurors that he was going to be tortured and killed, but he escaped. He told them that he had overheard conversations. He gave a few pointless facts that we already knew, but it was enough. Gold switched hands and he was cleared, hailed as a hero who escaped the clutches of death and may even be in line for an O.M."

“If Lucius Malfoy gets the Order of Merlin, I’m emigrating,” said Rose flatly. “You can now see why Draco Malfoy has been even further up his own...even more arrogant,” she altered her phraseology under her mother’s glare, “than he usually is.”

Harry felt a flush of anger at Lucius. He was threatening his sister. He was trying to get her expelled, incarcerated or whatever. He could attack Harry all he wanted, but he should not come at him through Rose. Harry felt a sudden desire to hurt Malfoy.

*You have to want to cause pain, Potter, you have to enjoy it!*

Bellatrix’s words came into his mind, stinging him like a scorpion. He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. He was not as bad as they were!

“No one likes the situation,” said James. “But it is the way it is and we can’t change it. Now, back to the trial; yes, Malfoy is a free citizen again, however, the medical report performed after his arrest showed that he had been hit with a hard, blunt object.”

“Scabbard,” said Harry, realising what had happened. It had been him.

“Well, the subsequent Stunner shut down most of his body’s functions, including healing ones. As a result, the concussion spread and he had to undergo a complex and expensive procedure to relieve pressure on his brain. At St Mungo’s he was unfortunate enough to cross a *Daily Prophet* photographer who managed to find out why he was there. His pride was damaged with the story and he is not best pleased, to put it mildly.”

“And since Dumbledore altered his memory so that he doesn’t remember me attacking him,” Harry took over the story telling, “He blames Rose.”

“That’s about it,” said James.

“Can’t they check her wand for the Stunner?”

“Not after nearly two months of classes,” said James. “In waiting this long there will be no real strong physical evidence in either way. It seems irrational. He must know that we can supply eye-witnesses that will support Rose.”

“He could go after families to encourage people to stay silent,” said Harry.

“We are watching the Weasleys, Grangers and the other Prefects’ families.”

“He could get the Slytherins to testify against her,” said Harry, thinking aloud. It was chilling that he could think of things like that so calmly.

“They weren’t present at the time,” said James. “And testifying would reveal their allegiance to Voldemort, and he doesn’t want that. He needs people to spread his influence

amongst the upcoming generation, so marking out his followers in Hogwarts is counter-productive.”

“So what ace does he have up his sleeve?” asked Harry thoughtfully. Lucius Malfoy wouldn’t be this rash. He was planning something, surely. But what was it? He knew from experience that Ministry justice was questionable at best, having sat through two trials of his own, in both of which he had innocent of the allegations. Harry did not want to see Rose sent to Azkaban.

“That’s the big question,” said James. “But I know one thing for sure; Rose will be wearing armour under her robes tomorrow and I am not leaving her side. Something stinks here, and I’m not leaving her until I know she is safe.”

They finished their desserts in silence, none of them in the mood for talking. Harry’s mind was reeling over Lucius Malfoy. What did he possibly have to gain over Rose? Harry had just been telling Rose to stay out of the conflict. It looked like it was already too late for that. She would go to trial tomorrow. They had just about finished eating, when a frightening thought occurred to Harry.

“Frank Longbottom is going to be at the meeting tomorrow, isn’t he?” asked Harry soberly.

“Yes,” said James. “Why?”

“In this world I killed his son,” said Harry. “In mine, Neville is my friend. I read my case-file. I know what I did to him. I can’t look him in the eye.” Images of Neville filled his mind. He remembered when Neville dressed the Boggart Snape in the vulture hat and dress, and seeing him face down Bellatrix in the Ministry last year. He shivered at the idea of meeting his father.

“Just keep your distance,” said Lily. “Albus can control him.”

“He shouldn’t have to,” said Harry. “Forcing us apart makes me look more guilty.” An idea slowly formed in his mind.

Harry didn’t meet anyone on his way back to the Room of Requirement that night. He stopped off at Dumbledore’s office to borrow something and for a quick tutorial in its use. Harry thought it would make a fitting tribute to a friend whose sanity he had so unfairly taken.

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At ten to eight on Halloween morning, just as the earliest of the students were entering the Great Hall for breakfast and taking in the fantastic decorations so delectably arranged by the House Elves, Harry pushed open the door of Dumbledore’s office. He was tired, having been up most of the previous night putting together his little present for Frank. The other Harry had taken everything from him, and it was a debt that could never be repaid. To ignore him made him look

guilty. Harry wasn't really sure how he was going to react. In his eyes, what he was doing was no different to the photo album that Hagrid had given him at the end of his first year. It was just in a different medium, that's all. Still, he was not looking forward to meeting him. Harry placed it in a gap on a shelf, to save him from having to carry it.

Inside the room, thirty chairs had been laid out in a circle. The room must have been magically enlarged, for it was significantly bigger than the last time he had been here. There were pumpkins on two of the shelves and one on the desk. Bats flew around the ceiling descending perhaps two feet, but no lower. They were utterly silent and obviously just illusions, but still looked very real. There were cobwebs over the books and windows to add to the effect. Dumbledore really was a child at heart. The room was empty except for Fawkes the phoenix, who sat on his perch, eyes closed and presumably asleep. Harry took a sweet from the bowl on the desk and threw it up into the air, catching it easily in his mouth and beginning to chew. *Mmmm, orange flavour.* The fire crackled quietly in the fireplace, and a thin column of steam rose from the kettle, which hovered unaided above the flames. The rows and rows of instruments, some of which Harry recognised from having destroyed them last summer, looked freshly polished, and glistened in the morning sun. It had been raining last night, so from the window he could see the dew covered grass, twinkling in the sunlight.

Suddenly the door flew open and in walked a familiar face, topped by bubble-gum pink hair. Harry had expecting a 'wotcher', rather than a wand in his face, but that was what he got. Harry managed to stop his hand flying to his wand. He knew that the young Auror would not hesitate to hex him if she felt he posed a threat. He was not wearing his body armour at present, just the combats and black jumper. Any spell she fired would definitely do damage.

"Good morning, Tonks," said Harry calmly, raising the palms of his hands to show he was not armed. "Can you lower the wand, please?"

"Let's get something straight," said Tonks. "Albus may trust you, but I still have my doubts. Understood?" Harry was somewhat taken aback by the Auror's response. She was usually so warm and friendly. Harry had often wondered how someone so pleasant could be an Auror. Now he knew; there was steel behind the smile.

"Oh, I understand," said Harry. "But let's not forget, Tonks, that I saved your life at the attack on the train." She was about to retort when someone else entered the room.

"Ah, Nymphadora," said a calm voice as Albus Dumbledore emerged from his living quarters. "I see you've met Mr. Potter. Please, do have a seat." He gestured to a chair. Tonks glanced at Dumbledore and then back at Harry before reluctantly lowering her wand. She gave him one last appraising look before taking a seat. Harry remained by the window glancing out over the grounds. With Dumbledore here, he was sure he would not be hexed, but he wanted to avoid any conversation with the Order. A tense silence filled the room, a fact that did not escape Dumbledore. "Would anyone care for a Sherbet Lemon?" he asked, breaking the silence and helping himself to one. Harry smiled to himself; some things never changed.

Over the next ten minutes, Harry stood at the window as the other members of the Order arrived. He felt privately glad that Dumbledore was here; otherwise he felt that every single one of them would have had the exchange that Tonks had had and Harry would have been driven up the wall. Dumbledore's presence did not protect him from the stares and hostile glances that he received, nor from the fact that everyone seemed to have their wand either in their hand or poking out of their sleeve. The Order were no different than the students. Even those who knew the full truth looked a little wary. It was almost five to eight when Lily and James Potter entered the study, immediately taking seats with one space between them, presumably intended for Harry. Lily beckoned him over, but Harry waved them away with a small gesture of his hand. He wanted to keep his distance for the time being, or rather until a certain Auror was present. Harry turned and glanced back out of the window. A few of the fitter sixth years were going for an early morning run. The chilly October morning, although sunny, was cold enough for their breath to hang on the air as they set off up the hill. His reception by the students had been far from positive, and he had a feeling that the Order were going to be just as welcoming. To keep a low profile was the best plan he could come up with.

"Good to have you back, Harry," said a soft voice behind him. It sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Thanks," said Harry, turning to face the speaker. As he turned, his heart leapt into his throat. Harry felt a surge of anger and before he could stop himself, his wand leapt from his pocket. Harry's hand clamped over Peter Pettigrew's neck, slamming him back against the bookcase, dislodging a few tomes from the upper shelves. The Order members were on their feet in an instant, twenty wands aimed at Harry, who stood motionlessly, crushing the air out of Wormtail, his wand levelled at the man's bulging eyes.

"Harry, release him," barked Dumbledore rising to his feet. Was that fear he detected in Dumbledore's voice, or even concern? It was the first time Harry had ever heard him raise his voice in anger.

"He's a traitor," said Harry icily. He felt no trace of compassion for the man who had denied him a future. Living here, now, he realised exactly what Wormtail had taken from him. He could have had a life, a home, a family. Rose didn't exist in his world. She would have, had he not betrayed them. Wormtail had killed Rose.

"He's on our side," said Dumbledore, signalling for the others to lower their wands. Harry didn't take his eyes off Wormtail, but out of the corner of his eye he could see the others lowering their wands.

"He'll betray you," snapped Harry. "Just like he betrayed me. They'd still be alive today if he hadn't sold them out."

"Who?" Peter managed to cough over Harry's grip.

"Shut up!" hissed Harry dangerously, gripping his throat tighter. Wormtail was going red; he was suffocating.

“Harry,” said his mother softly. He felt a hand touch his shoulder lightly. He was so tense, every muscle contracted in anger, and her touch was so light. It seemed to calm him. Harry felt his anger receding. “Whatever he has done to you in your past, this is not the same man.” She didn’t understand! He had killed her. She had never had to live in his world. Wormtail was a slimy little rat and he would betray the Order in a second if he thought it would protect him.

“He took everything from me,” said Harry, glaring into Wormtail’s bulging eyes. “It’s his fault, all his fault.”

“Let him go, Harry,” said Lily softly. “He hasn’t done anything.” Just as he had not done all the things the other Harry had done. They were two different people.

With a last growl of frustration, Harry released his grip and Wormtail slid to the floor, gasping for air and clutching his throat, which was marked with a red handprint.

Harry glanced around at the others in the room before stepping away from Wormtail.

“Stay away from me, Wormtail,” snarled Harry. “And if you were harbouring any thoughts about defecting, let that be a lesson to you. If he doesn’t kill you, I will.” He pocketed his wand, and under the watch of all the other members, he slowly sank into the empty seat between his parents.

“What was all that about?” whispered a voice behind them. Harry’s heart skipped a beat as he came face to face with Sirius Black. He was grinning from ear to ear, and had the familiar glint in his eyes, but with none of the dullness twelve years in Azkaban had given the other Sirius. Harry was speechless. He sat gaping like a fish, unable to get a word out. Sirius gave him a lopsided grin. Harry really wanted to tell him everything, but he couldn’t. This was not the time. He managed to calm himself long enough to form a sentence.

“He betrayed us all,” said Harry sadly, glaring as Tonks helped Wormtail to his feet and into a chair. “My parents died and you spent twelve years in Azkaban, because he betrayed you. It was the Fidelius Charm. He was the Secret Keeper; we should have been safe. Trust him all you like, but I know him well enough to know that he’ll side with whoever can protect him best, and at the moment that looks like Voldemort.”

Neither of his parents seemed to find a response and so backed down. Harry was ever more aware of all the eyes on him. That had not been the best way to gain their trust, attacking one of their own. He was glad that Frank had not seen it for two reasons, one, Frank would not hesitate to hex him into oblivion and secondly, he wanted Frank to accept his little present. He glanced over at it on the shelf just to make sure it was still there.

Harry’s eyes were fixed on the door waiting for a certain Auror to arrive. He only had to wait a minute or so before the door opened and in stepped Frank Longbottom. He was tall and well built. His Auror robes billowed out behind him in the draft. His hair look windswept but his sharp eyes were already taking in every detail of the room, and one of its occupants. As the Auror’s eyes fell on Harry, his jaw clenched. A look of utter loathing appeared on the Auror’s

features. His eyes bored into Harry's and he had to fight the temptation to look away. He dared not smile or glare at him, so he restricted himself to a neutral expression. He realised that he was sweating beneath his clothes. He suddenly felt rather flustered.

Absolute silence filled the room as the two stared at each other. Everyone knew of their history, but only a handful knew that Harry was literally a different person now. Frank knew it, but it was not easy for him to let go of his hatred, Harry knew this, but he didn't like it.

"Frank," said Dumbledore softly. "Please join us." He pointed to a chair. With one final glare at Harry, Frank took a seat. Harry noticed this his hand was centimetres from his wand. He was ready to hex Harry from here to Timbuktu. Luckily he had not been present when Wormtail had made his appearance. The Auror's eye stayed on Harry, not blinking, not moving, just staring. Harry fought the urge to squirm in his seat. He was grateful to McGonagall who was sitting next to Frank, as she tried to engage him in conversation.

Over the next few minutes, the rest of the Order arrived. In total there were around thirty people in addition to the inner-circle as Harry called it. He recognised a few faces, but not many. Eyes constantly flicked to him, and hands and wands were kept in close proximity.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice," began the Headmaster, rising to his feet. He stood behind his desk, towering over those sat around him. He definitely could command respect when he needed to. "As you may know, last night I received a letter from the Minister of Magic. It was a request to attend an emergency meeting with John Major, the Muggle Prime Minister. These meetings are very rare and as such I hastened to Downing Street. What I am about to tell you is not to leave this room, lest we may start a panic. Nearly three weeks ago, while Hogwarts was under attack by vampires, there was an attack at the Devonport Naval Base in Plymouth. As I understand it, the clear-up is still underway with taking statements and modifying memories. However, what was not disclosed to us at the time was that during the attack, a..." Dumbledore picked up a piece of parchment to read... "nuclear warhead disappeared."

"Jesus Christ," said Harry softly. He knew what a nuclear bomb was, having briefly covered World War Two in primary school, and from general knowledge. He knew that two had been used on Japan and that they had destroyed entire cities. He remembered watching the news in 1991 before he had gone off to Hogwarts before his first year, about the war in Iraq, where American missiles had, by and large missed their targets, but still caused a lot of devastation. He remembered seeing cities on fire, char-grilled bodies, but that had been a conventional attack. It was nothing compare to a nuclear one. Images of mushroom clouds filled his mind.

"I take it from Mr. Potter's reaction he knows what one is," said Dumbledore. Harry glanced around the room. Many of the Order were looking baffled, and obviously had no idea what this meant. "For those of you who do not, I will elaborate, but first I have a few points to clear up. Normally this kind of theft would not warrant our involvement, us being the Magical community as a whole, but this is a special case. Up until now the Muggle policy has basically been that Voldemort is our problem and we have to deal with him. There has been much anger over the years that we have not brought him to justice. Now that he has attacked a Muggle

establishment and stolen a Muggle weapon, they are involved. Minister Crouch is taking a beating from Downing Street. We are under enormous political pressure to bring him in, especially now he has the power to destroy a city. We need to resolve this quickly. If such a device were detonated on British soil, we could find ourselves in a confrontation with the Muggle government. Memory charms are only effective if we have a small number of witnesses, but if this spreads through Downing Street to the Ministry of Defence, we could be looking at a major diplomatic and possibly military confrontation. The attack on Devonport was a sign to the Muggles. They believe that we, (the Prime Minister does not distinguish between us and Voldemort), are threatening Britain's defences."

"But it's only You-Know-Who and his crew," said Hestia Jones. "Why hold us all responsible?"

"We raised, taught and then failed to stop him," said Snape. "Besides, the desire for revenge will outweigh logic in the minds of those in power. We have power over them and it will scare them. It is in their nature to fear what they do not understand. And let us not forget that it is becoming more and more difficult to tell who is with us and who is with the Dark Lord."

"Indeed, Severus," said Dumbledore. "Downing Street are still angry that we failed to stop the bomb that destroyed Paddington Station in September. Over one hundred lives were lost and the whole Tube Network came to a standstill. It was an embarrassment to him and he needed someone to blame. But this is not the time to debate politics. Our first priority is to retrieve this weapon. Our reasons are twofold, firstly to prevent loss of life and secondly to avoid a confrontation with the Muggle authorities. Now, I have some details for you. The Nuclear Attack Submarine, HMS Vanguard of the new Vanguard Class had just come in to be...refitted – that is the word they use, I do not know what they mean, but I assume it means maintenance. While this was happening, Death Eaters attacked the dockyard, leaving seven Aurors, twenty-one Commandos, and twelve Death Eaters dead. During the battle, Voldemort stole a nuclear warhead and according to the Navy, he has everything he needs to detonate it. Muggle attempts to recover the warhead have failed and now they would like our help. Minister Crouch has put Aurors on it already, but we are going to aid in the search, off the record."

Harry's stomach seemed to have shrunk to half its size. His chest was tight, and a chill was shuttle-running up and down his spine. Nuclear bombs? Never in a million years would Harry have guessed it would come to the Wizarding World. And the Muggles, what were they thinking? Surely they would not blame the crimes of a few on the entire population. It was so...racist. Harry resented the idea that he was anything like Voldemort. If it were not for the Aurors, more Royal Marines would have died and Voldemort could have stolen more. They owed the Magical Community. Did they have any idea the lengths that the Aurors went to, to prevent attacks on Muggles? He felt suddenly betrayed by the British government. Uncle Vernon had said that it was no wonder the country was going to the dogs with 'his kind' in government, but Harry thought that Crouch could probably do a better job than that Major. There was an election next year, Harry dared not think of who might be elected; some utter moron, no doubt.

"Surely You-Know-Who would consider the use of a Muggle weapon below him," said someone to Harry's right.

Good point, thought Harry. Surely he was not stupid enough to actually use a bomb. It was just such an un-Voldemort thing to do. Destroying a city did as much harm to him as it did to everyone else. Harry was no expert but he knew a little about radiation, enough to know it caused cancer and killed. But Voldemort was not an expert in Muggle science, he would not know about radiation, would he?

“That was once true,” acknowledged Dumbledore, gravely. “But Tom may have changed his tactic. In the last of a Samurai wars in Japan, the Samurai refused to use firearms, matching swords against cannons, as they believed it dishonoured them to use guns. I do not believe Tom values honour in the same way. If he once did, or if he once believed Muggle weapons to be below him, after decades of war he could now be willing to use any means necessary to get the job done. There is no Magical device or spell that has the potential for destruction like what he has now acquired. We must also consider that he took this weapon for more reasons than just mass destruction. Look at the political impact it has already had.”

“Are you suggesting he is trying to start a war?” asked McGonagall. War? Their type of war was one thing, but a full-scale battle was a different kettle of fish. The occasional attack on Muggles, some arrests, an intelligence war, a guerrilla war was already in full swing, but an outright conflict between Muggles, whom, they were trying to protect was unthinkable. Harry had never been in a full-scale battle. He didn’t want to imagine the destruction, the loss of life. They were trying to protect Muggles; if they turned against the Aurors, they would be caught between Voldemort and the Muggles. Once they were gone, the Muggles would have no protection from Voldemort. It was a terrifying thought. Then there was the politics of it. If the Muggles attacked the Magical Community, or were seen to, Voldemort’s numbers would quadruple. If news of a Muggle built weapon being used against Wizards (as was now happening) got out, people would flock to Voldemort in droves, eager to avenge themselves on the Muggles who had apparently attacked them. This was a delicate situation.

“He has had it for three weeks,” growled Moody. “And the Muggles only tell us now?”

“The Prime Minister felt it was a Muggle problem and they should clear it up,” said Dumbledore, gravely. “He believed they were proficient enough to be able to recover the bomb. I believe that was a mistake and he now agrees with me, but we cannot change what has happened, so let us move on. I believe the most pressing questions are why has he not used it yet, what is he waiting for, what is he going to do with it and when.”

“Perhaps to spread dissent,” suggested McGonagall. “Just knowing a weapon so destructive is out there causes fear. Look at the chaos it has already caused. Muggles often use the phrase Nuclear Deterrent when referring to these devices. They are so destructive that they act as a warning to other nations not to use them. One could argue that they are not actually meant to be used. You-Know-Who may only have acquired one for this purpose.” That seemed more likely to Harry, but was it just wishful thinking?

“I do not fear the man who wants five hundred nuclear weapons,” said Flamel softly. “I’m terrified of the man who just wants one.” *Is he really going to start speaking in riddles all the time*, wondered Harry. Dumbledore doing it was annoying enough.

“What is that supposed to mean?” sneered Snape impatiently. Was Harry misreading this, or did Snape look genuinely worried?

“It means that five hundred is a deterrent,” explained Flamel calmly. “The USSR have thousands of bombs, but would never use them, as the retaliation would destroy them; they are simply there to show off, to intimidate. However, one bomb has a purpose, and is meant to be used.”

“I thought the USSR collapsed in 1990,” whispered Harry. “It’s just Russia now, isn’t it.”

“Perhaps in your world,” replied Lily. “Not here.” This world really was different. That was a massive change. The Cold War was still going and the international climate was probably why the Prime Minister was so paranoid. This really was a ‘gas-leak’ of a situation. One spark and the entire world could be plunged into war.

“The Muggle Prime Minister is under enormous political pressure from home and abroad,” continued Dumbledore. “Hence he has asked us to help.”

“Which he should have done as soon as it went missing,” said Moody. “Not three weeks later.”

“It’s in the past Alastor, and cannot be changed,” said Dumbledore. “Our first priority is to retrieve this weapon. For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with such technologies, I will endeavour to explain. First, though, here is the Prime Minister’s report. It details exactly what has happened.” He passed a pile of paper to Flamel who sat on his right. Flamel took one and passed the pile on.

Harry knew fairly well the horrors of a nuclear bomb, and so when the report came around, he immediately opened it and began to flick through. His mind was beginning to panic. Voldemort with a nuclear bomb! He could take out London with one attack and the radiation that followed would kill thousands. But that would contaminate the country, make it uninhabitable. He wanted to rule the country, not to destroy it. This didn’t make sense. As Harry skimmed through the paper, his heart descended further into his stomach.

During the attack, a Trident MK5 Missile had been disassembled and a fifty kilo-tonne warhead had been stolen. Harry had no idea what a kilo-tonne was, but he understood what a warhead was and it was not something Voldemort should have. The tracking devices on the bomb were removed and left at the scene of the crime. On the back page was a list of people who knew about this. There were several military officers, and several scientists who were part of the Nuclear Program, and were experts in this field. Voldemort must have found another expert to help steal the bomb. Something like this was huge; how long had he been planning it?

“...the subsequent explosion could have a diameter of up to 12 miles depending on the device’s yield and the topography of the land,” Dumbledore was saying to the rest of the group.

“He’s arming himself,” concluded Moody. “One attack could take out an entire city. Combine that with the escapes from Azkaban and the lack of smaller raids, then he is calling all his forces to him. He is amassing an army. I think we could be looking at the beginning of his final assault. He’s just waiting for enough people to join him before he marches on Hogwarts and the Ministry.”

Moody’s statement hung in the air. A chill went down Harry’s spine. The words Nuclear and Bomb were echoing through his head. Voldemort had the power to destroy a city; it was a terrifying thought. In his world, he had known Voldemort was evil, he had known he wanted to take over, but he had always expected small attacks, on towns, a spot of Muggle killing here and there. He had never really thought about any final battle. A war-zone had never even entered his mind. The gravity of the situation caused a sickening feeling to brew in his stomach. Voldemort had the deadliest weapon on Earth; he outnumbered the Order fifty-to-one. The Aurors were good, but a large majority were probably Death Eaters. Spies were everywhere. This really was the beginning of the end. Part of him wanted to find a way home, to escape from this horrible nightmare. But this was no nightmare, this was no dream; Rose-Marie and his parents were real. He could not leave them to this fate.

“But if it is as complicated as Albus is saying,” interrupted Hestia Jones, breaking the silence. “Then You-Know-Who himself could not arm it. He hates all things Muggle. His followers are mainly pureblood. Most wizards can’t spell electricity, let alone disassemble a complex circuit. He would have needed an expert.”

“And don’t they need arming codes and that kind of thing?” asked a young man to Harry’s right. He looked a few years older than Harry and he must have been a Muggle-Born, for he wore jeans and a Chelsea shirt. “It can’t be this simple to hijack a bomb.”

“If you read the report,” replied Dumbledore gravely. “The missile was opened, the security and anti-tamper devices bypassed, the tracking device taken out, and the war-head removed. Whoever did this has a keen knowledge of the internal workings of such a device.”

“So we can start right there,” said Dawlish. “Black, after this meeting head straight back to the Division. You and Rachel go through every specialist there is. Every Nuclear Engineer the Navy has, past and present, every University lecturer in Nuclear Physics, especially with military experience, and anyone else who would have the knowledge. Check for magical ties to the family, disappearances, anything out of the ordinary.” Sirius nodded and started flicking through the report.

“Potter, I know I promised you the day off, but I need you back on call,” continued Dawlish. Harry was about to ask when Dawlish had promised him the day off, then he realised who Dawlish meant. He was glad he had kept his mouth shut; otherwise he would have looked very stupid. Harry saw his father nod out of the corner of his eye. “You, Tonks and Shacklebolt can pull any Death Eater we are following and grill them for information. If this thing can destroy a city, the gloves are off. Moody and I will try to put together a plan for if this thing does go off.”

“Run like mad,” muttered a familiar voice to Harry’s left. Mundungus Fletcher was his usual helpful self. Harry gave a small snort, luckily no one heard.

“Thank you Mundungus,” said Dumbledore with an impatient sigh. “If you cannot be helpful, please do not hinder. Now, do we have any idea where he might attack or when?” asked Dumbledore.

“We can’t know when,” said someone else. “It could be ready to go off now. It could be anywhere. It could be in the castle right now.”

“I’ll have guards posted all over Hogwarts, Diagon Alley, the Ministry and other hotspots around the country,” said Dawlish, making a note on a scrap of parchment.

“He’ll want it to be public, a big show of his power,” said Wormtail. “But we don’t know when. I reckon he’ll do it somewhere with a lot of people, like Diagon Alley, but I can’t guess when.”

“Today,” said Harry, turning the page of his report. “But it won’t be Diagon Alley.”

Silence filled the room, the arguments died down in an instant, as he spoke. All eyes turned to him. It was the first time he had spoken in the meeting, and everyone seemed to be watching him.

“And how would you know that?” sneered Frank. Harry saw Dumbledore begin to get up, but replied before the old man could interrupt.

“Because he loves Halloween,” said Harry evenly. “Today is Halloween and there is always an attack on Halloween. As for the location, I don’t know where, but I don’t think it will be Diagon Alley. If Wormtail is right and he wants to make it a public show of power, and for the record I don’t think he does, he will want witnesses. Diagon Alley is so small that no one would survive to tell the tale. Also, I don’t think he will use it anywhere like Diagon, Hogsmeade or Hogwarts, places he would want to rebuild and use once he takes over. Voldemort’s motto is ‘there is no good and evil, only power and those too weak to seek it’. That means he wants to rule, to have power over people, not to destroy them all. If he explodes a nuclear bomb in Diagon Alley, not only does he destroy half of London, but he also irradiates the area. Diagon Alley would be inaccessible for a thousand years. Anyone who enters would receive a fatal dose of radiation poisoning and be dead in a week. Then in the long term, the radiation would possibly cause anyone living near London to get cancer and to have deformed babies. Once we are all dead and he is in charge, he would not be able to rebuild it. The radiation would be spread by the wind, contaminating London and making it uninhabitable for years. If he has an expert like you say, he will know this, so he won’t make Diagon Alley inaccessible for the next millennium. That’s not his aim.” He managed to keep his voice level and even look Frank in the eye.

“This is pure conjecture,” sneered Frank.

“This is the harsh reality,” said Harry, turning back to the report he was reading. “Destroying a city does not help him.”

“I think Harry has a point,” said Dumbledore. “If we look to the past, Voldemort has indeed made a significant attack on Halloween every year. Even if the bomb is not detonated today, we can expect an attack. Dawlish, can you increase security in public places, make our presence felt?”

“Sure,” said Dawlish. “But we can’t just sit back and wait for this thing to blow up.”

“If we pull everyone we know,” interrupted Moody. “We lose all the intelligence we have. He will know exactly who is being followed. We would lose every source we have. For a week his numbers will go down, but in the long-run, he would benefit from this.”

“That may well be his plan,” said Snape. “The bomb could be a bluff, but we can ill afford to take that risk.”

“I agree with Severus,” said Tonks. “Whatever his political aims, whatever this costs us, we can’t let this bomb go off.”

“Is there any way of tracking these things?” asked someone.

“No spell will work and the trackers were removed when the device was stolen,” said Dumbledore.

“What about the place where they took Potter?” asked Moody. Harry shivered at the memory of lying on that cold wet floor, pain filling his mind, his body feeling as if it were on fire. He had no desire to go back. He hoped Dumbledore didn’t ask him too.

“It was protected by the Fidelius Charm,” said Flamel. “We cannot enter.”

“Potter was told where he was,” said Moody. “He could go in.” Harry gulped. He was desperate not to go back. His whole body tensed.

“If Voldemort has an expert present,” said the Chelsea fan. “He will know about radiation and will not keep a bomb where he is living.”

As they argued, Harry came to realise that they knew next to nothing about this bomb. They were not experts, and the full extent of the destruction was a mystery. He understood one in three words of the report, and one in five acronyms. This was utter conjecture. They needed someone who knew what they were talking about. He flipped to the back page of the report, where the government experts were listed. Harry skimmed through the list looking for a title that was not military. Any officer would not talk to him, would rant on about the Official Secrets Act and so forth. He needed a civilian. He selected the first civilian name he came to. Doctor Chris Gaynes was, up until two months ago, part of the team of scientists who were disassembling bombs in accordance with some new peace treaty with the Soviet Union, and now worked at

Cambridge University. This Dr Chris Gaynes was an expert at dismantling warheads; she could definitely help them.

Harry rose to his feet, and stepped towards the door.

“And where do you think you are going?” snapped a voice instantly. Harry turned back to see Frank glaring at him. All thoughts of his present were gone. Harry had more important things to do. Again he noticed that everyone was watching him like a hawk.

“You can argue for as long as you like,” said Harry impatiently. “But none of you know anything about these bombs. I’m going to the Cambridge University to speak to someone who does, to one of the experts in the report, Doctor Chris Gaynes. He might be able to defuse the bomb if we find it. He may know how to track them, and if not, he will be able to help us with a contingency plan for if it all goes pear-shaped. Dawlish has the right attitude, pull every source, kick over every stone, raid every house, and come up with a plan for if this goes south. Add security everywhere. Aside from this fireplace here, shut down Hogwarts. Nothing comes in or goes out until we find this bomb.”

“You are not an Auror,” said Frank. He fixed Harry with a glare. He was being irrational, putting his anger with Harry above the best interests of the Order and the country.

“True,” conceded Harry. He stared back at Frank unblinkingly. “But the bomb is ticking and we don’t know when it is set for. I am going to find someone to defuse it. Any objections?”

“Harry,” said Dumbledore suddenly. For a second Harry thought he was going to be told to stay here and let someone else go, or that it was a stupid idea, but Dumbledore merely withdrew something from the drawer of his desk. “Take this.” He handed Harry a small card. Harry took it, turned it over in his hand and immediately recognised what it was. It was a Chocolate Frog Card, more specifically an Albus Dumbledore card.

“What am I going to do with this?” he asked. He immediately felt very silly, as judging from the look around him, it was glaringly obvious. The entire room seemed to be smirking at him. Even Dumbledore smiled to himself.

“This, Harry, is how we communicate,” said Dumbledore. “Simply say my name or any other Order member’s name into the card and we can speak. Only you will be able to hear what is said.” Harry’s eyes widened in understanding. This was what Snape had meant about a better means of communication than a fireplace. It seemed so obvious now. Last year, Dumbledore had even said that Fudge could take all his titles but not take him off the Chocolate Frog Cards. These things enabled Dumbledore to see people across the country, or to disguise the Order’s means of communication. It was so simple yet so clever. No one questioned their presence. They could get through any security check. It was...genius.

“Potter,” said Dawlish. “Bring Doctor Gaynes to the Auror Division. From there we can work on a plan of attack.”

“A Muggle in the Ministry,” said Harry melodramatically, walking towards the door. “Whatever next.”

“We can arrange for it,” said Dawlish. “Security will be told to let you pass and give you all the assistance you need.”

Harry nodded. He pocketed the card and then slipped out of the room. He quickly broke into a run, heading straight back to the Room of Requirement. He removed his cloak and threw it over into the hammock; He quickly changed into a pair of black trousers, and then pulled a navy blue woollen jumper on over the top of his armour to cover it. He tucked his wand up his right sleeve, and then pocketed the Frog-Card. Satisfied that he looked more or less like a Muggle; he left the Room and headed down towards the Entrance Hall. He would go to Hogsmeade, where he could Floo to Cambridge.

He hadn't even got half way back to the entrance when he ran into trouble. It was five to nine and queues were forming outside rooms, where students waited for teachers to arrive. Harry swore to himself before setting off at a jog through the crowd of students.

“Excuse me,” he shouted about the din. “Coming through, watch out, please.” He had to gently push a few people out the way to begin with, but as he ran, he was ever more aware of a path being cleared for him as students recoiled in fear. He didn't have time to worry about appearances now, and kept on running.

He reached the staircase at the end of the passage and to save time, jumped over the banister, landing on the stairs one floor below them, narrowly missing a third year Ravenclaw girl who screamed in surprise. Harry quickly muttered an apology and set off at a run towards the office. He had only gone fifty feet when he heard a familiar voice.

“BUGGER OFF, MALFOY!”

Harry skidded to a halt as he recognised Ron's voice. He still had not talked to his best friend since he had been here. Rose and Ginny had mentioned that Ron remained suspicious and this hurt Harry a lot. Part of Harry wanted to see Ron and the other wanted to hurry to Cambridge. Harry approached the scene of the argument. Ginny, Rose and Ron stood opposite Malfoy and his two loyal goons. Seamus and Dean were a step back, presumably ready to prevent Ron diving on Malfoy.

“Calm down, Weasel,” came Malfoy's bored voice. “Think of your blood pressure.”

Malfoy's calm seemed to infuriate Ron even further. His face was almost as red as his hair.

“Leave him, Ron, he isn't worth it,” Lavender tried to intervene. “He's just jealous.”

“Excuse me, Mudblood,” said Malfoy politely. “This is a private conversation. And what, pray tell, am I jealous of? Do you really think I have any desire to have more brothers than

Knuts, a girlfriend who bears a striking resemblance to Blast-Ended Skrewt and a mother who's so fat that..." he never finished the sentence, as Ron broke from Seamus and Dean's grip and dived at Malfoy. Ron lifted Malfoy up in a rugby tackle and thrust him against a wall. All magic was forgotten as Crabbe and Goyle each grabbed one of his arms and tore him off Malfoy, throwing him roughly to the ground. Malfoy was back up on his feet, seething with rage.

Seamus moved to help Ron, but Goyle blocked him with a meaty fist. Rose and Ginny, who had stood by until now, decided to intervene. Ginny shot a Bat-Bogey Hex straight at Goyle. The spell found its mark and Goyle was knocked to the floor, suffering the effects of the spell. Rose unleashed a curse Harry didn't recognise at Malfoy who side-stepped easily. Malfoy grabbed her outstretched arm and pulled hard, spinning as he did so. Rose was thrown into the wall, while Malfoy spun out of the way of the curse, withdrawing his wand as he did. Quickly, he sent a Boils Curse at Rose, who dived out of the way.

Harry had seen enough. That was his sister in danger. He had thought that Ron was overprotective over the years, but now he understood why. Harry ran forward just as Rose and Malfoy levelled their wands at each other. Simultaneously they shouted a spell. Harry didn't hear what either of them were, but he reached them just in time to interfere. He grabbed Rose's wrist, forcing it upwards. Whatever spell she had used shot into the ceiling, cracking the stone and causing a shower of dust to rain down on the fallen Goyle. In the same movement, Harry pivoted on his left foot, driving his right into Crabbe's chest, knocking the boy off his feet. With his own wand in his left hand, Harry conjured a shield, which enveloped himself and Rose. Malfoy's curse bounced off the shield with a clang and hit the wall to Harry's left. With a flick of his wand, the floor beneath Malfoy exploded in a flash of white light, sending the Slytherin four feet into the air. The boy hit the ground hard, but before Malfoy could move, Harry was standing over him, his wand aimed at the blond's throat.

There was a gasp as those around them recognised Harry. It seemed that the entire corridor had frozen. Harry kept his wand pointed at Malfoy's neck. Keeping his face expressionless, Harry stared straight into Malfoy's eyes for a few seconds before looking away. He turned to his sister, whose wand arm he still held. She looked thoroughly angry, and Harry wasn't sure if it was at Malfoy or at him for interfering. Harry released his grip on his sister's wrist.

"Are you alright?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she sighed, controlling her anger.

"Good," said Harry. "Now go to class." She hesitated but then disappeared with Ginny in tow. Harry waited until they were gone before turning back to Malfoy, who still had his wand out. He seemed to be fighting the urge to turn and run.

"Malfoy," said Harry in an exasperated tone. "Get out of my sight."

He didn't have time for anymore and he didn't want to give Dumbledore any more reason to mistrust him. There was something in the Headmaster's voice when he had ordered him to

release Pettigrew that worried Harry. He had sounded as though he didn't trust him, as though he was turning back into the other Harry. Finished with Malfoy, Harry turned and made to leave. He found that they were surrounded by fearful-looking students. They seemed to be encircled, with Crabbe and Goyle lying in the clearing and Malfoy and Ron standing. Had the others gathered in hope of seeing a duel? Idiots. They didn't know what a real duel was. Harry glancing around and then walked to the edge of the circle.

“Move,” he said simply. The crowd instantly parted, allowing him to leave. He walked swiftly from the room and disappeared through the main door. He set off at a jog in the direction of the Three Broomsticks.

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Harry emerged from the fireplace into a small room with chairs laid out in rows. At the front of the room was the fireplace with lit candelabras on the mantelpiece. In front of him were two tables topped with gold cloths, and again, candelabras on top of each. There were then many rows of chairs, with an aisle down the middle with a red carpet. White rose petals were sprinkled over the carpet and on the chairs were small white pieces of paper. Harry picked one up and read the first few lines.

He smirked to himself as he realised that he had arrived in the middle of an atheist wedding. It would have been far worse had he emerged in the middle of a ceremony and covered the bride's dress in soot. He put the note back on the chair and walked quickly to the back of the room. He did not want to get caught. Just as he reached the door, it was thrown open and a man walked in wearing a suit and carrying a folder. Harry froze; he had been caught and he had no real reason for being here. Harry judged from the man's clothes that he was not a guest. He guessed he was the registrar.

“Who are you?” asked the man instantly, fixing Harry with a piercing stare. Harry considered just running, but chose to simply lie instead, to practice what Flamel had taught him.

“I'm the best man,” said Harry quickly, smiling broadly. The effect on the man's face was instant; his suspicious gaze turned into a wide-eyed look of surprise.

“Oh, I do apologise, sir,” said the registrar quickly. “Is everything to your liking?” Harry glanced around the room, falling into the part of the best man.

“Pretty much,” said Harry, surveying the room. “Just straighten the front few rows and I think we are about there, thanks.”

“As you wish, sir,” said the man, though Harry could see he was a little hurt by the answer. Harry watched him disappear into the room before running down the stairs. He had to make a quick exit before the real best man showed up. Harry found himself in a magnificent entrance hall. The walls were covered in wood and the floor was polished stone. The red carpet was laid out and the ornaments freshly polished. He slipped out of the chapel, thankful that the bride had not arrived yet.

Thankfully, Cambridge University was well sign-posted. He followed the signs to the science department and from there on to Physics and then up the stairs to Nuclear and Particle Physics. He found himself at the end of a long corridor. The floor was covered in black and white stone tiles and the walls painted white. There were posters explaining complex theories along the wall and the occasional cabinet filled with antique measuring equipment. There was a clean clinical smell to the building. The doors all held a number and the name of the occupant. Harry was sure that he was in the right place. He walked swiftly along the corridor, looking for the name on the report Dumbledore had given him.

He had passed seven doors before he found one that read,

NPP.1.08

Dr C. GAYNES

Harry knocked, and shortly afterwards there was a call from within.

“Come in,” said a sharp voice on the other side of the door. Harry took a deep breath. He had been preparing his story since he left Malfoy. He pushed the door open and stepped into the office. The room was small, and at the far end was a desk with a computer and behind that sat a tall woman dressed smartly in a dark blue suit, with short blond hair down to her neck and small glasses. She looked up as he came in and gave him an appraising look. Harry groaned inwardly. He didn’t have time to chat to secretaries. Where was the doctor?

“Can I help you?” she asked politely, though Harry had the feeling he had interrupted something. He managed a small courteous smile before replying.

“I’m looking for Doctor Chris Gaynes,” said Harry politely.

“You’ve found her,” said the woman. Harry had been expecting her to say that he had gone to lunch. He didn’t say anything and managed to hide his surprise - sexist comments would not be helpful. “A little young for an undergraduate, aren’t you?” she asked.

“I’m not a student,” said Harry quickly. He had expected she would think he was a student. He knew he was nowhere near intelligent enough to get into Cambridge, even if he had had a normal education. Stonewall Comprehensive would not have given him any chance. “I represent a department of the government.” The best lies have elements of truth in them. Even so, that sounded even less likely than him trying to pass himself off as a student. She raised an eyebrow and stared at him for a second before sighing and leaning forward. She gave him a tired look, through which Harry could see irritation.

“Son,” she said gravely. “I am very busy and I do not have time for these games.” Harry should have realised how unconvincing he sounded. He decided that a more aggressive approach was necessary. The truth was a dangerous thing, but Dawlish wanted her brought to the Ministry, so the Statute of Secrecy no longer applied to him. He took a deep breath.

“Three weeks ago you were asked to advise on the theft of a warhead during the attack on Devonport Naval Base,” said Harry quickly. His voice was level but firm. That got her attention. Her eyes narrowed and her head shot up to face him, failing to hide her surprise. Her jaw dropped but she quickly closed it. Harry held up the report that was still in his hands. Her eyes flew to the report and then back to Harry. Harry was sure she believed him, or at least would hear him out. She leaned back in her chair and interlocked her fingers in her lap.

“My...department has been called in to help track down the...em...” he trailed off.

“Bomb,” finished the doctor. Harry nodded.

“Look,” she said, leaning forward again. “I told the Prime Minister everything I know, which is more than I should have done.” Harry could hear bitterness in her voice. He had not been expecting her to sound angry. Surely she should want to stop the bomb.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because I have spent the last five years of my life trying to stop the production of those damn things,” said Dr Gaynes. “My original field of expertise was Nuclear Fusion and producing energy for the Third World. Later I became involved with environmentalists and I joined a team responsible for disassembling some of our arsenal in accordance with the latest Arms Reduction Treaty. I have been shrugged off for years and now they have lost one, which I kept warning them was a distinct probability, now they suddenly expect me to drop everything and help.”

“So you’d be the ideal person to talk to about disarming one, then?” asked Harry. She nodded. “Look, Doctor, I’m sorry about your past, but I need you to put all that behind you. We need your help to stop this bomb.” Harry closed the door behind him.

“Stop it?” she asked. “I thought you said find it.” She was clever, Harry had to admit. He had slipped and she had picked up on it. He gave her a small smile.

“I don’t know how much you were told by the Ministry of Defence,” he began taking a seat in front of her desk. “But here is the situation as it stands. Three weeks ago a fifty kilo-tonne nuclear warhead was stolen from Devonport Naval Base. We have reason to believe it is under the control of a maniac who has the technology and expertise to use it, and we are positive that it will be used today.” He paused, letting his words sink in. Harry watched the colour drain from her face. Now he said it out loud he realised exactly how hopeless it seemed that they would catch this device. Another image of a mushroom cloud filled his mind. *What if the target was Hogwarts?* he wondered. He dared not imagine all his friends dying. Doctor Gaynes sat gaping at him for a minute before finding the words to reply.

“This isn’t a joke, is it?” she asked shakily. Harry couldn’t blame her. He did not want believe it, but it was true.

“I wish it was,” said Harry. “I truly do. The trouble is we don’t know exactly what this would cause. We need help. My department is not very...technologically minded and we need

someone to explain, in simple terms, what a detonation would cause. We need an expert who can help us disarm it if we find it fast enough, track it if at all possible, or help us draw up a plan, if this thing does go off.”

“*If* we find it fast enough?” she echoed. Harry bowed his head. He did not want to admit out loud that there was a chance this thing could actually go off. She seemed very pale and shaky. He had to be very reserved with the bad news.

“There is a lot of country to cover and the terrorist who has it is very good at hiding,” said Harry. “What I need is for you to accompany me back to an underground facility in London. From there we will fill you in on precisely what is happening. From there we need help to track it and stop it.” He deliberately left out ‘clear up after it’.

“London is ninety minutes away in good traffic,” said the scientist, looking worried. “Do we know what time it is set for?” ‘We’? Was she going to help them? Harry smiled as she rose from her seat and pulled a long black coat off of a peg on the wall.

“Doctor Gaynes,” said Harry slowly, trying to decide how to tell a scientist that breaking all her laws of physics was child’s play.

“Call me Christine,” she said, quickly pocketing a mobile phone and shutting down the computer.

“As you wish,” said Harry. “Christine, we have ways of transportation you could never imagine.” She shot him a sceptical glance. It was time to take the plunge. “Tell me, doctor, do you believe in magic?”

“No,” she said simply. She seemed not only sceptical, but also impatient. Harry hoped she didn’t decide he was a crackpot who had found the report. “I don’t believe in God, fairies, elves, Santa Claus, ghosts, aliens or witches.”

“How very narrow-minded of you,” said Harry matter-of-factly. Then again, he had not before Hagrid had knocked on the door, or rather knocked the door off its hinges. It was time for a demonstration. He reached out with a hand, pointing towards the mouse that was connected to her computer. Fortunately it was a wireless one, otherwise his transfiguration would look a tad silly wired to a computer. He concentrated hard on it and before the startled eyes of the PhD-holding Cambridge graduate, the mouse flew into the air and stopped three inches above Harry’s outstretched hand. Harry stopped the spell and the mouse fell gently into his hand. He glanced up at her with a small smile. Her eyes were wide and her jaw low. Harry suppressed a laugh. He closed his other hand over the top of the mouse. Concentrating hard, he muttered a few well-chosen Latin words under his breath. When he removed his upper hand, the mouse had changed into a real mouse. It was about half the size of the plastic namesake with white fur, red eyes and a cute pink nose. Harry was quite proud of himself, as he had made a rather adorable mouse, rather than a tatty sewer rat.

Christine gasped in surprise. Her hand covered her mouth as she stared wide-eyed at the small creature. Harry held the tiny rodent out towards her. It sat calmly on the palm of his hand, cleaning its whiskers with its front paws. He stroked its back with the back of his finger. He could feel it trembling on his hands.

“It’s perfectly real,” he assured her, before adding, “It doesn’t have any diseases. You can touch it if you want.” It occurred to him after he had said this that many people were terrified of mice and rats. Not everyone had been around Scabbers for four years. Most rodents were very clean, it was only sewer rats that were dirty and carry disease. Christine, it turned out, was not afraid of rodents; she slowly and cautiously reached out with her hand and gently prodded the mouse. It stopped cleaning its whiskers and lowered itself onto all fours. As Christine held out her hand, the mouse cautiously climbed off Harry’s hand and onto hers, testing the air with its whiskers. It sat on her hand for nearly a minute, while her mouth opened and closed but words utterly failed her. Harry couldn’t blame her. Everything she had come to believe had just been turned on its head, much like when Harry arrived in this world. He just hoped she still agreed to come with him, and that she didn’t faint.

Harry smiled to himself, remembering the first time he had seen a spell. Hagrid had lit a fire with an umbrella in the shack on the island. Harry pulled his wand out of his waistband and gently tapped the mouse on the head. After a second, the mouse reverted back to its original form. Christine turned it over in her hands, unable to speak.

“Magic is as real as any of your laws of physics,” said Harry gently. She sat still on the desk, staring down at the mouse, unable to speak or move. “It is a wizard who has stolen this bomb, Christine, a very nasty one. We need your help.” He laid a hand on the back of hers, bringing her out of her shock.

“I...,” began Christine, staring at him and looking very pale. “Are there others like you?”

“There is a whole world of us,” said Harry gently. “We live amongst you in secret.”

“Why in secret?” she asked.

“It’s...complicated,” he replied. “Man fears what he doesn’t understand, and there are...” Harry trailed off. He didn’t have time for this. “Christine, I will be happy to tell you everything when we find this bomb, but for now we don’t have time. I must take you to the Ministry of Magic. It is from there that you can help us.”

“Ministry...as in you have a government?” she asked.

“A secret wing of your own,” he replied. “We still report to John Major, though he is being a bit of an idiot at present.”

*Harry Potter*

Harry stopped talking immediately. He could feel something vibrating in his pocket, and quickly fished it out. It was the Frog-Card that Dumbledore had given him. It was no longer blank. Dumbledore's face filled the face of the card. Harry glanced at Christine, but then realised that since he was going to tell her everything, or Dawlish would wipe her memory, it couldn't hurt to let her see more. He couldn't really send her out of the room or stun her. Dumbledore had said that only he would be able to hear the card.

"Harry," said Dumbledore quickly. From the look on Christine's face, Harry was sure she could not hear a word that was said. "A man was just brought into one of London's hospitals diagnosed with radiation poisoning. He has been fatally exposed. His name was Michael Lane, a former Air-Force officer and part of Britain's Nuclear Program. He was on the list of mysterious disappearances that your father has put together. He has been tortured with the Cruciatus Curse until his mind broke, and is barely alive. It seems that after he outlived his purpose, he was tortured and then left to die but Muggles found him. The doctors say he was exposed to a lethal dose of highly radioactive material. From the dosage, they believe it was weapons-grade material." Harry couldn't tell if this was good news or bad. Mr. Lane must have come into contact with the bomb – he probably built it. But if his mind was fried, they couldn't get any information, could they?

"I take it we can't get any information from him," said Harry irritably.

"I have used Legilimency to probe what is left of his mind after excessive exposure to the Cruciatus Curse and nuclear material. I can't find a location, but I have seen part of what he did to the device. Is your scientist nearby?" Did this mean there was hope? Harry felt a tingling of hope in his stomach.

"She's right here," he replied quickly.

"She?" asked Dumbledore.

"She is a she, not a he," said Harry. "And it's a good thing *she* can't hear us." He smiled to himself, before glancing at Christine. She looked curious, but Harry was sure she had managed to put two and two together.

"Harry I need you to relay to her what I am saying," said Dumbledore. Harry nodded and then turned to the scientist.

"Christine," said Harry quickly. "I need you to listen carefully."

"Are you talking to that?" she asked. "I can see your lips move, but I can't hear anything."

"Yes," said Harry, grateful that she had made the connection, otherwise he might have had to explain. "A man has been taken to a hospital with radiation poisoning. We have been able to extract an image of the device. I need you to listen and tell me what you think. Okay, sir, go

ahead,” he said into the card. Dumbledore paused for a second, and then began to speak, once sentence at a time, so Harry could relay it to Christine.

“He removed the casing, only using a small part of the bomb. It is cylindrical and about ten centimetres in diameter and a total of fifty in length. There are metal rods down the outside of the cylinder. Halfway down the cylinder, it narrows and then expands into a black sphere with wires coming out that disappear into the cylinder on both ends. There is flat metal plate with a hole filled with golden sticks on the middle of it.”

Harry relayed the information to Christine word for word. She looked thoughtful for a minute before speaking.

“Is the black sphere warm to the touch?” she asked. Harry had no idea what this meant, but she obviously did. Harry was sure Legilimency didn’t work like that, but he relayed the question to Dumbledore anyway.

“I cannot tell from his memory,” said Dumbledore, confirming Harry’s suspicions. “It does not work like that. I do sense a lot of fear of the sphere in particular. I feel as though he did not want to touch it, yet he was forced to under the Imperius Curse.” Harry shuddered as he imagined being forced to do work that you knew would kill you under the Imperius Curse. He turned back to Christine, trying to keep his voice level.

“We don’t know,” said Harry to Chris. “His mind was badly damaged. We managed to extract some of his feelings and emotions. We know that he was scared of this sphere. We believe he was forced to work on it.”

“Mind damaged?” she asked. “What...”

“Christine,” said Harry. “I know this is awful; he was held by terrorists and forced to do work that as good as killed him. I know it is horrible, but I need you to concentrate.” She nodded, closing her eyes. She took a deep breath, and then opened them again. Harry felt sorry for her, knowing that her first experience of his world depicted it as a band of lawless barbarians and terrorists. This was not the real Wizarding World at all.

“It sounds to me like the Primary Trigger,” said Christine thoughtfully. “It is pure plutonium and unprotected.” The trigger of a gun was useless without bullets. Did that mean they were safe?

“So if it was just the trigger, does that mean he can’t use the bomb?” asked Harry hopefully.

“Sadly, no,” said Christine, shaking her head and sighing. “He could allow the Plutonium to be detonated by the primer. It wouldn’t go to maximum yield but it would irradiate the surrounding environment.”

“In English, please,” said Harry.

“Sorry,” she said rolling her eyes. “It wouldn’t detonate and destroy everything in sight. It would blow up like a conventional bomb, but the surrounding area would be heavily contaminated. It would be uninhabitable for years, the winds would spread radiation, causing cancer and death.”

“No city-wide destruction?” asked Harry. He wasn’t sure if things had gotten better. They had a bit, but cancer and radiation were still a major risk. The death toll would be in the hundreds, not thousands, but that was still far too many, and the long-term affects of cancer were horrid.

“No, but it will still unleash fatal radiation into the air and, depending on winds, it could still wipe out a city and then some,” said Christine. “It’s what we call a dirty bomb. The initial blast heats the Plutonium up to a volatile temperature and then it spreads dangerously fast, contaminating anything in its path. It will penetrate cars, buildings, the air around it, water and everything that drinks it.”

“Jesus,” muttered Harry exasperatedly.

“Oh, I think we need his help today,” said Christine.

“I thought you didn’t believe,” sad Harry.

“That was before a boy turned a mouse into a mouse in front of me,” she said. “Now I don’t know what to believe. I wouldn’t be surprised if you flew on broomsticks.” Harry was unable to keep a guilty smile from him face.

“You’re kidding!” said Christine, her eyes widdening.

“Um, back to the bomb,” said Harry.

“Yes,” said Christine. “This is still a weapon capable of mass destruction. The long-term effects are catastrophic and the environmental effects are worse. But, on the plus side, now you can track it.”

“How?”

“The outer casing of the bomb is lined with lead to keep the radiation in. If the primary is out of the casing, it is giving off radiation. That is what poisoned the man you found. It is not strong enough to irradiate a location, or cause cancer in the short term – this man must have received long-term exposure. However, it is enough to track. Geiger-Muller Tubes can detect radiation if the source is close.”

“Do you have any tubes?” asked Harry hopefully. If they could post guards with these tubes around the Ministry, Hogwarts, Diagon Alley, and other public locations, they may intercept the bomb.

“One here, more in the labs at the other end of campus,” said Christine.

“We don’t have time,” said Harry.

“If you don’t have them, photographic film will do. It turns the black film white.” That sounded more like it. It was easy to come by; the *Prophet* could ship it in. If everyone had some, it would be so much simpler.

“Professor,” said Harry into the card. “Doctor Gaynes says that it’s a dirty bomb. It won’t blow up a city but it will contaminate the area around it, including the water supply and the air around it. Do you know where it is going?” It was all well and good being able to trace it in ten feet, but where was it heading?

“I could not get the information,” said Dumbledore. Harry sighed. “But the use of this device would now seem to be to contaminate rather than to destroy.”

“Agreed,” said Harry. “No one will be able to enter the target for years. I don’t think we are looking at a city.”

“It would be more tactical than that,” said Dumbledore. “Tom is not rash.”

“I agree,” said Harry. “He wants to rule, not to destroy.”

“I believe this is only part of his plan,” said Dumbledore. “Think of it like a game of chess. First you prepare an army, which it would seem he has done. From there it is like a game of chess. Next you place key pieces in key places, then you blind your opponent or deceive him and then you strike.”

“This is too big to be a bluff,” said Harry. “We’ve even seen the scientist’s memory.”

“So if he is not going to deceive us, he is going to blind us,” said Dumbledore.

“The Ministry,” said Harry quickly. It all made sense. He was going to blind the only people who could stop him – the Aurors. With them blind he had free reign to amass an army, take out strategic targets and move on. Dark Magic could not be detected, panic buttons not answered, illegal Apparation not monitored. “He’s going for the Auror Division. I’m heading there now - perhaps Doctor Gaynes can defuse it. Call ahead, tell Dawlish to expect me, and to search the building. Give everyone photographic film. Get as much as you can from the *Prophet*. If it turns white it means the bomb is near. They should evacuate the building.”

“If we evacuate, we could scare him off,” said Dumbledore coolly. Harry’s heart had been racing, but he suddenly came down to earth with a bump. He felt a chill run down his spine at the words and tone of voice. Surely Albus Dumbledore could not be thinking what Harry thought he was thinking.

“If we don’t evacuate, hundreds of people could die,” said Harry. Loss of life was unacceptable in his eyes.

“He’ll have a backup target,” said Dumbledore. “If we scare him off, he will go somewhere where we are unprepared and the death toll will be higher. In the Ministry it will be contained underground, with no access to water or air that gets to the surface.” Harry could not believe what he was hearing. What if it went off before he got there and hundreds of people died when they could have evacuated? It wasn’t fair for them. It was cold, barbaric.

“We can’t just leave all those people to their deaths,” insisted Harry. He felt a surge of anger directed at the old man. “They are patriots. They are keeping this country together. Everything from transport to the Wizengamot is controlled through that building. It’s too much to lose!”

“Are you suggesting we sacrifice a second, perhaps more public location for this one?” said Dumbledore.

“You don’t know that!” shouted Harry, glad that Christine could not hear them. The Wizarding World already looked dangerous; this would have made it seem barbaric.

“Yes I do,” said Dumbledore gravely. “Harry, believe me, I take no joy in this decision, but we both know that Tom is highly intelligent and will always have a back-up plan. Here it can be contained, Diagon Alley it cannot and that is open air so it will spread to Muggle London, as well as everywhere a contaminated item is taken.” Harry didn’t want anyone to die, but he realised now more than ever that it was a growing possibility. Dumbledore was right, but it just seemed so cold, so heartless. Harry didn’t want more death on his conscience.

“I’m heading to the Ministry,” said Harry firmly. “Get the *Prophet* to send every bit of film they have to the Ministry. Let’s hope we can catch this bomb in time.” Dumbledore nodded and his face disappeared from the card. Harry took a second to compose himself. He had a deep desire to throw the card across the room in frustration. He could not believe he was leaving all these people in danger. Flamel’s words about the ugly business of war came back to him. Flamel had been right – this sure as hell was ugly. He sighed deeply before turning to face Chris.

“Okay, listen,” said Harry. “We have a good idea what the target is. We need to head there now. Do you have any photographic film handy?”

“No,” she said. “We use these new digital cameras now. I’ve got a Geiger counter, though. She picked up a black padded case from on one of the shelves. She slung it over her shoulder so it hung at her hip. It was about twenty centimetres long and ten high and wide.

“How are we getting to London?” asked Christine.

“This way,” said Harry, taking her hand and moving towards the door. He was surprised she was so eager to help, given the danger. *It just goes to show, it’s amazing what a person can do when the pressure is on*, thought Harry. They walked swiftly down the stairs and out of the

Physics Department before breaking into a run and heading back towards the chapel. It had been twenty-five minutes since Harry had pretended to be the best man. He hoped they didn't walk straight through the middle of the wedding. He was dressed in black combats with a navy-blue woolly top. She wore a suit, but they were still not fit for a wedding, not to mention the fact that they'd have to use the Floo system right in front of Muggles.

They reached the chapel in just over five minutes, having run the considerable distance from the Science department. As they reached the chapel, they charged in and up the stairs. Harry was panting and Christine was looking very red. He was impressed that she was fit enough to run all the way, especially in heels and a suit. The entrance hall on the ground floor was empty and so were the stairs. As they came up onto the first floor, Harry could see through the glass that the bride and groom were kissing, having finished the ceremony. He could see the fire behind the altar, where he had to get to. He cursed under his breath and checked his watch. 'Come on,' he muttered.

"Where are we going?" asked Christine, recovering her breath.

"Fireplace in there," said Harry pointing to the wedding. He needed to get them out of the room. How long would this ceremony take? Suddenly he spotted a red box on the wall next to Christine. An idea formed in his head. He stepped closer to her and was about to hit the box when she realised what he was going to do and grabbed his wrist. Harry glanced up at her with an irritated expression.

"You can't do that!" she hissed, apparently outraged. "It's their *wedding*. You can't interrupt the happiest day of their lives with a fire-alarm!" Harry knew it was a nasty thing to do, but they had to hurry. What if the bomb was already there? What if it came with the morning rush? It was nearly twenty past nine; the Ministry would just be getting busy.

"It could be a radiation warning if we don't hurry," said Harry angrily. "I know this is harsh, but we could be saving their lives or their children from cancer!" Christine did not release his wrist, and continued glaring. Harry considered taking his wrist back by force, but he didn't want to hurt her and he needed her help.

"Are there no other fires in Cambridge?" she hissed.

"Plenty, but none connected to the Floo network in the immediate area," said Harry.

"Floo? Oh, never mind, they're coming out now anyway," said Christine, releasing his wrist. Sure enough, as she finished speaking the door opened behind them and the Master of Ceremonies emerged, followed by the bride and groom. The groom's eyes fell on Harry as he passed. Harry could see the confusion in his eyes. He had no idea who the strangers at his wedding were. Harry hoped they didn't call security or anything. He was about to run into the room, pushing past people, when Christine did something that Harry thought was utterly stupid.

“Congratulations,” said Christine, shaking the groom’s hand, in front of a speechless Harry. She smiled warmly and the suspicion vanished from the face of the groom. Harry glanced at the groom and then Christine who stood with a smug expression on her face.

“Manners get you a long way,” said Christine vaguely, as the procession continued up the stairs to where Harry assumed the reception was to be held. For a moment Christine reminded Harry of Luna Lovegood. He shook the idea from his mind and as soon as the last guest had left, Harry entered the room. Only one man remained and he was packing away from the registry on the front table. Thinking on his feet, Harry called out to him.

“There’s a telephone call for you downstairs,” he said politely.

The man looked up. His eyes quickly narrowed. Harry realised with an inward groan that this was the same man who he had told he was the best man earlier.

“Aren’t you…” began the man, standing upright.

“Telephone call for you,” repeated Harry. The man continued to eye him suspiciously.

“Who are you?” he asked. “And what are you doing here?” Harry decided he didn’t have time for this. He pulled out his wand and with a flick of it shut the door behind him. He turned back to face the registrar.

“Stupefy!” he hissed. A jet of red light shot out of his wand and hit the man in the chest. He went stiff as a board and then keeled over. Christine gasped as he hit the floor. She glanced at Harry at the man and then at the door.

“Don’t worry about him,” Harry kindly reassured her. “He will wake up in half an hour and think he fainted. I did *not* want to do that, but we have to leave now.” She stared open-mouthed at him. What he had just done had not helped her opinion of the Wizarding World.

Harry checked that the man was okay before walking over to the fireplace. He took the small bag of Floo powder out of his pocket and beckoned Chris to join him. Shakily she did, obviously deciding that he was safe and that a nuclear bomb was enough incentive to trust him.

“This is going to feel very strange,” said Harry. “Hold on to me, and don’t let go. Oh, and please don’t scream either, it’s really irritating.” She gave him a nervous glance. Harry smiled reassuringly. He put his arms around her, and from behind her back he threw a pinch of the powder into the fireplace.

“Ministry of Magic!” he shouted before pushing himself and Christine into the flames.

True to her word, she did not scream. They emerged a second later in the Ministry of Magic’s entrance hall. Since they were locked together, they instantly fell over, Harry landing embarrassingly on top of her. He quickly rolled off her and stood up, trying not to blush. Still sitting down, her head was moving frantically as she glanced around at all the witches and

wizards and wizards appearing from fireplaces and from thin air. The Fountain of Magical Brethren was gleaming in the light and the queues were stretched back by nearly thirty metres from the security desk. There were two lines, employees and guests. Both were bustling with people, and the guards looked overworked. The pictures on the wall were glaring down at the hustle and bustle of the morning rush. This was the Ministry at its most busy.

“Come on,” said Harry, pulling Christine to her feet. Her mouth was hanging limp as she stared around.

He took her by the hand and began to push his way through the crowd. It seemed like a jungle of bodies in his way as more and more people emerged from the fireplaces.

“Excuse me,” said Harry pushing past the nearest people. “Excuse me!” *The England Rugby team would have trouble getting through*, thought Harry to himself. His manners disappeared with his impatience, and after five metres, he changed to “MOVE! COMING THROUGH!” as he charged through the crowd with Christine in tow. He pushed people violently out of the way spilling coffee, tea and all sorts of food over the floor and robes and he surged through the crowd. After a minute he had gotten maybe ten metres further at most. This was getting him nowhere! He pulled his wand out of his pocket and pointed it at the ceiling.

*BANG!*

Harry fired three loud cracks from the end of his wand. Instantly everyone in the room ducked to their knees at the sound of bangs. All eyes turned to see him and the strangely dressed Muggle next to him.

“MOVE!” he shouted, pushing past the kneeling figures in front of him.

“GUARD!” he called, addressing the man at the gate. “DAWLISH IS EXPECTING ME.”

“Yes, sir,” said the man timidly, recognising Harry. Harry pushed his way right to the front of the queue. “We are supposed to do whatever you say.”

“Christine,” said Harry. “Give him the Geiger counter and show him how to use it.” Chris took the machine out of her bag. It was a small black box about ten centimetres cubed with a curly wire coming out and a small tube the size of the card inner tube of a toilet roll on the end.

“Point this at the person,” said Christine, handing him the tube. “It should start clicking. A few clicks is alright, it’s background levels, but if it starts clicking a lot and really fast then it’s a positive reading.” That sounded simple enough.

“If that happens,” said Harry to the guard, “You stun that person instantly and call the Aurors. Can you manage that?”

“Yes,” said the man. Harry wasn’t sure he could, but he didn’t have time. He would send an extra Auror up to help him out. He knew Dumbledore would not evacuate the Ministry. All these lives he passed were at risk, but the idea that it could go off somewhere more public where it could not be stopped was too frightening. He was caught between a rock and a hard-place.

“Come on,” he said to Christine, taking her hand and guiding her to the lift. From the gauge at the top of the door, he saw that the car was two floors down, so Harry quickly moved to the stairs. Pushing past people they made a break for the staircase. As they neared the door, they were flung open by two Aurors. Both were dressed in the customary scarlet robes, and each held the hand of another man who was thrashing against the grip. He looked a little rodent-like with big teeth, dirty blond hair and a long thin nose. He was no more than twenty-four years old, but the Aurors were certainly being forceful with him.

“You can’t do this to me!” he cried as he thrashed in their arms. “I work here!”

“Not any more, Redgrave!” sneered the Auror on the right. “You are not an Unspeakable anymore. If we catch you trespassing again, you’ll end up in Azkaban.”

“You don’t understand!” protested the man as they moved past Harry. “The Muggles know! They know about us. They’re prepared for...” His voice trailed off as the Aurors disappeared into the crowd. Harry had half a mind to go and ask him what he meant, but there was no time. Together, he and Chris ran down three flights of steps and out into the Auror division. The main floor was huge with lines of desks stretching out across the room. He could see the huge form of Kingsley standing around a table with Sirius, Dawlish and a woman he did not recognise.

“DAWLISH!” he shouted as he ran into the room. Every eye turned to face him as he ran through the room. Many of those in the room had spent a year hunting him; many had lost friends because of him. Harry knew there was a good chance of getting hexed on his way through. As he approached the desk, he could see that they had been looking over a map of a city, probably London.

“It’s here,” he panted as he reached the desk. “They broke it down to something more deadly. It’s going to go off here!”

“Are you sure?” asked Kingsley, his eyes wide.

“Not certain,” said Harry. “He had it modified. It will not blow up a whole city anymore, but it will contaminate everything it touches. Voldemort is trying to blind us, or rather you so he can build his army, not destroy a city. Files can be salvaged, monitoring stations rebuilt, but not if everything in sight cannot be entered or touched.”

“But you’re not one hundred percent sure?” asked Dawlish. Harry felt so exasperated. Why couldn’t they believe him? They had to search the building. He knew he couldn’t give them the answer they wanted, but he needed them to trust him.

“No, but there are hundreds of people in the building,” said Harry. “We can’t afford to ignore this. We can even track it now.”

“How?” asked Kingsley instantly.

“Christine?” asked Harry.

“The casing was removed and it is leaking radiation,” she explained. “Not enough to kill unless you are exposed for a long time, but enough to track. We left the guard on the gate with a Geiger counter. He will find it if anyone tries to get in carrying it.”

“He needs backup,” said Harry taking over. “Send at least two Aurors to accompany him. This check will not help the queues.”

“Do we know when it will go off?” asked Dawlish.

“No,” said Harry. “But it’s rush-hour, and the casualties would be at their highest now. I was told that we should not evacuate either, in case we scare him off and he goes somewhere more public. If it goes off at Diagon Alley or somewhere like that it will be harder to contain. I don’t like it, but that what was decided.” Dawlish nodded. He sent two Aurors up to the Entrance Hall.

It was then that Harry spotted Sirius. It reminded him of something else.

“Where’s Dad?” he asked.

“With Rose,” said Sirius. “Her trial starts in ten minutes.” Her trial, of course! That was why Malfoy wanted her there. He was never going to turn up. She was definitely a target now. It all made sense.

“That was why Lucius wanted her here!” said Harry quickly. “He knew he could never win, but if he could get her here when the bomb goes off, she’d die. It is an attempt to throw me off balance. Sirius, find dad, get him and Rose out of here. It could go off at any moment.”

“Rachel, where’s James?” asked Sirius.

“With his daughter and Arthur down the hall,” replied the woman standing with them.

“Tell them to leave now,” said Sirius. The woman, Rachel, set off at a jog towards the door. Harry could see her right leg was not quite running in the same way as her left. There was a trace of a limp there. Harry watched her go and as he did, he noticed that no one was working. Everyone was listening to the conversation. He, Dawlish, Kingsley and Sirius were the centre of attention. He might as well take control of the situation.

“LISTEN UP,” shouted Harry taking the initiative. “THERE COULD BE A BOMB IN THE BUILDING. THE GUARD IN THE LOBBY HAS A MACHINE THAT CAN DETECT

IT. THE REST OF YOU NEED TO SPREAD OUT THROUGH THE BUILDING. TAKE PHOTOGRAPHIC FILM WITH YOU. IF IT STARTS TO TURN WHITE YOU ARE CLOSE TO THE BOMB. Christine, is there any way we can contain the radiation?"

"Lead and concrete will stop all gamma rays."

"ALSO, WE NEED A TEAM TO GO THROUGH EVERY LEVEL OF THE BUILDING. TRANSMUTE EVERY INCH OF FLOOR AND CEILING INTO LEAD, IT WILL HELP CONTAIN THE RADIATION IF THINGS GO SOUR. THEN WE CAN CONFINED IT TO ONE FLOOR."

"How thick will it be?" asked Chris.

"As thick as the tiles, about a centimetre on both sides of the floor," said Kingsley. "Between that, the floors themselves are two feet of stone."

"Good enough," said Chris. "That should withstand the explosion of the bomb itself." Harry felt a little bit relieved. If they could isolate the radiation to one floor, then many lives could be saved and the Ministry would not totally fall.

"Dawlish," said Harry. "We need to find as much concrete as possible and transmute as much lead. If we can isolate it to a floor..."

"YOU'RE TOO LATE, POTTER!" screeched a horribly familiar voice.

Harry spun around to see Dolores Umbridge standing at the entrance to the room. Her cardigan was hanging open and he could see the silver cylinder strapped to her chest. A manic smile was etched into her toad-like face. Her eyes were glazed over and vacant.

*She must be under the Imperius Curse!* Harry realised.

She was no longer useful so she had been assigned as a suicide bomber. This was where the path of all Death Eaters ended – either killed by the Aurors or killed by Voldemort when no longer useful. Why did people join him? Did they think they wouldn't get hurt or killed? Did they think they meant something to Voldemort? How naive were people these days? Did the term Dark Lord not mean anything to them? 'Dark' as in 'evil' as in 'should not be done'? How could people fail to see this? Harry felt so frustrated with the stupidity of the public.

Harry could see a button in her right hand, presumably the detonator.

"*STUPEFY!*" yelled about one hundred voices at once. Umbridge was launched up and off her feet. She flew through the air and into the wall, bouncing off and landing on her face on the floor. She was dead before she hit the wall from the force of all those stunners.

Harry ran forward, kneeling over the fallen Umbridge. He rolled her over and found himself staring into her hollow eyes. As expected, she was dead. He closed her eyes more for his

own well-being than respect. Dead eyes were creepy. Christine arrived next to him, kneeling beside the body.

“It’s on a timer,” she said, sliding a panel back on the end of the cylinder revealing a small clock with red numbers. It read 03:02 and it was counting down. Presumably, Voldemort did not trust her to do it so he had had a timer installed.

“They’ve removed the keypad,” she said. Her face was white and looked terrified. “All these wires shouldn’t be here. It’s wired so I can’t stop it.”

“What does that mean?” asked Harry urgently. He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“They removed the keypad that allows me to disarm it and they installed all these wires as an anti-tamper device,” she said.

“As in you can’t disarm it?” said Harry.

“I can try,” she said. That didn’t sound good. Harry wanted to run to get out of the building, as far away as possible. It had never really hit him until now. He assumed they would be able to stop it, but now it looked like they would fail. “Give me a minute to sort these wires out,” said Christine.

“You have just under three,” said Harry. He stood and glanced around looking for a red box on the wall. It was definitely time to evacuate. He found one behind him.

“GET EVERYONE OFF THE FLOOR!” he shouted. “THE ONES ABOVE AND BELOW AS WELL. DON’T LET ANYONE COME DOWN HERE. TRANSFIGURE ALL CEILINGS, FLOORS, WALLS AND DOORS INTO LEAD. QUICKLY, MAKE SURE THERE IS NO ONE ON THE FLOOR.” Harry smashed his elbow into the fire alarm.

Instantly the lights in the room turned red. A siren went off all around them, piercing all their ears. All around them Aurors started to move for the exits, some casting spells on the floor. Harry could see them turning the carpet, floors, ceiling tiles and everything else in sight into lead. The building was made of stone so beneath the lead was stone which should offer a little protection. Harry did not know the lead spell to be able to help.

“*Lumos!*” he shouted, holding the white light up for Christine to see. She was inspecting the wires inside the cylinder. Suddenly they were covered in water as deep grey rain-clouds formed on the ceiling and began to rain down upon them. It was the magical equivalent of a sprinkler. Harry was soaked through in seconds and water droplets were running all over the cylinder. He heard Christine swear as she tried to find the right wire.

“Harry!” shouted Dawlish above the alarm. “We have to go!” he was standing over them. Harry could see that all the floor and ceiling was covered in a dull grey metal. It was time for them to leave. It was contained and there was no time to dismantle the weapon. They had lost, but they could limit the damage. He nodded to Dawlish.

“Christine, let’s go!” bellowed Harry above the din.

“I can’t stop it!” she said, panicking. “You have to get it out of here!”

“Where would we send it?” shouted Harry. “Where could it go that it would not contaminate something, and with the wind it could spread to a city or town? Here it is contained and there is no loss of life, except Umbridge. We’ve got to get out of here, now.”

“Just a little longer,” she insisted, turning back to the bomb. Harry was scared; he felt the desire to drag her kicking and screaming from the bomb.

“In an alarm, all chairs become Portkeys to the assembly point,” said Dawlish. “I’ve got to get to the assembly point. Take one and activate it when you leave.” The assembly point was no good. He needed to get to Dumbledore. He would know what to do.

“I need to get to Dumbledore’s office,” shouted Harry in Dawlish’s ear. The Auror shot him a frustrated glare.

“You can Floo out,” he pointed to the fireplace. “There is powder in the red pot above the fire.” Harry nodded to the Auror.

“Seal the door and turn it to lead as you leave,” said Harry. “Make sure you do the stairs and lift as well.”

Dawlish nodded towards the door. Harry hoped he could get everyone out in time. He glanced over Christine’s shoulder at the clock. 01:03

“Are we in danger from the radiation?” he asked.

“Yes, but not fatally,” she said. “We’ll be out of here in one minute.” Harry was sure she was going to add ‘one way or another’ but had decided against it. Harry glanced at the clock: it read 00:57. He was sweating despite being drenched in icy water. He had never been so scared in his life. He wanted to run. Couldn’t the stupid woman see it was hopeless?

For ten seconds Harry watched her fiddling with wires. After that she picked took a deep breath and pulled one wire out. Harry was absolutely terrified. Every instinct told him to run and hide, but he couldn’t leave Christine. She was fiddling with wires again. Harry glanced at the clock: 00:27.

“Christine, we’ve got to go!” he insisted, grabbing her arm.

“But…”

“No buts,” he insisted, pulling her roughly to her feet. “We’re going now, or we all die!” She didn’t protest any longer. Harry sprinted across the room, hoping they had time to Floo.

She glanced at him and then the bomb before nodding. She joined him at the fireplace Dawlish had pointed to. Harry quickly grabbed the pot of Floo.

“Hogwarts Headmaster’s Office!” he shouted, throwing the powder into the fire. He just hoped the fireplace could hear him above the alarm. The flames in the grate burst into a brilliant emerald green. Harry wrapped his arms around Christine and pushed himself into the fireplace, just as an almighty bang went off behind him. He felt the heat on the back of his neck as he stepped into the flames and then...nothing.

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Albus Dumbledore

The headmaster pulled the vibrating Frog-Card out of the drawer and looked into it. Dawlish’s face was staring back at him.

“Albus, Potter was right. The bomb is in the Ministry. We have evacuated and Potter is trying to defuse it now. It will go off any second.” Albus looked up, James had arrived with Rose not three minutes before. Lily had arrived shortly after.

“Was that about Harry?” she asked instantly.

“He’s trying to defuse the...”

Suddenly the flames in the grate exploded into colour. Wisps of green flames surged up the chimney as two figures fell out of the grate. A tall woman in a suit came out backwards, holding onto Harry. They fell to the floor, Harry landing on top of the woman. To Albus’ horror, a jet of orange flames shot out of the fire over the heads of the new arrivals, causing Fawkes to take flight as his perch was licked by the flames.

Albus raised a hand to shield his eyes. The flames were gone as quickly as they had come. Harry and the woman – who Albus assumed was Dr Gaynes – lay on the floor. The woman coughed once as she tried to sit up, but with Harry on top of her, it was easier said than done. Lily immediately knelt next to the pair, rolling Harry off of her. Everyone in the room gasped at what they saw. Harry had a serious burn on his right cheek, and some of his clothes had been burned away.

Albus quickly sank to his knees next to Harry’s body. He managed not to gag at the smell of charred hair and flesh. Lily was kneeling next to him, her hands over her mouth and tears streaming down her cheeks. Harry didn’t deserve this, and Lily didn’t deserve to have to live through it either. Cautiously, Albus extended two fingers to the side of Harry’s neck. A chill ran down Albus’ spine.

He could not feel a pulse.

~~~~~ Chapter XI ~~~~~  
**What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger**

*“People killing, people dying,  
Children hurt and you hear them crying,  
Can you practice what you preach,  
And would you turn the other cheek?”*

*Father, Father, Father help us,  
Send us some guidance from above,  
Because people got me, got me questioning,  
Where is the love?”*

~ *Black Eyed Peas (Where is the Love?)*

If you had asked Harry at any time over his sixteen years on this mortal coil what he thought dying would feel like, he might have replied that he expected to feel numb all over, then sit up, stare down at his body for a few moments, before walking up towards the light. He might have told you that it felt like nothing; just blackness all around him. His opinions changed with every film he saw, every opinion he heard, but one thing remained constant in his mind; death was not the end. Harry believed in life after death, and as he fell into the darkness, part of him rejoiced in the fact he had been right. He remembered reaching the fireplace, he remembered the bang and the heat on his neck and face, but then it all went black and Harry found himself plummeting into the darkness. He wasn't entirely sure how he knew he was falling, but he was certain he was. He glanced downwards at his own body. His eyes bulged as he saw that he was entirely naked. He felt a blush immediately making its way to his cheeks, but then realised that there was no one here to see him. Adam and Eve had eaten the apple and their eyes had been opened and hence, just like Harry, they had been embarrassed by their nakedness before the Lord God. He glanced in each direction but saw nothing but darkness. It occurred to him that he was falling through blackness rather than darkness, for his body did not appear in shadow. His eyes seemed to see clearly; it was just that everything was black.

He began to get used to the feeling of falling. What worried him was that he had always imagined that Heaven was upwards and Hell down below. Was he on his way to Hell? Had he been that bad? Who was he kidding? He had killed people; he had committed almost all of the cardinal sins, missing only lust and gluttony. He was a monster, a killer and worse. Was there a universal devil or was there one in each universe? Did this Satan think he was the other Harry and would torture him for the sins of the Dark Knight?

Suddenly, Harry stopped moving. He did not land on anything, but he felt his movement stop. Ground seemed to appear beneath his feet; it was as black as the rest of this place, but soft and cool to the touch. He took a step forward, holding his arms out to balance, expecting to fall. After a few seconds, he relaxed enough to take a few paces.

“HELLO?” shouted Harry into the darkness.

He half expected either an echo or the booming voice of God. Instead he got absolutely nothing. There was complete and utter silence. Harry had never known silence like it - he didn't even have his heartbeat to listen to. Everything was utterly still.

*CRACK!*

Suddenly a brilliant white light appeared in front of him and Harry felt a surge of some sort in his chest that made his whole body feel weak. Harry ducked away, shielding his eyes with his arm. He managed not to cry out, but the light was so intense. It seemed to penetrate not only the darkness, but Harry's flesh and soul as well. Did he even have flesh anymore? Daring to turn back and face the light, he held up a hand to try and see through it. He didn't know what to expect. If his heart had been beating it would have been pounding a hole through his ribcage. He was utterly terrified. Was this it? Was he doomed to hell? Was this the light he was supposed to follow? Was his soul pure enough, or would he be forever doomed to ride Satan's instruments of torture? Harry found himself being drawn to the light. His body shook with every step, but holding his hand up to save his eyes, he stepped closer to the light.

OW! Another surge hit his chest, and he doubled up in pain. Why was he still feeling pain when he was dead? Supposedly, in Death all life's questions should be answered, but he was still clueless.

He was half expecting an elderly face with a long white beard to appear in the light, dressed all in white. He stepped closer, trying to see the source of the light. Where was he? Where was the light coming from?

Suddenly, Harry saw movement in the light. He wanted to turn and run, but he was frozen to the spot. Something was moving in the light; whatever it was it was huge and it was coming towards him. He could see it moving up and down in the light, getting closer and closer. It was coming straight for him! Harry wanted to scream but his voice left him. The thing kept coming...kept moving up and down, kept...flapping! The thing had wings! For a second, Harry thought it was a dragon, or a demon of some kind.

Suddenly, Harry relaxed; a sound had flooded his ears that he'd given up all hope of ever hearing again. It seemed to penetrate every corner of his mind, filling him with warmth. He felt the power coming out of him. The sound was like a warm blanket that wrapped around him, keeping him safe from all the horrors that lay out there. Harry stared into the light, watching the approaching Phoenix as it sang its beautiful melody. Harry could see it clearly now as it glided gracefully towards him. It was enormous, almost half the size of Harry with a wingspan longer than a Land Rover. The song surrounded him, enveloped him. He felt all the fear leaving him as he let the music take him. His eyes kept watching the bird as it soared out of the light. It was like watching it in slow motion, as it flapped its mighty wings again.

As it came closer Harry was suddenly aware that it was coming right for him. He tensed slightly, just as the Phoenix reached him. Harry expected to feel the claws land on his bare shoulder, or the bird to circle him. The last thing he expected to happen was for the bird to fly right into him - literally. As the Phoenix neared him, it changed into a silvery cloud form, similar

to a Patronus, and as it collided with Harry, it disappeared right into his chest. There was a flash of light as the tail feathers disappeared into his chest. Suddenly Harry felt warmth and a power spread to every inch of his body, penetrating every cell of his body, every corner of his mind invigorating his sense, and calming his mind.

*Duh-Duh*

Harry gasped as a cold stream of air filled his lungs.

*Duh-Duh*

His heart was beating again!

In the land of the living, in the Headmaster's office of Hogwarts, Harry Potter sat up, gasping for breath, but very much alive. Madam Pomfrey and Rose, who had been crouched over him, jumped back in shock.

"Harry!" shrieked his mother, throwing her arms around him. He felt her arms wrap tightly around him as he gasped for air and glanced around, trying to make sense of what had just happened. He remembered the darkness and the Phoenix so clearly. After a second, his memory of the bomb, of Christine and the explosion, came back to him. He remembered everything. He glanced around, looking for Christine, hoping he hadn't gotten her killed. She was innocent and had risked her life for his world. She didn't deserve to die. To his relief she was leaning against the wall to his right, wearing an expression of concern. She looked unharmed, though clearly shaken. Suddenly an odd feeling swept over him.

"Something's different," he said, more to himself than anyone else. It was an odd sensation, but somehow he could sense the magic in the room. The kettle was hovering above the fire and Harry could sense the spell, or rather the *presence* of the spell. The room seemed alive with magic. He couldn't see it, hear it or feel it in any physical way, but he could *sense* it. It was a disorientating sensation, and his head was pounding to begin with.

Suddenly the euphoria of life left him, and pain came flooding back. He clutched his hand to his face; the left side of his face felt fine, but the right was a different matter. He couldn't feel the touch of his hands, as the nerves in his face had been completely burned away, but he could still feel his face with his hands. It felt like burned toast; rough, crispy and liable to snap, allowing blood to flow out from fissures. Part of him wanted a mirror, while part of him wanted never to see his face again. He could only imagine what he looked like.

"We thought you were dead!" Lily sobbed into his shoulder, bringing Harry away from his thoughts. The pain in his face was unbearable, his head was spinning, and his chest hurt.

"I was," he panted. "I was dead."

"You have third degree burns, Potter," said Madam Pomfrey suddenly, her eyes wide in shock. "To the Hospital Wing, *now*, before they become infected."

Harry didn't respond; his burns were not the big news. He turned to face McGonagall. "I know what my Animagus form is," he said, wearing a lop-sided grin. "I'm a Phoenix."

"Harry," said McGonagall gently, "your heart stopped. You are hysterical; it's only natural. Take a deep breath and calm down."

"I *am* a Phoenix," repeated Harry, brushing Pomfrey off him. "And I *am* calm."

"Harry, that's not possible," said James. "I know. I wanted to be a dragon; I spent ages researching it. It's not possible to be a magical creature."

"I know," said Harry, "but it happened. You told me I'd know when it happened. And it just happened. I tell you, I'm a Phoenix." He realised he was rambling, but his head was spinning, and he was so pleased to be a Phoenix, he just couldn't get a clear sentence together.

"What are you talking about?" asked a shaky voice. Harry turned to see Christine leaning against the wall, shooting worried glances at all those gathered.

"Wizard stuff," said Harry. "I will soon be able to turn into a magical bird and back again."

"Harry," said Dumbledore. "What you are, and what just occurred will be up for discussion later. For now, we must get you and Miss - sorry, *Doctor Gaynes* - to the hospital wing to have you checked out."

"But..." protested Harry.

"But nothing," said Lily firmly.

"Listen to your mother," said James. "I'll go to the Ministry and see what's left of it. You stay here and get better."

Harry was about to protest, but then a floating feeling came over him and the floor beneath him vanished along with the cold feeling on his bum he had gotten from lying on the cold floor of the office. He looked down and found himself hovering eight inches above the floor. Madam Pomfrey seemed to have levitated him, presumably bored of waiting. Harry gave Rose a glare as she failed to hide her laughter as he was dragged away down the stairs. Harry just lay back and enjoyed the flying sensation as Pomfrey carried him to the hospital wing, Christine walking by his side, giving him concerned glances - she was presumably trying to work out how the law of gravity was being broken. Harry smiled at her, but then cringed as the smile caused his blackened skin to split and blood to seep out. He saw the look of disgust and pity on Christine's face and promised he would explain as much as he could when they reached the Hospital Wing. It would take over two days of conversations for her to understand the basics of the world that yesterday she never knew existed.

As they reached the Hospital Wing, Harry was levitated onto a bed. Madam Pomfrey leaned over him, inspecting his face. All he could see was her face and the ceiling. He had been able to feel spells of dizziness coming and going on the way up, and now the room was beginning to spin.

“Potter?” said a voice. Harry’s eyes opened to see the matron leaning over him. “I need to put you to sleep. When you wake up, it will be over. I need you to drink this.” She offered him a phial. He was too tired to argue. So instead of risking people running off when she prescribed sleep, Madam Pomfrey now kept patients unconscious? How very sneaky.

Harry drained the phial, and then lay back. He remembered having his tonsils removed at the age of five. The nurse had gassed him then asked him to count to ten. He had only made it to six. He was about to try again, but potions are stronger than drugs; he never even got to one before sleep took him.

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Harry?

Harry opened his eyes, and then abruptly closed them as the bright lights of the infirmary blinded him. He groaned and tried to sit up. He had seen Madam Pomfrey leaning over him as he awoke and it didn’t surprise him when she spoke.

“Relax, Harry,” said Madam Pomfrey, pushing him back down. He kept his eyes closed as she spoke. “The numbness of your muscles will pass in a few moments. For now, please listen. This is going to be very hard to hear, but I need you to remain calm. You were lucky in that you have not received a large dose of radiation and will not suffer any ill effects from it. However, your face was burned badly; so much so that it didn’t just blister; it was completely reduced to carbon. As such, I had to remove it all, as it would never heal. There is now no skin on the right side of your face. I have managed to fix the nerves and I have given you a salve that will re-grow skin over the next three or four days. If I use a spell to heal the burns, you will have a mass of scar tissue, so this way is better as it will match your complexion.”

Harry cringed. Now he definitely didn’t want a mirror. He could imagine his face, half of it red, showing nothing but muscles and cartilage. It would be slimy red with blood everywhere and thick purple veins snaking over his face, throbbing obscenely. He felt sick to his stomach. He wanted to touch his face, to prove she wasn’t telling the truth, but he knew she was and he knew how much it would hurt to touch it. However, Madam Pomfrey wasn’t done.

“However, while the potion does its work, we must keep all dust, germs and ultra-violet light away from it. I have already spread a local anaesthetic over the wound so it won’t hurt, but I need you to wear this for the next three or four days.”

She held out a mask, or more specifically, half of one. It was white and featureless except for a hole for the eye and mouth. Harry stared into the hollow eye of the scrap of plastic. It was smooth on both sides, but so blank and emotionless that it was somehow creepy. Part of him was

grateful that he had something to hide behind, while another part of him was sickened by it. He didn't know how he felt about it, but the thought that it was only temporary was a comfort to him.

"Keep this on at all times," she said. "After three days, no one will ever know that you were burned."

Harry took the mask from her and stared into its hollow eyes. He remembered Tonks' words when he asked about becoming a Metamorphmagus. She had said that she bet he wished he could hide his scar at times. This mask would hide it, along with the face that brought suffering to all those around him, and brought him looks of hatred and fear. But then again, it felt like a prison, having to hide who he was more than ever. Still, he should get over his pride. Three days and it would come off and no one would ever know that he had been disfigured. But if he was to appreciate it, he had to see his face as it was now.

"Do you have a mirror?" he asked her. She clearly hesitated. She glanced at him, a look of concern on her face, clearly hesitating. "Please," he added.

She sighed and summoned a small mirror from the table by her office; it was a small wooden thing with a handle. Harry took it from her and glanced at the unfamiliar reflection. Half of his face was...gone. It was featureless, a sickening shade of red that looked like there was nothing keeping the blood in. Purple veins snaked across the layers of tendons and muscles in his face. He looked like an exploded diagram in a school textbook. He felt sick, looking at himself. Maybe he deserved to look like this. A monster should wear a monster's face.

"It's not as bad as you think," said Madam Pomfrey gently, trying to comfort him. "You just need to apply this cream every morning and in three days it should be back to normal. Once it is, come back and we'll re-grow the missing hair. You will need to see your mother about the painkillers, though. The name is Boronite."

Harry nodded, throwing the covers off. He may be disfigured, but he was not crippled. "Aren't you going to tell me to rest?" he asked as he stood up.

"Would you if I did?"

"Nope," said Harry with a small smile. He felt a stab of pain as he smiled. He needed to get some more Boronite from his mother. Madam Pomfrey left while he changed. Harry put on a clean set of clothes that had been left for him. All black – it suited his mood. He threw them on, being careful as he pulled the jumper over his head to avoid his face, or lack thereof. It was then that he glanced in the mirror. Half monster, half human. It reflected the two Harrys so well. With a small smile he stared at his face; the skinless side was also pulled into a smile, giving it an evil grin, while the other, normal, side smiled sadly back at him. *How symbolic*, thought Harry to himself, as he slowly raised the mask to his face - it was held on by magic so it wouldn't fall off. It was cold to the touch, and felt strangely soft and padded, though no padding was visible. Oddly enough, it didn't obstruct his vision; it felt soft and soothing to wear it. Harry stared at his reflection. Half of his face was normal while the other was white, emotionless and featureless.

Still it was better than the monster below. Harry realised suddenly another glaring example of symbolism. Half of his face was that of a Death Eater, covered in a white mask and clothed in black. The other was the Boy-Who-Lived. His reflection showed the conflict within, in perfect balance. Now he was working with Flamel to tip the scales. In a few days, his appearance would be back to normal, one hundred percent Boy-Who-Lived; his soul would never be that pure again. It was just another sacrifice made way down the line.

The Potions room was full of fifth years as Harry knocked on the door. Judging by the look of the room, they were in the middle of a written test. He could see a familiar head of red hair to the left and another of black hair next to that. He slipped in the room, trying to cause the least disruption, but naturally that was never going to happen. His already fearsome reputation was added to by his bizarre appearance.

Lily looked up from her desk. Her eyes grew wide at the sight of her son, while the others in the room had stopped their test. Harry crossed to her desk.

It was she that spoke first. "How do you feel?"

"Fine, I guess," Harry said. "Apparently I have to wear this for three days, maybe four. After that, I should be as good as new."

"Does it hurt?"

"The Boronite is wearing off," he whispered. "That's why I'm here."

"Ah," she said. "Keep an eye on this lot while I get some." She disappeared through the door into her office. Harry glanced around the room. No one was even trying to hide the fact that they were watching.

"No time will be added on for this," Harry said coldly. He wasn't trying to be nasty, but he was in a foul mood after his reflection on his reflection. "So I suggest you get back to your test." His tone reflected his mood at the moment. He saw Rose and Ginny exchange a look. Ginny leaned over to whisper something to Rose, but Harry cut her off. "Your own test, Miss Weasley," he added, trying to hide his amusement. She shot him an annoyed glance before getting back to her own work.

Lily emerged a few moments later.

"Is this enough?" she asked, handing him a phial of potion. Harry nodded. With one final glance around the room, he stepped out into the corridor and back to his mother's living quarters.

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Two days after Halloween, on the Friday at five to seven in the evening, Harry knocked on Professor McGonagall's door. He opened it and stepped into her office. This was the first time his Animagus classes had been held somewhere other than the Room of Requirement. This

was not a problem, as there were no requirements or equipment needed in the classes, unless she was going to teach him to fly - Phoenixes were birds after all. He would be able to fly of his own accord, without a broom or anything - perfect freedom in the skies. How amazing would that be!

McGonagall was sitting behind her desk, marking an essay by the look of it. She glanced up as Harry entered. Harry was ever more conscious of the mask that covered half his face. Anyone seeing him in profile would see a Death Eater standing where the Boy-Who-Lived should be. *It's only temporary*, he reminded himself.

"I'll be with you in a minute," she said, not even batting an eyelid at the mask, and returning to her marking. Harry walked across the room and sat down on the sofa to the right of the desk. In all his years he had never been in his Head of House's living quarters. The room was larger than he would have expected, but McGonagall's practical and minimalist personality was abundant. Harry thought back to Umbridge's office- that had been just plain hideous. McGonagall's room was rather bare in Harry's opinion. The walls were uncovered stone with a window on one side. There was the desk she now occupied with a sofa to the right, which Harry was now sitting on. In addition there was another table, with a set of cutlery laid out. There was a fireplace on the left wall, with a pot of Floo powder on the mantle beside a candelabra, a mirror and also a china figurine of a cat, standing to attention. There was another cabinet with a glass front through which he could see a few more items on display - Harry had no idea what they did, but they were certainly magical. There was a bookcase next to the sofa. While four of the five shelves held thick books that were clearly for references and teaching, the top shelf was full of fiction, which Harry found rather odd. He saw Asimov's *I, Robot*, Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four*, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Wells' *Time Machine*, Milton's *War and Peace*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* as well as about forty more, most of which Harry did not recognise. She was clearly into her Muggle Fiction, a fact that you would never have guessed about her. Combine that with the *Divine Comedy* and there was a lot more to McGonagall that met the eye. The old Puss-in-boots was full of surprises, once the ice was broken.

"What do you think of this?" asked McGonagall, holding out a sheet of parchment. Harry reached out and took it. It was an essay by a girl called Charlotte Saunders, a second year Ravenclaw. Harry began to browse through the essay.

"Ouch," he muttered to himself. "I remember this one." He hadn't even noticed that he'd said it out loud. McGonagall, on the other hand, had.

"And what did you get, might I ask?" she pressed, giving him an appraising stare.

"Seventy two percent," said Harry. He had actually been quite proud of himself at the time, since eleven people in the class got under fifty percent and only three people had beaten him. His good mood had evaporated when he reached his next lesson: Potions. He wondered what his mother was like as a teacher. "I believe your notes said something along the lines of, 'Good breadth of knowledge though lacking in detail. Wider reading required'."

McGonagall seemed satisfied, and returned to her marking. Harry continued reading. He remembered his mother saying that English should be taught at Hogwarts, and he was beginning to agree with the mistakes in the essay. He knew he was being hypocritical and was not renowned for his spelling abilities. He, in fact, had handed in an essay in his fifth year with the word banana spelt 'bananana'.

McGonagall took the essay back and began to mark it. It seemed to be the last one left to do.

"What would you have given it?" she asked.

"Low sixties," said Harry matter-of-factly. He had no idea about marking criteria, but he might as well give it a go. He felt he could have done better, but that was with an extra four years of experience. He hoped he had done better when he had done that essay. McGonagall only gave him a 'hmm' in response. It took about three minutes to mark the essay, since it was only one foot long. Finished, she put the quill back in a pot of water and screwed the top back onto the ink. That done, she slid the essays back into a loose-leaf folder marked 2 R/H, presumably, second year Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs.

She stood and left her desk, taking a seat on the opposite end of the sofa near the bookshelf. She removed a large and heavy looking book from the bottom shelf.

"Ready?" she asked, without any introduction. Harry nodded.

"Right," she said taking a breath. "Now as I mentioned weeks ago, and as every book on the subject will tell you, you cannot become a magical creature."

"But a Phoenix saved me," protested Harry instantly.

"Madam Pomfrey saved you, Harry," McGonagall cut him off.

"But..."

"Let me finish," McGonagall cut him off again. "I mentioned the potential consequences of mixing two forms of magic, did I not? Now, you are adamant that your form is a Phoenix, which is about as Magical a creature as exists. Theoretically this is impossible, but I *am* willing to hear you out. First though, I will tell you what happened from our perspective..."

*Whoosh!*

*The fireplace sprang to life, flames of emerald green shooting up the chimney. There was a loud thud as two people fell rather than emerged out of the fireplace, landing in an undignified position on the polished floor of the office. Minerva only had a fraction of a second to comprehend what was happening before a jet of orange flame shot out of the fire, over the heads of the new arrivals. Fawkes took flight with a squawk as the flames engulfed his perch. Everyone in the office backed away from the fire. The flames disappeared as quickly as they had come,*

*leaving a smoky smell in the office and two bodies on the floor. Soot covered the area around the fire.*

*There was a cough as the woman, on top of whom the unconscious form of Harry Potter was lying, began to splutter. This must be the scientist Harry had been working with. She tried to sit up, but with the weight of the boy on top of her, it was easier said than done. Coughing profusely, she struggled to get up. In a flash Albus was at her side, rolling Harry off the poor woman. James immediately went to check on the woman, scanning for injuries, or so Minerva assumed. Meanwhile, Harry lay unmoving on the floor. As Albus moved, Minerva got her first unimpeded view of the boy. She gasped in shock.*

*The right side of his face was very badly burned. It wasn't pink, nor was it white with blisters; it was black, having been reduced to pure charcoal in the heat of the flames. Part of his hair had been burned away, and the smell of charred flesh and hair made those in the office cover their noses.*

*Albus slowly extended two fingers to the underside of Harry's face, the left side to avoid the burns. He sat motionless for a few seconds before striding to the fireplace in one step.*

*"Poppy," he barked urgently into the fireplace, throwing some Floo into the grate. "Come quickly, it's an emergency." Less than two seconds later, Poppy emerged from the fireplace, brushing soot from her white matron's robes. Her eyes fell on Harry instantly and she was by his side before Minerva could say a word. Her wand was out and ready.*

*"He's flat-lining," she said to herself more than anything. "Has he had any spells or potions in the last few hours?"*

*"None we know of," said Dumbledore.*

*"Lily," said Poppy quickly, "roll up that piece of parchment and put it in his mouth. Hold his nose and when I tell you to, breath into the other end."*

*With her wand she vanished the jumper and t-shirt he was wearing, leaving his chest exposed. She placed both hands over his heart and then pushed sharply down. She repeated it fourteen more times in quick succession, counting to herself.*

*"Now, Lily."*

*Lily already had the parchment rolled into the tube and in his mouth. The Potions Mistress breathed into the 'pipe' and Minerva saw Harry's chest expand as Lily forced air into his lungs.*

*"STAND CLEAR!" ordered Poppy, pointing her wand at Harry's heart. A red light shot out of her wand, straight at his heart. His entire body bucked violently for a second but then lay still. Poppy's hand flew back to his heart. Again she pressed into his chest fifteen times, counting as she did. "Lily....stand clear!"*

*Again Lily breathed into Harry's mouth the light surged out of Poppy's wand, hitting Harry's heart. His body thrashed on the floor, but then lay still. It didn't seem to be working!*

*"Still nothing," said Poppy angrily. "Lily, do you have any strengthening potion? I need it now!" Lily disappeared into the fire in an instant. "Rose-Marie, take over!" ordered Poppy.*

*"I..." stammered Rose.*

*"The brain dies four minutes after the heart stops. We have ninety seconds to get it going again, so do as you're bloody well told," snapped Poppy. Minerva had never seen her talk to anyone like that. She felt so helpless standing there as Rose knelt next to her brother. Poppy started pumping his heart again. "One, two, three, four, five..." Minerva glanced at Albus. His calm demeanour was gone. The Headmaster was sweating and appeared genuinely scared, as he stared helplessly down at Harry. Minerva had never seen him in such a state. "... thirteen, fourteen, now Miss Potter." Rose-Marie breathed into the pipe and Harry's chest rose. "CLEAR!"*

*Harry's body thrashed, but less vigorously than the last time. The body was dying! Suddenly the flames burst into emerald green as Lily re-emerged clutching a phial.*

*"Rose-Marie, keep breathing every three seconds," ordered Poppy. She took the phial from Lily and uncorked it. She summoned a silver plate from Albus' desk and poured the contents of the phial onto the plate. She waved her wand and muttered some charms that Minerva couldn't hear. The orangey-pink liquid glowed red for a few seconds. Satisfied, Poppy waved her wand and the liquid disappeared.*

*"I've just introduced the potion directly into the boy's heart," she announced. "Breathe again, Rose-Marie." As Rose did so, Poppy pointed her wand at Harry's chest for what could be the final time.*

*"CLEAR!"*

*The red light shone out of his wand, surging into the boy's chest. Harry's body bucked violently under the spell, his shoulders and feet being all that remained touching the floor. As his stomach rose from the floor, his eyes flew open and he took an enormous breath. Harry gasped at the air around him as his heart began beating again. He sat up, coughing profusely and hugging his chest, which presumably hurt a lot after his ordeal.*

*"Harry!" cried his mother, throwing her arms around him. He sat there, embraced by his mother, panting like a Bull-Mastiff, but very much alive. Minerva saw something cross his face, a realisation probably, and then he spoke.*

*"Something's different," he said softly.*

*"So what was different?" asked McGonagall, staring at Harry as she ended her story. Harry didn't answer immediately. He was trying to get a grip on what he had just heard. Was it*

all a dream? Had Pomfrey really saved him and he had just been hallucinating? No, it couldn't be a dream, it couldn't! Finally, he answered the question.

"I can feel magic around me," said Harry. "It's as if my eyes have been opened. I can sense spells in the air, the presence of spells. For example, I can feel the lock on the desk drawer over there," - he pointed towards her desk - "I can feel the presence of the spell, though I don't know what it is. I am just guessing that it's the locking spell as it is your private desk."

"Interesting," said McGonagall. "That is indeed said to be one of the abilities of the phoenix. Could you tell me what happened from your perspective?"

"While I was...dead," he began. "There was darkness everywhere and then a light and a Phoenix came towards me. I remember it looked like a Patronus and it just disappeared into me. My father told me I would know when I found my form, and I just knew that this was it. Was this what you meant?"

"No," said McGonagall. "Assuming I take you at your word, that this is your form, you were not meant to die and be saved by it. When I was in your shoes, I remember seeing the cat and then...it was like everything just clicked into place and my eyes were opened. All other animals just seemed inferior to it. I could see what it was thinking - it was like an epiphany, and I knew that was for me. Dying was not part of the agenda."

"But a phoenix is reborn from the ashes," said Harry.

"Yes, but symbolism like that doesn't really mean anything," McGonagall replied.

"You said that the form is a representation of the person's character. That's all about symbolism, isn't it?"

"Are you always this stubborn?" asked McGonagall, giving him an irritated stare.

"Only when I know I'm right," said Harry affronted. He merely stared back, unwilling to budge. He was there, he knew what he had seen and felt. Bollocks to her. Harry knew what he knew.

"Fine," said McGonagall after a moment, "I assumed you would argue like this. As such I asked Professor Dumbledore if I could borrow his Pensieve. Let me see this apparent encounter with a phoenix for myself."

"Oh, damn," said Harry before he could stop himself.

"Do you not want me to see?" asked McGonagall, raising an eyebrow.

"It's not that," said Harry, covering his mouth with his hand. He had completely forgotten! *Dickhead!* "I put some memories in there. I meant to give it to Frank, but I kind of forgot in the excitement of Halloween."

“You can attend to Mr. Longbottom later,” said McGonagall. “I am a very busy woman, Harry. Can you please place the appropriate memories in the Pensieve.”

Putting Frank aside, though making a mental note to get it to him ASAP, Harry pulled out his wand and placed it to his temple, following the instructions Dumbledore had given him the night he had borrowed the Pensieve. Having spent half a night doing it, it was no trouble. He pulled out the memory and deposited it into the Pensieve.

McGonagall nodded to him and then dipped her nose into the Pensieve. As she began to use the Pensieve, Harry was struck by a sudden thought. He was *naked* in the memory! He felt the blood surge to his cheeks. His Head of House was about to see his...something she damn well shouldn't see. It could be worse; it could be Snape, but still...McGonagall. Yuck! He felt himself break out in a cold sweat. How embarrassing!

Less than two minutes later, McGonagall finished the memory. She leaned back on the sofa and stroked her chin thoughtfully. Harry was tempted to say ‘I told you so’, but that risked her bringing up the subject of him being naked, so he held his tongue. He sat and stared at her, hoping she wasn't going to comment on his appearance in the memory. He wondered briefly if he was burned in the memory. For over a minute, McGonagall sat in complete silence, staring at the coffee table but clearly not seeing it. Her mind was somewhere else. Harry could almost see the cogs turning.

“Curious,” she said at last, reminding Harry of Ollivander. Was that it? All she could say was ‘curious’? He was about to ask her to elaborate, when she did of her own accord. “From what I have just seen,” she began slowly, “I find myself being forced to believe something I know to be impossible. Harry, you have just broken every rule in the Animagus textbook.”

“So you believe me?” he asked. She hesitated for a second before answering.

“Yes,” she said at last. “Harry, I am going to be honest with you. What I have just seen should not have happened. Suppose you are right and that you were literally reborn from the ashes, then this is the first occurrence of this in the world. Do you recall that I mentioned why you should not be able to be a magical Animagus? I said that combining two types of magic could be very dangerous. We will be dealing with a different form of Animagus here, one about which there are no books or resources. I will do my best for you, Harry, but we are entering the unknown. I cannot say if this will be easier or harder or what you will feel, but I will do what I can for you.”

“Fair enough,” said Harry casually, eager to get on with the training.

“Wait,” said McGonagall. “You do not appreciate the situation, Harry. You say that so casually I know you have no idea the danger you are in. Not only is the Phoenix a magical creature, but it is one of the most powerful on the planet. If something were to go wrong you could lose your humanity, literally. If you are sure - and I want you to go away and think about this - if you are one hundred percent *certain* that you want to continue and that you truly appreciate the danger, then we will continue. That is all I will say tonight. Go and think about it,

long and hard. You have the weekend to think it over. Come back on Monday with a decision. I mean it Harry, I honestly do not know what is going to happen.”

Harry sat for a moment before rising from the sofa. He already knew he wanted to do it, but to say so would just infuriate McGonagall. He did appreciate that this was the unknown, but that was also exciting. There was no doubt in his mind that he would succeed. He could already feel the difference. He could feel the tingle of magic on the air. He could feel the presence of spells without even needing to look. She was right about one thing; Fawkes was *very* strongly magical - he almost seemed to glow now, and Harry could feel his presence from almost anywhere in the castle.

Think long and hard, Harry did. He already knew what he wanted to do, but in case McGonagall was a Legilimens or had some other way of knowing it, he did actually sit down and think it over. He brought up the subject in a conversation with his father. Being an Animagus himself, he was able to offer some advice, but his final answer was a little vague. He said that McGonagall was right and that this was potentially dangerous, but if he chose to do it, and it was his choice and his alone, then James would support him.

At seven o'clock on the following Monday, Harry once again knocked on the door to McGonagall's office. This time she was apparently unoccupied, or rather she was not busy. She was curled up on the sofa with a book, in a pose that he would never have imagined her in. Minerva McGonagall putting her feet on the sofa? Perish the thought! Though she had taken her shoes off. She looked up at him as he entered.

“Have you reached a decision?” she asked simply. Harry nodded.

“Did you actually think it over?” she asked, giving him a piercing stare. Again Harry nodded. There was a pause and Harry was sure she would tell him that she didn't believe him. She stared at him with one of her trademark stares before suddenly snapping the book closed with a sharp bang and sitting upright.

“So be it,” she simply said. “On the desk is a pile of books - bring them here.” Harry did as he was told, resisting the urge to use magic. McGonagall took the stack and rested them on her knees. She opened the top one to a large diagram of a skeleton of a bird, a magpie. Harry hesitated. There was a more than subtle difference between a magpie and a phoenix. Was this book even relevant? Before he could ask, McGonagall began to explain.

“Some of these books are simply for reference, others you need to read in detail,” she informed him. “This first one is a Muggle book, but it has its uses. The first three chapters detail the basic bone-structure, feather structure and biological make-up of a bird. The same principles apply to a phoenix as to a hummingbird or a robin. You need to read and understand this one before we go any further. The Animagus ability is neither a spell nor a potion; it is force of mind, so you must be able to visualise and understand the workings of every single part of its anatomy. I have here a feather from a pigeon, a golden eagle, a crow and Fawkes. You need to study them in detail. Remember, it is not about learning the names of the parts. That does no good to man or beast. You must understand what the parts are made of - bones muscle or cartilage for example -

how they contribute to movement - both walking and flying - and what they equate to in your human body. Remember, they are transfigured from your body. While it is obvious that your heart becomes the heart of the phoenix, you need to ask yourself what your fingernails will become. There are no claws on the wings. Attention to small detail like that is essential.”

For the next hour, McGonagall went through the diagrams piece-by-piece, displaying a depth of knowledge of Muggle Biology Harry would never have thought of her, or most witches come to that. Harry found the whole experience much less interesting than he had been expecting, but still tried to take in as much as possible, knowing that once this was out of the way he could get on with the more interesting things.

McGonagall lent him the book and that night he lay awake reading until one in the morning. He realised that he was putting more effort into this endeavour than he did most homework - a revelation he had no intention of sharing at their meeting the following afternoon. Harry brought the book back, having read the appropriate chapters twice and taken notes. All in all he was feeling quite proud of himself.

“Before we begin,” said McGonagall, gesturing for him to take a seat, “I want to let you know what to expect. You might recall that I said an Animagus reflects your inner character. As part of this, some of the instincts of the animal in question will begin to manifest themselves in your human mind. Over time, you will come to recognise them and control them. It’s nothing particularly strong, simply that creatures like owls, bats and wolves tend to find themselves staying up later, enjoying the night and hating mornings. Those who become birds lose any hint of vertigo and speaking from experience, cats dislike rodents and water. Over the next few weeks, you will begin to feel these impulses pulling at you.”

“And what impulses would a phoenix have?”

“I cannot say,” said McGonagall. “That’s what makes this so interesting. Remember, we are in uncharted territory, Harry. You may also notice some smaller changes in your character and body. Some people develop more physical qualities similar to their form. For example, a girl who left here two years before you arrived chose to become an Animagus in her final year. Her form was a hawk. She found that her eyesight improved as she developed her ability.”

Harry was still trying to guess how a Phoenix would affect him. He could already feel something different about the world; he could sense magic before it happened, but that was about it. One thought occurred to him - Fawkes was red; Harry just hoped he didn’t turn ginger.

“When an urge comes to you,” McGonagall continued, “don’t fight it. Allow it to wash over you. Remember, it is just an urge; you can choose not to do it, but letting the animal into your mind will speed up your transition.”

“Right,” said Harry. He still wondered how this applied to him. What would a Phoenix tell him? He would probably forget any vertigo, but he didn’t suffer due to his Quidditch skills.

“Okay,” said McGonagall. “That will subtly happen over the next few weeks. It is nothing to worry about, and in time your mind will automatically filter out phoenix impulses from your own human ones. Now, shall we move on?”

Harry nodded and brought the book out onto his knees and opened it to the diagram of the bird.

“Right,” said McGonagall. “Unfortunately with bird, we must start with the hardest part and the most dangerous. If this goes wrong, it can be very painful.” Harry gulped slightly. This sounded ominous. He had better not get it wrong. “One of the biggest changes between a mammal and a bird is that the pubic bone, located here,” - she pointed to the top of the bird’s legs - “and here,” - she gently poked him on the hip - “is turned backwards. It’s all to do with reproduction, but that’s irrelevant. The point is that at present, your pubic bone faces the front and when you are a bird, it must face backwards or you will not be able to walk or fly. Poppy Pomfrey is on call, so if we have any difficulties, she will be able to fix everything. What you need to do is effectively rotate the base of your spine one hundred and eighty degrees.”

Harry’s jaw was hanging limp. YUCK! Break and twist his spine. He cringed when people cracked their fingers, a habit Seamus was very proud of, but drove Harry up the wall. Part of him wished his form was a mammal. Then he would only have to drop to all fours. No! A Phoenix was what he was, but still...twisting his spine was a sickening thought. The image of bones twisting, grinding together with a gut-churning, scraping sound filled his mind. He shivered involuntarily. Now he understood why some people couldn’t stomach becoming an Animagus.

“Obviously you don’t actually rotate your spine,” continued McGonagall. He felt a wave of relief, accompanied by confusion. “I said *effectively* rotate it, not *literally*. In truth, you have to reshape your pubic bone to face backwards. I must state first that you must not attempt to walk with it facing backward until you are completely transformed, otherwise you might do some damage. Remember, your legs will still be facing forward and you could potentially dislocate your entire leg.”

She stood and walked to her desk. On top of it, covered by a green cloth, were two large things. Harry hadn’t noticed them when he came in. As McGonagall removed the cloth, Harry could see that they were models, of the pubic bone of a phoenix, or at least a bird and a human. At least, Harry hoped they were models.

“You will need to study these closely before we try,” said McGonagall. “I want you to use a wand and transfigure one into the other. Once you can do that on these models, your visualisation will be enough to do your own bone. For the next fortnight, I hope to cover the skeleton and get the major changes out of the way, such as the extension of the neck, reversal of the pubic bone, three toes as opposed to five, nose and jaw into beak and the merging of the arm and wing bones. From there we will move onto the sizing, muscles and flesh.”

Harry took a deep breath, looking at the plastic models of the bones in front of him. This wasn’t as easy as he had anticipated. He didn’t regret his decision, but he had hoped it would be

quick and that her guess of four months was an over-estimate. He promised himself that if he worked at it relentlessly then he could bring it forward. He just hoped it wasn't too painful. It was unlikely, but hope springs eternal.

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The next morning Harry had another Occlumency lesson with Flamel. Today's lesson, Flamel announced at the beginning, would be different in that only half of it would be Occlumency, the other half would work on using the skills left by the other Harry without allowing them to control him. He had been working on suppressing emotion for nearly a week, but now they were going to actually try and use it.

Flamel tested Harry on lying, then on hiding memories and then suppressing emotion. That took nearly fifteen minutes. After that, Flamel announced that they were moving on.

“Okay, Harry,” he began. “We will move slowly, but if at any time you feel it hurts too much, or that it is too much, tell me and we can stop. Putting you through too much and hurting you is counter-productive, so don't be afraid to speak up. Right, remember what we have been doing. Keep your mind clear from any form of feeling. Reach into that arsenal of yours, but keep your mind clear. If you start to feel again, stop, okay?”

“Got it,” said Harry.

“You must not just relax; I need you to consciously try to remember,” said Flamel softly.

Harry stood in the centre of the room, his wand held in a ready stance as if in a duel. He closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind, concentrating on the sound of waves. They were in Flamel's office, not the Room of Requirement, so he had to imagine the waves without the real thing to aid him.

“Concentrate, Harry,” came Flamel's soft voice.

He felt the emptiness take him and all thoughts leave him. The mask as a symbol alone seemed to help. It gave him the idea that no one could see through into his mind. His paranoia about his thoughts was reduced by the presence of the mask. He tried to reach inside, grasping for memories, for skills, for anything. He seemed to be wandering through a wilderness, then suddenly it happened.

On the floor in front of him was a woman. She had silvery blond hair that was matted from being asleep. She wore a white nightie and was lying on her back, her arms and legs straight and together under the effects of the full body-bind. Harry crossed to her side, emotionless. The woman's cheeks were streaked with tears. The dead form of her husband was sitting in a chair to her left, his stomach cut open and his intestines hanging out and dangling between his legs. He had a mane of dark blond hair and a certain lion-like appearance. Harry paid no heed to the body as he crossed, pulling out his sword in the process.

“Mrs. Scrimgeour,” said Harry coldly. “You will not testify, understood? You did not, repeat not, see anything on the night of July twelfth. You were here with your husband. If you testify, you will be hearing from me again. Don’t think for a second that you can hide. Your husband was head of the Auror division, and we still got to you, so make no mistake. If you testify, I will personally hunt down you, your sister, your niece, your Aunt and even your dog, is that understood?”

“Harry?” said a voice softly.

“No!” he stammered. His eyes flew open. He realised he was lying on the floor and thrashing with arms, fighting an unseen and non-existent foe. He was in a cold sweat and Flamel was kneeling over him. “It’s okay, Harry,” he said kindly, helping him into a sitting position. He fished a bar of chocolate out of his pocket and handed him a piece. Harry took it and put it in his mouth. Flamel pulled him to his feet as he chewed.

“Are you alright?” asked Flamel, helping him into a chair.

“Near enough,” said Harry. He felt like he had during Occlumency with Snape and Dementor lessons with Lupin. He had once again ended up unconscious on the ground. He had thought that Occlumency was coming along slowly but surely, but now he had utterly failed. His head ached from where he had presumably hit the floor.

“What happened?” asked Flamel.

“Another memory,” said Harry. “Head of the Aurors, Scrim-something or other, sounded German. His wife was threatened.”

“Harry,” said Flamel gently, “Rufus Scrimgeour was the Head of the Aurors; he reported directly to Amelia and Crouch. He was killed a few months ago, and his wife recalled her testimony against Rosier. Dawlish and Kingsley were given the job until a suitable replacement can be found, but between them they are managing and there are no volunteers. Harry, that murder was never solved, though many had their suspicions.”

“Chalk another one up for the Dark Knight,” said Harry darkly. “I guess this Occlumency isn’t working.”

“That was but your first go,” said Flamel. “I was not expecting you to get anything. I also was not expecting you to have such a strong reaction. If you don’t wish to continue, I understand.”

“No,” said Harry. He wasn’t going to be defeated as easily as this! “One more go; I’ve got to learn this sometime.”

Harry stood back up and got ready again. He took a deep breath, preparing himself. He closed his eyes once more, concentrating on the waves, casting all thoughts from his mind, even

the fear of what he would find. He fought against the emotion, removing it from his mind. Finally ready, he reached down into the darkness inside him.

Harry stood at the edge of a ledge. He was on a round formation of rock, somewhere underground. The walls of rock stretched skyward above him, rising another twenty feet before reaching ground level. Another twenty feet below him was the bottom of the pit, filled with churning water. The water swirled around, like a whirlpool with jagged rocks in the bottom. The water bubbled and spat everywhere as it churned over and over. The ledge surrounded the centre cavern, and all along the edge were a circle of Death Eaters, their masks shimmering, reflecting the dancing glow of the water. The roar of the water filled his ears.

This was the Devil's Cauldron, realised Harry. He found that unlike the last memory, as he watched it, he was capable of his own thoughts and feelings, rather than feeling the other Harry's emotions.

Next to Harry, dressed all in black, stood the Dark Lord himself. He stood on an outcrop of rock inside the circle of Death Eaters with Harry behind him. This was it! This was what he had been waiting for. Excitement surged through him.

Suddenly the cavern dissolved and Harry was staring up at the ceiling again, his head pounding. He had had no more success than the last time. Flamel was by his side, helping him up once again. If it carried on like this, Harry would be sick from too much chocolate. He took the piece that Flamel offered him and ate it. He climbed into a chair, his legs shaking, barely able to hold his weight.

"I think it's getting worse," said Harry after swallowing the chocolate. "My head really hurts, but now I can feel my own thoughts and feelings, rather than just his."

"You are progressing, but too much at once will harm you," said Flamel. "I think we had better call it a day there. Your mind is too tired to cope with any more Occlumency."

"One more, please," said Harry. He knew he could do it this time. He was determined to. He was stronger than the other him, and now he would prove it. "Holy trinity, third time lucky, let me try a third time. Last one, I promise."

Flamel hesitated. He clearly was not comfortable with this, but Harry persisted. "Please."

"Absolutely the last time today, and promise me you will not try this in your own time," said Flamel.

"Of course," said Harry, and he meant it. He had no wish to go through this alone.

For the third and final time that day, Harry stood in the centre of the room, wand at the ready and trying to force all emotion from his battered mind. He managed to slow his breathing, preparing to delve into the darkness. He willed himself to relax before reaching into the darkness.

The Dark Knight stood in a dark room. It was large and grand, though much of it in shadows. There was a figure in front of him, his face in shadow. The Knight felt anger towards the man, and knew he was his enemy. Harry's sword was facing backwards under his arm. He could feel a weight on the end of it and knew he had ended another life. He shivered with the excitement of having driven the cold steel blade into the soft warm flesh of an enemy. Harry could sense the Dark Knight's pleasure at having killed. He turned slowly and calmly to face a man impaled on the sword. Harry felt sick as he looked into the Auror's dying eyes. He felt a surge of hatred towards the other Harry. He could feel the Knight's cold anger as he wrenched the sword out of the man's stomach. With nothing to keep him up, the Auror fell to the floor. The Dark Knight emotionlessly turned to face the other Auror. Inside his head, Harry was screaming at the Dark Knight's coldness. The Auror stepped forward into the light. Harry immediately recognised his face. Kingsley!

Suddenly, Kingsley dived forward, unleashing two curses in mid-air.

Sanctius! thought Harry silently. A small turquoise shield appeared at the end of his wand. Effortlessly, he batted the incoming curses away. Several more curses were exchanged, but Harry's head was starting to pound as the evil unfolded before his mind's eye. He could feel the excitement and hatred from the Dark Knight. Harry was having trouble staying conscious, or unconscious, whichever the case may be, but he was determined to watch. Just knowing that this wasn't real was an improvement.

Suddenly, a book was zooming towards him.

Reducto! Harry could hear the Knight's spell in his mind as the book was shattered to a million pieces.

"Cute trick," the Knight taunted Kingsley. "But two can play at that game."

Oh, you are so going to pay, screamed Harry at the Dark Knight, in his mind. When I find you, I'll rip your Goddamned heart out, you son of a bitch!

The Knight used the same spell as Kingsley to fire something at the Auror. Harry nearly vomited as he saw what the Knight used as a missile. It was the severed head of a Goblin. Harry suddenly realized where they were. The grandness of the room, the goblin behind a desk - this was Gringotts. He remembered reading about a siege here, at some time. Kingsley had been the first Auror to survive an encounter with the Dark Knight. This was the Gringotts Siege!

Harry was so pleased with his discovery that he hadn't been paying attention. The next thing he knew, a curse had hit him, or rather the other him, in the chest and had blasted him across the room. He landed hard on his back. Kingsley had obviously had enough. Harry heard the incantation of the Paralysis Curse. Sure enough a pink ball of light was zooming towards him as he sprang off his shoulder onto his feet.

Harry felt a wicked pleasure in the Knight's mind. JurofacIo! Harry felt a warm feeling in his right hand. He was holding a ring of pale blue light. It didn't hurt him as he held it in a

gloved hand, but he knew it wouldn't even if he didn't have gloves. He was proud of the ring; he knew that it was his own invention. As the pink curse came towards him, he scooped it up in the ring before the eyes of a startled Kingsley. It looked like the planet Saturn as he held it for a fraction of a second. Harry hurled it back at Kingsley, who was too shocked to move. The combination of spells zoomed towards him, spinning as it did. Kingsley had the sense to raise a shield, but it did him no good. As the dual spell hit his shield, the blue light disappeared causing the shield to pop like a bubble, leaving his own Paralysis Curse to hit the person who had cast it. The Knight thought of the spell as Poetic Justice, and that was what he called it.

Suddenly, Harry was being shaken by Flamel. He looked up to see the old man, over him, holding him by the shoulders.

“When you didn't wake up, I panicked,” confessed the professor. “That is absolutely all for today, no arguments.”

“I did it,” said Harry, grinning stupidly at the Professor. “I got into his mind, or what was left of it, and I saw the spell, the incantation. I got the Sanctius Shield and one of his own making.” Harry shouted the incantation aloud, holding out his hand as the other Harry had done. Suddenly the ring of blue light burst into existence in his hand.

“Awesome,” said Harry, looking down at the spell.

“Write it down,” said Flamel. “We will continue after you have had a night's sleep. Remember, do not pursue this in your own time. You need someone competent with you.”

Harry promised him he wouldn't before leaving the room.

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Three days, Occlumency lessons and Animagus training sessions later, Harry sat on the side of the Fountain of Magical Brethren, dressed in a woolly jumper and black trousers and, of course, the mask, even though he didn't need it any more. He had had to wear it for four days, which meant that since yesterday he had no longer needed it. His face was back to normal and he couldn't see a difference in the mirror. Madam Pomfrey had done a good job. The mask did however, have its uses. As he was now in the Ministry, he had chosen to wear it, to hide who he really was. He didn't want even more people to stare or take more aggressive action against him. He was only here with Rose, for her trial, but since only one family member could accompany 'the defendant', he had had to stay outside, so he was now watching the Minister's Press Conference with interest. With all the photographers and journalists around, he had no desire to be recognised. The mask earned him a few glances, but nothing hostile. He did have one other reason for wearing it: It also covered the hair he had lost, which was still growing back, but was much shorter than the rest of his hair. Growing hair with spells was simple enough and fast - he had once made Neville's sideburns grow until they reached his belt - but that was only a temporary spell. Getting real and permanent hair to grow over an area in which the hair follicles had been destroyed was much more time consuming. As such, he still had an area that looked like it had been shaved recently, so he had chosen to keep it hidden.

In front of him were five rows of chairs, each containing ten chairs, five on either side of an aisle. Around the back and sides, wizards and witches were setting up tripods ready for cameras. The table at the front was clothed in blue, with the Ministry's logo hanging on a backdrop behind the table. There were three seats behind the table and each of them had a plaque with a name on it in front of them. Harry could read the names from the back. Crouch, Dawlish and Bones. It had been over a week since the dirty bomb had detonated five floors below him. What he knew was sketchy, but he knew the gist of what was to come. Harry watched with interest. It was now the second week of November, and he wondered how much the Ministry had recovered in the week and a half since the bomb.

With a 'ping' the lift doors slid open at the end of the corridor. Crouch emerged, flanked by Amelia Bones and Dawlish. There were two Aurors behind him, dressed in their familiar red robes. The Minister and his escort walked swiftly from the lift towards the table set up for them. The audience rose as Crouch entered, presumably as a sign of respect, though possibly to get a better angle for a photograph. Cameras flashed in Crouch's face as he sat down at the table. Once he was seated, the audience sat down again, though most had their hands in the air, baying like jackals for a few scraps of information. Harry couldn't help but think back to his slander campaign at the hands of Fudge and the year of Rita Skeeter. *Bitch*. He could see her sitting amid the rabble of the press.

Crouch raised his hand for silence. The questions died down slowly and after nearly ten seconds it was quiet enough for Crouch to speak. Harry was glad no one was paying attention to him. He was only here while some idiotic bureaucrat official exonerated Rose from any assault on Lucius Malfoy. His father and Rose were over at the new Auror Complex, so while they were in an office signing parchments, Harry had opted to come and watch the proceedings.

"Ladies and gentlemen," began Crouch. "First off, I have a statement. Once I have finished I will open up the floor to questions. If these questions do not come in a calm and orderly fashion, I will not hesitate to leave, so please be calm and professional. Now, I have in my hand a report published this morning regarding the attack on the Department of Magical Law Enforcement two weeks ago. Some details are obviously of a sensitive nature, but copies of the report will be made public tomorrow and you shall all receive a copy. For now, allow me to sum up the key points.

"At half past nine on Halloween, a Muggle-built device was detonated within the Auror division five floors beneath where we now stand. I would like to point out that no one here or anywhere else in the building is at risk. Due to the quick thinking and professionalism of the Aurors, the contamination caused by the device has been limited to one floor. While the floor in question is uninhabitable for a great many years, the rest of the Ministry remains unaffected. To make sure, radiation checks are carried out daily; so far, there have been no leaks. Rest assured that you are all perfectly safe.

"The bomb in question is Muggle in origin and was stolen by Lord...well...you know who I mean. It was delivered by Dolores Umbridge, my former senior undersecretary. It is believed that she was operating under the affects of the Imperius Curse, which as you all know, is an Unforgivable. Unable to stop herself, she became a suicide bomber and died in the

explosion. Dolores Umbridge was a patriot; she did a world of good for her country and will be greatly missed.” Harry managed not to snort from the back of the room. He understood the politics of making her out to be a martyr, but he didn’t like it. He had a deep-seated hatred for that woman, and with good reason. It was true - politics was an ugly business.

“I am aware,” continued Crouch, “that rumours are circulating that the Ministry is now helpless. That is one hundred percent false. Construction has already begun on the new Auror Complex. It is being built with all haste, and under maximum security. We are using every ward in the book to make sure this can never happen again. The new Complex should be open within another week. This probably sets a speed record for the construction of a building, but the haste is much needed. A team of three hundred builders are working around the clock on the Complex; it comes complete with state-of-the-art equipment for monitoring dark magic, enough holding cells to rival Azkaban, a medical centre on par with St Mungo’s, as well as a built-in training centre and gymnasium. For years the Aurors have wanted a more modern facility and now they have one. My only regret is that it had to happen under these circumstances. The rumours that are running wild at the moment have inspired a wave of violence as is clear by the reports in the *Daily Prophet*. We ask all members of the public to stay in their homes, to travel in groups and avoid leaving their houses after dark. The Ministry’s ability to monitor Apparation and dark magic will be back on-line within days. In the meantime, please remain vigilant. Until such time as the Complex comes on line, Aurors will be on patrol in major public locations to preserve the peace. The telephone number that was given out for the public to contact the Aurors is still functioning, and will continue to do so, until the Auror Complex comes on line. Once again, I urge all citizens to remain calm and bear with us through this turbulent time. Thank you - any questions?”

Of course there were questions. Harry groaned inwardly as the jackals began baying once again. They seemed to surge forward, practically crushing those at the front. Harry could see Crouch’s distaste for the media, but he was well aware of the need for them. Politicians were perfectly two faced. Harry wasn’t. He wore his distaste on his sleeves. Crouch pointed to one woman in the rabble.

“Madeline Cullen, Scot’s Wizard,” she said in a heavily accented voice. “Rumour has been flying around that this was an orchestrated attack by the Muggle government against our way of life. Do you have any comment on this, Minister?” Harry felt a flicker of anger. He knew perfectly well that this was nothing to do with the Muggle government. Voldemort obviously wanted it to look like it was. The Muggles had been leaning heavily on Crouch before the weapon was taken. The Order had assumed that Voldemort was trying to start a confrontation with them by infuriating them. He seemed to be doing the same here, by spreading discourse through the community.

“There is no truth to those claims,” said Crouch firmly. “The device was manufactured by Muggles, but that is where their involvement ended. They are so destructive that they are kept behind the highest levels of security. Over twenty Muggle Marines died to protect the bomb. Sadly, they were overpowered by You-Know-Who’s forces, and he escaped. The Muggle government did everything they could to track it down. It was a joint effort between them and us. There was even a Muggle scientist, Christine Gaynes, who helped us track down and confine the

bomb to a single area. Without her help, the entire Ministry would have been destroyed and the loss of life would have been astronomical. She saved a lot of lives. Muggles are not to blame here, only You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters. These recent attacks are unprovoked and illegal. It had been decided that the Ministry will no longer use its influence to protect members of the Magical community caught assaulting Muggles. Those caught will face six months in a Muggle jail, with no protection from the Ministry. Anyone caught by Magical authorities will spend three months in Azkaban. These measures may seem extreme, but I intend to protect the Muggle and Magical communities as best I can. That is what you elected me for, and that is what I will do. These criminals who think Muggle baiting and assault are fun and games will not stop me from keeping the peace. They forfeit the right of our protection as soon as they chose to engage in criminal activity.”

Harry thought about it, it seemed fair; Criminals should face the consequences of getting caught. Assault was not fun. Dudley was like that, a disgusting slob and a moronic bully. He deserved to be locked up. He forfeited the right of freedom when he beat up ten-year-olds. Personally, Harry would like to see him caught by the Magical Authorities. That would scare him senseless, after his previous encounters with Wizards. Harry hoped that a Muggle jail would scare a wizard in much the same way. That might put an end to the ongoing violence. With no way to Apparate in or out, no wand and after being checked by an Auror, there would be no escape. Without their wand, most wizards were nothing. As for his stance on Muggles, Harry thought Crouch was right to be honest, and to omit the facts he left out. Exaggerating Christine’s part was a good idea. She had been very helpful. Following the explosion, she had stayed at Hogwarts for three days while her minor burns healed. Magical remedies work much slower on Muggles, as they cannot react with the Magic in the body as they do with wizards. After that she was returned to Cambridge. Harry managed to convince Dumbledore not to Obliviate her. To the best of Harry’s knowledge, she was still working in the Physics department, though she had announced her intention to take a part-time degree in Occult Studies. Personally, Harry thought she should come to Hogwarts to teach Muggle Studies or at least the basics of science and maths to Purebloods. But then again, he didn’t want to put her in the path of the storm. Meanwhile, Crouch had picked another person to ask a question. Harry cringed as he saw who it was.

“Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet,” she said calmly. “Minister, you mentioned that a Muggle was involved in the Ministry’s search. I can appreciate you bending the rules to get the job done - it was an emergency, after all. However I have heard a rumour that Dr Gaynes was not the only civilian you brought in. There is rumour of Harry Potter’s involvement, though no comment has been made about which side he worked for. Could you please elaborate?” *Does this woman have it in for me?* wondered Harry. Did she exist solely to slander him? She even led the Minister with the question, trying to get him to say that Harry was evil. Was she planning a big ‘I told you so’ story about his return to darkness? *Shite!* Just as Harry was beginning to be accepted. He really hated that woman.

“It is true that Mr. Potter was involved in the attack,” said Crouch. There was a gasp around the room, and the sound of scratching quills on parchment. Harry felt himself begin to blush. He hoped Crouch would not get him to give a speech. Harry was definitely not in the mood for it right now. Luckily, the Minister made no move to do so, but instead went straight into the cover story that had been arranged. “I felt Harry Potter’s familiarity with the criminal

underworld might have been an advantage, so I brought him in to advise. As his past shows us, he is more of a doer than a talker. Might I remind you all that Mr. Potter is under twenty-four hour surveillance, and his wand is capped so that we know every spell he utters as well as its location. At no time was the public in any danger. However, these security measures proved unnecessary. Mr. Potter travelled to Cambridge to recruit Dr Gaynes. It was a joint effort between the two of them that discovered the target of the bomb. Between them they saved many lives, and even attempted to disarm the bomb right up until ten seconds before it went off. I have also heard that Mr. Potter himself was gravely injured in the attempt and that there is a chance he will be permanently disfigured; his heart stopped temporarily, however, he is now alive and well. You call him the Dark Knight, but he came selflessly to our rescue in our hour of need. I call him the White Knight. I would like to extend a personal thanks to Mr. Potter, wherever he is.”

Harry blushed slightly at the White Knight comment. He was hardly the romantic ideal of a knight in shining armour. Harry couldn't tell if Crouch had actually noticed him or not, but was grateful to him for not dragging him into this. His thanks were noted. At the front, Crouch picked another reporter to ask a question.

“Gloria Herringford, *Magical Times*,” said a short woman with a ridiculous blonde perm that would have looked disastrous even in the eighties. “Even with the new Auror Complex complete, do you not feel that too much has been lost, not only in terms of records and equipment, but with morale as well? Some things are irreplaceable, do you not agree?”

“There is an element of truth to your words,” conceded Crouch. Crouch was more honest than Fudge, Harry noticed, but he wasn't convinced that honesty with regard to weakness was a good idea. “Many records were destroyed or contaminated when the bomb went off. However, Auror recruitment is at the highest point it has been in nearly five years. Equipment can and is being replaced. As for morale, I view this atrocity as a calling. It goes to show that these people who allegedly fight for the glorification of wizard kind are nothing of the sort. They are terrorists, common criminals with no regard for life. This should be a calling to every free citizen in the country. Don't stand for this, be heard, show You-Know-Who that he cannot steal our way of life!” Harry thought that was quite inspiring, right up to the point where he called him You-Know-Who. A common criminal whose name he still feared to use. Not a good sign.

Instantly there were twenty hands in the air. Questions were being shouted out. Harry could see Crouch's frustration. The Minister did not hesitate; he rose to his feet.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I asked for the questions to be orderly. You have failed in this, so I am leaving now. Good day.” With that, Crouch turned to his right and stepped down from the stage. The noise from the jackals only became louder. Crouch shot one final glare at them. As he did so, his eyes fell on Harry, sitting at the back. Harry pulled the mask aside, long enough for Crouch to see his face.

Crouch raised a hand and beckoned Harry over to him. Putting the mask back on, Harry crossed through the dispersing crowd quickly, keeping his head down to avoid recognition. He reached the Minister's side, but before he could say a word, the Minister held up a hand to silence him.

“Not here,” he said simply. He led Harry into the lift and pressed the button to go down. The doors opened a few seconds later to reveal a huge room that stank of paint, solvents and God-knows what else. There were workmen in white overalls all over the room. Harry could see stairs going up to another level against one wall. There were corridors leading away from the main floor.

“Welcome to the Auror Complex,” said Crouch softly.

*It's got to be a speed record,* thought Harry. The room was huge. How could they have built a building so fast? Even working around the clock, it was a magnificent accomplishment. He thought back to the Minister's speech. Arsenal, training facility, medi-centre, gym, enough cells to rival Azkaban. This was just what the Aurors needed.

“It should be ready soon,” said Crouch. Dawlish and Bones stepped out into the new complex. “Some of the cells are already occupied. Fewer guards are needed, of course; with all the solvents in the air, the prisoners are as high as kites. The ventilation system hasn't been installed yet.” Harry was about to point out that solvents abuse can kill, but he was sure Crouch would not lose a night's sleep if a Death Eater died because of it. Harry caught one last glimpse before the doors slid closed.

“I thought it was off site, somewhere secret,” said Harry.

“It is,” said Crouch. “The lift is fitted with a Portkey-style device that transports it all the way over here, over two hundred miles. This way, the button to the Aurors still works. As for the old Auror Division, it is completely sealed; lead has been plastered all over it. Even the lift shaft is sealed.”

“Good,” said Harry.

“Your help was invaluable, Harry,” said Crouch as the lift continued down. Harry noticed the use of his first name but did not comment on it. “How's it all going?”

“In what context?”

“School, family, all the things you couldn't do over the last year,” said Crouch. Harry was naturally suspicious. Was he hunting for a confession? Or softening him up before asking for something? Crouch had invited him in and was being civil – he must want something.

“Fine,” said Harry. “I am not in lessons, but I think I'm settling in fine.” He couldn't really go into detail. Animagus training was off-the-record, so Crouch must never know. Not to mention that he was breaking every rule by being a Phoenix. Unspeakables would probably put him through all sorts of tests if they found out.

Just then the doors opened. Crouch stepped out, and Harry fell into step beside him. They walked to the end of the corridor and turned left. After about twenty feet there was a pair of double doors on the right wall, which slid open as Crouch approached. Harry followed him

through the doors and into a large room that reflected the power of the office it housed. The ceiling was high and cavernous and Harry wouldn't be surprised if the room echoed. There were two rows of three desks, with a witch or wizard sitting at each of the six desks. Along the back was a row of filing cabinets above which were shelves filled with parchment and files. Halfway along the left wall a staircase that protruded out by about ten feet, allowing for a shallow climb up to a doorway made of glass. The bottom ten feet of the wall were just like the others, but from about ten feet up, the entire wall was made of glass. Harry could see another room through it. Artwork covered three of the walls. Harry did not consider himself an art buff, but he recognised a copy of the Mona Lisa, Monet's Water Lilies and what looked like a smaller representation of Michelangelo's David. These had to be copies. The real Mona Lisa was in the Louvre, wasn't it? There were other portraits he didn't recognise, but he imagined that if they were legitimate - and they appeared to be so - they would be worth one hell of a lot. The ceiling of the room was enchanted to show stars, much like Hogwarts. A huge ornate chandelier that hung from the ceiling seemed to be made of over one thousand diamonds - a priceless antique. Beneath it, the secretaries stood as the Minister entered. What did one man need six secretaries for? Harry shrugged the question off. He glanced around the Minister's own office. He wondered how many people had entered this room. Security was pretty tight these days.

Harry followed the Minister into the room. He quickly turned left and headed to the metal stairs that came out of the left-hand wall. Crouch didn't spare a sideways glance at any of the secretaries, except to bark at the last one on the left, a young witch with red hair and a purple silk scarf, demanding tea.

Harry followed Crouch up the stairs. The Minister pushed open the glass door and marched through. Harry was a step behind and found himself looking into what had to be Crouch's office. It was a large room, but not cavernous. The wall through which he had come was made entirely of glass. Through it, the Minister and Harry could see the goings on below. Crouch probably was not one to tolerate slacking and time wasting. However, Harry still couldn't comprehend why he needed six secretaries.

The carpet was thick and a pale cream colour. The Minister made no sound as he crossed to his large desk. There were several piles of parchment, an oil lamp, some quills and ink and a few ornaments on Crouch's desk, but it seemed very organised. The remaining three walls that were not glass were painted white. There was an old record player on a black cabinet to Harry's left. Above it was a landscape picture that reminded Harry of Aunt Marge's farm in Devon. To his right were two large leather sofas with a matching armchair gathered around a glass-topped coffee table. Behind the desk at the back were bookshelves filled with books and ornaments. There was also what Harry was sure was a mini-fridge, and judging by the whisky tumblers on the top, it housed a variety of alcohol. Since Crouch had demanded tea, Harry was sure he was not going to get any booze today.

Crouch dropped the pile of parchment onto his desk and then marched over to the sofas. He sat on one and gestured for Harry to sit on the other. Harry dropped onto the sofa in the Minister of Magic's boudoir.

"What do you think?" asked Crouch, gesturing to the room.

“Impressive,” said Harry. “A little up-market compared to what I’m used to.” Just then there was a sharp knock on the door. Knocking on glass gave a much colder, clinical sound than knocking on a wooden door. Something seemed distinctly un-homely about it to Harry. The red-haired witch entered carrying a tray with a teapot, two cups, saucers, and spoons, a bowl of sugar cubes, a jug of milk and a plate of biscuits.

Crouch did the honours and soon Harry was happily sipping away on a cup of tea. Crouch was doing the same opposite him.

“So, Harry,” said Crouch, leaning back on the sofa. “As I said outside, I would like to offer my personal thanks for helping us contain the destruction the bomb could have potentially caused.” Harry nodded. “I was watching you during the Press-Conference. I could see disapproval in your eyes for some of it.” Harry hadn’t been aware he had been spotted, nor how Crouch could see his eyes at that distance through a mask, but he didn’t argue.

“It’s nothing personal, Minister,” said Harry. “It’s politics. I don’t understand it all, but I understand the reason for it.”

“Only half the war is fought by soldiers,” said Crouch. “The other half by politicians. We must win the hearts and minds of people.”

“My uncle once said that a politician was someone who was willing you give *your* life for *his* country,” said Harry. “Again, I understand the need for politics, but I don’t like it.”

“It is an ugly business,” conceded Crouch. “But life is simpler for a soldier. We give him a gun and tell him whom to shoot. All he has to do is pull the trigger.”

“And risk his life for it,” objected Harry.

“Yes,” admitted Crouch. “But our war is not without risks.”

“There’s a difference between risking one’s job and popularity, and risking one’s life and torture if you’re caught.” Crouch nodded again, but Harry could see that Crouch was becoming annoyed, so he decided not to argue further.

“We have to keep people believing in the cause. To do so, we must do some pretty awful things. Take Dolores Umbridge, for instance. You accused her of being a Death Eater at your trial. Albus Dumbledore then wanted her arrested to advance the war effort, but I knew, as a politician, that the scandal created by a Death Eater penetrating the Minister of Magic’s office would break what little respect the Ministry has left. The sheer implication that we are helpless would be disastrous; people would join You-Know-Who out of fear. So I allowed her to stay in place. We fed her some false information. Once she was dead, I had to keep up the pretence by telling the world that she was a martyr. It really eats me up inside, calling scum like her a hero, but it has to be done, to prevent panic. A person is smart, but people are dumb. Management training calls it ‘Group Think’.”

“I know the feeling,” said Harry, thinking back to the hate mail he and Hermione had gotten during his fourth year. People by-and-large were stupid and tended to believe whatever they read. Scandal was not about whether the rumours were true or not, but what the very implication could do to the reputations of those involved. Facts were set aside for irrational opinions and crappy journalism. Fiction was more fun than fact, and the tabloids loved to stir up trouble.

“So you played up the capabilities of the Aurors, to keep moral high?” asked Harry.

“Partially,” said Crouch, sipping his tea. “The new Complex will be up soon. It is well equipped and the recruitment *is* on the rise. However, records were destroyed in the attack. Much of our information about criminals is lost, everything from last known-address to criminal records are now incinerated. We have to compile these records all over again. Already with the top profile fugitives, we have had the case officer recall what he can from memory, but we have lost twenty years of intelligence. If this war comes down to who knows what about whom, we’ve already lost.”

“Obviously, you can’t go out there and say that,” said Harry, more to himself than to Crouch. “Realistically, how effective can the Aurors be now?”

“Variable,” said Crouch, frustration clear. “Investigative powers are limited because many of our files were destroyed. The Archives are being used to reassemble some files, along with Azkaban’s records for former inmates, but not all of them have copies in the archives, and it all takes time. Now we are dealing with the aftermath. We are defending against attacks rather than preventing them. We are hunting the effects, not the cause, because our investigative powers are failing. It doesn’t help that these *animals* are taking it on themselves to attack Muggles.”

“How much of what I’ve read in the *Prophet* is accurate?” asked Harry. He had read the reports about attacks on Muggles by wizards with no criminal records.

“It’s worse than that,” said Crouch. “It’s not even the Death Eaters; they have been quiet since the bomb. How can we go about fighting them when the rest of the country, those we are trying to protect, are acting like Death Eaters? These attacks are getting out of hand. Every gang in the country is taking it upon themselves to wage a war on Muggles. In London, West End gangs have killed twelve Muggles this week alone and Merlin knows how many assaults they’ve orchestrated. It’s not only them; groups of drunk wizards seem to find it amusing, students especially. Magical students at Muggle Universities are out of control. Students are supposed to steal road-signs and traffic cones, wake up with hangovers in bushes somewhere. That is the stereotype. Not blowing up cars, vanishing clothes and that kind of thing. Muggle baiting used to be relatively easy to cope with. Regurgitating toilets is one thing, but the recent stuff...Arthur Weasley can’t cope. I have given him a team of twenty Aurors and still they are overrun.”

Harry sat in silence, assimilating the information. It was going to get worse. He couldn’t think of anything to do. Couldn’t people just be helpful and leave it to law enforcement to get them through? Could they not see how much trouble this caused? The Aurors couldn’t fight

Voldemort if all their attention was on these common criminals. Regurgitating toilets was Muggle baiting, murder was Voldemort's fun and game, but the rest of the population seemed to have found some middle ground. According to the *Prophet*, every gang in Knockturn Alley, every group of wizards out on the piss seemed to end up in a confrontation with Muggles. Assaults, destruction of property, turning lawns orange with a few expletives written on in blue seemed to be quite popular, according to the *Prophet*. In reality it was much worse.

"Muggles and Wizards live in such close proximity," said Crouch, shaking his head. "This kind of hatred could easily start a riot. Walking among those you believe to have attacked you is not easy."

"What is being done?" asked Harry. "I heard about leaving them to Muggle jails, but what is the Ministry doing to catch people and maintain order?"

"The first day after the attack, when the monitoring equipment was lost," began Crouch, "we put a telephone number in the *Prophet* that links straight to the Aurors. Not everyone knew how to use a telephone, so it was accompanied by a guide. Anyone who witnesses an attack can report it straight to us. We are getting over one hundred and fifty calls daily. It seems that wizards and witches have taken it on themselves to strike out at Muggles. Prank-callers are sending Aurors all over the country. We are being run off our feet. If this doesn't stop soon, the Aurors are going to collapse. When we show up, they Disapparate, and we can no longer track them. Portkeys are the same. Those we catch get a slap on the wrist and then are back on the street in forty-eight hours."

The only thing Harry could think of was a Nazi-style tactic of shooting on sight. A no-tolerance policy might help - increasing penalties and putting Aurors on street corners to preserve the peace. The trouble was that that plan sacrificed the very freedom they were trying to protect. It could even make Voldemort look like a way out to people sick of this violence. Was that what he wanted? There was no reasonable way out of this, not until the Auror Complex came on-line.

"And that's just the half of it," said Crouch bitterly. "Downing Street are seriously pissed. First we tell them there is this terrorist at large. We fail to capture him after twenty years. He kills and we seem to be doing nothing. They do not understand his power, influence or how our world works. They think he can be caught by any old person, and that we are incompetent. They don't think much of us. Then he goes and defeats all their security and makes off with a nuclear bomb. Suddenly, our entire race is more dangerous than they realised. We fail again and a nuclear bomb detonates on British soil. Naturally, it's all our fault; we raised him, and failed to stop him. We are pretty high on the Downing Street Shit-List."

"Surely they can see that..."

"That what?" asked Crouch. "They don't know the nature of magic, or how he can evade our searches and theirs. They think we should be able to stop him. A little hypocritical - they never caught Jack the Ripper, we did. We caught the Yorkshire Ripper in the eighties and let them take the credit, and now we are incompetent. Major doesn't understand us. He wants this

threat taken care of, and since he doesn't know how we work, he assumes we are inept. Now of course, we are under more strain."

"Why?"

"All these attacks," said Crouch. "When they started, we went around and used memory charms. As the numbers grew, we could no longer continue this. We had to admit we have a problem to Downing Street. It is human nature to fear what we do not understand. Naturally, this wave of violence was racially based, so Major interpreted this as our community rising up against his. We tried to smooth it over, but every attack fuels more hatred in the government for us. They want this to stop or they will respond with lethal force. Then all hell will break loose and we will have a full-scale war on our hands. We originally pulled strings to get those who got caught out of jail to face Ministry justice. All Muggle jails and police stations are warded to prevent magic and break-outs. Now we just leave them there. Hopefully, when we publish stories about Muggle jails - with a few embellishments - in the *Prophet*, they will die down."

"What stories? What embellishments?"

"Advice not to drop the soap," said Crouch calmly, sipping his tea. Harry smirked to himself. Shock tactics would hopefully work. Better than his Nazi-style idea, but if it failed, what other option did they have? They were nearing the brink of war. The time for half-measures was over.

"The era of the diplomat is fast dwindling," said Crouch. "Soon, I fear we may end up with violence."

"But to train the Aurors to take on Muggle weapons..." began Harry.

"Would be seen as an act of war by the Muggles," continued Crouch. "And the media would circulate rumours of a coming war and even though that is not our intent, that is what we would have. Muggles outnumber us fifty-to-one, and their technology is more advanced than many wizards realise." Harry was certain he detected something even remorseful about that last comment, but he held his tongue.

"What use is a Protego Shield against a Harrier Jump Jet and Sidewinder missiles?" asked Crouch. "We don't have Anti-tank spells."

*Though we could lift and throw them around,* thought Harry. Not that he had even levitated anything that large before. *And vanish or destroy their guns, transfigure them into carrots or something.* Could it really come to that? Thousands, maybe millions would die. That war was unthinkable. Surely Voldemort was mad enough to start it?

"Would Aurors have a chance against the SAS?" asked Harry.

“I couldn’t say,” said Crouch. “Shields can stop solid objects, but you get no warning with a gun. The bullet has struck before you hear the bang. At least with a spell you can hear the incantation and see it coming. We used to run a training scheme with the SBS.”

“*Special Boat Service?*” asked Harry.

“Yes,” confirmed Crouch. “The SAS’s even more secret sister organisation.”

“Who’s better?” asked Harry.

“They are essentially the same thing, just different governing body,” said Crouch. “The army owns the SAS, the Navy owns the marines and hence the SBS. The SAS are more famous after that thing with the Iranian Embassy in nineteen-eighty, but the SBS go through the SAS training and selection and then do a hell of a lot of canoeing, diving and stuff like that as well. Anyhow, this is irrelevant. The point is that we used to train with them on assaults on buildings, close protection, hand-to-hand combat, explosives, surveillance and all manners of espionage and combat. That was part of how specialist the Aurors are. Once You-Know-Who started creating havoc, Downing Street decided that we were too much of a risk to continue being trained by their best Special Forces. I visited their base in Poole at the time they were training the Aurors. Those guys are serious. They scared the hell out of me.”

“So bottom line,” concluded Harry, “is that we need to stop Voldemort, *and* put an end to these muggings, before the Muggles put an end to all of us.”

“Delicately put,” said Crouch.

“Minister,” said Harry. “I appreciate you being frank with me, but I do not believe you called me down here just to tell me all this.”

“True,” said Crouch. Harry saw him give the faintest trace of a smile. “We are at such a point that if we do not take extreme action, we will all suffer. The Ministry is full of spies and now with all this, we are under too much pressure from inside and from out. I have a plan to remedy this, but that is in the future. Right now, we need to use every resource available.”

“What’s the point?”

“The point is that I have removed the cap from your wand,” said Crouch. “You are no longer under constant surveillance.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“I spoke to Dumbledore,” said Crouch. “He assured me you were on board. He also informed me that you were taking an interest in teaching duelling at Hogwarts.”

“Yes I am,” said Harry. “As long as Snape manages not to veto the club.”

“I am giving you full Ministry backing,” said Crouch. “Off the record, of course. Money, resources and even time with Mad-Eye if you need it.”

“You want me to build you an army?” asked Harry, reading between the lines. “The idea is for them to defend themselves, not to fight a war for you.” He remembered he had had to justify this to himself in much the same way. He too had considered making them soldiers.

“I want you to put enough duelling skills into the upper years to cut down on Auror training time,” said Crouch. “Also, it will enable people to fight off attackers, help stranded Muggles and may even inspire hope amongst our youth. Now, there are obviously rules, Harry. No Dark Arts, for one.”

“Any Dark Arts in front of me and I will personally make sure that person finds their way to the showers at HM Prison Dartmoor with a slippery block of soap,” said Harry.

“Good,” said Crouch. “They are our future, so let’s make it a good one.”

“Very poetic,” said Harry. “Thanks for the tea, but I must be going. My sister’s trial should have finished by now.”

“Trial?” asked Crouch.

“Malfoy is filing for assault charges,” said Harry. “I hit him when I was on the train. Dumbledore modified his memory to stop him from telling Voldemort I had switched sides. Officially, he blames Rose for his injuries.”

“And unofficially?”

“He wanted Rose in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement when the bomb went off,” said Harry. “Since she survived, he now has to sit through a trial he has no hope of winning, even with his gold.”

“Are you positive that he is a Death Eater?” asked Crouch.

“Yes,” said Harry. “But we can’t pull him.”

“Why not?” asked Crouch, the vein on his temple throbbing.

“If you do, two things may happen,” said Harry. “First option: Voldemort will protect him, and since he controls the Wizengamot, Malfoy would walk and then probably sue the Ministry for millions. Option two: Malfoy would confess everything. He would go to Azkaban for maybe a week before Voldemort breaks him out. In addition, his confession would include bribing all departments of the Ministry, recruiting spies in the Ministry and Hogwarts’ board of directors: the scandal would destroy everyone. I hate letting him remain out there, but we have no choice, yet.”

“I thought you didn’t understand politics,” said Crouch. “You have a very shrewd mind for this kind of thing.”

“I didn’t work this out,” said Harry. “I was angry when Rose almost died and I ranted to my dad. It was he who explained why we can’t arrest Malfoy yet.”

“I must give him a pay rise,” said Crouch thoughtfully. “I really must go through the Aurors, find a team of loyal, elite Aurors. Someone I can trust...maybe...never mind. I will make sure no legal reprimands come to your sister, Harry.”

Harry thanked the Minister and drained the last of his tea.

“Good luck, Harry,” said Crouch as Harry opened the glass door. Harry debated whether or not to tell him about his son. After a second’s pause, he decided against it. Angering him when he was being helpful was not going to help. For now, let the Order handle Crouch’s son. Harry nodded and quickly made his way back up to the entrance hall where Rose and his father were waiting.

“Where have you been?” asked Rose as soon as she saw him.

“Tea with the Minister,” said Harry. “How about you? How’d it go?”

“Great,” said Rose. “Ginny, Hermione and me had to testify. Malfoy didn’t have a single witness. He looked fit to burst. He never thought he’d have to sit through it - he hadn’t prepared anything. Even his wife, a QC could do nothing. He even ended up having to pay a two hundred galleon fine for wasting Wizengamot time.”

Harry smirked slightly to himself as they headed for the fireplace. After James had gone though, Rose leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“Party, Gryffindor common room, eight o’clock, you’ll regret it if you don’t show!” she whispered. She shot Harry a devious glance before stepping into the fire.

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What the hell are you doing, Harry? he asked himself as he stood before the Fat Lady. Through the wall he could hear the music of the party, presumably in full swing. Knowing Gryffindor as he did, he knew that Seamus would be all over the shop, Dean would be showing off his ‘moves’, Ron would be arguing with Hermione and Ginny would be chatting amiably with her year-mates. Then again, since this was a whole different universe, he could be way off. Except for Seamus - he was definitely going to be smacked off his tits.

It was simple. All he had to do was give her the password; she would swing open and he would be in. Was it so hard? No. So why did he hesitate? He did want to see them all again, especially Neville. He had never gotten around to giving Frank the present he had prepared. He

had worked so hard on it, but suddenly in light of the nuclear threat, it had slipped his mind. He had not seen Frank since.

Harry could picture his friends' faces in his mind. He wanted to see them again, but for some bizarre reason he felt so scared. Part of him wanted to hide from them. Seeing them again only made him feel homesick. Although he had everything he wanted here, (short of Voldemort being six feet under), he did not truly belong here. The people on the other side of the door were not his real friends. They were shadows of their real selves, the same only in appearance. Harry had befriended Ginny again but she was the only one. He cared about Rose, but as for the rest of them...he knew he wouldn't know them. They were different people, and to top that, they all thought he was a monster. They thought he was a killer. They wouldn't come near him; every conversation would be awkward. He knew what would happen when he walked through the door. Everyone would stop as they noticed him. He would be like an exhibition. Everyone would pause and stare, eyes wide with fear and those with heart would have hands on wands. He would be as hated as had been when he emerged into the Great Hall. Hannah was not the only one with a grudge against him. Surely it would be better for Rose, for the others, for the whole party that he not attend? He would spoil the mood; rain on her parade, as it were. What right did he have to ruin it for her?

Harry turned on his heel, and headed back up towards the Staff Accommodation wing. He had gone three paces when something stopped him. This was his sister he was talking about. She was family. Family were supposed to stick together. He was expected to be there. It would break her heart if he did not turn up. It wasn't hard; all he had to do was take the first step and then be himself. A chill ran down his spine. Harry realised that he was sweating beneath his jumper. Again he had gone for the Muggle look with black trousers and a dark blue woolly jumper over a black t-shirt, and his mask firmly in place. He felt naked without it. It was like a sanctuary for him. No one could see through it; he was safe inside. Maybe it would be better for him to have left it at home, but firstly his hair was still not back to normal and secondly he was still unhappy to show the other Harry's face. He was completely unarmed, leaving even his wand in the Potions Dungeon. Following the bomb blast and his magical recovery, Harry had moved from the Room of Requirement to his mother's rooms in the Staff Quarters. He had been given a room that was essentially an annex to hers. It had been decided by Dumbledore that he should stay with her. Harry sensed Flamel's hand in the machine, but made no comment nor complaint in it. He would rather stay there than at Gryffindor Tower for the very reason he was now struggling to step into the Tower.

Totally unarmed, unprotected and at the mercy of those inside, Harry stood before the Fat Lady.

Do it now, Harry, before you chicken out. Don't hesitate. Do it!

"Lionheart," said Harry, his voice a hoarse whisper. As the Fat Lady swung open, Harry's legs felt like jelly. They seemed to resist his will to move. He walked shakily forward, emerging into the room. As expected, the party was in full swing. A banner reading 'Congratulations, Rose' was hanging on the far wall, with the letters flashing different colours every few seconds. The drinks were running free. Pumpkin juice was available, but Harry got the

impression from some of the dancing, people sitting around the edges of the room and the empty Butterbeer bottles that there was more on offer. He could see several bottles of other spirits on a table near the back. Sure enough, Seamus was in the vicinity of the alcohol. Some people were eating biscuits, cakes and other snacks. Presumably, someone had paid a visit to the kitchen. The Wireless was blasting out some cheesy old track to which some idiot in the fourth year was attempting to break-dance to.

Harry only had the chance to observe for four seconds before the inevitable happened. Someone, he wasn't entirely sure who, spotted him. Immediately, those around them noticed. It spread over the room, and within another two seconds, the room was silent except for the wireless, which soon joined the room.

Every eye was on Harry, just as he had expected. No one moved a muscle. His mask gave him a haunted appearance, yet it also protected him, if only in his mind. His cracked sanity was grateful for a place to hide.

I knew this would happen, Harry cursed to himself. Why the hell did I actually turn up? What was I thinking?

He could feel the blood flowing to his cheeks as he stood in the doorway. He knew he should say something, but words escaped him. He opened his mouth but then quickly closed it. Stammering 'err' over and over like a gaping fish was not constructive.

"Hi," he said, realising immediately after how stupid it sounded. They weren't expecting Shakespeare, but he could have done a little better than that. Oh, God, why did I come, he wondered. This was just what he was afraid of. He was the centre of attention, not Rose - and it was her do.

"You came!" said a voice to his right. Harry turned to see Rose, who had been talking to another Gryffindor in her year.

"Apparently, I'd *'regret it for the rest of my days'* if I didn't, according to a certain young lady who shall remain nameless."

"I never dreamed you'd actually show," she said, putting her cup down.

"I nearly didn't," conceded Harry. "Scared to show my face." He gestured to the mask.

"Do you still need that bloody thing?" asked Ginny.

"Apparently," lied Harry. "According to she-who-must-be-obeyed. That and a month of rest, to which I told her to do something I would never repeat in front of Professor McGonagall." There was a murmur of laughter. He didn't know why he decided to lie. Maybe he was scared - more scared of her than he was of Voldemort. Maybe he just didn't want to show his face in its current state, and this was a means to an end. He was trying to be honest with his family, but he

found lying so easy - maybe it was Flamel's training. The world seemed so many shades of grey when the Light Side taught him to deceive.

"Well don't just stand there, idiot child," said Rose, "get a drink and join the party." She grabbed him by the collar and led him to where the drinks were being poured. As he passed, the noise began to rise as groups began to speak again, albeit in much quieter voices.

"What do you want?" asked Seamus cautiously.

"Anything non-alcoholic?" asked Harry.

"You're not t-total, are you?" asked Seamus, in a tone that suggested Harry had just blasphemed.

"No, but I don't think you'd like me when I'm drunk," said Harry, smiling at the Irishman's jovial persona. Maybe he wasn't so different. "Someone might get hurt."

"Going to be moving back in any time soon?" asked Seamus, pouring him a drink.

"Not that I'm aware of," said Harry. "Have you really missed me that much?" Seamus gave him a wry smile. Harry was tempted to add 'didn't think so' but held his tongue. He took the drink and sniffed it. It didn't smell alcoholic, but he didn't trust Seamus. "What is it?"

"Verailia Sap Spritzer," said Seamus. "No alcohol, but high in caffeine." Harry sipped the drink. It was cold, fizzy, but sweet and tasty. He thanked Seamus, then turned and glanced around the room. He saw old friends, new faces and many more besides. He easily spotted the new first years he had never met before. They were keeping much to themselves with their drinks, which Harry hoped Seamus had been sensible when he had poured. The sixth years were dotted around the room talking to various groups. Those he assumed to be the Quidditch team were together, Katie Bell the supposed captain. She was the only surviving member of the team he had started with. It would be the end of an era when she left and Harry would be alone. After he left, who would take over? Sloper, Kirke or whoever else the captain in his world, probably Katie being the eldest, had chosen. Of course, the question hinged on him getting back in a fit state to play Quidditch to a world that an opponent-less Voldemort had not yet taken over.

"Reminiscing?" asked a familiar voice. Hermione was standing next to him. His mind had been so far away he had never heard her approach.

"After a fashion," said Harry, sipping his drink.

"How can someone without a memory reminisce?" she asked.

"I didn't say I'd lost every memory," said Harry quickly, clearing his mind. It was so much harder outside the silent surroundings of the Room of Requirement. Lying to his friend was also harder because of his desire to be honest. He fought not only to keep a straight face, but

also to keep his mind clear. He doubted that she was a Legilimens, but he wouldn't put anything past her.

Concentrate, Harry! Yes/No answers, mind clear, no emotion, think of the waves.

"Dumbledore trusts you," said Hermione, softly. Harry nearly snorted into his drink with the irony, but managed to contain himself. "If I had not seen you fight a vampire for a few first-years and myself, that would not be enough. I want to believe you, Harry," she said turning to face him. "But you've got to tell me something. I know you are hiding something, and that you haven't lost your memory. You know who you really are. I just want to know why you swapped sides."

"Hermione," said Harry smiling slightly. "You really are the brightest witch of your age." She blushed slightly under the comment. "But you are also only seventeen. There is a war going on, and the knowledge you ask for will make you a target. If anyone found out that you knew, you'd be dead before you hit the ground. I know this is a tall order, but please stay away, for your own safety."

"You ask me to trust you blindly?" she asked.

"I know it's a lot to ask..." began Harry.

"It's too much," finished Hermione. Harry remembered the other Hermione and her disapproval of being asked for blind trust. She too had not liked it, but she had known him well enough to do it. This Hermione did not. He just hoped she didn't go running to Dumbledore and tell him. Who knows what the old man would do?

"Hermione," said Harry. "I want to tell you, I really do, but I can't. I hate who I am and what I've become, but I can't change it and right now a monster is what's needed. Please, don't press further. As soon as it's safe, you have my word, I will tell you." She gave him an appraising look, and he was fairly sure she didn't believe him, but she didn't push further. She excused herself and disappeared up the stairs.

"Have a seat," said a voice as a hand took Harry's. Rose guided him into an empty chair. She seemed determined to get him to interact with the Gryffindors. Harry found himself in a circle of chairs along with the Gryffindor Quidditch team and the rest of the fifth and sixth years. Ron was explaining to the others how his father had managed to secure tickets to England's World Cup qualifying match against the People's Republic of China. Apparently he had once again gotten top box tickets.

"Ever play Quidditch?" Ron asked Harry, taking him by surprise.

"I...er...yeah," stammered Harry. "Seems like an eternity ago."

"What position?"

“Seeker,” said Harry.

“That’s Ginny’s position,” said Ron, eying him with an unreadable expression.

“Good for her,” said Harry, sipping his drink. It occurred to him how trivial Quidditch seemed compared to nuclear bombs, wars, and Dark Lords. Still it was little things like that that kept him sane, that kept him knowing who he really was. Were it not for the people sitting before him, he would have cracked, and with his new ‘skills’ would be no better than the bastard he had replaced.

“Not thinking about playing, then?” asked Ginny.

“I’m a tad busy at the moment,” said Harry. “Things to do, people to see, et cetera.”

“Coming to the game on Saturday?” asked Ron. “It’s Slytherin.”

“Why not?” said Harry. He realised it was really hot with all the people in the room. He put his drink down and pulled his jumper over his head, taking his t-shirt embarrassingly with it.

With the jumper over his eyes, he couldn’t see anything, but he heard the wolf-whistle. Blushing furiously, Harry yanked the jumper off him; luckily it didn’t dislodge the mask. He shot an annoyed glance at the others, but he had no idea who it had been.

Luckily, the conversation went on, without Harry having to endure too much. He still got a few glances sent his way, but on the whole, the others were beginning to warm him.

“Chocolate?” offered a girl standing behind him. She held out a small sweet, wrapped in foil. “Made them myself,” she added. Politely, Harry took the chocolate from her.

“Sorry, you are?” he asked her.

“Romilda Vane,” she replied with a smile. Harry had spoken to her a few times, but didn’t really know her. He unwrapped the sweet, but then froze. He stared at the sweet. It appeared ordinary, but his Phoenix senses were going haywire. There was magic in these sweets that there shouldn’t be. She had made them herself, so what had she done to them?

“On second thought,” said Harry quickly, “I’ll save it for later.” She looked a tad put out, but not hostile. It was not a poison, but it was some sort of potion or spell. At first, Harry thought it was a WWW product, but she had claimed to have made them herself. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

“Come on, grumpy-pants,” said Rose, taking Harry by the wrist and pulling him to his feet.

“What?” he protested, instantly.

“You are coming to dance,” said Rose.

“Oh, hell no!” said Harry quickly, sitting back down. Rose shot him an irritated glare and grabbed his wrist again. Ginny was sniggering behind Rose, and the others seemed to be giving him amused stares. The Dark Knight dancing? He hoped Colin didn’t have his camera handy. He would so regret it in the morning.

“Harry,” said Rose exasperatedly. “Get your arse up now, and boogie with me.”

“Absolutely not,” said Harry. “I look like a bloody frog in a blender.” He was blushing furiously, but there was no way he was dancing. He had made an arse of himself at the Yule Ball and had no intention to repeat it. He considered getting drunk and then doing it, but he didn’t trust himself to drink, in case he snapped at someone.

“Now worse than Ron,” said Rose. Harry defiantly shook his head. “Whose party is this?” she asked, giving him a glare to rival that of her mother. Suddenly two arms slipped under his and across his chest. Seamus was standing over the back of the chair, his arms around Harry.

“Come on, big guy,” he said in a slurred voice. “I’ll put on Night Fever.”

Bollocks, thought Harry as Seamus and Rose literally dragged him to where they were dancing. It might not have been so bad if everyone hadn’t stopped and stared.

The party went on for another two hours, and Harry felt as he left that evening that things had taken a step in the right direction. Aside from the Vane girl trying to slip him a potion, and his appalling attempt at Night fever, followed by Rose’s attempt to teach him the Macarena, the evening had passed well. Harry had spoken to all his old friends, even Ron, though Ron was more hostile here. As he made his way back home, he was sure he had made the right decision to attend.

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From the Daily Prophet...

### *WAVE OF VIOLENCE SWEEPS COUNTRY!*

*Following the detonation of a Muggle-built bomb in the Auror Division two days ago, a wave of anti-Muggle violence has spread across the country like a plague with the Areas worst affected by the violence being the big cities. These vigilante assaults are attended by Aurors, leaving the Ministry of Magic’s Law Enforcement Department under a lot of strain.*

*These attacks are unacceptable,” said Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Law Enforcement. “The attack on the Ministry had nothing to do with Muggles. These common criminals are not helping. Aurors are now under instructions to treat all attackers as Death*

*Eaters. Assault is a crime, and we will not distinguish between Muggle baiting and a full-out attack. These thugs may think they are helping, but they are driving a wedge between our community and the Muggles. They are doing exactly what You-Know-Who wants them to do. The sooner people realise this and return to their homes, the sooner this war can be won.”*

*With the Aurors effectively crippled, it seems that many of our community have started taking liberties. Assaults are becoming more common, and both the Aurors and the Police are struggling to cope. Citizens are now scared to leave the house, fearing an attack. The Ministry have issued a statement, pleading with the community to return to their homes and to remain calm, but is this enough? The violence has increased daily since the attack on the Ministry, and with the Aurors incapable of detecting illegal magic, only a handful of arrests have been made. With the public under constant watch, and with gangs taking up all the Auror’s time, what is You-Know-Who up to? The Aurors can no longer monitor him and all resources that should be trying to stop him are being used on the thugs who think they have the right to attack Muggles left, right and centre. The Ministry is stretched as it is, and it may only be a matter of time before the whole government collapses and the country plunges in anarchy.*

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The Defence Against the Dark Arts room was almost full when Harry arrived the following Friday. He had just come from an Animagus lesson with McGonagall in which he had been working on changing arms into wings and feet into claws. His limbs ached as he hobbled into the room. He felt stiff all over, and his mind was still on wings and claws.

Silence fell over the room as he entered. No longer wearing the mask, Harry’s face was enough to silence the class. His hair was back to normal and no one could ever tell he had been burned. Everyone sat in silence, staring. It seemed he had much the same effect on a class as Snape himself. His attendance at Rose’s party had boosted his standings, but he was still far from welcome in the eyes of most. The class was sixth years, so he recognised all the faces. The Slytherins were in a group towards the front-left of the room, with the Gryffindors towards the back and the right, presumably to get as far away from Snape as was possible in this room. Hermione was the only exception to this rule, sitting as a lone Gryffindor at the front on the right, away from the Slytherins and accompanied by the Ravenclaws, which made sense when Harry thought about it.

The class gazed expectantly at him, as if he was teaching the class. *How ironic*, he thought. If this lesson isn’t up to scratch then he may end up teaching a select few of them, maybe more than a select few, now that he had Crouch’s permission to build him an army. Harry was not happy about his friends being trained to fight, but war called for sacrifices.

“Are you taking this class, Potter?” drawled a voice from the direction of the Slytherins. Harry fixed him with a cold stare before replying.

“I’m just observing,” he said softly.

“Then sit and observe,” came a clipped voice from behind him as Snape strode into the room, cloak billowing out behind him as usual. A scowl was etched into his face, an expression he had not changed since Dumbledore had informed him that Harry was to be sitting in on his lesson. Dumbledore had not given a reason, but presumably Snape had read between the lines. Harry knew that Snape’s attitude would be far from positive during this lesson, but luckily Dumbledore had said that he could not take points off Harry, as he had not officially rejoined the student body yet.

Harry sank into a seat at the front, just inside the door, from which he could see everything that Snape was doing. He was two seats away from Hermione, who was sitting next to Padma Patil. Harry stole a glance at the textbook she had open. It seemed they were doing advanced duelling techniques at the moment. Harry approved of the subject material, but Snape’s teaching he had yet to see.

“Since the beginning of the year,” began Snape, forgoing any form of greeting or introduction, “you have been instructed to perform all spells non-verbally. As was said at the time, or rather quoted at the time from the textbook by Miss Granger, this is so that your adversary is unaware of the spell you have used and it reduces the time taken to cast the spell, and as such gives you an advantage in a duel. In today’s lesson you will begin Parrying. There are various stages at which a spell can be parried. We will start at the beginning; when the incantation is uttered. For today only, your opponent will be using the incantation so that you have a chance to block it. We will move on to parrying a silent attack next lesson.”

Harry did not want to be impressed. Saying he went into his lesson with an open mind was a downright lie. He wanted Snape to be as dreadful as Umbridge, but he seemed to know him stuff. As infatuated as Snape was with the Dark Arts, his breadth of knowledge was vast. But then again, his knowledge of Potions was vast but his ability to teach was only a tad better than a Blast-Ended Screwt.

Snape withdrew his wand. “The counter-curse is *Prius*, but is to be performed silently.” He demonstrated the wand movement once, and rather quickly. Harry glanced around and noticed the baffled expressions on the faces of some of the students nearer the back. Snape was going too fast in Harry’s opinion, but it was what he had expected.

“Now, to demonstrate,” continued Snape. His eyes fell instantly on Harry. “As the guest of honour, Mr. Potter, I believe you should be the one to demonstrate.” Malice flickered in his eyes. Harry should have known Snape would single him out. If he couldn’t take points, he could try and take his dignity. Harry felt a deep desire to just say no, but he was here to observe, not to disrupt. It was more of a disruption to argue than it was to demonstrate. Luckily for him, *Prius* had been one of the spells that he and Flamel had uncovered in his vast arsenal of darkness the night before. To give him his credit, Harry Potter had been quite a duellist.

Harry slowly rose to his feet and stepped forward to the front of the class, facing Snape. He drew his wand and stood waiting for the order from Snape. As much of an insult as it was to take orders from Snape now, he managed to control any desire to resist.

“Mr. Potter is now going to attack me, casting the spells aloud,” said Snape. “Watch how he will be unable to complete the spell. Potter, attack me.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” said Harry coldly, causing a muffled laugh from the Gryffindor area.

“Furnicu...” As Harry spoke, Snape flicked his wand as he had earlier. Harry felt his mouth shut. He couldn’t finish the spell. Snape’s spell had cut him off halfway through the incantation.

“Even the mighty Dark Knight cannot hex you if he cannot finish the incantation,” Snape informed the class coldly. “However, against an accomplished dueller, this spell should only be used sparingly. If you use it too often against a master, you become predictable and he or she will find a way around your defence. In this example there is an obvious way around this – observe. Potter will attempt to block this attack.”

Harry barely had time to comprehend that Snape was going to attack. As soon as he saw movement, he flicked his wand as Snape had, concentrating on the spell. It was no good, as Snape was not using the incantation. He swished his wand at Harry. Instantly, Harry felt something grab his ankle and yank it sharply upwards. The next thing he knew, he was hanging upside down, staring at Snape’s knees. He dropped his wand in surprise, which bounced out of reach.

There was a laugh from several people in the class as Harry hung upside down. He recognised it as the same spell his father had used on Snape in the Pensieve. Luckily for Harry he was wearing trousers, not robes, and had tucked his t-shirt into his trousers so even though he was upside down, he was not exposing himself as Snape had done. Harry hung upside down, shaking his head at Snape with his best ‘you are pathetic’ look on his face.

“How childish,” said Harry calmly. The blood was running to his head, but he was determined to appear at ease.

Snape shot him a look of daggers, but made no attempt to let him down. Instead he turned back to the class. As Harry hung there, face reddening and beginning to feel dizzy, he felt a deep desire to hex Snape. To do that he needed his wand, but he would not lower himself to asking Snape to release him. Harry looked at the class. Malfoy was wearing a thoughtful expression, while Parkinson was openly laughing at Harry.

Harry knew he needed to act before he was too dizzy to think. He could see his wand lying two feet away. He needed to summon it. He could do it wandlessly, but if he tried, Snape would hear and disarm him, and then he would be left to pass out. Harry knew he had to do it

wandlessly *and* silently. He had never tried it before. He had become proficient at Summoning Charms in his fourth year but he had never tried it like this and under these conditions.

He balled up his fists and closed his eyes, concentrating hard. He visualised the wand and the word in his mind. He poured every ounce of magic he could muster into his arm. He opened his eyes and extended his left arm towards the wand. *Accio wand!* his mind screamed, but no sound left his lips. His wand gave a small wobble and moved an inch towards him.

“Err, Sir...” a voice interrupted Snape. Pansy was on to what he was doing.

“Stop interrupting, Parkinson,” Snape brushed her off.

ACCIO WAND, he tried again. The wand leapt into his hand.

Finite Incantatem! he thought, aiming his wand at his feet. The spell vanished and he fell towards the ground.

Wingardium Leviosa! he thought, aiming his wand at himself. He stopped falling an inch above the ground so that Snape didn’t hear him landing. Harry righted himself and landed lightly, removing the spells. He had a deep desire to stab Snape in the back and hex him with the most embarrassing spell manageable. Maybe he should transfigure his robes into a tutu. However, he knew he shouldn’t, not here. He could embarrass Snape more by undermining him. He was definitely going to set up the DA now; Snape’s attitude had seen to that. Harry sat on the edge of Snape’s desk, glaring at his back.

He glanced down to see what was on the desk. Snape was not one to have photographs or anything remotely sentimental on his desk. All Harry saw aside from stationary was a rather worn looking textbook that had definitely seen its fair share of use. What intrigued Harry was that it was not stamped with the letters S.S., but rather E.P. Pince, perhaps? Harry assumed it was second hand or that Madam Pince’s first name began with E and it was library book.

“So take heed,” Snape was saying. “Varying your spells is the key to good duelling.”

“For example,” interrupted Harry. Snape whipped around to face him. Harry saw a flicker of surprise at the sight of him on his own two feet. “Sometimes the simplest spells are the best. *Alohomora!*” Snape sidestepped the spell, just as Harry had intended. The spell hit the cupboard behind him. The door flew open, hitting Snape sharply on the back of the head as it did so. Snape recoiled slightly.

There was a snigger from the back of the room as Harry pocketed his wand and strode back over to his seat. Snape shot him a look of daggers, but made no further comment. Harry was sure that he would call on Harry again later. Luckily, he was wearing his armour beneath his t-shirt, as he had predicted Snape would use him as a test-dummy.

After that the class was divided into pairs to practice. As it happened, there was an odd number so Harry ended up partnering Hermione, much to Snape’s disgust. As usual Hermione

was the first to get it. Harry didn't dare use anything strong against her. It took about eight goes for her to get it, with a few words of advice from Harry. He felt a tingle of pride as he helped her to do the spell. After all the years of her helping him, he was repaying her, after a fashion.

As the bell rang at the end of the lesson, Harry slipped quickly out of the room and headed up to Dumbledore's office, his mind already planning the first meeting of the new DA. Harry entered Dumbledore's office several minutes later, to find the inner circle gathered. He had just closed the door when it opened again, admitting a rather irate Snape.

"How was the lesson boys?" asked Flamel, a hint of amusement in his eyes.

"Much as I expected," said Harry icily.

"So you still wish to go ahead?" asked Dumbledore. Harry nodded.

"Are we in the middle of something, here?" asked Harry.

"Yes," said Snape. "*We* are, *you* are not, so leave."

"Severus," Dumbledore cautioned him. "Harry, do join us. This affects you too." Intrigued, Harry closed the door behind him and then leaned against the shelves around the edge of the room. Was this a secret Order meeting? After a few moments, Dumbledore continued. "This Sunday, as in the seventeenth of November, which happens to be the Minister of Magic's birthday. As such, the Ministry are holding a celebration. Most of high society will be there. The entire bottom floor of the Ministry will be converted into a ballroom for the celebrations."

"Right," said Harry slowly, unable to see the significance, unless Dumbledore wanted a surprise party.

"When you were with the Minister last Wednesday, did he mention Operation Black Watch?" asked Dumbledore. Ah, that sounded a little more relevant.

"Nope," said Harry. He didn't recall any mention of it, or anything to suggest a secret project.

"It's his latest plan, but we don't know what it is," said Dumbledore. "Kingsley?"

The Auror leaned forward in his chair, and cleared his throat. "The words he used were, 'a major change to security in the Ministry, and a re-vamp of the Aurors'," said Kingsley, rubbing his hands together. "He said the time for half-measures was over. He is planning something big, and it affects the Aurors, but beyond that we have no clue."

"He said the same to me," said Harry, beginning to piece it together. "About the time for half measures being over. I think his words were, 'the day of the diplomat is over'. I'd assume he's now planning something more forceful." Crouch was up to something, but Dumbledore didn't know what it was. Knowledge was power and so it unsettled the old man not knowing.

“We are worried he is about to do something both rash and very foolish,” explained Dumbledore. “As such, we are putting a number of the Order at the party. During the celebrations, one of us will slip away and enter the Minister’s office. We need to know exactly what Operation Black Watch is. He called it his final solution, so it will be big, but it may also be rash as well, as his government is failing. One wrong move here, and the government could fall.”

“Lily, James,” said Flamel. “can we get you and your family there?” Families are less likely to arouse suspicion.

“Of course,” said Lily, nodding. “But Rose and Harry are not going to be your little spies, Albus.”

“Of course, my dear, I would not want to put your children in danger,” said Dumbledore. Harry resisted the temptation to cough the word ‘bullshit’, not wanting to swear in front of his mother. “Kingsley, I believe you should be the one,” continued Dumbledore. “Frank is in charge of security, so you can arrange your insertion with him. James, are you alright to be the fall-back option, in case Crouch wants Kingsley with him at all times. Third choice is Nymphadora. You can arrange your method of entry with Frank.”

“Got it,” said James.

“So, Harry,” continued Dumbledore. “At six thirty on Sunday evening, you need to be ready for this ball.”

“Yeah, no worries,” said Harry. “How old is Crouch, anyway?”

“Eighty-one,” said Dumbledore.

“Though you wouldn’t think it to look at him,” said Flamel.

“That’s a lot of candles,” said Harry absently. “Must be a huge cake. What kind of ball is this anyway?”

“A masquerade,” supplied Snape. “How ironic,” he added clearly referring to the mask Harry had had to wear most of that week, though had chosen not to wear at the Defence lesson. His face was now back to normal, with no sign of ever having been burnt. The mask he had kept for sentimental value.

“A masquerade,” said Harry, a thought occurring to him. “How good is security? It’s just that it seems quite poetic that Death Eaters in masks would appear at a Masquerade. I know that the seventeenth of November isn’t exactly a famous day, and that he loves anniversaries, but this is almost crying out for it.”

“Security is fine,” said Kingsley. “However, such people as the Malfoys, Parkinsons and Averys are on the guest list. They will be searched upon entering, but they will be present.”

“So behave yourself,” added Snape.

“Harry,” said Dumbledore. “I have some things to go over with Kingsley. We can make arrangements for your club at a later date.”

“Of course,” said Harry, turning to leave. “.

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From the London Evening Standard...

### *MYSTERIOUS PLAGUE SWEEPS THROUGH WEST-END!*

*Following a series of recent deaths - mainly in the West-End of London - the Metropolitan Police Department have called in the CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear) response teams, for fear of a new virus having been released in London and other major cities. Security chiefs have yet to comment, but the Security Service, commonly referred to as MI5, have commented that an investigation is underway into a series of mysterious deaths in several major UK cities.*

*The victims are of all ages, sexes and races, and have so far left the coroner and the police clueless. The bodies are said to have no signs of injury, nor anything to suggest illness. As one paramedic commented, ‘they seem to have simply died’. The only odd thing about the victims, aside from the absence of a cause of death, was a terrified expression and often evidence of having been crying.*

*It is believed that the UK may be experiencing an epidemic of a new form of virus, so far undetectable. While this might explain the randomness and condition of the victims, it is not suspected that this is a weaponised virus, as it has been present for a number of days and the death toll is still relatively low, compared with all government scenarios for a biological attack on the British Mainland. The geographical locations of the deaths are sparse and random, which does not fit the profile of an airborne virus. Therefore it must be transmitted by another means. The Department of Health has issued a statement advising against unprotected sex, tattoos, and any recreational drugs, especially those involving a hypodermic needle.*

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A Masquerade, thought Harry as he followed his parents out of the lift and into the ballroom. Part of him was glad, as it hid his face and protected him from the stares of the other guests. He felt a tad silly, dressed as he was in long black robes topped with an extravagant hat that rose to a point behind him like a witch’s hat. A black mask complete with beak covering his face, except for his mouth. The theme of this masquerade was animals, ironic given Harry’s lessons with McGonagall. He had considered going in red as a Phoenix, but had decided to keep

that under wraps. As such he was a raven. He knew he would get comments about crows, rooks and even blackbirds, though a blackbird ironically has a yellow beak, not a black one, so he clearly was not a black bird. It was thanks to the Muggle book on birds that he had been reading for his phoenix studies that he knew so much about the Crow family.

He trailed a few paces behind his parents and Rose. The young lady was dressed as a unicorn in robes of pure white, her hair covered in glitter, and a shiny white mask with a large horn on top. Harry had annoyed her thoroughly before leaving by using his mother's bangles as hoola-hoops and trying to throw them over her horn.

James was predictably wearing a head-dress of antlers over dark robes, and Lily rather amusingly had come as a cat with whiskers and little ears, though she had resisted the urge to wear a tail.

Harry's eyes darted around, looking at the other people in the room. There were well over two hundred at present and the room wasn't even half full. Harry's eyes were peeled for the familiar white mask and black robes. It seemed so poetic for Death Eaters to be at a Masquerade.

"Hide your face so the world will never find you," sang Rose softly next to Harry.

"What?" asked Harry.

"It's a song," said Rose. "From the Phantom of the Opera. We saw it in London over the summer. There's a song called Masquerade. Ooh, free drinks." She disappeared through the sea of people in costume towards a table with a wine fountain and lots of bottles of other drinks. Harry hoped Rose wasn't going to get smacked off her face. He didn't want to carry her home or have her puking all over the place. In truth, Harry was impressed by the Wine Fountain. He had heard about chocolate ones; they melted chocolate so finely that it was as viscous as water and pumped it out of the top like a fountain and then it overflowed to the level below in a cascade-like system. It looked really impressive, though the only time Harry had seen one, it had been at a wedding of Aunt Petunia's old school friend. Dudley had been asked to leave because he kept sticking his fingers in the fountain and stealing chocolate despite the big sign that read 'DO NOT TOUCH'. Oddly enough, Petunia never spoke to that 'scandalous woman' after she 'had the nerve to ask my "perfect Diddikins" to leave'. Anyhow, being magical, this fountain was more impressive in that it actually squirted wine out the top into the air like a real fountain and was five stories high, not three. Also, people held their glasses out and took wine from the fountain rather than not being allowed to touch it. Harry decided to indulge himself. He scooped a glass-full out of the bottom tier of the fountain. It was warm and fruity; Mulled wine - not bad, he concluded after tasting it.

"Take it easy," said a soft voice behind him. His mother was helping herself to a drink. "I have no wish to have to carry you home." Harry couldn't help but smile. He was tempted to point out that she was accusing the wrong offspring, but he knew Rose would hate him for it so he kept his mouth shut. Instead, he merely nodded. His glass full, he walked away from the table towards the dance floor. The room was filling up and his movement through the sea of people was becoming slower. The chatter of voices filled the room, drowning out the music if you were

not within twenty metres of it. The thirty piece orchestra was playing in a small area to the side of the dance floor.

Looking up, Harry saw Crouch standing at the top of the stairs by the lift. He wore a mask which Harry was sure was supposed to be a lion. The king of beasts – Crouch had an ego the size of Big Ben. Harry was tempted to go and say hello, but thought he'd leave it. He had a sneaking suspicion that Crouch would insist on introducing him to a load of high-fliers in modern business. Harry had no wish to go around shaking the hands of creepy old men.

“Mr. Potter,” said a voice to his left. Harry turned and came face to face with a rabbit. Tall, white, furry ears protruded from the top of the woman's mask, giving her an amusing appearance. The scrawny figure, sickeningly sweet voice and bright green quill gave away her identity.

“Miss Skeeter,” said Harry, bowing slightly. “Shouldn't you be a beetle?” he added coldly. The affect on her face was instant. Her eyebrows became visible above the mask as they shot towards her hairline. Her jaw dropped and she coughed and spluttered into the drink she had been sipping. Coughing profusely and wiping the spilt wine from her chin, she shot him an angry glare. Harry managed to keep a smile off his face, keeping it straight and business-like. “Your secret is safe with me, unless you wish to start a slander campaign, in which case I should warn you that I have a big mouth.”

Rita Skeeter gave him an appraising look before responding. “Harry, my boy,” she said, taking his arm in hers. “Let's not ruin a perfectly fashionable party with squabbling.” He could hear the falseness in her girly voice, but didn't comment. “I'm here for the Minister.”

“You've got that infernal quill,” said Harry icily. “So you're clearly here on business.” *Careful, Harry*, he reminded himself. *You have enough enemies here without adding to the list.*

“Business and pleasure,” corrected Rita. “There is nothing wrong with enjoying your job.”

“So why are you talking to me?” asked Harry.

“All business,” said Rita. “You are the story of the year, if not the decade, and your silence thus far has made you –” she leaned in close to him, so he could smell her awful perfume, which reminded him of the Duck Bleach that Aunt Petunia used to clean the toilets with. “- highly desirable,” she concluded.

“Really?” asked Harry in a facetious voice.

“Whoever gets your first interview since your change of heart will be guaranteed top-dog at the Journalism Awards at the end of the year,” she continued. *Brilliant*, thought Harry. *Very subtle.*

“And you would like to be that person, wouldn't you?” asked Harry, feigning ignorance.

“Am I that transparent?” she asked. “Come on, Mr. Potter, a few words - you have lots to tell. In fact, why not forego the *Prophet*. How about you and me sit down and write your biography, from start to finish - how you grew up, your decision to leave, your time on the devil’s right hand, the Dark Knight, your redemption, your saving Hogwarts and the Ministry, your reappearance as the White Knight. We could call it *A Knight’s Tale*, or perhaps *The Light at the End of the Tunnel*. Can you imagine the profits, and the celebrity status, Harry, you don’t mind if I call you Harry, do you?” Harry felt a flush of anger. She wanted to put his life under a magnifying glass, slander him in front of millions and reap the profits. She was so cold, with the morality of a scorpion. He hated her so much.

“What little I remember of my life,” said Harry in a clipped voice, resisting the urge to hex her, “wouldn’t make a very good tale. Your offer is very kind, Miss Skeeter, but I must decline. I’m far too young for a biography. Enjoy the party, though, and bear in mind that if you try and follow me, Insect Repellent will be the least of your worries.”

With that, Harry strode quickly away, leaving a rather irate-looking Rita Skeeter standing by the window. Harry saw Kingsley and Frank talking as he passed. So, Kingsley was about to set off on his mission for the illusive Operation Black Watch; part one was complete. *Let’s just hope he makes it*, thought Harry.

He waked back over to his mother.

“Where’ve you been?” she asked as he arrived. Rose was next to her, helping herself from a tray of Ferraro Rochet from a man in a penguin suit and white silk gloves. The butler offered Harry the tray but he declined.

“Hang on,” said Rose. “I’m going to see Susan Bones, back in a jiffy.”

With that, she set off through the crowd, munching on a mini spring roll.

“With a little alcohol,” said Harry absently. “The behaviour reflects the madness within.”

“Something you’d know all about, wouldn’t you, Potter,” drawled a cold voice behind him. Harry knew who it was before he turned. He stared into a pair of steely grey eyes.

“Are you lost, Malfoy?” asked Harry, turning away.

“Of course not,” said the Slytherin, grabbing Harry’s wrist. Harry didn’t hesitate; he twisted Malfoy’s wrist sharply, causing him to let go.

“Don’t touch me,” he said icily.

“Of course,” said Malfoy quickly, a glimmer of fear crossing his face and disappearing as quickly as it had come. He rubbed his wrist in pain.

“Enjoying the party, Potter?” asked the blond.

“More or less,” said Harry frostily. “Though watching fat old politicians in stupid costumes getting merry and dancing badly is not my idea of fun. So how is the old man?”

“Father?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “Last I heard he’d been fined for wasting Wizengamot time.”

“An inconvenience,” acknowledged Malfoy.

“Next time he tries to kill my sister, his bank balance will be the least of his worries. Tell him to keep his pointy little nose out of that which does not concern him.”

An expression crossed Malfoy’s face that Harry had not been expecting—for a second he looked like Christmas had come early. Harry could see he was now very pleased.

“So there is something happening off the record, then,” said Malfoy more to himself. Harry froze. Did this mean Malfoy knew he was lying, that he was from another world? *Jesus, if Malfoy knew, Lucius would, and then Voldemort.* Harry felt a chill run down his spine and his hand move towards his wand.

Malfoy saw his hand move and quickly raised his hands, showing a surrender. “Easy, Potter,” said Malfoy, looking a little worried. “Your secret’s safe with me.” *Oh, great,* thought Harry. *What does he want? Is he going to try and blackmail me?* Malfoy was unpredictable and had little to no morals. He wouldn’t hesitate to give him up if Harry didn’t go along with him. There was a chance that Malfoy would need to be silenced. Given his experience with the twat over the last few years, Harry thought that he would feel relieved that he had an excuse to finish off Malfoy, but he didn’t. He was spiteful, the son of the Death Eater, but a kid none the less. He wasn’t even of age he was a Hogwarts student as well. Harry didn’t like the idea of seriously hurting him.

“You see,” continued Malfoy, the arrogant smile plastered on his face. “I know what’s going on.”

“Do you?” said Harry, resisting the urge to go for his wand. He also knew he could not act here. Malfoy was safe and he knew it. Harry was at a loss for what to do.

“This is how I see it.” Malfoy took a deep breath before continuing. “The Dark Lord knows that Dumbledore’s little helpers are everywhere, but he doesn’t know who or how many. He needs someone who can go into Hogwarts and enter Dumbledore’s circle of trust. You are the ideal candidate. You have the emotional attachment of your parents, you’re an inner circle Death Eater with valuable information, and you’re a highly lethal soldier with battle experience and you’re a Hogwarts student. This has to be off the record, so Dumbledore never finds out. Even my father and Aunt Bella don’t know about it—only you and the Dark Lord. That is why you remember that story about using an unforgivable that you told to the Abbott girl; and then the Dark Lord only sends four vampires when he could have sent an army”

Harry listened in silence as Malfoy spoke. He could see what the Slytherin was getting at, and the logic behind his assumption. Malfoy was not as stupid as Harry had always given him credit for. He was wrong, but his deductive powers were quite good. Harry stood motionless for a few moments. This was an opportunity, he realised. It was risky and Malfoy would pay the price if it went wrong, but it could help to end the war more quickly. Malfoy was known to pass information to his father. If Harry could convince him to work the other way...this was definitely an opportunity for him, but he had to remember that this also had to be for Malfoy. If he honestly believed him to still be the Dark Knight, then he was taking a risk telling him that he knew about him. The other Harry would have slit Malfoy's throat by now, without thinking twice. If Malfoy was taking a risk with his own life, he must want something pretty badly. What was it? If this was going to work, Harry had to act like the other him. He hated doing it, but it had to be done.

"You see a lot, Malfoy," said Harry softly, gazing across the room at the Minister of Magic. "Who else have you told?" He felt it best to intimidate him a little first. He couldn't make it too easy, or Malfoy might see through his plan.

"No one, honest," said Malfoy quickly.

"Good for you," said Harry icily. "So you are offering to keep my secret for me. Sounds a little like blackmail to me, Malfoy, and that hurts my feelings. You don't want to hurt my feelings, do you Malfoy?"

"No!" said Malfoy quickly. "I don't mean it like that. I just want to help."

"And how exactly can you do that?"

"I don't know," said Malfoy. "What do you need?"

"Negotiating, are we?" said Harry with a small sneer. "And what do you get out of it, little Dragon?"

"Nothing," said Malfoy matter-of-factly.

"There are no selfless acts in this world," said Harry. "Especially from a Slytherin, so out with it."

"Fine," said Malfoy. "I want to be somebody. I'm sick of my father treating me like a means to an end. Putting me at risk to get into the Dark Lord's good books." Harry could understand that. Malfoy always wanted to be the top dog, and he would screw his own father, albeit a ruthless bastard of a father, over to get it.

"So you don't want to take a risk?"

"Not without the possibility of my gaining something from it," said Malfoy.

“In other words,” said Harry, reading between the lines, “you want me to guarantee you a place in the inner circle, *above* your father, upon completion of this operation?” Malfoy would make a good politician. He had no morals and when the opportunity came he would screw over anyone to get ahead.

“In a word, yes,” said Malfoy.

“I take it the Sorting Hat had no trouble placing you in Slytherin,” said Harry softly.

“Didn’t hesitate,” said Malfoy proudly.

“It wanted to put me there,” said Harry emotionlessly. “But I asked it to put me in Gryffindor with Weasley, whom I met on the train. Me and my bloody big mouth.” Malfoy gave a small laugh.

“Okay,” said Harry, turning to face Malfoy. “Here is how it works. You speak only to me on this. Not a word to your father, mother, or aunt. You don’t tell Parkinson, Crabbe, Goyle or that ugly, scrawny one whose name I can never remember.”

“Zabini?”

“Probably,” said Harry. “You do not tell them that you are on a task for the Dark Lord or that you have a secret. It is life as normal, so resist your tendency to brag. Wait until you are initiated. When I need something, I will contact you. Until then you keep them off my back, but be subtle. Remember I am still Judas as far as they are concerned. And one more thing, if you even think about telling Dumbledore or anyone else, I’ll kill you, your mother, your father and your owl for the trouble you’ve caused me, is that clear?”

“Crystal,” said Malfoy quickly. He had paled somewhat, but he still seemed quite pleased with himself.

“Making friends, Draco?” asked a silky voice to Harry’s left. He turned to see the majestic form of Narcissa Malfoy sweep by to join her son. Unlike her husband her face was not constantly marred by a sneer. She was slender in build with a thin yet soft looking face. Only her eyes were cold. She seemed very elegant, but her blue eyes were the colour of ice with all the warmth to match. She was how Harry visualised the Ice Queen when he had read the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.

“Just getting reacquainted,” said Draco, smoothly.

“Just like old times,” said Harry, icily. “And Lady Malfoy, I never did get to thank you for trying to break me out of my trial, even if you did leave me to burn in the process.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Narcissa calmly, sipping her cocktail, and giving him a seemingly innocent smile.

“Of course not,” said Harry. “How foolish of me.”

“Are you enjoying the party,” he asked,

“This Ministry to-do’s are always the same,” she said.

“Your sister planning on attending?” asked Harry.

“She’s over there,” said Narcissa calmly, pointing over Harry’s shoulders.

Harry whipped around his hand flying to where his wand was concealed. He had only surrendered one of them to the security check. His eyes flicked through the crowd, looking for a head of black hair. With all the masks it was impossible to see anyone. God damn it, what was she doing here? Who was she here to hurt? Were there more Death Eaters coming?

Suddenly, Harry’s eyes fell on a familiar figure, or rather and mask topped by a familiar head of bubble-gum pink hair. She was talking to a taller and older woman with wavy brown hair dressed in black and white, presumably as a badger. She looked slightly like Narcissa, but with a warmer manner. Suddenly Harry realised what she meant.

“I meant your other sister,” said Harry icily to Narcissa, trying not to blush for his mistake. “Bellatrix, not Andromeda.”

“Haven’t seen her in months, old boy,” said Narcissa, a smirk plastered over her face. “Though a word of advice, Harry. She is out there, she is insane and she is dangerous, so in the interest of self-preservation, I would be very careful about setting foot in public, if I were you.”

“Thank you Narcissa,” said an icy voice as a hand landed on Harry’s shoulder. “I may not have married for money, or have the allegiance of a homicidal sister, but I can look after my family, thank you very much.” Harry could tell it was his mother, more from her touch than from her voice.

“Lily,” acknowledged Narcissa, bowing slightly. Lily’s head sank a fraction of an inch in response. “How are you?”

“I’ve been better, not that you care,” she snapped.

“True,” said Narcissa coldly. “But manners cost nothing.” She ran a finger gently around the edge of her glass. “Not even crystal,” she noted absently. Her calm only served to infuriate Lily.

“Not that you ever think about costs with that husband of yours,” said Lily. “How can you sleep at night, in the bed of yours, surrounded by a house bought with blood money?”

“That’s a very serious allegation,” said Narcissa calmly in her best QC voice. “And where Lucius’ money comes from is none of your concern,”

“Perhaps,” said Lily. “The money may help, but don’t you ever regret it?” Her voice was no longer laced with anger. It was soft, and almost pleading in tone. “You’ve not lived a day since you married him. You’re another trophy to him, a means to an heir nothing more.”

“How dare you,” snarled Narcissa, her calm evaporating in an instant. “You have no idea what we have!”

Harry knew there was a lot of history to this, and now was not the time for a catfight, which was quite ironic given Lily’s cat costume. Harry’s eyes met with Draco’s. He nodded towards Narcissa. He got the message.

“Come on, Mum,” said Harry, taking Lily by the arm.

“Come, mother,” said Draco, wrapping his arm through his mother’s a guiding her away. Lily resisted at first, but then gave up and allowed Harry to lead her away.

“What was all that about?” asked Harry, as he guided Lily through the crowd.

“Long story,” she muttered. “Excuse me.” She pulled away from him, heading towards the loos.

“You’d better give her some space,” said James, arriving at his side.

“What happened there?” asked Harry. “One minute she’s happy as Larry, the next she’s an ice queen.”

James whistled to himself, looking awkward as he stopped moving.

“Those two were once inseparable,” said James. “Back in the day. Never saw one without the other, despite one being a Slytherin and the other a Gryffindor. Things went a bit tits-up half way through the sixth year. You’d better make sure they don’t meet again. If you want to try and stand between them, you’re welcome, but you’re a braver man than I, if you do.”

“Now,” said James, straightening himself up. “Where’s that sister of yours got to?”

“I’ll have a look for her,” said Harry. He started off towards the other side of the room, where the drinks were being served. He had gone five paces when he walked straight into someone.

“Sorry,” muttered Harry.

Crouch ignored him and continued moving quickly towards the door. He was followed by about eight Aurors, including Kingsley. Their faces were stern, and eyes wide. Something was happening and it was important. The Aurors all seemed to be making for the door with the Minister. What was going on? Why wasn’t Kingsley trying to break into the Minister’s

chambers? If he wasn't then James or Tonks should be. But why would Kingsley abort? Harry was about to follow when a hand landed on his shoulder. He turned to see his father.

"Harry," James said quickly. "Something important is happening. Take Rosie and your mother home, now. I'm going to find out what's going on. We're aborting the mission. This is serious if it takes the Minister away from this party. He's had it planned for months and even rearranged a meeting with the President of the United States for this. If he is changing his schedule, it's big. Please, go now."

"Okay," said Harry. "But don't you want me to try and get into Crouch's office?"

"We're aborting," repeated James. "Go, now!"

"Okay," said Harry. He quickly made his way over to his mother, who was sitting with Rose on a seat on a corner.

"We have to leave," whispered Harry into his mother's ear.

"Why?"

"Something has happened," said Harry. "Dad says to leave."

Lily nodded and helped Rose to her feet. The girl had had too much to drink and was swaying as she stood, with a lop-sided grin on her face. *Idiot*, thought Harry. He wrapped his arm around hers, guiding her towards the exit. She found it impossible to walk in a straight line, so the journey took twice as long as was needed. It took nearly fifteen minutes to get into the lift and out into the entrance hall. From there, they collected their wands, or rather the girls did and Harry collected the spare he had surrendered, whilst keeping his primary wand.

They Floo'd to the Three Broomsticks, Harry going at the same time as Rose to make sure she got out the right grate. From there, things got worse as Rose announced that she needed to be sick. Lily took her into the witch's toilets while Harry waited outside. His mind was reeling over what had happened. What could be so important that it could drag Crouch from a party that out-ranked the President of the United States?

It was nearly five minutes before Rose and Lily re-emerged, Lily looking rather angry and Rose looking rather pale. Rose stumbled on the stairs but Harry caught her, lifting her back to her feet. Lily gave her a sharp look, but said nothing.

"Come on, you little rascal," said Harry gently, remembering that you should always speak to a drunk like a child. He put an arm around her, holding her up as they set off up the hill. One and a half miles felt like twenty with her added weight and inability to walk straight. Her sparkling conversation was not up to its usual standard, but did cover the important topics of Snape's sex life, the reason for the figure of speech being "to borrow a cup of sugar and a saucer of milk" when it clearly made more sense to put the milk in the cup and the sugar on the saucer,

and the ever important question of “what was Captain Hook’s name, before Peter Pan cut off his hand?”.

It took nearly half an hour to walk up the hill, and another ten before they got to the Entrance Hall. Harry didn’t know how much she’d had to drink, but it had certainly had an effect. He wondered if she would have a hangover come tomorrow morning. He noticed that she no longer had her mask, having discarded it somewhere at the party. She was leaning on him, but even with his help, she wasn’t exactly walking in a straight line. He considered levitating her or even carrying her, but she would probably protest loudly and wake everyone up. That was partially why Harry was with her - in case they ran into Filch. As long as Rose was with him, Filch couldn’t do a thing about her being out past curfew.

Lily told Harry to take her to Gryffindor Tower, while she went to find out what was wrong.

Harry managed to get her up to Gryffindor Tower surprisingly quickly. They had to stop twice as she tripped over her own feet, but Harry was there to catch her. At last they ended up outside the Fat Lady. Harry threw his raven mask off, and then gave the Fat Lady the password. Harry realised as it opened that he couldn’t get into the girl’s dormitories, so theoretically, Rose would have to sleep on the sofa.

Sleep was not the issue as the portrait swung open. As soon as the hinges moved, the sound of music, parties and a ruckus pounded into their ears. Harry could see the common room alive with students and music. The atmosphere was jubilant as he helped Rose into the room.

They barely even noticed him as he lay her down on the sofa in front of the fire. She sat looking gormless for a few seconds before speaking.

“What’s going on?” she asked in a slurred voice.

Good question, thought Harry. He could see several empty bottles around, just like at Rose’s party, though this was most likely not for the Minister’s birthday. A few feet away, Hermione was standing, sipping a drink. Harry tapped her on the shoulder, ducking a toilet roll thrown across the room, leaving a trail behind it.

“What’s going on?” he asked her.

“You haven’t heard?” she asked, looking flabbergasted.

“No...what?”

“We got him!”

“What?”

“It’s all over the Wireless, listen!” Harry turned to the small box on the table. From it, a crackling voice made an announcement that nearly made Harry keel over.

WWN has just received a confirmed report from the Minister of Magic that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has been arrested by Aurors!

~~~~~ Chapter XII ~~~~~  
**And You Shall Know the Truth,  
and the Truth Shall Set You Free**

*“Many that live deserve death.  
And some die that deserve life.  
Can you give it to them?  
Then be not too eager to deal out death  
in the name of justice,  
fearing for your own safety.  
Even the wise  
cannot see all ends.”*

*~ Gandalf – The Lord of the Rings (J.R.R. Tolkien)*

***YOU-KNOW-WHO ARRESTED!  
THE WAR IS OVER!***

*The war that has decimated our lives for over two decades came to a dramatic end last night as Aurors Kingsley Shacklebolt and Alastor Moody placed He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named under arrest. In a stunning turn of events, the war that seemed to have been lost has just been won. Following an anonymous tip, Aurors raided an abandoned warehouse in the London Docklands area. Four Aurors and eleven Death Eaters were killed in the battle, but the Dark Lord himself was arrested alive, and at this moment is safe and sound inside a Ministry holding cell awaiting trial.*

*“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Minister Crouch in a statement last night. “We finally got him!” There was a joyous atmosphere in the Ministry yesterday as the Minister told the press how Aurors received an anonymous tip off and raided the property in East London in the evening hours of yesterday. While there were casualties on both sides, this mission can be seen as a success as it brought about the end of a war that has plagued our community for decades.*

*You-Know-Who, real name Tom Riddle, is in a class three cell awaiting trial before the Wizengamot for crimes against humanity, the state and the crown. The date is yet to be set, but for now, know that the country is once again safe. The 17th of November will from now on be a public holiday in memory of those who gave their lives in this war.*

Harry couldn't read anymore. This stank to high heaven, in his opinion. What was Voldemort doing in prison and more importantly, why now? This was part of his plan, it had to be, but what did he have to gain by it? Harry knew from his conversation last week with Crouch that the *Prophet* only printed half of what actually happened. Politics was what Crouch called it, though Harry thought 'BS' was more apt. Harry knew there was more to this than met the eye. He slammed down the paper in frustration.

“Come on, Grumpy–Pants,” said Seamus, biting into a piece of bacon. “We got him, it’s over. Better yet, it’s party time.” Harry was sitting at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall. He had been invited down three days ago and ever since had had breakfast, at least, with the rest of the school. He was still skirted in the corridors when he ventured out, but the Gryffindors were beginning to warm to him. His presence at Rose’s exoneration party had helped to gain their trust.

Harry shot Seamus a glare, before turning back to the paper. He scowled down at the image of Voldemort standing calmly between Kingsley and Mad–Eye. Ten Aurors were present, wands drawn, but they weren’t aimed at Voldemort. It was like a hunting photo, with the catch laid out in front of the hunters. They were posing as if they had won a prize. Cretins! Did they not see the danger they were in? It was like Fudge all over again. There was still danger out there and he knew it, but it was easier to sit back and do nothing, to save themselves the hassle. How many lives would pay for this stupidity?

“Come on, Harry,” said Hermione, putting down her own copy. “I know this isn’t how you thought it would end, but cheer up. It’s over.”

Harry glanced around in disgust. All over the hall, everyone was smiling broadly, reading the paper. The noise level was higher than ever and someone even set off fireworks to celebrate, much to the annoyance of McGonagall.

*Idiots!* cursed Harry to himself.

“Hermione’s right, Harry,” said Rose to his right. “Let it go.”

“Aren’t you glad he’s been caught?” asked Ron, his mouth full of hash browns.

“Actually,” said Harry irritably “I’d rather he was still out there.” Ron froze at his response and several heads turned. That might have been a little loud. He realised just how bad that had sounded – as if he was siding with Voldemort. Several people who had turned were watching him closely. He lowered his voice and leaned forward to whisper.

“Ron,” said Harry. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I just think that there’s more to this than meets the eye.”

“Like what?” asked Ron.

“Have you ever seen the memorial wall at the Ministry?” asked Harry. A wall was not entirely accurate – it was a room with four walls covered in names of fallen Aurors. “How many Aurors have died trying to get close to Voldemort?” – Ron cringed at the name – “The inner circle has never been infiltrated, to my knowledge. How many men have duelled with Voldemort and lived to tell the tale? We all thought it would take an army to bring him down but it took just two strike teams. He had only twenty Death Eaters with him. There was no protection, it was no contest for the Aurors.” He left out that the Inner Circle had been penetrated by the resident DADA Master as he didn’t trust some of the others who were listening.

“We caught him off guard,” said Ron. “We got lucky.” Harry smiled – Ron’s hopeless optimism was somehow amusing. Harry realised that he used to think like that. Now he thought like a soldier and a killer. He had changed so much in the last few months – changes that could never be undone.

“A man like Voldemort doesn’t make mistakes,” said Harry, ignoring the gasp from Rose and those close enough to hear. He knew for a fact how patient Voldemort could be, how cold and calculating. He engineered the entire Triwizard Tournament to catch him, and then sent him dreams for the best part of a year because he didn’t want to fetch the Prophecy himself, and all this after waiting thirteen years to get his body back. There was no way he would be so clumsy and get caught so easily. He’d have a plan b, c, d, and e to make sure he didn’t stay in custody long, but it had been over ten hours.

“He is never ‘off-guard’,” continued Harry. “He carries an emergency Portkey at all times. He could have killed the entire strike team if he had wanted to. I’ve seen him duel with Dumbledore and trust me, it is not easy to equal him, let alone best him. He has made no move to escape; he surrendered to Aurors whom he could have killed. He only took four with him. There has been no attempt to break him out, or to rescue him, despite the fact that the inner circle are still out there.”

“It’s only been ten hours,” said Ginny.

“He’d have a plan ready to go at a moment’s notice,” said Harry. “Like chess. He thinks many moves ahead.”

“Death Eaters could be planning it as we speak,” said Lavender, butting into the conversation from next to Ron. “But we’ll be ready when they do.”

“Lavender, sweetie,” said Harry, “think about it. An anonymous tip; there is one hell of a bounty on his head – ten million galleons for information leading to his capture. Why tip off the Ministry but not give a name or collect the reward?”

“They could be afraid of revenge by Death Eaters,” said Lavender, defending her position.

“Lavender has a point,” said Hermione. “A reward is no good if you aren’t alive to spend it, and as you said, the inner circle are still out there.”

“Then why turn him in in the first place?” asked Harry. “That takes courage, a risk with no gain is pointless. This is such a risk that the gain must have been phenomenal, but whoever made the tip didn’t collect the reward, and then Voldemort is captured by a force he could have killed easily with his army? No, this was set up. He has made no attempt to escape, and his Death Eaters have done nothing. He is there because he wants to be there. It must be part of his plan. I want to know why. He is in the heart of the Ministry, past all the security checks, and under guard. With all his spies he could leave his cell and go anywhere. He could escape at any time. He is patient. He waited thirteen years for...something to happen. He is there for a reason, and

until we know what it is, I won't sleep easy. He will know what we would do to him. He knows he will get a public trial because Crouch will want to gloat. He could be counting on that to get him before the Wizengamot."

"You're reaching, Harry," said Ron, shaking his head. "Can't you just accept that we got him and it's over?"

"It's never over!" snapped Harry. "I don't believe in luck or coincidence. Men like Voldemort don't give up. He will continue the cause until the day he dies. Trust me, I know him. This is far from over. I just hope Crouch realises this. If we get complacent now, we may lose everything. We have a chance, now he's in custody. We need to limit his influence and strike out at his accomplices. If Crouch squanders this window of opportunity, we are completely screwed."

"I hate to say it," said Rose, "but I agree with Harry. This is too simple." Harry looked over at her. Her brow was furrowed in thought. "I wish it were true, but something's amiss."

"Let's say you're right," said Ginny. "Let's say this is part of his plan; you're never going to convince Crouch of it. Look at the man's pride. At the moment, he is the man of the hour, along with Shackbolt and Moody. He won't let you rain on his parade, so what are you planning to do?" *Good point*, thought Harry. What could he do? He had no power to compete with Crouch. If Crouch even did grant Harry an audience, he would never listen to reason. He was a man of honour, but also of pride. He was better than Fudge, but he also was a politician and would not want to risk his career by announcing that it was not over, especially after the *Prophet* raised their hopes. He would be committing political suicide if he took that back and said the war was still on. Harry needed some help here.

"Firstly," said Harry. "I'm going to Dumbledore. Let's see what the wisest man on earth has to say."

Harry got up and marched out of the room, nearly walking straight into little Professor Flitwick on the way out, but jumped aside just in time. He jogged up to the Headmaster's office, his copy of the *Prophet* under his arm. He arrived at the gargoyles to find them already aside. As expected, the Headmaster had company. Harry pushed open the door and entered the room without knocking and saw that Dumbledore was in a conference with the inner circle of the Order; Flamel, Snape and McGonagall were there with Kingsley, Madam Bones, Dawlish, Moody and Arthur Weasley. They were sitting around the Headmaster's desk on which a copy of the *Prophet* was laid out. Fawkes, who had been asleep with his head under his wing when Harry entered, looked up and called out to him. Must be his Phoenix presence.

"This is a private meeting, Potter," said Snape coldly.

"Then why did you leave the gargoyle open when you arrived?" Harry replied just as icily. "You don't really believe this is real, do you?" he asked, holding up the *Prophet*. Kingsley's face flickered briefly and Harry realised exactly how badly that sounded. He quickly

stumbled an apology. “No offence, Kingsley, good job, sorry about your men, but there’s more to this.”

“We agree, Mr. Potter,” said Kingsley calmly, his voice level and his fingers interlocked in front of his chest. “I may be Crouch’s new Golden Boy, but I’m not stupid. I know I could not have taken him in a duel, but what the papers are not saying is that there was no duel. He surrendered as I approached him.” The words echoed in Harry’s mind. His jaw dropped.

“*He what?*” asked Harry. Voldemort gave up without a fight? That definitely meant something was wrong. Kingsley glanced at Dumbledore, who nodded. Taking it as a sign to elaborate, Kingsley began again.

“He killed the first two who tried to take him by force,” explained Kingsley, bowing his head. “His Death Eaters seemed to make a half-hearted attempt to duel. We took as many as we could, but within a minute they were running to the doors and windows. They fled rather than rallied to their master. I thought at the time that this was a little odd, on the grounds that if they did escape, You-Know-Who would punish them for deserting him, so why were they running? Anyhow, with them gone, we had You-Know-Who cornered. I approached him and identified myself.”

“You told him your name?” asked Harry, unable to understand the logic.

“I mean I shouted to him that I was an Auror and that he was under arrest,” said Kingsley, chuckling slightly. Harry felt a little stupid but managed to keep from blushing. He glanced at Flamel who smiled slightly, while Snape gave him the customary ‘idiot child’ glare. “I told him he was under arrest, that there were anti-Apparation wards all around the building. I told him to drop his wand and lie down with his hands behind his head.”

“He obeyed?” asked Harry.

“Not quite,” said Kingsley, sighing. “His exact words were, ‘Well done, Master Auror, tonight will guarantee you a place in the History books’. Then he held out his hands, and said, ‘Come and claim your prize.’ With the others covering me, I stepped forward. I thought he’d at least try and escape, but he stood perfectly still while I magically and physically bound his wrists and used the Disarming Charm to check for weapons.” He gave himself up? thought Harry. Why would a fanatic give himself up? Nothing would stop Voldemort short of death, so why did he surrender? What good could possibly come of him being locked up in the Ministry?

“A man like Voldemort does not give himself up,” said Harry.

“We are in complete agreement,” said Dumbledore. “That is why we are here, to discuss the possible benefit he could gain from being arrested. I trust you have come to the same conclusion, since you are here. Please, Harry, do you have any theories?” Dumbledore was asking him for his input? This was a bit of a change. He only had one idea, and it was far from concrete.

“One,” said Harry, sliding into a chair next to Flamel. Snape raised an eyebrow and gave him a patronising stare, while the others calmly watched him. “He is now inside the Ministry building, past all that security. Instead of storming the building, he has been welcomed into it. If he has enough spies inside, he could have them break him out and then he has a small army inside the building with access to all departments. To what end, I cannot say.” There was a pause as he finished speaking. Dumbledore glanced at Snape and then back to Harry. Harry had a nasty feeling he had said something stupid. He felt like the others were weighing him up, rather than just looking at him. At last, Dumbledore spoke.

“Severus came to the same conclusion,” he said softly. A small smile spread over his lips. “Great minds think alike.”

“Fools seldom differ,” said Harry, throwing a dirty glance at Snape.

“What you have both said,” said Dumbledore, “is our most likely scenario, but it still does not tell us what he is after.”

“Perhaps the Prophecy,” said Harry.

“He knows it in full,” said Flamel. “In fact, it doesn’t exist, so he would have no reason to go there. However, the Department of Mysteries is quite likely.”

“He mentioned the door to me,” said Harry. “The one that’s always locked. He didn’t know where it was at the time, but he may have found out.”

“Kingsley, can you place guards around the Department of Mysteries?” asked Dumbledore. “It is entirely possible that that is his target. We have no proof one way or another, but there are things in there that he should not be allowed to gain control of.” The image of the veil flowed into Harry’s mind. He could see Sirius falling backwards, the look of surprise on his face. He had yet to talk to Sirius properly in this world. When things were a little less hectic, he would like to sit down and talk to his Godfather. He had so much he needed to say.

“Easily,” said Kingsley. “But we are short of man—power, *trustworthy* manpower.”

“We need another layer of security around Voldemort,” said Harry.

“He is under maximum security,” said Kingsley.

“Add more,” said Harry.

“What more can we add?” asked Kingsley. “We already check every person with Veritaserum and Legilimency for any history with Death Eaters. Test them at resisting the Imperius Curse and make sure no wands are taken into the cell. No magic nor matter can pass through the shield.”

“I know,” said Harry. “I’ve been inside a Class Three cell, but I still don’t trust them to hold Riddle.” Riddle knew deeper magic than any man alive. Who could tell what he was capable of? Could any prison really hold him?

“Potter,” said Snape. “It is all being taken care of. Believe it or not, we adults *are* capable of managing without you. The Dark Lord is under enough security. Let us handle this.”

“Actually, Harry,” said Dumbledore, calmly cutting off Snape, “it is fortunate that you have come. What Severus does not know is that Voldemort has made but one request since his capture. It is a little unusual, but he is adamant. He has promised to provide us with a full confession, but there is a catch.”

“What?” asked Harry. He hated the idea of giving that monster what he wanted, but if it guaranteed him a one-way trip to Azkaban, or hell, (not that there as much difference between the two), he would hear him out.

“He will only talk to one person,” said Dumbledore gravely, staring at Harry.

“Who?” he asked, though he already knew the answer—it would never be over for him until Voldemort was dead.

“You.” The word rang in his ears. He had known it was coming, but to hear it spoken aloud was still shocking. Just when it might be over for him, Harry was being dragged back into the middle of it.

“Me?” asked Harry. He wasn’t surprised, but curious. It was another irrational request. “Why me? Surely someone impartial would be better.” Did Voldemort honestly think that Harry would represent him fairly, or even lift a finger to help him? None of this made sense.

“To avoid bias, yes,” said Flamel. “Using you, with your history together, is an...unorthodox step. This too must be part of his plan, but it seems irrational.”

“It’s only irrational because we are missing a piece of the puzzle,” said Snape. “If we knew his objectives, it would not seem irrational. He wants Potter for a reason, and until we know what it is, I say we do not grant his wish. In the meantime we have to decide what to do with his followers. We have a small window of opportunity.” For once, Harry and Snape were in complete agreement. They had to round up the Death Eaters. While the Aurors were incapacitated, who knows what they had been doing? Now they were ready and the next stage of Voldemort’s plan was in effect. If they didn’t bring them in quickly, it would be too late. This was Voldemort’s final assault. Failure now would mean losing the whole war.

“Agreed,” said McGonagall. “With You-Know-Who inside, they are leaderless. Now if we assume this is part of the plan, they will be doing things in his absence, preparing.”

“There will be the usual backstabbing,” said Snape. “But they will do their best not to disappoint him. While he is out of communication, assuming he is – Shacklebolt we need to

monitor who has access to him—they are vulnerable. I believe we should hit them hard now. Pull every known Death Eater.”

“Where would we hold them?” asked Flamel. “Arresting them, placing them in holding cells either in the Ministry or the Auror complex would be putting a potential army inside the Ministry building. This could be what he wants us to do.” This was a series of crosses and double-crosses. There was no way to know what they were up to, and arresting Death Eaters was not Harry’s problem. Only one thing concerned him.

“Either way,” said Harry, interrupting, “am I going to have to talk to him or not?”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore, staring into his eyes. “Crouch tried other Aurors, but he merely toyed with them and sent them packing. He will only speak to you.”

“Wait a few days,” said Moody thoughtfully. “Let him wait. Inconvenience him; unsettle his schedule. It is Monday now, so I would suggest Thursday at the earliest.”

“What good does waiting do?” asked Harry.

“Hope one of his followers slips up and gives us something to work with,” said Moody. “Make it clear that he is a prisoner and that we are in charge. He doesn’t get what he wants when he wants anymore. Let’s ruffle his feathers. In fact, do a cell-search, strip search, drugs-test, anything to humiliate and unbalance him. Put a big television next to his cell with Muggle cartoons and talk-shows on with the volume up high. He may be holding the ace, but let’s hassle him a bit.”

“The Dark Lord cannot be psychoanalysed so easily,” scoffed Snape. “You won’t achieve anything.”

“The Aurors will see him as nothing more than human,” said Moody. “It will do wonders for morale.”

“I agree with Alastor,” announced McGonagall. “Make a statement. Show him he isn’t in control.” Harry agreed with this. Even in prison, Voldemort was trying to call the shots. They had to show him he wasn’t the head-cheese any more.

“We could be giving him time to build an army,” said Snape.

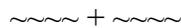
“It’s only three days, Severus,” interrupted Flamel.

“Fine,” sneered Snape. He did not sound convinced.

“Are we agreed?” asked Dumbledore. Everyone nodded. “Good. Harry will see him at eight on Thursday. Until then, ruffle his feathers. Kingsley, double and triple check every person with access to him. Move him daily to a new cell. Let’s not make it easy for him. Harry, on Thursday please report here at half past seven. Let us go early, and if Kingsley would see to it

that he not get much sleep that night, I hope for this incident to pass unhindered. We can then move on to find a prison from which he could not escape.”

Never before had a weekend lasted so long for Harry. Every hour seemed like a month. His mind was all over the place and Flamel had to abandon his Occlumency lesson after twenty minutes. He only had time to discover one new spell – he could now use the spell that had saved him when a vampire had thrown him off the staircase. Animagus classes continued for three hours both days. Connecting his nose and upper jaw into one mass of bone, namely a beak, was causing him a bit of trouble, though he had yet to get stuck. Madam Pomfrey was always on call, but he had yet to need her. All this changing of shape was taking its toll on his body. The transformation hurt and his muscles ached for hours after he tried. After each lesson he felt like he had run the London Marathon twice.



Come Thursday morning, Harry was almost relieved that the time had finally come. He was not overly happy about stepping into a room that housed the monster that had denied him a life and a family, as well as tortured him. A sickening blend of fear, anxiety and nerves filled his stomach, and Harry wasn't sure that his breakfast would stay down long enough to get to the Ministry. It was the twenty-first of November and the air was cold. Wrapped in a warm woolly jumper and combats, he once again had the appearance of a Muggle. Tucking his wand into the belt loops of his combats he headed up to Dumbledore's office, from which he could Floo to the Ministry.

One question played over in his mind: why? Of all the people in all the world, why him? He wasn't an Auror, or a Ministry worker. He had no power or influence to get him anything. Negotiating with him was pointless. Surely Voldemort would see that? Kingsley, Dawlish, Moody, Madam Bones, even Crouch himself would have been better. What did he possibly have to gain by asking to speak to Harry?

His father had assured him that he was safe. Harry remembered what it was like to be in a Class-Three detention cell. He remembered the walls of blue light, the tiny circular space in a cavernous room. It had been in one of those that he had first met Rose. He had been so rude to her, and to Crouch. Looking back, he felt a tad silly that he hadn't realised he was in an alternate reality. It seemed so obvious now, but he knew for a fact that it was one of those things that are glaringly obvious when you know them, but if you didn't know it, it was so hard to find. After all, crossing the fabric of space and time was not a common occurrence, even in the world of Magic. He wondered if he was the first ever to do it. On a related note, he wondered if there had been any progress getting him home. He remembered Flamel saying that he was working on a translation of an ancient Greek text that spoke of a doorway to other worlds. He was pinning all his hopes on this one book. Deep down he knew there was only a tiny chance of him getting home, but he refused to give up hope. *Fear will hold you prisoner, and hope can set you free.*

He arrived at the Ministry at ten to eight. The early birds were arriving and those on nights were looking ragged and tired. They were handing over their shifts to the next watch with relieved expressions on their faces. The whole building seemed so empty as he appeared out of

the fireplace. He was met by a familiar looking Auror at the main gate. He remembered her name was Rachel, as she had been there when he arrived to disarm the bomb. She walked over to him, limping slightly as she did. After shaking his hand, she guided him through security and down the lift to the new Auror Complex. There was still work to be done and the air was thick with solvents. No wonder the Aurors looked so tired and sleepy. There were large sheets covering building equipment in the corners. The structural work was done, and now they were on to decorating and installing new equipment. Not bad, considering how quickly it had all been done.

“You get used to it,” said Rachel, giving him a nod. “Come on.” She guided him between rows of desks and over to a line of wooden doors on the right hand wall.

“Come in,” said a voice as she knocked on an office door. Harry recognised the voice immediately. Inside, Amelia Bones was sitting behind her desk, a steaming cup of herbal tea in her hands. Dawlish was there, standing to one side, skimming over the parchments on the table. They both turned to greet Harry as he entered the room.

“Ah, Potter,” said Amelia. “Good to see you. Shepherd, that will be all.” Rachel nodded and retreated from the room.

Harry sank into the seat that Dawlish gestured to.

“Thank you for doing this, Potter,” said Amelia, putting her mug down. “Before you go in, though, we need to go over a couple of things.” Harry simply nodded. He knew there would be a load of rules to follow, but he wasn’t stupid. He was also in no mood to chat. He didn’t want to hang around. Being around Voldemort was not something he was looking forward to. He wanted to get it out of the way.

“Fine,” he said, though in truth he was far from fine about it. He didn’t like entering a room he wasn’t guaranteed to walk out of. Voldemort was up to something, and since Harry didn’t know what it was, he was very uneasy. His mind was going over it again and again. What would be the logical response to his arrest? What was he expecting the Ministry to do? His mind was going around in circles. The only thing he knew for sure was that he was up to something.

“Firstly,” said Amelia. “Crouch is going to hold a trial. He wants this as public as possible. Therefore, we need evidence. We would be grateful if you could conceal this on your person.” She held out a small black crystal. It was about two centimetres long and as thick as a pencil.

“It’s a smaller version of the recording orbs you saw at your hearing,” said Dawlish. “Hide it somewhere and it will record everything that is said. Don’t worry about it being covered in clothing; it will still hear what is said. Try to get him to talk about what he has done.” Harry took the crystal and held it in his hand. He rolled up the sleeves of his woolly jumper and tucked the crystal into the folds. Somehow it worried him to wear a ‘bug’. Voldemort couldn’t get out, but the idea of it was disturbing. What if he was caught? How could he be caught? He was being paranoid, but the fear was still there.

“Next is the matter of security,” said Amelia. “The cells should stop all matter and magic passing through, but given who this is, we are taking no chances. There are two Aurors in there at all times. I must ask you to surrender your wand. We can’t risk him getting hold of it.” Harry took out his wand, the only one he had brought with him, and laid it on the desk.

“Lastly there are some simple rules,” said Dawlish. “First, you do not touch the light. You do not pass him anything, or accept anything he offers you. You do not step over the yellow line. You do not ask the Aurors to leave their posts unless it is an emergency. Beyond that, it is common sense. Do not tell him anything that might compromise the Order or Ministry. You won’t be taking in a quill or anything; the crystal will record everything. That’s about it, so are you ready?” It wasn’t a lot of information to absorb. Harry nodded.

“As I’ll ever be,” said Harry. He rose to his feet.

He followed Dawlish and Madam Bones out of the office. The room was almost full with Aurors now and most of them stood and faced Harry as he moved through the aisles towards the lift. He felt much as he had when Crouch had led him through the old Auror Division on the way to his trial. Struggling to keep his eyes straight ahead, he passed through the sea of people on the heels of Dawlish.

The doors slid open and Harry stepped out of the lift. They were back in the Ministry now, on the lowest level of the building, over a mile underground. They walked past the Department of Mysteries and the Auditorium that had housed both his trials. They continued along until they reached a painting of a man standing on the scaffold, ready to be hanged. Madam Bones reached up and touched the lever that opened the trapdoor in the painting. The painting immediately swung open to reveal another passage. This one was narrower and more confining; they hadn’t even bothered with the magical windows that showed a landscape outside. The corridors were blank from floor to ceiling, giving them a foreboding feeling and making sure that every sound echoed eerily around them. Harry’s footsteps bounced off the wall and it seemed that the three of them were like a herd of elephants, especially with the metallic click of Madam Bones’ heeled shoes.

At last they came to a door. There was no label on it and no handle, just a small hole, and to the left of it, a large metal plate. Madam Bones took out her wand and inserted it into the hole, then pressed her palm to the plate. The entire door glowed green before dissolving into nothing. Before them was a small square room perhaps three feet long and wide with a door at the far end. The three of them stepped into the cramped room.

“Don’t touch the walls,” said Amelia. This was harder than one might imagine, as the room was so small. As the door reappeared out of thin air, the wall and the doors started to glow a faint blue. A band of white light passed from the bottom of the room up to the top and then faded into nothing.

The door in front of them slid open, and they stepped through into another corridor. Two Aurors immediately blocked their paths.

“Surrender your wands, please,” said one of them. “The scan showed two are you to be carrying.”

“Stand down,” said Dawlish. “Harry, it’s the door at the far end. We will not go any further. If anything happens or you feel uncomfortable, walk to the door and the Aurors will let you out. If you can’t do that, simply say ‘the sun is shining’ and we’ll be in that room like a rat up a drainpipe, okay?”

“Okay,” said Harry. He didn’t feel any better about the situation, but he wasn’t in the mood to talk. He just wanted to get this over and done with. He didn’t like the idea of seeing *Him* again, especially without a wand. Harry took a deep breath, and then began to walk slowly and shakily away from the Aurors. His footsteps were slow and echoed around the entire corridor. He passed door after door, getting closer and closer to the cell that held the man he was destined to murder. Every step felt like a mile and his shoes as if they were lined with lead.

The door rose out of the ground in front of him like a barrier. It was solid steel and looked pretty thick. Harry grasped the handle. He didn’t even have to push; as soon as he touched the handle, there was a hiss and a puff of steam as the pressurised room was opened. The heavy steel door swung effortlessly open. Taking a deep breath and summoning his courage, he stepped over the threshold.

A damp musky smell hit Harry’s nose. The room seemed bigger from the outside looking in than from the inside. He cringed as he remembered being incarcerated in a similar cell. He wondered if it was the same one. The room was large and cavernous, yet nothing echoed. The floor seemed to be covered in water, and the pillar of light reflected eerily off the water. The entire room was in shadow; almost total darkness except for the column in the middle. A small circular section of the room was raised by six inches and around the edges a wall of blue light descended from the ceiling, preventing the prisoner’s escape. There was an Auror on either side of the door, standing guard. Each had what looked more like a spear than anything else aimed at him, the tip of it was glowing a pale blue. Harry didn’t dare imagine what the purpose or the effect of these weapons were.

“Harry Potter,” said Harry softly. “I’m here to question...it.”

“Very well,” said one Auror. “Have you been told about the procedures?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “Though I don’t feel any better,” he added softly.

He slowly approached the circular cell. It seemed such a waste for a tiny cell in the middle of such a cavernous room, but that was the least of his concerns. As he neared the cell, memories of his over governorship of a similar cell came back to him. He shook them from his mind and tried to think of the waves. Magic cannot pass through the shield, but he didn’t know if Legilimency would. His footsteps splashed lightly in the water as he neared the cell.

Inside he could see the familiar metal-framed bed that was as soft as a slab of granite and just as comfortable. Next to that was a wooden table, and an armchair. Harry remembered that he

had only had a tiny wooden chair, yet the Dark Lord had a comfy armchair. Someone in here liked him. He made a note to inform Dawlish when he got back out. The armchair had its back to him. He could not see the Dark Lord, so Harry assumed that he was in the chair. As he neared the cell he could see a yellow line on the floor, covered in muddy water. He was not supposed to cross it. He couldn't exactly knock, and manners seemed inappropriate given the situation.

"Riddle?" said Harry softly, breaking the silence. It didn't stay broken for long. There was no reply from the cell. Everything seemed unnaturally still. Harry had an urge to run for the door, but something made him stay. He had a job to do.

*Come on Harry, relax, he told himself. He can't get out. You're safe. Just relax and do what must be done!*

"Come on Tom," said Harry, a little louder. "I don't have time to arse around." There was a pause and Harry was sure he was going to have to repeat the statement, when a chilling voice came from the cell.

"I, on the other hand, do," came an icy whisper. "I have all the time in the world."

The chair slowly began to turn. As it came to face him, Harry caught a glimpse of the Dark Lord. His face was thinner than the last time they had met, more skeletal, giving him a haunted look. He didn't have the snake-like features of his counterpart in Harry's world. His long black hair still seemed to be as dark and flowing as it ever had. Were it not for the prisoner denim he wore, Harry would not have guessed that he was a prisoner. His body showed no sign of having been hassled and his eyes showed no sign of inconvenience, which worried Harry no end. Something was rotten in the state of Denmark.

"Because you're not going anywhere any time soon," said Harry coldly. With every word his confidence grew. Voldemort was nothing but a caged animal. A simple little snake with no fangs, all alone in a cage, being gawked at by tourists. He wasn't in control, and there was no reason to be scared of him.

"You'd like to believe that, would you not, Harry?" A cruel smile spread over the Dark Lord's lips. His eyes flashed with malice and he leaned forward, sending a chill down Harry's spine. "You would dearly like to believe I am forever out of your life, that you, your sister and parents can sleep soundly in your beds, guaranteed to wake up the following morning, free from the eternal fear of knowing that I am out there somewhere. Sleep soundly, Harry, I am not going anywhere – I am perfectly at ease here."

"Four Aurors?" snapped Harry. "You were arrested by only four Aurors? You could have killed five times that number without breaking a sweat." He managed to sound at ease, but inside he was screaming. The idea of killing his sister in her sleep was terrifying. He remembered a dream about how the other Harry had slipped into her room at night. If Voldemort touched her, he would kill him. Still, he had to appear commanding. "Why are you here, Tom?"

“I broke the law,” said Voldemort, staring levelly into Harry’s eyes. “I must be punished.”

“You’ve been murdering for decades,” said Harry. “Why now?”

“That I have, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I’ve committed acts that would make you sick to your stomach. I’ve killed, maimed and tortured without pity or remorse to an extent the Ministry are completely unaware of. If they are good, they will have perhaps two thirds of the murders I have committed on record.”

Harry was aware of the crystal on his arm recording all that was said. Voldemort was giving him exactly what was needed to put him away for good. He was practically guaranteeing himself a place in Azkaban. What good could that do him? Was a trip to Azkaban his goal all along? What good would that do?

“You didn’t answer the question,” said Harry. “Why are you here?”

“Luck runs out for us all, eventually,” said Voldemort calmly. “It was my time.”

“I don’t believe that,” said Harry icily. “You could escape at any time, so if you’re here it’s for a reason. You’re here because you want to be. What is it? What have you been doing while the Aurors were blind?”

“I did very little,” said Voldemort calmly. “But it would seem that many others have followed in my footsteps. Tell me, how did the Aurors cope with all the attacks on Muggles?”

“They nearly collapsed,” said Harry. “Now they have new monitoring equipment; they’re back online. Nearly two hundred arrests in the last three days. People are getting the message and it’s dying down.”

Harry realised that this was not going anywhere. He was giving out more information that he was getting. He knew Voldemort was here for a reason, but pressing him wasn’t working. Maybe he could get him to let it slip some other way.

“What are you thinking, Harry?” asked Voldemort. “Are you perhaps thinking that you can psychoanalyse me? Or perhaps you are wondered how you might trick me into divulging what my accomplices are doing. Come now, Harry, do you really believe that common mind tricks will work on me?”

“Your pride will be your undoing,” said Harry. If you cannot answer your opponent, simply insult your him.

“Your love for your friends will be yours,” said Voldemort. “But let us not argue. I brought you here today.”

“No,” said Harry, cutting him off. “You *requested* my presence three days ago, but I had more important things to do. You are not in charge here. I came when I couldn’t think of anything more interesting to do. Don’t think for a second that I was not willing to simply walk away and leave you to rot.”

“If you say so,” said Voldemort. He clearly didn’t believe Harry, but his calm was absolute and every bit as infuriating as Dumbledore’s. Harry could see the anger burning in his eyes, and knew he deeply wished to lash out, but was holding himself back. Harry was slightly impressed with the icy precision with which Voldemort kept his insatiable anger in check. But if he was keeping it in check, it was again for a reason. What was he up to? “But whichever way you see it, Harry, you are here for one reason.”

“And what would that be?” snapped Harry.

“To hear what I have to say,” said Voldemort, calmly.

“You could have had anyone,” said Harry. “Crouch would even personally see to this case as he did when I was arrested. Why me?” It was just one of the questions that he was burning to ask. Why, oh why, did Riddle want him? As expected, he didn’t get a straight answer.

“When a man knows the end is near, he starts to reflect on his life,” said Voldemort, staring unblinkingly at Harry. Harry knew he was simply toying with him, but why? He had called him here, and it must be for a reason, and a better reason than to gloat. He was patronising, teasing and mocking him. Why?

“You would never give up, and the end is not near,” said Harry.

“Not of my life, certainly,” conceded Voldemort, “But of this petty little war. I have taken steps along the path to immortality; something that you of all people should be aware of. Now before this tale of death and destruction reached its climax, I still have some unanswered questions about certain aspects of my life. Namely, you.”

“I am not the subject here,” said Harry, cutting him off. He could feel his anger rising. He was the interrogator, not Voldemort. There was not going to be any Quid Pro Quo here. “You are going to be sentenced to death for crimes against the state, crown and humanity. You called me here to negotiate, to...”

“I am aware of why I called you here,” said Voldemort icily. Harry stepped back. It was the first time Voldemort had lost his cool. The anger flickered in his eyes. “And it certainly was *not* to beg for my life. Do not think for a moment that you are in charge here. You are here because I desired it. I have already admitted multiple counts of murder. The recording crystal that you have concealed about your person has served its purpose; your friends in the Aurors have enough to convict me. You have what you want, now you will give me what I want.”

“Wrong,” said Harry, just as coldly. Voldemort knew about the crystal. He had been caught red handed. The best thing to do was to cut losses and leave. “Since I have enough to put

you to death, my purpose is done. I can walk out of here and you get nothing.” Harry turned on his heel and marched towards the door.

“You wouldn’t dare leave,” said Voldemort calmly as Harry walked away. There was no fear, or any emotion in his voice. He sat calmly in his seat as Harry neared the door. “Not if you want the answers you so desperately seek.” Harry paused. Did he know about the existence of other worlds, about Harry’s true identity? No, it wasn’t possible. What answers did he mean? He knew something Harry didn’t. What was he offering? Curiosity killed the cat and had gotten Harry into trouble on many occasions, but he couldn’t help it.

“And which answers might they be?” asked Harry, turning back to face him. He stepped closer to the cell.

“Don’t plead ignorance,” said Voldemort. “You do not have to delve too far into the Aurors records, or the *Daily Prophet* articles to find out what I have done, what we have done *together*. Your first murder was the Minister of Magic, and you did it on my instruction. There is a reason you were my most valued disciple, but more to the point, there was a reason why you said yes to me. I offered you a life of power and privilege and you said yes. You don’t remember that, do you? You fight who you really are, but you do not understand it. Do you think perhaps I corrupted you at the tender age of fourteen? I was only a catalyst. The darkness was always in you; I merely brought it to the surface. Despite your new moral standings, you are still the same monster, consumed by the same darkness. You fought off five vampires, I read in the *Prophet*. We both know that it was my influence that enabled you to do so.”

“Can we give your overworked sense of self-grandeur a rest?” said Harry frostily. “I was a monster, a dirty little bastard – no one is disputing that – but I’ve learned my lesson.”

“You may wear the costume of a do-gooder, you may even believe you are a new person, but the darkness is alive in you as much today as it was on Black Noel, or the day in the Devil’s Cauldron. Do you remember that, Harry, what we did that night? Through the act of murder, we made sure that I would never be vanquished.”

Harry felt a fog envelope his mind. He raised a hand to his head as his legs went weak. Images of the churning water and the jagged rocks plunged into his mind. He could see the light swirling around him and Voldemort like a vortex of red and white light.

“Yes,” said Voldemort softly. “You do remember. If it makes you feel better, you were not perfect. You strayed from my instructions on several occasions. You were always fond of Muggle technologies. You did great amounts of research into explosives, you studied martial arts and the sword, disciplines I myself deemed beneath me. You even disobeyed direct orders from time to time. Do you perhaps remember the time I sent you to get your own sister to help us?”

“Vaguely,” said Harry. He recalled a dream where he entered her room and put the Imperius Curse on her.

“Her instructions were to deliver a bomb to Canamarro Square in Edinburgh, “ continued Voldemort. “She was to be killed herself, to prove your loyalty to me. She left the bomb and walked away. You told her to walk away. You saved her life, despite my instructions. The bomb went off; twenty seven people died, but she lived. “

Harry’s head was spinning. The Other Harry, evil as he had been, had still loved Rose, and had still saved her. Maybe he wasn’t so bad. But then again, he had killed nearly thirty people. Hang on, why hadn’t Rose mentioned this? Surely this would weigh on her conscience. Why hadn’t anyone told him this.

“You may be wondering, “ said Voldemort. “Why she does not remember the incident. “

“I suppose I gave her a memory charm, “ said Harry.

“Half right, “ said Voldemort, “though it was not you. I suggest you ask your parents. The world is many shades of grey, Harry. They modified her memory to save her from the Wizengamot. They broke the law to save their daughter. Not the model citizens anymore, are they? Just like you. You may wear the costume of a do-gooder, you may even believe you are a new person, but the darkness is alive in you as much today as it was on Black Noel, or the day in the Devil’s Cauldron. Do you remember that, Harry, what we did that night? Through the act of murder, we made sure that I would never be vanquished. How does it feel, knowing that the only way to truly kill me, is to kill yourself?”

Harry froze. A chill ran down his spine. It seemed like a common threat, but there was something in it that made him believe it. Voldemort was serious. Even if he managed to vanquish the Dark Lord, he would not survive long enough to live in the free world. Although he had never given much thought to a life after Voldemort, he had always been certain that there would be one.

“What do you mean?” said Harry, stepping closer. Had he been paying attention, he would have noticed that he was stepping over the yellow line. Unluckily for him, he was not. “What did you do to me?” Curiosity bubbled over. He had to know. Who was the other Harry? What had he done to him? Why did he have to die to kill Voldemort? He had to know! There were so many questions and the man before him held the answers. What on Earth had Voldemort done to him?

“You make it sound like I violated you,” said Voldemort, a cruel smile spreading over his lips. “It was *your* choice as much as mine. You *asked* me to use you.”

“Why?” gasped Harry. No, it couldn’t be true. Voldemort had taken him against his will, he must have. He had brainwashed the other Harry. “What could have driven me to such madness that I would join you?”

“There is only one person who can answer that,” said Voldemort staring directly into Harry’s eyes. “I can merely tell you what *I* did. I’m sure by now the old man will have notified you of your ancestry.”

“My what?” asked Harry, confused.

“Your blood, Harry,” said Voldemort, showing a glimmer of impatience. “Do you know from whom you are descended?”

“Who?” asked Harry, raising an eyebrow.

“Godric Gryffindor,” Voldemort practically spat the name.

The fog re-enveloped his mind. He was back on Aunt Marge’s farm. The shield had just stopped Voldemort’s killing curse. Harry lay wheezing in the bubble. Dumbledore’s words came back to him.

*“No spell nor person of Slytherin blood can enter the circle as long as Gryffindor’s sword and blood lie within!”*

He remembered the time he emerged from the Chamber of Secrets, the debrief in the Headmaster’s office, and Dumbledore’s words.

*“Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that from the hat.”*

Harry was the Heir of Gryffindor! He kicked himself for not having seen it before. The Prophecy didn’t apply in this world, yet Harry was still facing Voldemort. The reason was so obvious. Gryffindor had fought Slytherin a millennia ago and now their heirs were carrying on the Founder’s Feud.

“I knew your father was descended from Gryffindor himself,” said Voldemort. “Of course I considered killing you both outright, but then a better idea occurred to me. Rather than halting the Gryffindor line, what if I could take it as my own; what if I could bind myself to both lines? I took you when you were coming into your power. I showed you a life you could only dream of. The price for this was to carry a...burden for me. You took possession of it at the Devil’s Cauldron. You became closer to me than humanly possible. You also became my heir. Remember, it was all by your own choice. You even selected the Attacus woman to be the victim. Through the act of murder, we formed a bond that even death cannot break. So now we come to the *crux* of it, if you’ll pardon the pun. I can kill you without being affected, but the only way I can die is if you join me in death. You could end it all, Harry, but is life too precious?”

Harry’s entire body seemed numb. The news washed over him like a tsunami. He couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think as the words reverberated in his ears. Questions bounced around in his head, pounding at his mind like a sledgehammer. He was going to die, he had to or Voldemort would win. But he had to kill Voldemort first. This was impossible. How could he be Voldemort’s heir? He swayed slightly on his weak knees.

“I...” he stammered, unable to think clearly. His mouth opened and closed rapidly. His stomach turned and he resisted the urge to vomit. He was struggling to remain standing.

“And you shall know the truth,” said Voldemort, a wicked smile spreading over his face. “And the truth shall set you free.”

“You...,” said Harry, fighting the urge to puke. “You’re lying!”

“We both know I speak the truth,” said Riddle calmly.

“NO!” shouted Harry. It had to be a lie. He was not Voldemort’s heir, nor was he going to die. He took a second to calm himself, resting his hands on his knees and taking deep breaths. *It’s not possible*, the silent mantra that kept repeating in his head.

“You wanted answers of your own?” said Harry at last, managing to stand upright again. He shouldn’t offer Voldemort anything, but he had to change the subject or he would be sick.

“I do,” said Voldemort, leaning forward. “But I do not believe that you would tell me the truth.”

“Damn right,” said Harry. He would not give him any of the information he sought. He would not compromise the Order or anything of the sort.

“Even though I have been candid with you?” asked Voldemort. “What of honour?”

“You forfeited the right of honour when you took human life,” said Harry.

“Then by implication, you deserve no better,” said Voldemort icily. “It matters not, for I have a plan to remedy this dilemma.”

“What?” asked Harry, raising an eyebrow.

He didn’t have time to react. His pounding head was too weary to think clearly and the Dark Lord moved so fast. In a flash he was out of the chair and against the blue wall of light. His arm shot straight through the shield towards Harry’s face. He felt those icy fingers wrap tightly around his neck, not squeezing, but holding him firmly in place. Harry tried to cry out, but he couldn’t get a word out. He stared helplessly into those burning red eyes.

Then suddenly, for no apparent reason, Voldemort just released him. Harry grasped his throat and rubbed it in pain as he gasped for air. He felt horrible. His mind seemed so tired and his body ached all over. He felt sick inside and dizzy. He turned to see the Aurors surging forward towards him. When he turned back, Voldemort was standing two paces back from the barrier, calmly watching him. Harry coughed and doubled up in pain as the Aurors grabbed him around the arms and dragged him away from the cell.

“We said, don’t cross the bloody yellow line,” snapped one of them, as Harry was thrust through the door and out into the corridor.

The last thing he heard before the door closed was a cold yet triumphant voice, muttering to itself.

“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free...”

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Harry took a long, deep breath. He stood in the corridor outside the cell, bent over, leaning against the wall with his hands on his knees. He ached all over, as if he had been practicing his Animagus transformation for the past three hours. His head was throbbing and spinning at the same time. He had no energy left to do anything. He swayed as he stood and then ended up leaning on the wall for support.

“You okay, Harry?” asked Tonks, passing him a glass of water. The young Auror had been waiting outside for him because Dawlish had been called back to the Complex.

“Yeah, thanks,” said Harry, taking the glass and sipping it. “Splitting head-ache, but I’ll live.” Tonks laid a hand gently on his back and rubbed gently up and down.

“It’s okay, kiddo,” she said gently. “It took balls to walk in there after everything you’ve been through.” Her touch was soft and soothing. It was odd, thought Harry, that in these situations, he usually ended up in a bed in the hospital wing, with people sitting around, staring to him, and demanding to know what happened. Someone actually touching him, comforting him, even in such an innocent manner, was quite alien to him, yet soothing. He felt his body relax slightly. The regular motion up and down his back was strangely comforting. He felt like he wasn’t alone. In fact, he felt a sudden desire to be with his mother. He wanted her with him, to hug him. It was a novel feeling and one utterly unfamiliar to him. What was happening? He was so used to being alone, and now he felt so dependent on her. He didn’t know exactly how he felt, or how he was supposed to feel. Pain just filled his mind.

“I shouldn’t have gone in,” said Harry, standing upright. “He put his hand right through the barrier. I knew he was too strong for it to hold him. I knew he could escape, it was stupid to go.”

“Shhh,” said Tonks, soothingly. “There was no way you could have known. It’s not your fault. And anyway, we aren’t going to let him get away with this. He’s here now, and that’s where he’s staying. He’s gone back to his reading and we have doubled the security. “

“I wish I could believe that,” said Harry after swallowing a mouthful of the water. He now had no faith in the cell. Voldemort had reached clean through an impregnable field. Why had he even done that? He had grabbed Harry but then released him. It made no sense. He hadn’t felt the stab of Legilimency. Voldemort hadn’t read his mind or anything, just grabbed him. He didn’t even try and choke him. Surely a rash display of power was not something that Voldemort would do? It only served to increase security around him “Thanks, Tonks. I don’t know how he managed to put his arm through the barrier. It gave me one hell of a shock when I touched it.”

“Harry,” said Tonks, soothingly. “Let us think about that. You’ve done you best; now go get some rest. We’ll deal with him.”

“I feel like I’m leaving a job half done,” said Harry. He didn’t know why he was protesting. He wanted to return to bed, but he felt like he was walking away from something important. He had to see this through.

“Half done?” echoed Tonks, still rubbing his back. “It gave me the creeps standing outside the room with him. You spent over half an hour in there with him.”

“It only felt like half that,” said Harry softly, sipping the water.

“His attacks were emotional,” said Tonks. “He pushed your buttons and you got worked up. You must have lost track. Don’t worry.” Harry pulled the crystal out of the folds of his sleeve and handed it to Tonks. She stopped rubbing his back and pocketed the crystal.

“I’d better be heading back now,” said Harry. Tonks was right; he needed rest.

“Better take this,” said Tonks, handing Harry back his wand.

Harry said goodbye to the young Auror and turned to leave, slipping the wand back into his belt-loops. He walked back to the security door and entered the small room. The familiar blue light scanned him, presumably detecting his wand. The door opened and he emerged into the corridor. Retracing his steps, he emerged from the painting of the hanging into the corridor outside the Department of Mysteries. He was tempted to go in and look behind the locked door, but he was too tired to make the effort. He had had enough for one day.

He turned left and then headed back towards the lift, trying in vain to walk in a straight line. He needed the wall for support as he staggered towards the lift. Harry pressed the button to call the lift.

Ping!

The doors, opened. Harry stepped forwards, still staring at his shoes.

“Ouch!” Harry walked into something soft and warm. He looked up to find himself staring into the eyes of a short man with dirty-blond hair and a long pointed nose. He was no more than twenty-four and was dressed in green. He looked vaguely familiar to Harry, though he couldn’t place him. *Probably an Auror*, reasoned Harry. *Or maybe someone who left Hogwarts in the last few years.*

“Sorry,” said Harry, stepping past the man into the lift. The man didn’t reply beyond a nod and then continued down the passage. *Some people*, thought Harry. Was a sorry or even an ‘it’s alright’ beyond him? Christine had said that manners get people a long way. She had been right. Shaking his head, Harry pressed the button for the lobby.

As the doors slid closed, Harry was struck by a sudden thought. He remembered exactly where he had seen that man before. He had been dragging Christine through a sea of people just over a week ago. Aurors had thrown this man out of the building. He was a former Unspeakable who had been caught trespassing in the Department of Mysteries. Suddenly the man's words came back to Harry.

“You don't understand! The Muggles know! They know about us. They're prepared for....”

Harry stuck out a hand instinctively to stop the doors closing. Harry pushed them open and stepped out. There were two possibilities: one, this man was right and the Muggles knew something, and the Magical World was in danger – and that was a distinct possibility, given the current political climate between Muggles and Wizards. Option two was that this man was insane and if that was true then he should not be allowed access to the Department of Mysteries, which was where he was presumably going. Either way, Harry had to stop him. There were no Aurors around. Head still pounding, Harry ran towards the department door.

Harry pushed the door open and entered the familiar round room. One of the doors was just closing as he entered. Harry dived towards the door, stretching to stop it closing. If the room moved, he could spend ages trying to find the right door and by then it could be too late. He managed to get a hand in the way and winced in pain as the door closed on his hand. It wasn't too heavy, but it still hurt. Harry pushed the door open, rising to his feet. He slipped into the room. This was one of the rooms he had not entered during his visit last year.

The room was large and in shadow. He could see cabinets around the edge of the room holding all manner of instruments. On the table in the middle of the room was a bowl that looked similar to a Pensieve but was wider and flatter than a Pensieve. Above it was a projection of what looked like a star-filled sky. Harry did not recognise any constellations in the image. It was probably not stars at all, but something Unspeakables understood.

Harry stepped further into the room. He couldn't see the man who had come into the room. He was about to head for the other door at the far end when something hit him in the back.

Harry was propelled forward head over heels and landed on his back. His wand flew out of the belt-loops of his trousers. Harry found himself staring at the ceiling. He hadn't even heard the Disarming Charm coming. He glanced up at ceiling, his eyes moving back and forth, looking for any sign of movement. After a second, a man in green emerged from the shadows. He was the same rodent-like man whom he had followed into the room.

“Who the...” began Harry, but the man cut him off.

“Shut up!” he hissed. Harry realised that he was completely unarmed, and his head was still throbbing. He was in no condition to fight. The man flicked his wand and the lights came on in the room. “Oh my,” said the man. “*The Harry Potter*. I knew You-Know-Who would send someone, but I never dreamt it would be you.”

Irritably, Harry got to his feet, the man's wand pointed at his heart the entire time. He brushed off his robes and threw the man a dirty look. The accusation of being a Death Eater after what he had just been through was thoroughly insulting.

"For your information," said Harry coldly, "I am no longer in the service of Voldemort. Secondly, I don't know who you are, let alone want to kill you."

"Yeah whatever," said the man, stepping forward and jabbing Harry with the wand. Harry didn't hesitate. As soon as the wand touched his chest, Harry grabbed the man's wrist and thrust his other fist into the crook of the man's elbow, bending his arm back so the wand was aimed at the man's own neck. Harry stuck his leg behind the man's knee and pushed forward. The man fell backward, landing on his back with his own wand and Harry's aimed at his neck. He looked terrified as he stared up at Harry.

"Now," said Harry coldly, "as I was saying. I am not a Death Eater, and you are not an Unspeakable. I saw you being thrown out last week. Now I followed you here because I saw you sneaking in. So, what are you doing here?"

"Go to hell!" snapped the man. Harry grimaced at the idea of having a 'tough guy' here. He didn't want to have to hurt the man.

"I'm going to ask you once more politely; don't make me ask again," said Harry. "What are you doing here?"

"You're not a Death Eater?" asked the man, his eyes wide and his jaw shaking. Harry shook his head. He could feel the familiar stab of Legilimency in his mind. So this man was a Legilimens. Harry made no attempt to force him out of his mind.

"You can get word to Dumbledore?" asked the man. "And you can protect me?" Harry nodded.

"...Fine," said the man, after a few second's thought. "Let me up and I'll show you why I'm here." Harry stood up, but did not give him back his wand. The man stood and then sat on the table in the middle of the room.

"My name is Rupert Redgrave," he began. "I've worked in the Department of Mysteries for the last five years. My field of research was magic in its purest form; what is magic, why does it exist, why can only some people use it, why can squibs exist given their parentage and the very basic questions like those. A few months back I began a little research into preventing magic. It occurred to me that if electricity doesn't work in Hogwarts and the Ministry because there is too much magic in the air, then could a surge of electricity or something like that stop all magic? A sort of EMP for magic, as it were."

"I'm not sure why you would want to know that," said Harry softly. *What good would that do?* Though having said that, preventing wandless magic in jails was a good idea. "Do go on."

“If I know what stops magic, it might unlock secrets as to what it really is,” said Redgrave. “Anyhow, since I was looking for something non-magical to combat magic, I had to do a lot of research into the Muggle sciences. As I was part of the Ministry of Magic, I had access to government computers. It was then that I came across a project buried deep in a Covert Operations section of the Government’s computer. The Project was called Arctic Thunder.”

Arctic Thunder? The name echoed in Harry’s mind. He had dreamed of it, many nights since his arrival; this was what Lucius had told Voldemort was hidden in Devon. But according to Voldemort, it was the code-name of the door in the Department of Mysteries behind which love was studied. That was what he was looking for. All they found in the Muggle facility in Devon was a load of druid ruins and a load of Muggle technology. Suddenly Harry understood. Lucius didn’t know what Arctic Thunder really was! He had made a mistake, and would have been punished for it.

“Operation Arctic Thunder,” continued Redgrave, “was a secret Muggle project. It was believed by some that You-Know-Who was getting too powerful and that the Ministry was losing the war and they foresaw a time when You-Know-Who would take over. They knew his politics and believed he would present a threat to them, and may even start a war. They knew that they didn’t understand magic, and that we have spells they could never even dream of. They felt that the only way for them to survive a war with You-Know-Who was to neutralise magic. The Ministry of Defence commissioned a project to create a device that would stop all Magic. Without magic, they reasoned, we would be helpless. Even the Aurors would be no use. The point is that there is a device out there that can neutralise any Magic within a five mile radius. Any army that walks with that at the front could march into Hogwarts, a defenceless Hogwarts, completely unimpeded.”

“Jesus,” said Harry. The idea of Hogwarts being entered so easily was not a nice one. If Voldemort got his hands on that, Hogwarts would fall within hours.

“Oh, it gets better,” said Redgrave with a wry smile. “The Ministry offered protection for the Project. Our Ministry had a team of Aurors watching the facility where it was kept, ready to go at the first sign of magic.”

“Why?”

“Politics” shrugged Redgrave. “I don’t understand it, but you can bet there was political pressure coming from somewhere. I doubt the Aurors knew what it was they were protecting. Anyhow, it didn’t do the project any good – You-Know-Who found it. A few months ago there was an attack on the facility where it was kept. I believe you were captured on that particular mission and apparently lost your memory. Despite the attack and a breach of the facility, nothing was taken. The Muggles moved the weapon, this time refusing the Ministry’s offer of protection. We no longer know where it is, but there is a device out there that could bring our world to its knees.”

“When the facility was attacked, Voldemort didn’t actually know what Arctic Thunder really was” said Harry. “Does Voldemort now know about this device?” The man stared at his feet. He didn’t need to be a Legilimens to see he was hiding something. What had he done?

“Does he know?” repeated Harry.

“When I found out about it,” said Redgrave sadly, “I went to my Head of Department. Only Crouch knew about the project, so I thought he could talk to Crouch, to convince him to find the new location and keep an eye on it. I was concerned that if we don’t monitor where it is, You-Know-Who could get it and we would never even know until it was too late. Unfortunately, my HOD’s loyalties lay elsewhere. He asked me into his office and then...bang. Have you ever felt the Cruciatius Curse?” Harry nodded. So he had tried to warn the Minister, but Death Eater spies had intercepted him, and now Voldemort knew a device existed that could open the gates of Hogwarts to him. *Christ almighty!*

“I had to tell him,” said Redgrave. “I know I shouldn’t but I had to...the pain! You-Know-Who knows it exists, but not *where*. They were going to kill me, but I managed to get out of there. They had me fired, and then waited outside my house. I’ve been in hiding ever since. My sister is dead and I’m so scared. I need to find out where it is, before You-Know-Who gets it.”

“So you want to steal it before Voldemort can?” asked Harry. He knew it was wrong to steal, but any price was worth it to keep such a weapon out of Voldemort’s reach.

“In a word,” said the Unspeakable, “Yes.”

“Why didn’t you go to Dumbledore, or Crouch directly?” asked Harry. Surely they weren’t that hard to reach.

“I couldn’t get to them. Death Eaters are everywhere.” A fair enough reason. You really didn’t know who to trust these days. Still, this Redgrave had a point. He had to find out where this device was kept and keep it away from Voldemort at all costs.

“Where would I have to go to find out where it is?” asked Harry. “You’re right. Voldemort must never get it.”

“I don’t know,” said Redgrave. “The Muggle Government, I suppose. You could...”

Harry stopped listening. He felt a sudden chill. Something was wrong. His Phoenix senses were going haywire – he could feel it in his mind. Darkness, coldness, evil! There was another presence in the room. Something was coming.

“*AVADA KEDAVRA!*”

Harry reacted instantly, diving forward, rugby-tackling Redgrave to the ground. He felt a chill as the curse shot over his head, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Harry

rolled off Redgrave and turned to face the new arrival. A tall man in black his was at the door, aiming a wand at Redgrave. The stranger's face was contorted in rage, and he aimed his wand for a second curse.

“Avada...” the man tried again.

Prius! thought Harry, flicking his wand. The silent parry stopped the Death Eater finishing the spell. “*Stupefy!*”

“Protego!” snapped the man quickly. A shield appeared and Harry's stunner bounced cleanly off, heading for the ceiling. Harry sprang off his shoulders onto his feet. He landed gracefully facing his attacker, just in time to duck another Killing Curse. Harry dived to the side, sliding away across the polished floor.

“Run!” Harry hissed at Redgrave.

“Incendio!”

The cabinet behind which Harry had taken cover burst into flame under the Death Eater's curse. Harry leapt away from the flames, his trouser-leg already alight. Harry dived to the floor, rolling over and over to smother the flames.

“*AVADA KEDAVRA!*”

Harry glanced up, and to his horror, the curse had already left the man's wand. It shot through the air like a rocket, zooming towards the target. It smashed into Redgrave's chest, launching him off his feet. The Unspeakable was dead before he hit the floor.

Harry lay still, staring at the man's body for what seemed like an eternity. He looked just like Cedric, spread-eagled on the floor. His vacant eyes seemed to call out to Harry. Why hadn't he been able to save him?

Suddenly, a shadow fell over him. The Death Eater was standing tall, his wand inches from Harry's nose. Harry felt a chill run through him, and he knew that the dark magic was being summoned ready for the darkest curse in existence. *The trouble with Phoenix intuition is that you knew exactly what was coming*, Harry thought. Suddenly a feeling appeared in Harry's stomach. A sensation came over him that he had felt but once before, in McGonagall's office. He could feel the Phoenix calling to him. He tried to relax and let it tell him what to do, which wasn't easy with a wand in his face and the killing curse seconds away. The feeling seemed to clear his mind. It was as if a fog lifted and he suddenly knew what to do. Concentrating hard, Harry tried to picture Dumbledore's office in his mind.

Before the eyes of the startled Death Eater, Harry Potter disappeared in a ball of flame.

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The office was empty as Harry reappeared on the cold hard floor of the office. Harry didn't know how he had just done that. He was sure it wasn't Apparation, in fact he was fairly sure that he had just done what Fawkes could do and appear out of thin air in a ball of flame. The idea had just come to him. He had just somehow known what to do. It then occurred to him that he was in Hogwarts and it was impossible to Apparate in and out of Hogwarts. Still, he had seen Fawkes flame around the castle. He had sent the signal to warn of Umbridge's approach when Dumbledore had been removed from office last year. This must be one of the perks of being a Phoenix. A small smile filled his face for a few seconds. He could enter Hogwarts at will. Cool. It occurred to him that he should discuss this with McGonagall before doing it again. It had been an emergency so he had an excuse this time, but he needed to talk to her before getting carried away.

Harry stood up and brushed himself off and dropped Redgrave's wand into his pocket. He considered leaving it here, but then Dumbledore would know he had been present during the death of an Unspeakable. It would not bode well for his trustworthiness. Instead he chose to keep it and dispose of it later.

Harry considered waiting here to tell Dumbledore what he had learned, but somehow he knew that politics still had its place in Dumbledore's ideas. He had to do this himself. Picking up the Floo from the mantle, Harry threw some into the fireplace. It was time to pay a visit to an old friend.

“Cambridge University!”

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“Chris!” called a voice from around the corner. Doctor Christine Gaynes gave an exasperated sigh before stopping and turning. After a second, a man came around the corner. He wore a mustard yellow shirt and red tie, which were far too bright for his old and dull features. He was a little on the podgy side and waddled when he walked. Doctor James Summers was not renowned for his love of exercise.

“Make it quick, Jim,” said Christine irritably. Jim was one of those infuriating people who, once he extended an invite, wouldn't take no for an answer. He was almost impossible to get rid of. He was a clever man, there was no denying that, but his people skills left something to be desired. Christine supposed that was what came of living your life looking at either a computer or a microscope. She was only twenty-six and when she got to Jim's age, she hoped she was nothing like him. Still her recent discovery about the ways of the world had broadened her horizons; the borrowed copies of *Hogwarts: A History* and *The Modern Magical World for Muggleborns*, which at present lay hidden beneath her bedside table at home, were a testament to that.

“I was just wondering,” panted Jim as he waddled up to her, “If you wanted to come out with us tonight. It's just that we are all going out to Wetherspoons for a meal and I thought you might like to come.”

Ah, thought Christine. *So he has hassled some other poor sods into coming out with him.* She knew what would happen, having been there herself before. Several would be unable to attend at the last minute and those that did would be stretched for conversation until they got a few beers down them. She couldn't take an evening of awkward silence. Christine was not keen on attending, but getting rid of the most persistent man on earth was not easy. She wished she could just wave a wand and get him to bugger off.

"I'd love to, Jim," she began before putting on her 'remembering a previous appointment' face, "but I'm afraid I can't. My sister is coming into town, and I can't leave her."

"Well, bring her along," beamed Jim. "The more the merrier."

"But she's brought my niece with her," added Christine. In truth she didn't have a niece, or a sister for that matter, but she was *not* going to attend. "You know how it is, a pub is no place for a toddler."

"It's only Wetherspoons," said Jim, his enthusiasm intact. "We could sit in the family area. They do kids' meals." Christine resisted the urge to roll her eyes. *Christ, will he not take a hint?* thought Christine irritably.

"Sir?" interrupted a voice. There was a boy to their right dressed all in black with a red baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. He was quite short, and carried a large cardboard box. "There's a phone call for you in your office."

"Who is it?" asked Jim. It occurred to Christine to ask what the kid was doing in Jim's office, but if it gave her a chance to escape, she would hold her tongue.

"Someone from Professor Stephen Hawking's office," said the boy.

"Stephen Hawking? For me?" stammered Jim, unable to believe his luck. Christine was beginning to wonder why the world-renowned Physicist would want to talk to Jim Summers, but she again held her tongue. Jim seemed convinced by it, as he quickly waddled off.

"Don't you just wish you could make him disappear," said the boy, removing the hat, "with the flick of a magic wand."

Christine broke into a small smile as she came face to face with Harry Potter once again. She still had nightmares about being in that room and the explosion behind her. Her nightmares were often filled with renegade bombs, but she would not have traded the experience for the world. Now she knew that the world was bigger than she had thought, it seemed to make the world a brighter place. All her little childhood dreams about fairy godmothers, unicorns, and magic came back to her, more real than when she was five. She had renounced them in favour of logic and science, but now, over twenty years later, she knew the truth. She looked back on how she had been a month ago. Work had been her life and there was nothing beyond it. She felt like she had been given a new lease on life, all thanks to the boy who stood in front of her.

“Is your visit business or personal?” she asked, wondering if she should find an empty room to talk.

“Both,” said Harry. “But we had better get going before not-so-slim Jim comes back.”

Christine nodded. “How old are you?” she asked, an idea formulating in her mind. He looked eighteen, didn’t he? Not really, but sod it, as long as he wasn’t buying – this was a University, after all.

“Sixteen, why?” he asked.

“Come on, put that hat back on, we’re going to the pub, I need a break,” she announced.

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Harry followed her as she set off towards the double doors marked ‘EXIT’. He was careful not to bump the box he was carrying as he followed her out of the building and out onto the familiar campus of Cambridge. She then turned right and crossed the road towards a building. Harry followed her down the gap between the buildings. The alley came out onto another road, but this time she turned right and she and Harry found themselves outside a bar. Christine marched straight in and over to the bar.

“Take a seat,” she said, pointing to a table in the corner from which they could see the entire bar, but there was no one near enough to hear them. Harry did take a seat and removed his jumper, as it was warm and stuffy in the bar. He set the box gently down on the seat next to him. The smell of cigarettes hung on the air and the wallpaper was stained slightly yellow. Harry cringed at the smell coming from the white stick on a student’s hand to his right. *Filthy habit*, thought Harry. He was sorely tempted to magically induce a coughing fit to cure the boy of his ridiculous habit, but resisted. If he wanted to stink and look like an utter twat, that was his prerogative.

With a clink, a glass was plonked down in front of him, and Christine took a seat next to him.

“What’s this?” asked Harry, pointing to the glass in front of him. It was filled with a reddish-purple liquid that looked like blackcurrant but smelt wrong. It had a frothy head and looked quite thick.

“Snakebite,” said Christine casually. “The drink of a student. You’re less than two years short of being able to drink and this is a uni, so never mind.” She herself had what looked like lemonade, though Harry was sure there was a spirit of some sort in it. Harry picked up the glass and sipped the cold liquid. It was fruity, with a slight aftertaste of something he didn’t know. It was good.

“What’s in it?” he asked.

“A dash of blackcurrant, half cider and half lager,” said Christine, putting her won glass down on a beer mat. *Soliciting of Alcohol to a minor – very naughty*, thought Harry, but he was very thirsty, so why not. Just the one. “So, what brings you to my humble abode, and what’s with the box?”

“Firstly to see how you are doing,” said Harry politely. In truth he had been quite concerned about her. Since Crouch had given out her name, he was worried that someone might come for her. Still, Harry had stopped her being Obliviated and even leant her some books. She was like a child, being born again into a bigger brighter world, even though her first experience of the magical world showed a load of barbarians. Harry actually felt quite paternal towards her, despite her being ten years older than him.

“I’m flattered,” said Christine.

“Well,” said Harry. “You did save many lives, including my own. And let’s not forget that you are the largest breach of the Statute of Secrecy I’ve ever come across. Technically, we should have wiped your memory, but I intervened.”

“To which I am eternally grateful,” said Christine. “Those books are fascinating, by the way. Just wandering around now, I notice things, things I never saw before. It’s like my eyes have been opened, and now I know what I’m looking for, I notice things. Like the other day, I saw this bright purple triple-decker bus that had armchairs instead of seats. No one else seemed to notice it.”

“The Knight Bus,” said Harry casually, sipping his drink.

“It’s like this whole new world had been opened up for me,” said Christine, sounding a touch sad. “It makes me wish I was part of it.”

“I could speak to Dumbledore,” offered Harry. “He is considering introducing Muggle Studies as a mandatory lesson to try and bridge the gap between us and you. Most purebloods don’t know what gravity is, let alone radiation. Surely someone with your knowledge of science and the world at large would be useful.”

“I…” stammered Christine. She was blushing and clearly a little uncomfortable.

“Of course, you wouldn’t want to leave everything behind,” said Harry, “I know a lot about that.” He was thinking about leaving an entire *world* behind. “But if you wanted to guest-speak some time, I’m sure we could arrange it.”

“Could you?” she asked, her eyes lighting up. “I would get to see Hogwarts?”

“You never know,” said Harry, taking another sip.

“I’d like that,” said Christine. “But this isn’t why you came, is it?”

“Honestly, no,” conceded Harry. He took a deep breath. He was about to ask her to commit a crime punishable by death. This was not going to be an easy conversation. “We have a...situation.” Christine shot him a concerned glance. “It’s nothing nuclear,” he quickly added, to ease her. She relaxed slightly.

“The terrorist who blew up the Ministry,” began Harry.

“He–Who–Must–Not–Be–Named?” she asked. Harry shot her a puzzled glance, before he understood.

“You’ve been reading,” he said. “For future reference, just use his name, Voldemort. You’ve never even heard the name before, so there is no need to fear it. If you are afraid of the name, how can you ever hope to fight the man behind the legend? But yes, you’re right. Voldemort. He used the bomb to put pressure on our government and yours. I’m sure you’ve read about the recent wave of muggings in the papers? Voldemort has spread rumour around the country that it was a Muggle attack and since the weapon was Muggle, many blamed you for the attack, and are taking revenge. That’s not a plague in the west end, it’s the result of the most Unforgivable of curses. The Killing Curse.”

“These attacks are all you?” she gasped.

“Aurors are running around trying to stop it,” said Harry quickly. “The bomb destroyed our monitoring equipment, but we’re doing our best. The new equipment came online two days ago, so the violence is dying down. We’re leaving anyone captured to face your authorities, and have increased sentences of our own justice system. We hope to get it to die down completely, soon. The point is that all this conflict is pushing our two communities to the brink of war. We both know what a war would mean. Thousands would be killed, on both sides. We have to stop this madman before it’s too late.”

“So how can I help?” Harry admired her courage. She knew so little about their world and what was being asked of her, yet she was still willing to help – an admirable quality.

“Your government has commissioned a secret plan,” said Harry, choosing his words carefully. “Do you know what an EMP or Electro–Magnetic Pulse is?” she nodded. “They have invented one that stops any magic within a five miles radius. It’s a fail–safe in case we lose and Voldemort takes power and attacks you. It enables you to defend yourselves. However, we’ve learned that Voldemort knows this weapon exists. If he gets his hands on it, Hogwarts and the Ministry will fall. Once he has control, he will lead what’s left of the magical community against the Muggle government. We need to stop him getting his hands on it, but the only way I can think of to do that is...”

“To destroy it or to have it yourself,” finished Christine. “You want me to help you steal a top–secret project from my own government.”

“Precisely,” said Harry. He didn’t know how he was supposed to look, so he kept his face blank. “You said you worked for the government. Could you possibly have access to a Ministry of Defence computer? Is there any way you can find out where it is for us?”

“I don’t have that kind of access to the M.O.D. myself,” said Christine, sipping her drink. “But I have a friend, or more specifically, an ex-boyfriend, that works for COBRA,” she added thoughtfully.

“COBRA?” echoed Harry.

“Cabinet Office Briefing Room,” said Christine.

“So what’s the ‘A’ for?” asked Harry.

“Nothing,” said Christine, “but Cobr isn’t a word, and spelling it out, ‘see oh bee ar’ just doesn’t sound as menacing as Cobra, the king of snakes.”

“Fair point,” noted Harry. Snakes were definitely associated with evil and malice. “So what is COBRA?”

“Heads of all military departments, special forces and intelligence services. It’s essentially a war council. My ex is the assistant of the home secretary. He’d have access.” Harry felt a tingle of hope inside him. If this man could get them a location, they could acquire the device.

“Can you get to him, or do you need us to?” asked Harry.

“You?” echoed Christine accusingly. “You mean, do I need you to put one of those spells on him, like that Major Lane? To force him to do something he didn’t want to, to get him killed?” Her tone was sharp and accusing. She obviously wasn’t happy with this plan.

“For your information,” said Harry gently, “that curse, along with the ones for torture and killing, carry a life sentence in the Island Prison of Azkaban, a resort on which I have no desire to spend my holidays. No, I have no intention of forcing anyone to help. I would never use force like that. It loathes me to admit it that there are those in my world who do use those curses with no regard for life. It is those people whom I am fighting against, not your world. I am asking you in the interest of saving lives to help us.”

“So you’re asking me to help out of the goodness of my heart?”

“It’s a lot to ask,” began Harry.

“You have no idea what you are asking,” said Christine, her tone firm. She was clearly not happy with this, and for good reason. She was being asked to risk her life and job for someone she hardly knew. “Let me spell it out for you. T-R-E-A-S-O-N. Treason, Harry. I am a Muggle. More than that, I am a British Citizen. Stealing classified secrets and giving them

to non-government personnel, and a boy I hardly know, is treason against the crown and that is still punishable by death. Not only that, if it comes to war, I will be killed by your people and I would be surrendering the only hope my people have of defending themselves. I am essentially handing you a loaded gun and asking you not to pull the trigger.”

“This is war, Christine,” said Harry sadly. “Someone is trying to start a war between us, and in the interests of both sides, we need to stop him getting these devices. Please, help us.”

“How long have I got to think it over?” she asked, staring into space and sipping her drink.

“Until I walk out of here,” said Harry. She shot him a surprised glance. “Sorry, but we have no time. Voldemort has a lot of influence, and his followers don’t have the respect for life that I do. They will not hesitate to use the three Unforgivable curses to get their way. He will get the device sooner or later; the only chance of stopping him is to help me.”

“Why not double security?” she asked. Harry had thought about this himself, even about asking Crouch for Ministry Aurors to defend it, but the Aurors might be Death Eater spies, and even if they *were* loyal, if the Ministry knew its location, so would Voldemort, and the Aurors would not stop him. Even in prison, Voldemort was still a terrifying opponent. This whole thing could be what Voldemort was after. He had gone to prison so that the Aurors would relax, leaving the Death Eaters to steal this weapon. There was no way that security would help.

“You could stick the whole SAS in front of him and he would cut through them like a hot knife through butter, with no regards for life on either side. Even his followers are expendable.”

Christine sat for a moment in thought. She was clearly debating the morals of treason and potential death if caught against saving lives in both worlds. It was a lot to ask, especially since she was an academic, not a soldier. Harry sat in silence, hoping to God that she would say yes.

“Okay,” said Christine at last. “I’ll contact Robert and see if I can get the location. Harry, I’m trusting you – not your Minister, not your people, just you.”

“I will keep the device safe from everyone, you have my word,” promised Harry. “This is happening off the record. My government, headmaster and parents will not know what we are doing. Only my accomplices will know it exists, and only I will know where it is.” He would take every security precaution he knew. Voldemort would *never* get hold of it!

“Fine,” said Christine. “Let’s hope I can do it in time.”

“Thank you,” said Harry. “I really appreciate it. Don’t worry about your conscience. You’re not betraying the crown; you’re protecting it. Her Majesty will be able to sleep soundly without Voldemort coming—a-knocking.” Christine didn’t look convinced, but she nodded and got up from her seat.

“Next time, you’re buying,” she said. She took two steps towards the door before turning back. “How do I contact you?” Harry had almost forgotten himself. He gently picked up the box next to him and handed it to her.

“Inside is a cage with an owl,” said Harry. “Attach a note to its legs. There is a self-addressed envelope inside. Remember, this is not officially happening. Your note must be seemingly innocent and vague, and must not contain your name or location, okay?”

“Got it,” she said, taking the box. She then strode out the door. Harry drained the last of his drink before following suit. He just hoped she could do it in time.

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Harry Floo’d back to Hogwarts, merging into the Headmaster’s office amidst a meeting for a majority of the Order. There were a good forty people in the room and Harry recognised some faces, while a few of the others he had never laid eyes upon before. They all turned to him as he entered.

“Ah, the man of the hour,” said Dumbledore, as Harry brushed himself off. “We have just been reviewing the crystal from this morning.”

“Don’t say it,” said Harry quickly. “I know I let it get personal. I messed up, okay?”

“Harry,” said Dumbledore in his infuriating calm. “it’s a little more complicated than that.”

“Yeah I know,” said Harry. “He was speaking in riddles the entire time, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“Harry,” said Dumbledore. “We don’t know what he said.” How was that possible? Had he messed up? Surely Dawlish would not have given him a dud crystal. He had wrapped it up and Dawlish had said that it would record through fabric. Voldemort have even acknowledged the crystal.

“What?” said Harry. “I thought the crystal recorded everything?”

“It only recorded you,” said Snape. “Not him.” Was Harry paranoid, or did he sound accusing?

“How is that possible?” asked Harry.

“It may be that someone sabotaged the barrier,” said Dawlish. “The crystal worked when I gave it to you. Tonks said he reached clean through the barrier and grabbed you.”

“Only for a second,” said Harry.

“He didn’t try anything once he had you?” asked Snape.

“Nothing,” said Harry. “I think he just wanted to scare me, to prove his power.”

“The point is,” continued Dawlish. “He reached through a barrier that nothing should be able to without even being hurt. And the Crystal didn’t record his voice when a similar one went through the same shield when you yourself were captive, Potter. The barrier must have been sabotaged.”

“This is a disturbing turn of events,” said Flamel. “If he has someone with that kind of access, loyal to him, he could escape at any time.” This was dangerous. If Voldemort controlled too much of the Ministry, then he could take over at any moment. Harry knew a cell would never hold him.

Harry yawned, he was absolutely knackered and he only wanted to discussing his new form of transport with McGonagall. He needed to get to bed before he collapsed.

“We can continue this later,” said Harry. “I’m too tired at the moment. I need rest.” With that, he staggered back to the Staff Quarters. Once home, he fell onto the bed still dressed and was asleep in seconds.

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The next day, Harry sat down and discussed with Dumbledore and Flamel all that Voldemort had said. They all agreed that only the other Harry, wherever he may be could answer the question as to why Harry had chosen to side with him. However, they did gain some useful information from the conversation. Despite the fact that Voldemort had spoken in riddles the entire time, they were able to salvage some of the facts. Of course, Harry and Dumbledore were interested in two different sections of the interview. While Harry was concerned with his past and what Voldemort meant by them being closer than was humanly possible and a bond that even death could not break. The words played over and over in his mind. The previous night his dreams had been plagued by the churning water and jagged rocks of the Devil’s Cauldron.

While Harry put the memory into a Pensieve and they watched it, Harry kept churning those words over in this mind. He knew there was meaning behind them, but what it was he could only guess.

“What does he mean by ‘steps along the path to immortality’?” asked Harry. “He has said that in my world too. I thought immortality was impossible, even with magic.”

“It is,” said Dumbledore. “The man who came closest is sitting in this room, and he is as mortal as the rest of us.”

“By all accounts it is impossible,” said Flamel, leaning forward in his chair, his ancient face looking even more weary than before. “However, Riddle’s knowledge of the Dark Arts runs

deeper than mine. Through some sick act he may have achieved what we believe to be impossible.”

“Through the act of murder,” quoted Harry.

“He may have taken one life to ensure himself of another,” said Nicolas. “But if I don’t know the spell I cannot say what he is referring to.”

“Do you think it’s true about my not being able to kill him without dying myself?” asked Harry.

“He may be trying to scare you,” said Dumbledore calmly, though Harry was sure he was hiding something. “On the other hand, he may be telling the truth. But look at it like this, Harry; whatever he did, he did to the other you. As such, you may not need to die after all.”

“Depending on whether the spell affected the body or the soul,” said Harry.

“Precisely,” said Dumbledore.

“Did you know about my being the Heir of Gryffindor?” asked Harry.

“Of course,” said Dumbledore. “I assumed my counterpart would have informed you of it.”

“He didn’t,” said Harry frostily. “And what about me being *His* Heir? Am I now the Heir of Slytherin too?”

“His blood does not flow in your veins,” said Dumbledore.

“This isn’t my blood,” said Harry holding up his wrist. Though in his world, his blood flowed in Voldemort’s veins. Interesting.

“I wouldn’t worry, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “You are your own person. You do not have to go the way of your father, and certainly not of a man who claims you are *his* heir. It is your life, so do not trouble yourself with needless worries.” Harry took a little comfort from his words.

The meeting was over shortly after that and Harry decided to go down to the Quidditch pitch to watch Gryffindor train. The new team were very impressive, though in his opinion, nothing on the original Wood line-up he had started with. That would forever be the Gryffindor Line-Up for him.

Christine’s answer did not arrive that day and Harry went to bed that night feeling rather deflated. Her answer didn’t arrive the next day, or the one after that.

The following Monday came and Harry was beginning to think something had happened to her. It had been too long and with every passing moment, Voldemort could potentially have acquired the device.

After lunch that day, Harry dressed in Muggle clothes and pocketed his wand. He had waited long enough and it was time to act. He was going to Floo to Cambridge and find out what was going on. He was just about to head up to Dumbledore's office when the door opened and in walked his mother.

"Going out?" Lily asked him.

"Er...yes," said Harry quickly. He managed to force a smile.

"Anywhere nice?"

"I just need a breath of fresh air and maybe a drink," said Harry.

"Hogsmeade?"

"I was thinking somewhere more Muggle," said Harry honestly. "I'm less likely to be recognised."

"And how do you plan to pay for the drink?" asked Lily raising an eye.

"Good point," said Harry quickly thinking of an excuse. "I'm still a little shaky. I'd have got all the way there before realising I was missing something."

Lily gave him a scrutinising glance, before nodding towards a table. "You can take some money from the draw," she said at last. "Go easy, Harry. I don't want to have to collect a drunken lout from a police station."

"Trust me," said Harry, smiling to himself.

At that moment, an owl flew in through the window. It was a tiny little thing, but also very familiar. It was the same owl he had given to Christine. Did this mean she had found out what he needed to know? Harry ripped the paper from the owl's leg and tore open the envelope like a child on Christmas morning.

*Harry,*

*Fancy another Snakebite? 18:00. It's your round.*

*Christ*

Harry smiled at the woman's dry wit. If she had gotten the information they needed, then they might have to go tonight. There was so little time left.

"Well," he said to his mother. "I'd better be off now. Back in a few hours."

He slipped past her, leaving a rather confused and unconvinced looking Lily in the room. Harry quickly ran up to Gryffindor Tower, bursting into the room, making several people jump. He found Ginny sitting by the fireplace, losing a game of chess to Dean Thomas.

“Ginny, can I have a quick word?” asked Harry, gesturing for her to follow him outside. She gave Dean an excuse and followed Harry out through the door into the corridor. They stepped away from the Fat Lady so they couldn’t be heard. Harry checked that they were alone, before beginning. He was not happy with what he was about to say, but he had no choice. He didn’t want to involve them, but he couldn’t do this alone.

“Ginny,” he began. “there is a situation in which I need some help, and I can’t go to Dumbledore.”

“What do you need?” she asked. Part of Harry wished she would refuse, but he knew she was a Gryffindor for a reason. Sighing, he continued.

“Can you get Rose, Ron and Hermione to come to the Room of Requirement at eight this evening?”

“Why?” she predictably asked.

“Like I said, I need help,” said Harry. “I can’t say anymore at the moment.” Ginny looked a little disconcerted, but nodded. “It’s only a meeting,” Harry reassured her. “You won’t have to go through with it if you don’t want to.” She looked a little happier. “Thanks, Gin.”

She turned and disappeared back into the tower.

The next few hours were among the longest in Harry’s life. He walked through Hogsmeade, and then Floo’d to Diagon Alley and then stepped out into Muggle London. He could not think of anything to do and didn’t want to be around anyone in case they picked up on how on-edge he was. He kept glancing at the clocks on the street and then cursing when only a few minutes had passed since he had last looked. Nothing he did could take his mind of the evening’s meeting. He tried a few Animagus exercises to pass the time, but his concentration was elsewhere. All he could think about was Artic Thunder. The idea of Hogwarts being so vulnerable, of Voldemort marching to victory unimpeded, was horrific. He would turn to knives and swords instead. He hated to imagine the students being hacked to pieces, but those sorts of images filled his mind.

It seemed like an eternity had passed, but finally, the time came. Harry concentrated hard on Oxford Street in London. He disappeared in a ball of flame. The rushing sensation and dizziness were becoming less intense, but it was still not the most comfortable means of transport. He reappeared in an alley between two shops, behind a large Biffa Bin. Stepping out, he emerged onto the road. It was four thirty and in an hour the shops would be closed. He had to hurry. He quickly made his way into an army surplus shop, his pocket full of money that his mother had lent him. Here he had no access to a Gringott’s vault, which could have presented a problem, but it was sorted now. He emerged from the surplus shop a few minutes later carrying

two bags containing clothing for tonight. He made one more stop in a toy-shop and then made his way quickly to the Leaky Cauldron and through into Diagon Alley. From there, he Floo'd to Cambridge.

He managed to find his way back to the pub. He could see the old building on the far side of the road and smell the stale beer and cigarettes from a good ten metres away. He regretted not having an invisibility cloak in this world. From his hiding place, he could see everyone that went into the pub. He only had to wait four minutes before he saw a familiar figure, though this time not dressed in a smart suit. She wore long black trousers, with a matching top and a small denim jacket over the top. While Harry couldn't imagine a teacher on the weekend, especially Snape, apparently lecturers did have a social life. He suppressed a grin at the memory of that Jim bloke who had been trying to get Christine to go to some stupid party.

Harry quickly darted across the road and slipped into the pub behind her. She had paused a few paces inside and was looking around for a quiet table. Harry stepped up behind her. He was just about to speak when she turned around. As her eyes fell on him behind her, she gasped in surprise. Her eyes grew wide and she stepped back.

"Sorry," mumbled Harry. He hadn't meant to scare her.

"Never do that again," she said, shaking her head in frustration and shooting him a glare. "Come on." She led him to a table in the corner, the opposite one from where they had sat last time. There was no one near enough to hear what was said. Being the evening, the noise level was higher which suited them. Students would have finished their lectures by now, and the rugby teams would already be heading out to the pubs.

"Okay," said Christine once she was set. Harry really wanted to know what had taken so long, but then on reflection re-acquainting oneself with an ex would probably involve time, as she couldn't just ask him to commit treason as Harry had her. He didn't dare think what she had had to do, what Harry had made her do to get the information. He had better not ask.

"I saw Robert last night," began Christine looking awkward.

*God, what have I put her through?* wondered Harry.

"I won't bore you with the details," she said, fidgeting with a button on her denim jacket, "but I managed to get into his computer. Or rather, he hadn't logged out of COBRA so I had a peek, as it were. I emailed myself the files and hey presto."

"Thank you," said Harry. "I really appreciate what you've done."

"I'll bet," said Christine a little icily. "Okay, here is what I know. Project Artic Thunder is under Military control. It was run by an Army Colonel, called Alexander Fortescue. He was murdered along with his entire family a few months ago, and his house burned down."

Harry felt a chill run down his spine. An old dream came back to him as clear as crystal. He remembered standing at the foot of a colonel's bed...

*"One more time, Colonel, " said Harry coldly. "Where is Artic Thunder? Your children's lives are on the line here, colonel. I'd advise you to think very hard before answering. "*

*"I swear, I don't know!" stammered the colonel.*

*Why does he have to make things so difficult? wondered Harry, impatiently. With a sharp tug of his right hand, Harry dragged the blade quickly over the throat of the young boy. The colonel and his wife screamed as a red stream of blood poured out of the gaping wound, spilling down the boy's front. Harry felt another adrenalin rush as he watched the life, flow from the gaping wound on the boy's neck. Harry let the body fall to the ground, staring unemotionally at the Colonel and his hysterical wife as the boy bled to death before him.*

*"He killed him! He killed him!" wept the Colonel's wife. She sobbed frantically into her husbands shoulder.*

*"HE WAS INNOCENT, DAMN YOU!" roared the Colonel. "WHY DID YOU HAVE TO KILL HIM? "*

"Are you alright?" asked Christine.

Harry blinked a few times as reality returned to him. Images from the memory flashed into his mind. His stomach tightened and the feeling of nausea swept into his head. He shook his head to try and rid himself of the feeling, but the chill was still shuttle-running up and down his spine like a pogo-stick.

"You look really pale," said Christine. "Do you want a hot drink?"

"I'm fine," said Harry, trying to sound convincing.

"Okay," said Christine, giving him a concerned glance. Her iciness had abruptly changed since the memory. "Following his murder," she continued, "there was an attack by the Ghosts on the facility where it was kept. The report refers to a notable arrest. I don't know what that means." Harry was fairly certain they meant him. Crouch must have told the Prime Minister that yes he had failed, but on the brighter side he had captured the second in command. ". Shortly after he was appointed, there was an attack on the base it was being held at. It was in Devon, underneath a supposed Water Purification plant on the road between Tavistock and Mary Tavy. The odd thing about the attack was that nothing was taken, though loss of life was significant. The press thought it was the Provisional IRA and COBRA encouraged this. In truth, COBRA believes it was a group of people that refer to as 'Ghosts', whoever they are." Harry thought about it. It wasn't too hard to understand whom they meant.

“They mean us,” said Harry, convinced of his conclusion. “If you are born in the Wizarding world, you have no birth certificate in the Muggle world, no passport, driver’s license or anything else. Bureaucratically, we don’t exist, we are effectively...”

“Ghosts?” finished Christine. “I see. Clever.”

“That’s my guess,” said Harry, trying to be modest. “I could be wrong.”

“Well, after this attack, the leadership of this project was handed to another man,” she continued, ignoring him. “This time a major, and former SAS officer. His name was Bowden. Major Bowden is still in charge. The first thing Bowden did was to move the devices.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. The words echoed in his mind. Devices? Surely that was a slip of the tongue? She didn’t seriously mean...she couldn’t!

“*Devices?*” asked Harry, in disbelief. “As in plural?” He knew the answer already, but to hear it spoken out loud was horrible.

“There isn’t one device,” said Christine nodding. “There are *three*. Luckily for you, they are all kept at one location. Bowden had them moved for safety. He believed that there were too many leaks in your government, so they refused the protection of the Ghosts. Your government failed to protect the facility the first time, and the colonel guarding it. As such they were not keen to renew the contract. Your government don’t know where it is. It just so happens that I know the location myself.” She seemed quite pleased with herself, if not about the operation as a whole. Harry couldn’t blame her. She was handing over power to him and had nothing but his word that he would be responsible with it.

“Where?” asked Harry.

“Not that far,” said Christine matter-of-factly. “I expect they thought people would expect them to move it to the other end of the country. In fact, they moved it fifteen miles.” Only fifteen miles? Was it even worth it? Then again, he had expected that they would need to go to Scotland or somewhere like that.

“Where?” he repeated again.

“It’s in here,” said Christine, holding out a beige loose-leaf file, filled with papers. “Inside is the location, maps, blueprints of the bunker.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, reaching out for the file. As his fingers touched the rough cover of the file, Christine pulled it roughly out of his reach.

“Promise me one thing though,” said Christine, staring into his eyes, her face stern. Harry gulped. She wasn’t going to start making impossible demands was she? He thought she was a sane and rational person. This was not the time for rash demands.

“What?” asked Harry cautiously.

“No killings,” said Christine. “No loss of life.” Harry breathed a sigh of relief. This was part of his plan anyway. He would not take life, especially soldiers just trying to defend their country.

“I promise,” said Harry. “We will not kill anyone.”

“Harry,” said Christine, removing her glasses and polishing them. “I’m going to be honest with you. I *don’t* like this. If they find out that a wizard stole the only weapons that can stop them, it could start a war.”

“I know,” said Harry. He had in fact thought of this already, and come up with a simple plan to remedy the situation. “Which is why the CCTV cameras are going to get pictures of Muggles.” Harry pulled the Toy Shop bag out from under the table and opened it enough for her to see what was in it.”

“You’re kidding,” said Christine. Her eyes widening.

“For illusion only,” said Harry, quickly, laying her fears to rest. “They’re only toys. I need enough doubt in the equation for our world to be deniable. The Provisional IRA are already suspected, so let’s continue that theme. This way we are unaccountable, and you are in the clear because the IRA seem to know everything the MoD do, You said before, that you may well be committing treason, but I don’t believe you are. This is not for the good of my world or yours. This is about stopping a war that will destroy both our worlds.”

“I know, but I still can’t sleep at night,” said Christine, she sounded weary and a little regretful.

Harry paused for a second, before extending an arm and resting it on her shoulders.

“I know this is hard,” said Harry. “Once this is over, you’ll sleep soundly. And if anything does happen, you’re always welcome at Hogwarts. We can make you disappear if needs be or you desire.”

“Thanks,” she said. “But it’s better for me to be here.”

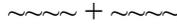
“Sure,” said Harry. “Okay, I have to go and save the world, so catch you later.”

“Bonne chance,” said Christine.

“What?”

“It’s French,” said Christine. “It means good luck.”

“Oh. Thanks,” said Harry walking out the pub.



The four Gryffindors arrived in one group. The Room of Requirement was set out much like Gryffindor Tower, in that there were identical sofas around an identical fireplace with an identical hearth rug. Harry was sitting in an armchair, facing the door. The flames in the fireplaces provided a little illumination; but enough to give his face a haunted appearance.

He gestured to the seats around him and the other four sank into them. Rose and Ginny appeared calm, while Ron and Hermione, who Harry noted sat as far apart as possible, looked rather unsure about the entire situation. He couldn't blame them. They hadn't been told what was happening. He thought back to how he felt stepping into the room with Voldemort last Thursday.

He looked around at each of their faces. Each of their eyes was so familiar, but not what lay behind them. Alike in appearance alone to those he knew, but that was enough. He paused again, wondering for the umpteenth time if involving them was the right thing to do. He hated getting them involved. Friends shared their secrets, while a real friend would protect them even if it meant keeping things from them and that is what Harry had been doing. He had kept Rose and Ginny far away from any action. He had not told Ron or Hermione the truth thus far, despite desperately wanting to be with his old friends.

He had had two things to consider when he was debating whether or not to involve his friends. Firstly there was the utterly cold and objective look. For political reasons he could not involve Crouch, the Ministry or anything of the sort in case news got back to the Muggles or Voldemort. He could not involve Dumbledore as he a, did not trust him, and b, would involve too many of the Order which was potentially compromised. He had considered involving Flamel. He had been wary of the old man for a while, as he snooped around in Harry's memories, as Harry feared he would go to Dumbledore with what he found. However, over time he had begun to trust his tutor and believed he would not pass on information to Dumbledore. His tutor and his mother were the two he came closest to telling about his little plan and asking for help, but somehow he knew they would stop him from going. With the Order and Ministry unavailable, and it being impossible to do alone, he was forced to turn to his friends for help.

As for the other debate as to whether to tell them, he had a serious problem with their being on the front line. Flamel had told him that was no place for a child, yet children think they know best. Harry had resented Dumbledore when he used this approach, but Harry had been shocked to discover he too was guilty. He hadn't told Ginny or Rose the danger they were in, nor the full truth about the war. He wanted to keep them safe and that meant keeping them ignorant, but now he was backed into a corner. They were the only ones he could turn to. They could fight, they had proved that last June in the Ministry and hopefully there would be no fighting anyway. But security was an issue for everyone's sakes. If anyone found out they were involved they would be hunted down. Also there was the danger of them letting it slip. As much as he loved his friends, their faults, just like his own were there for all to see. Ron had a big mouth and Malfoy could easily get him wound up. If Malfoy found out...perhaps Harry could pass it off as a trick as Malfoy believed him still to be loyal to Voldemort, but if Pansy Parkinson found out, that was a different kettle of fish. Maybe he would Obliviate them afterwards, if he could. It seemed harsh to do that to his friends, but it was for their own protection. It was safer for them not to know

anything. If all went well, he could convince Flamel to do it. If Lily and James had really altered Rose's memory to protect her – and she did seem happy not knowing – then maybe it was all right. He felt a pang of guilt as he was just using them for his purpose and then discarding them when they were redundant, but it was in their best interest too. After all the debating he had made his choice. He had to tell them, and he knew that Hermione's inquisitive mind, would draw out more facts that he wanted to give out.

“Thank you for coming,” said Harry to break the ice. “And once again for keeping this meeting a secret. What I am about to propose will be rather dangerous, but I believe necessary in order to prevent a war.” He was going slowly, choosing each word carefully. He was about to continue when he was interrupted.

“We are already at war,” said Ron, and Harry was sure he was going to add ‘duh’ on the end, but thought better of it. It was clear from his eyes that Ron still feared the Dark Knight.

“With Voldemort, yes,” said Harry, nodding. There was a gasp at the name, from Ron and Hermione. Harry considered telling them off, but offending them when he needed them was a bad idea. As much as it annoyed him that people were scared of a name, he let it go. “But he is trying to start an all-out war between the Ministry and the Muggles.”

“He's what?” gasped Hermione. She would be the worst affected by this, her family being Muggles. She would be removed from Hogwarts and God only knows what else.

“You've read the *Prophet*,” said Harry. “The last fortnight's attacks were racially based. He spread mistrust with the nuclear bomb, and wizards have taken the law into their own hands. Look at it from the Muggle perspective. A groups of very powerful people are attacking them simply because they are Muggles and they have no way to fight back. If these attacks don't stop soon, Downing Street are going to declare war on the entire Wizarding Community, making no distinction between us and the Death Eaters. We will be dragged into a war we didn't start. Thousands will die on both sides if this happens, and I hate to think what will happen to the Muggleborns among us.” He paused to allow his words to sink in. Ron looked disbelieving, Hermione very pale and Rose and Ginny a tad shaken.

“Something must be done,” he continued. “I have a plan, but it must be done off the record with no involvement from our government, or Hogwarts. If we are caught we cannot involve our world. We will be arrested and sent to a Muggle jail, at best. My idea is quite dangerous, so we have now reached the point of no return. Anyone who does not want to go any further, who feels uncomfortable with this can go. All I ask is that you don't breath a word of this to anyone.” In truth, if anyone left he would get Flamel to Obliviate them in the morning, though he hoped it would not be necessary. “For those of you courageous enough to fight for your country, I will tell you exactly what is going on, and ask you to accompany me on a little trip. This is not about power or reward. This about stopping a war and saving lives. This is not something I wished to happen, but it has and as a last resort I am asking for your help to save our nation and our friends. Will you come with me? Each of you, choose now.”

Harry sat in his chair for a full minute without moving, except for his eyes. They darted from face to face surveying them. Rose was going to come; he could see that. Her face was set and she would follow him blindly. That was not always a good thing, but right now, it was necessary. God, he hoped nothing happened to her. Then there was Ginny. Her family were known supporters of Dumbledore anyway, but that didn't justify Harry's decision to bring her and Ron along. He had chosen them simply because they had been in the Ministry last year, and he knew they had the potential to fight. This was a big gamble and he hoped it paid off. If anything happened it would be all his own fault. He realised just how much danger he was putting them in, but there was no one else and he needed help. He hated having to do this, hated putting them in danger but it was the only way. The magical word must be deniable. If there was another way, he didn't know it. He couldn't go to Crouch; if he did, Voldemort might get wind of it and seize the devices. If Crouch went to the Muggle Government, they would ask where they got the information and they would know COBRA was compromised and Christine would be in danger. No, this was the only way.

A minute came and went. Not a single sound had been made. The time had come. Harry leaned forward once again.

"Rose?" he asked, gently.

"Count me in."

"Ginny?"

"Yep."

"Hermione?"

"Harry," she said slowly, "you haven't told us what is happening, or what is expected of us."

"So that if you choose 'no', you cannot give us away," said Harry, he had expected a little protest from her. He just hoped she had the courage of her counterpart inside her. "I've already told you this must be a secret meeting. I know I ask for a lot of trust."

"Then how about you throw some our way?" she asked firmly. Her face was set and Harry knew what was coming before she opened her mouth. "Who are you, really? You haven't lost your memory or anything of the sort. Since we're talking about trust, give us a *genuine* reason to trust you. Tell us who you really are and why you switched sides."

Rose had visibly paled. She cast a concerned look at Harry and then Ginny. She opened her mouth, but Harry silenced her by shaking his head. Harry's neutral mask had slipped into a sad expression. He knew that one day he would have to face this. He also knew that it would be her that figured it out. As much as he wanted to tell them everything, he almost didn't. He didn't want to put them in danger, but...that was what he was doing right now. This was his last chance to pull out? Was it really impossible to do it alone? Was there anyone else he could turn to? Of

course not. This was the only way and there was no way Hermione would let him get away with less than the full truth. He only hoped that they believed him. He had barely believed it when he had found out, and someone as rational as Hermione wouldn't believe him without consulting a book and there were none on this topic.

"You truly are the brightest witch of your age," said Harry, shaking his head and smiling sadly. "And you're right. I never lost my memory." There was no point in lying. The time had come for the truth to out. He just hoped he could make it sound as though he was trustworthy.

"Hah! I knew it," concluded Ron, earning his glares from the other three. Ron seemed not to notice. "I knew there was something fishy about you!"

"Once I tell you, Hermione," said Harry, "there's no going back. You must keep this to yourself, and it will mark you as a target. If this ever gets out, the lives of millions will be put at risk. You must take this secret to your grave. Are you prepared for that?"

"If I go on this mission I will be a target, so it makes no difference, but I will not risk my life without a valid reason," she said. Harry nodded, smiling to himself. Maybe she wasn't so different from her counterpart in his world.

"Very well," said Harry. "I've wanted to tell you all for so long, but I was scared that you wouldn't believe me. This is going to sound like a whopper of a lie, but it's the truth." He took a deep breath and interlocked his fingers in his lap. Summoning up his courage, Harry began to speak. "My name is Harry Potter and I was born on the thirty-first of July, nineteen eighty...in a completely different universe." The effect was instant. Hermione's eyes nearly popped out of her head, before she recovered her composure and a sceptical look appeared on her face, while Ron's eyebrows shot into his hairline.

"You what?" echoed Ron. His mouth opened and closed like a fish, while Hermione leaned back, staring unblinkingly at Harry. She looked thoughtful and Harry could practically see the cogs whirring.

"You heard," said Harry, calmly to Ron. "In my world, at the age of one, my parents were murdered in front of me by Voldemort. In so doing, the Killing Curse that was meant for me rebounded on him, reducing him to a spirit. The world knew thirteen years of peace, but we became complacent. Two years ago, during the newly reinstated Triwizard Tournament, Voldemort got his body back. Since then we have been at war again. At the end of August this year, he came for me. In a three way duel between myself, Voldemort and Dumbledore, an unholy mixture of blood magic, Killing Curses, shields, ancient relics and other magic was enough to force me sideways in time. I effectively have possessed your Harry's body. Where his soul is, I cannot say, but I have a nasty feeling that that monster is in my world, a world containing an even more powerful Dark Lord, and totally unprepared for the Dark Knight." Ron and Hermione stared at him in silence for a few seconds, eyes wide and mouths gaping.

"In my world," said Harry, "there is a Prophecy predicting that the war will end in a duel between myself and Voldemort, a duel only one of us will walk away from. Even here, it seems

it boils down to a contest between him and me. Since being here I have gained some of the other Harry's skills and instincts, hence the martial arts, swords and that. In my world, I'm just your normal boy, more or less, with no great power or skill. Dumbledore will return me to my world once Voldemort is six feet under in this one – if I survive, that is." He left out the part about the Boy-Who-Lived, not wanting to sound egotistical. He told them only what they needed to know as briefly as possible. It was interesting watching their reactions. Hermione sat unmoving, the calculating look never leaving her face. She was not his friend here, so tears were not going to happen. She was still looking pensive as he regarded her. Ron on the other hand was still gaping like a fish. As Harry had spoken, his face had gone through all the usual expressions of confused, disbelieving, curious, confused, mystified, bamboozled, confused, shocked, awe and then confused.

"This whole war hangs on you?" asked Ron, unable to grasp the situation.

"If you believe in Prophecy, and I am talking about real Prophecy, not the bollocks Trelawney teaches," said Harry, "then yes. One of us must die at the hand of the other."

"Talk about the lesser of two evils," muttered Ron to himself. Ginny lashed out with her foot but was out of range.

"It's true, Ron" ventured Ginny, breaking the silence. "He's not the monster we knew."

"You knew?" thundered Ron. "My sister...why not...how...? You knew and you never told me!"

"So that's why you asked me about multiple universes last month," said Hermione thoughtfully, glancing at Ginny. She looked as if she was kicking herself for not seeing it sooner. She gave a frustrated glare at her feet, before looking back at Harry. Ron still looked like steam was about to come out of his ears. "Do you have any proof?" said Hermione.

"No," said Harry, shaking his head sadly. "This is his body, with his scars and his DNA. I don't have his memories, so you can't ask me questions only I would know. I only have echoes of his more violent memories, Black Noel for instance. All I have that's really mine is this scar." He pointed to his forehead. "Where the Killing Curse struck when I was one."

"No one can survive the Killing Curse," said Hermione sceptically. Harry couldn't blame her. Two fundamental laws, laws she knew to be true, had been broken by Harry.

"No one can travel between worlds," said Harry calmly. "But here I am." He really wished he had brought the Pensieve to show them; it would make things so much simpler. But it was too late now. "In my world, I've known you since the very first train journey all those years ago, when Ron ate half my chocolates." He smiled to himself at the memory, while Ginny shot a smirk at her brother.

"We were all in Gryffindor. Together, we fought our way past McGonagall's giant chess board, three headed dogs, basilisks, Dementors, dragons, acromatulae, yes even you Ron.

Together, you two, myself, Ginny, Luna and Neville Longbottom were ambushed in the Ministry last summer. The six of us fought off an army of the highest ranking Death Eaters Voldemort commands, including Rodolphus Lestrage, Bellatrix Black and Lucius Malfoy.”

“I suppose Neville Longbottom is alive in you world,” said Hermione a little sceptically.

“Yes,” said Harry, the image of the timid little boy filling his mind.

“And Rose?”

“Was never born,” answered Harry.

“You said you were attacked when you were one, but if she is only ten months younger than you then why wasn’t she born?” asked Hermione.

“I don’t know why,” said Harry. “In my world my parents went into hiding because a Prophecy was made naming me or Neville as the one who could bring about Voldemort’s defeat. They were in hiding for a good few months before Wormtail gave us up. Perhaps they felt this wasn’t the time to bring another child into the world. I don’t know. They died years ago so I never got the chance to ask.” He realised that his voice was now laced with anger, and he quickly squashed it. Hermione backed off, but Ron didn’t seem to notice his frustration.

“You are saying that we fought off Death Eaters?” asked Ron sceptically. “Even Loony Lovegood?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “And for your information, after myself and Neville, Luna was the last man standing. You were attacked by a weird Brain–thing within minutes. Ginny blew up a planet in the face of one of them. I never knew Neville and Luna had it in them.” The others looked on disbelievingly. Harry stared at his feet, lost in memory.

“And Granger?” asked Ron, coldly. How could they be so hostile here, when in his world they were such the opposite? It just went to show that Harry was the influence that brought them together. He made a note to tell them if he ever saw them again.

“That’s ‘Hermione’ to you,” said Harry calmly. “And since you ask, in my world, you’re such a *sweet* couple.”

“Yuck!” said both of them simultaneously, looking outraged. Harry didn’t even bother to hide his smile.

“Believe it,” said Harry. “Everyone can see it, but you two refuse to acknowledge it. It’s cute in an odd sort of way.” Harry realised that they were wasting time. He needed to bring them back to the problem at hand: Artic Thunder. “Hermione, you’re the smartest witch of you age, but the Hermione I knew was the greatest.” Hermione looked affronted.

“The difference being?” said Hermione hotly.

“The Hermione I knew put her life on the line time and time again for what she believed in,” said Harry. “She realised that books were only part of magic. You are so much like her, but without the fire in your eyes. You can’t spend your life reading about how others lived and lost theirs or you’ll forget to live. I’d trust my Hermione with my life, and I have, time and time again.”

Hermione’s eyes were glistening slightly. Harry’s words had clearly affected her quite deeply.

“As for Ron,” said Harry turning to face him, “having five brothers left him with a lot to live up to. He wasn’t head boy, Quidditch captain or anything like that; he was better: he was a hero. He fought down McGonagall’s giant Chess set, Death Eaters and even went into the Chamber of Secrets with me.”

“Ginny,” he continued turning to her, “a sister I almost counted as my own. I faced a Basilisk for you, and you always felt that you’d never repay me. You did, Gin, by simply being around. You were my replacement as Seeker, my friend and an inspiration. You were there when I felt most alone.”

“Ever since I can remember I have tried to keep you guys out of danger,” said Harry. “Now I have no choice. I need your help, and I can’t do this alone. In my world, in our country’s time of need we rose to the challenge. Now I ask you to rise with me. Voldemort is on the verge of acquiring a weapon that would render Hogwarts defenceless. If he gets it, Hogwarts will fall and it will not be a battle, it will be genocide, the systematic extermination of all but the Pureblood among us. So I am asking each of you now, will you help me to help you?”

“I’m in,” said Rose.

“Me too,” said Ginny.

“And me,” said Hermione.

“And there is no way Ginny is going without me,” said Ron.

“Now I feel much better,” said Ginny sarcastically.

Before Ron could retort, Harry cut them off. He rolled out the blueprints and a map in front of them. They all slid off their chairs and onto the floor. A bright light appeared above their heads, making it easier to read. This room was really useful.

“Okay,” said Harry. “This is off the record. Dumbledore will not know this is happening. Crouch must be deniable, and so will not be informed. The Order of the Phoenix must not find out.”

“The Order of the Phoenix actually exists?” asked Hermione raising an eyebrow. “I thought it was a legend. No one has ever seen or caught a member of the Order. The Ministry has never confirmed their existence.”

“They exist alright,” said Ginny.

“We’re all members,” added, Ron in a superior tone.

“Not strictly true,” said Ginny, shooting Ron an annoyed glance. “Our parents are in it. We aren’t allowed. Harry’s in it, though.” Hermione glanced at Harry again, but said nothing. “Dumbledore is in charge,” continued Ginny. “We have spies in most departments of the Ministry.”

“You mustn’t breathe a word of this to anyone,” reiterated Harry. “Anyhow, back to tonight. Project Artic Thunder. The Muggle government felt that the Ministry are losing the war against Voldemort. As a fail safe, they started a secret project to produce a weapon that would stop all magic within five miles of it when activated. Three such devices exist. As you can imagine, just one of these things could bring down the wards of Hogwarts, making it easy for Voldemort to enter and slit the throats of anyone who stood in his way. I am proposing that we enter this facility, destroy two of them, and commandeer the third.”

“You want us to break into an army building and steal a top secret weapon?” asked Ginny. The Weasleys and Rose looked up at Harry in surprise. He merely nodded. Hermione was already leaning over the blueprint. It was full of technical diagrams as well as a map, which meant little to Harry and nothing to Ginny and Ron.

“Harry,” said Hermione slowly, “if I’m reading this correctly, and I’d like to think I am, this is as secure as a bank vault. Even if we get inside the hut, the lift is protected by God Knows what kind of locks, fail-safes and anti-intruder devices. To make things worse, if this is military, I am guessing there will be guards with guns to get passed and CCTV cameras. You do not simply walk into a building like this and just walk out.”

“For those of us who don’t speak techno?” asked Ginny.

“I’ll explain,” said Harry, taking a deep breath. “Remember the mission in Devon when I was apparently captured?” They all nodded. “Well in fact, that was a raid by Death Eaters on the facility where the weapons were being kept. To be fair, Voldemort didn’t know they existed at the time. He was looking for a chamber in the Department of Mysteries, and Lucius Malfoy provided inaccurate information that that room was in Devon. Anyhow, after the attack, the Ministry of Defence moved the project from Mary Tavy to Princetown. It’s a small village fifteen miles east-south-east of Mary Tavy. There’s a TV mast here, and at the base, or rather below the hut at the base of the tower, there is another underground facility used by the M.O.D. They have long used Dartmoor as a firing range, leaving unexploded rounds and debris all over the moor, and annoying the locals, but that’s beside the point. What does matter, is that this place houses a state-of-the-art security system that rivals Gringotts.”

“Wait,” said Hermione. “I’ve been thinking, politically, that is. You said this was a weapon designed to stop us, if Voldemort wins?” Harry nodded. “If we destroy it, won’t they see that as an attempt to render them defenceless?”

“Good point,” said Harry. He had thought of this. He was quite proud of his political thinking that evening. The Prime Minister was jumpy as it was and destroying his only line of defence was not going to sit well with him. The Wizarding World must be completely deniable, otherwise a mission designed to stop a war could potentially start one. After all, why should they not be allowed a weapon that could potentially damage the Wizarding World when wizards have hundreds that could devastate their world? But then again, what gave Harry the right to police the country? But this had to be done. The only way to keep the world safe was to keep it safe from You-Know-Who. “That’s true, Hermione,” he conceded. “Which is why the CCTV cameras will show them that this was a Muggle attack.”

“How?” asked Hermione raising an eyebrow.

“I stopped off at a few shops in London,” said Harry.

“I knew that money wasn’t for books,” said Rose, cracking a smile and shaking her head.

“The money you spent on booze for your party was also supposed to be for books,” Harry shot back. Rose didn’t respond, but she shot him a frustrated glance. “Anyhow,” said Harry. “I brought these.” He threw a piece of fabric at each of them.

“A balaclava?” asked Rose. “Hiding our faces won’t do much to represent us as Muggles.” Harry ignored her, reaching deeper into the bag.

“And these,” continued Harry, removing a box and passing it to Hermione.

“You’re kidding,” said Hermione, staring wide-eyed at the box. Inside the box that Harry held out was a small black plastic pistol. Harry smiled slightly at her.

“They’re not real,” Harry reassured her. “They’re only water pistols, but they look real enough for the cameras to be fooled. We use wands, but keep these on show. It’s not foolproof, but enough doubt is there so Crouch can honestly say he didn’t know about it and the evidence points to the Muggles. They’ll blame the IRA or something.” Rose nodded, smiling to herself.

“This is lunacy,” said Ron, throwing the water-pistol back to Harry.

“It’s this or we wait for Voldemort to get it and then come knocking on Hogwarts doors,” said Harry. “I’m sorry to rush you, but if we hesitate, he will get the key to Hogwarts. All wards will fail, we will be defenceless. Without starting a war, this is the only plan I have. If you don’t like it, fine, give me a better one, but we are not going to sit here waiting for him to come.”

“How long do we have to plan?” asked Ginny, presumably ready to go on the trip. She seemed quite keen on it.

“Four hours,” said Harry.

“What?” stammered the others at the same time.

“Midnight,” said Harry. He knew this was pushing them and asking a lot, but they couldn’t wait. If Voldemort beat them to it, it would be catastrophic for all. Also, it gave less time for people to find out about the plan, since they wouldn’t be seen together. “We can’t wait. Voldemort might know where this thing is. We can’t wait. If we do, he may get it first.”

“He’s in prison,” said Ron. Harry got the feeling he just didn’t want to go, but couldn’t admit he was scared.

“And if one of these things was activated in the Ministry,” said Harry, “his cell would fail and he would be released. The Aurors would be defenceless. He’d take over in one attack.” He paused to let his words sink in. “Remember Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lest...Black and the old crew are still at large. We need to keep this out of their hands. Here we have the blueprints to the bunker. We have the opportunity and the water-pistols to give the illusion of this being Muggle. If you can think of a better plan, I’m all ears, but don’t tell me we’re giving up.”

“If we could thief dad’s old cloak,” said Rose thoughtfully, “we could sneak one or two in. Then we can unlock it for the rest of us.” That was more like it; constructive thoughts. Her brow was furrows in thought.

“No magic on the cameras,” said Harry. The cameras must not see anyone put on or take off a cloak, but they could use it none the less, as long as they were careful where they took it off and put it on. “But if we can get the cloak, it would be great.”

“I can swipe it,” said Rose. “I know where he squirrels it.”

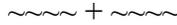
“You mean where Mum hides it from him and us,” corrected Harry, with a small grin.

“Precisely,” Rose concurred.

“You said security was tight. Will the Alohomora Charm work on electronic locks?” asked Ginny. Harry hadn’t actually thought of that. It was a good point. There was no artificial intelligence in a spell. It couldn’t crack a code, so would it work? If it didn’t this would be the shortest offensive of all time. Harry turned to Hermione, searching for an answer.

“Unless they are computer-based,” said Hermione. “As long as they have a bolt and are mechanical in principle then a keypad is no problem. If they are magnetic or electronically sealed then no. The spell can open a padlock or a vault door, but not crack a computer password.” Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

“Okay,” said Harry. “Let’s start planning, and remember: no overt magic. We must be deniable.”



The Princetown Television mast stands on top of a concrete bunker at the top of Higher Longford Tor just outside the tiny village of Princetown. It is practically the centre of the moor, a title that can also be claimed by the neighbouring village of Two Bridges. The mast stands over two hundred feet high with a beacon on top to stop aircraft flying into it. The night was crystal clear and the glowing red beacon flashed on and off high above them. The uneven earth and tufts of grass swayed slightly in the autumn breeze. Luckily, the Tor was a long and flat ascent rather than a short and steep one. The going wasn't too hard on the grounds that a clear path had been made by flocks of sheep and herds of ponies. As such it was free from bogs and the gorse was sparse enough to pass easily. A dry stone wall ran along the right of the path right up to the hut and all the way down to the edge of Princetown. It was there that the Knight Bus dropped them after their broom flight to Hogsmeade. They didn't dare use Portkeys; the Ministry could now monitor them again and asking an adult for one risked being caught. The Bus dropped them outside a pub called the Prince of Wales in the centre of Princetown. From there they hiked up to the mast. It was less than a mile.

There were lights coming from the single-room concrete block. If you didn't know what lay beneath, you would never have guessed that this mundane concrete shed housed the most secret secret the Ministry of Defence had. It was the British answer to Area 51, though as with most American comparisons, on a slightly smaller scale.

The Gryffindors lay on their stomach dressed entirely in black, wearing balaclavas and holding both their wands and the toy guns Harry had brought. The uneven ground and clumps of long grass, bracken and gorse made it easy to hide. Harry stared up at the tower. He could see a small camera mounted on the corner of the building above the door. Extra security drew attention. Two Bridges and this area of the moor was very popular with tourists so they had to be very minimalist. This would work in their favour. Harry slipped off his backpack and checked the contents. It held a large roll of duct tape, a flask of lamp oil, his water pistol and plenty of room for the prize. Rose had the cloak which she had pilfered from their parents.

The night was cool and a gentle breeze was blowing. Harry was warm enough in his clothes and the balaclava would keep his ears warm. He pulled it over his head and gestured for the others to do the same. After all, they couldn't have caught the Knight Bus and walked through Princetown dressed as terrorists, could they? The breeze was gentle enough for them to be able to hear what was around them without the whistling of the breeze. Harry glanced around to make sure the coast was clear. He could hear the roar of a car engine not too far away. He waited in silence for a minute until the headlights could be seen over the edge of the hill coming from the road below. Harry couldn't see the car because of the angle of the hill, but the sound of the engine told him it was there. It was so loud. The moors were not properly policed and didn't hold Speed Cameras so speeding was common practice. It must be doing at least sixty if not seventy, and the limit was forty. Probably a boy racer or someone stupid, with a spoiler and skirts pinned onto a tiny clapped-out banger which was falling apart aside from the brand new Porsche badge super-glued over the top of the original badge. Some people were just plain sad. Harry wondered what the Dudleymobile would be.

“Harry,” hissed Hermione from her place three feet behind him, also lying on her belly. He turned to face her. Her eyes stared warily out from under the balaclava.

“You see that building over there?” She pointed down the hill and across the valley to the other side of Princetown. She was pointing at a large complex of old stone buildings surrounded by high walls and covered in small windows. It was topped with huge chimneys and surrounded on one side by allotments.

“What is it?”

“That’s Dartmoor Prison,” she said. “That’s where we’ll end up if this goes wrong. Are you sure we have everything covered after just three hours of planning?”

“Trust me,” said Harry, giving her a confident nod. Inside he was not so confident. He nearly pointed out that she wasn’t right; in fact, if they were caught they would be shot on sight rather than arrested. Still, it was best to keep information like that to himself. It was the pain of leadership.

Bringing his mind back to the present, Harry waited for the car to disappear before nodding to Rose. According to the plan, she was the first to move. Harry was impressed with how she was dealing with this. She was as precocious as her mother, but also very brave. Wrapped in the cloak they had borrowed from their father, Rose crept forward. Invisible to everyone including the camera, Rose knocked on the door.

After a few seconds, the door opened. Harry dug further into the ground as the light from the bunker shone out over the ground. Rose left no shadow as the cloak wrapped around her. The man was short and a tad podgy. This meant that he filled up the doorway leaving no room for Rose to slip inside. He glanced both ways and then grunted. He stepped out into the darkness. Harry couldn’t see, but he hoped Rose had done her job and slipped past him.

“HELLO?” called the man into the darkness.

The man glanced both ways one more time. It was another fifteen seconds before he went back inside. He closed the door behind him with a bang. Harry rose up to his knees, the others following. There was a three quarter moon in the sky and they could see well enough not to trip up. The plan was for Rose to unlock the door from the inside twenty seconds after the door closed. Harry started counting.

As he reached twenty, he pulled the toy gun out of his belt and held it out in front of him. He had his wand in his other hand, in a clenched fist with the tip downwards, like a knife in that infamous scene in Psycho. He twisted his wrist and held it up horizontally so the wand pointed out in front and then rested his gun arm on the wand arm. The result was that both the gun and wand pointed out in front of him.

Waiting ten more seconds, he nodded to the others then ran forward. He got to the door in three seconds and pushed the handle down. He was thankful that the door slipped open easily. He

kicked it open and stepped inside. The tubby man had been watching TV in a wooden chair, but turned in surprise as the door crashed open. Harry hoped that Rose had not been behind the door when he had kicked it. ‘Tubby’ was staring at Harry with wide-eyes, the remote control to the television still in his hands. Harry levelled the gun at the man.

“Don’t ya move, ya fucker!” he shouted in his best Irish accent. He saw out of the corner of his eye another camera in the room. Luckily his face was concealed behind a balaclava and the gun covered his wand. The fat man was too scared to move. His mouth opened and closed in rapid succession, like a fish, and he was shaking. Harry stepped closer to him and brought the gun down on the back on his neck. Being only plastic it didn’t render him unconscious, but it did knock him to the ground. Harry quickly knelt next to him, and making sure his body covered his wand from the camera, levelled it at the man.

“Stupefy!” he hissed. The man went limp on the floor. By now Rose should have slipped outside and would return with the others, this time free of the cloak. As long as she didn’t take it off in front of the camera, they were fine. Harry took a roll of Duct-Tape out of his pocket and began to bind the man. *So far so good.* The guns had been seen and his appalling Irish accent had been heard. Hopefully, the IRA would be blamed and Crouch could make a genuine denial. Harry realised the danger if they were caught; not only to himself, but to his friends and Christine. They were hiding not only from the Muggle government, but from their own. This mission was illegal in every way.

Two seconds later, the other four came into the room.

“Okay,” whispered Harry. “If any alarms go off, deactivate them with this switch here.” He pointed to the line of red buttons on one consol, marked ‘Alarm’. If anyone comes, stun them, but remember to use the guns. Hermione, if you would see to the lock. Rose, the cloak, if you would.”

She handed him the cloak while Hermione went to work on the lock. Harry checked the monitors to their right. At the bottom of the lift shaft was a corridor with two soldiers carrying machine guns. There was a camera in the lift, which was another problem. They couldn’t be seen in the lift or the corridor so the cloak was needed again. Hermione had used a knife she found to wedge the keypad off the wall. As such she could get to the mechanism itself. A simple *Alohomora* charm would then open the door.

Ron was tall enough to reach the camera in the room. He bent it out of the way so it wasn’t facing them. Harry pulled the invisibility cloak over himself and Hermione. Hermione pointed her wand at the lock from under the cloak and uttered the simple spell. The metallic double doors slid smoothly open revealing a lift. Covered by the cloak and stooping slightly so it didn’t reveal their ankles, they entered the lift and pressed the button to the bottom floor. The doors slid shut, blocking their view of the others. They were on their own for the time being. Harry’s stomach jumped into his throat as the lift slid silently yet quickly downward. There was a metallic scraping as they descending into the pit. According to the plan, it was a six hundred foot descent. He could feel Hermione shaking next to him. He could feel her trembling body against his. He wrapped an arm gently around her. She wasn’t used to this sort of thing. She was

used to books, so it must be terrifying for her, but she was beginning to act like the other Hermione.

“It’s okay,” whispered Harry. “We’ll be fine.”

She nodded under the cloak. The doors slid open and they found themselves in a grey corridor with a yellow stripe on the right hand wall at waist height. It was about twenty metres long with large metal doors at the far end. On either side of the doors was a soldier wearing the red beret of the Royal Military Police. They each were dressed in camouflage and raised their guns as the doors opened. Harry could see the surprise on their faces as lift was apparently empty. He and Hermione stepped out of the lift, covered in the cloak. They crept further forward, not daring to breath as they approached two men with guns, armed only with a water-pistol (an unloaded water-pistol at that). The soldiers were on the cameras so they had to be careful in how they handled this.

Hermione, of course, had it sorted. She extended an arm towards the men. With a few well-chosen words, the man began to yawn. In a few seconds, both of them were swaying where they stood. It was nearly a full minute before they collapsed. Harry gestured for Hermione to kneel with him. Together they sank to their knees over the bodies and Harry stunned each of them to make sure they didn’t wake up. That done, they returned to the lift and went back up to the security room. Ron held the camera in another direction while they removed the cloak.

“Rose and Ginny,” said Harry, “you stay here. If anyone comes...do what you can. If it gets too much, take the cloak and run. Don’t wait for us, understand?” He knew that in their position he would never abandon them, but he needed them to trust him.

“Got it,” said Ginny, though Harry had a feeling she wasn’t being entirely honest.

Harry stepped into the lift with Ron and Hermione behind him. The doors closed and once again they headed downwards. The Trio were together again. It was a far more significant moment for Harry than for them. They didn’t fancy each other here. Harry missed the comedy of their interactions sometimes, but a relief from their arguing was always welcome. Still it felt good to be with his friends again.

The doors opened and the three of them ran to the far end. Hermione went to work on the lock while Ron and Harry bound the soldiers’ wrists and ankles with Duct-Tape. After a few seconds there was a whoosh and the door slid silently open. It reminded Harry for an instant of Voldemort’s cell door. He wondered if they could store Voldemort down here until the end of time. Pushing the thought aside, he rose to his feet.

Harry stepped over the threshold and into the laboratory. The room was large and octagonal in design. There were all sorts of instruments and computers on all the desks. The walls were bare and made of stone while the floor was a grill through which he could see pipes, the same as the ceiling.

“Dad’s paradise,” muttered Ron, staring at the computers.

“Shhh,” said Harry. There might be voice recorders in the room. He stepped forward on the grate floor. Beneath him he could see a load of pipes and tubes. Above him was a ventilator shaft and all around him the stone walls were painted white. He was on the upper level of the lab. In front of him were some steps that went down eight feet to a lower level. The upper section ran around the edge of the room and was about two metres wide. There was a rail around most of it. In the middle of the lower section was a table with three devices on it.

“Bingo!” said Harry pointing. “You guys, make a mess and take anything that looks interesting. Make it look like a robbery gone wrong.”

There was a series of crashes as Ron forced his way into a glass cabinet. Hermione was slightly more decorous and she knocked over a microscope, but pocketed something from a worktop. Harry slid down the letter.

“Cool!” came Ron’s voice. Harry glanced up to see him looking at a workspace. He had touched the computer and now the screen was active with a picture of a woman displaying all her endowments. Hermione shot him a tired glare, while Harry turned back to the devices. They looked rather like giant rugby balls except made of metal with golden, or probably brass rings around the edges and several lights and buttons on one side. There was a notepad next to them. Harry picked it up and began to flick through it. It showed how to arm and use the devices. Harry pocketed the book and then slipped his backpack off. He picked up the middle device and placed it gently in the bag. He did the bag up and slung it over his back. He then moved on to the next device. He took out his wand and stuck it into a hold in the casing.

“*Reducto!*” he hissed. There was a flash and the smell of burning wires.

“*Fluvias!*” he muttered. He flooded the inside with water, which he was fairly certain would short circuit the internal workings if there was any left. That done he dropped it on the floor and stamped on it three times then did the same to the other device. He then piled them up on top of each other. Next he removed the small flask of lamp oil from his bag and poured it liberally over the devices. He flicked on the lighter he had brought from a newsagent and then dropped it onto the devices and watched as the two metal cases went up in flames of healthy orange. That should prevent anyone repairing them.

“Come on,” said Harry, turning to climb the ladder back up to the upper level. Ron and Hermione had succeeded in making a mess; there was hardly a pane of glass that wasn’t smashed and most of the instruments had been upturned. As much as Harry hated theft and common violence, it was necessary to maintain the illusion.

They headed back out the room, closing the door behind them, (the lab was air-tight so the fire would not spread). They stepped over the bodies of the fallen soldiers and hurried to the lift. As the door slid shut, Harry resisted the urge to jump for joy. They had done it! They had the device and there had been no fatalities. They had gotten away with it. Success! He glanced over at the others. Ron was smiling and Hermione seemed quietly content. They still had their balaclavas on, but Harry could see Ron’s pearly whites.

Now all they had to do was catch the Knight Bus from Princetown to Hogsmeade where brooms were concealed. Then they burn the clothes and guns and they were home free. It was almost over. The doors slid open and the other two came into view. Both of them were looking nervous, but smiled as the trio emerged from the lift.

“Got it?” asked Ginny.

“Yep,” said Harry, pointing over his shoulder at the bag. “Was any of the magic seen?” he asked pointing at the cameras. He wanted to make absolutely sure. He was fairly sure they had been watching over the CCTV cameras.

“Nope,” said Rose. “The guards randomly fell asleep, but no one was seen.” Excellent. They had no proof of magical involvement. Crouch could in all honesty deny any knowledge and the magical world would not be blamed.

“Fantastic,” said Harry, heading for the door. He pointed at the unconscious fat man as he passed “Nick his wallet and then we’ll go.”

“Rob him?” asked Hermione. Her conscience was clashing as well as Harry’s, but it needed to be done.

“To make this look like common criminals,” explained Harry. He wanted to justify his instruction, but he wanted to be out of here as soon as possible. “We have no use for pounds and pence. Just do it!” Hermione didn’t move, but Ron did.

The man was lying on his back and Ron reached into his back trouser pocket and pulled out a leather wallet. He dropped it in his pocket and then nodded to Harry. He apparently had less of an issue with theft. Harry reached for the door, but before he got there it was thrown open.

“Okay, Ollie,” said the soldier standing in the door holding a plastic bag. “One chips and curry for y...” he froze as his eyes fell on the five masked intruders. His eyes grew wide and in an instant there was a gun in his hand.

“ARMY! FREEZE!” he shouted, levelling the gun at Harry. Harry instantly grabbed the gun and forced it upwards. His ears nearly burst as a shot rang out into the ceiling. He let go of the gun with one hand and drove his elbow into the stomach of the other man. He then twisted his wrist and yanked down hard, throwing the soldier over his shoulder in a judo throw.

“Run!” he shouted to the others. They didn’t need to be told twice. There was a thundering of feet as the other four surged past him and out into the night. Harry’s hands were still clamped over the soldier’s wrists, forcing the gun away from him. He twisted the gun free of the man’s hands and threw it out the door. The soldier was back on his feet in an instant, a combat knife in his hands. Harry wished he could use his wand, but they had to be deniable. The water-pistol was in his bag and if the soldier found out it was a fake, they’d be for it. He had to do this the old fashioned way.

“Come on, you focker!” snapped Harry in his pathetic Irish accent.

The soldier lunged at him. Harry sidestepped, punching the soldier in the cheek in the process and spinning away. The soldier turned and swung the knife. Harry jumped backwards out of reach, but in so doing, he landed on a computer consol. The soldier was on top of him in an instant, His back was bent backward over the worktop. The weight of the soldier was crushing the air out of his lungs and the knife was bearing down on his face. Harry’s hands clasped over the soldier’s wrist, trying to force the knife away from his face. Fighting Death Eaters was one thing, but this man was a trained killer. The man was on top and had gravity on his side. He was older, tougher and stronger than Harry and the knife was dangerously close to his face.

“*Rictusempra!*” choked Harry. The soldier’s hands went limp as a tickling sensation filled his arms. Harry took the opportunity to throw the man off him. The tickling didn’t delay him for long. The man dived at him again, but Harry quickly sidestepped and man surged past. Harry picked up the pot of hot curry sauce and threw it over him. The scolding hot liquid covered the soldier’s face.

The man screamed in pain and dropped the knife as it burned his face and hands. Harry didn’t think twice. He turned and surged out the door into the night. He didn’t stop running until he reached the streets of Princetown. It was a miracle he got that far without twisting his ankle on the uneven ground of the Tor. The streets were deserted, as it was nearly one in the morning. A car was turning at the mini-roundabout ahead, but wasn’t coming his way. He removed his balaclava and continued to run. He reached the Prince of Wales in another two minutes.

As Harry reached the pub he stopped. He leaned against the wall, panting from the exertion. He glanced around, unable to see his friends. They must have gone already. He had told them not to wait after all.

“You look knackered,” said a voice. Harry spun around to see the other four emerge from the bushes of the house opposite him. Harry cracked a smile at the sight of his friends. They hadn’t left him. He breathed a sigh of relief. They had gotten away with it after all. Now they just needed to get home.

“All right?” he asked.

“More or less,” said Ron, no longer wearing his balaclava.

“Let’s go home,” said Harry.

“Let’s,” said Ginny, holding out her wand. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He glanced down the road to check for any signs of pursuit; he was glad to see an empty street, as the purple triple-decker appeared out of thin air. They had nearly lost everything, but tonight had been a success.

Luckily, neither Dean nor Seamus had closed the window to the sixth year boys dorms in Gryffindor Tower. The two beds were curtained off, and the sound of snores were clearly audible as the five slipped into the room. They had burned the balaclavas and gloves and then flown back on brooms, right up to the window.

Harry thanked each of them in turn in whispers. The others looked tired, but a little excited as well. There were smiles as they felt oddly pleased with themselves. Now he just hoped they could keep their mouths shut. As they all disappeared into their own rooms, Harry slipped out of Gryffindor Tower and into the school. He had one more stop to make before he went to bed tonight.

As Harry stepped through the painting of the bowl of fruit, the aroma of freshly baked bread filled his nostrils, making his mouth water. A tidal wave of elves surged forward, eager to serve. Harry wasn't sure if they would help him, given that he wasn't a student. That didn't seem to bother them.

"What does master wish us to be doing?" asked a short elf as he approached. Harry glanced around. There were far too many of them. He only needed one, one he could trust.

"Can I talk to you alone?" said Harry. Immediately the other elves back off, while the elf in question looked like Christmas had come early. He stared at Harry with wide eyes. Harry hoped he wasn't going to 'do a Dobby' and start crying about how wonderful he was.

*That's a point. Where is Dobby?* wondered Harry.

Presumably, since the incident with the Chamber of Secrets never happened, Lucius still had the diary and Dobby was still Draco's punch-bag. Harry felt a pang of regret over his old friend. He wished he could do something, but he had no reason or desire to go near any of the Malfoys. Putting up with Draco took all his patience.

Harry sat down on a stool, and the elf climbed up onto the bench next to him. There other elves were several feet away so Harry was fairly comfortable talking.

"What's your name?" asked Harry, breaking the ice. Aching all over from his run, he reached over his shoulder and took the backpack off.

"P...Perky," replied the elf in a timid voice. He seemed to have some trouble dealing with the fact that Harry had picked him over all the others. Harry was certain a 'Dobby-spell' was coming, so he kept speaking.

"Okay, Perky, I need you to do something for me," whispered Harry. He held the backpack out to the elf. "This is a secret, and you must not tell anyone about it, even Professor Dumbledore." He knew that this was against the nature of the elf, but he had to ask.

"But Perky is Master Dumbledore's elf, he cannot lie to professor Dumbledore," protested the elf, predictably.

“I’m not asking you to lie,” said Harry gently. “If he asks you directly, tell him, but don’t tell him if he doesn’t ask, okay?” the elf thought about for a second before nodding reluctantly. “You can’t tell anyone else, you can’t even tell anyone that I have come here.” The elf nodded again.

Harry handed the backpack to Perky. “I need you to keep this safe for me,” he said. “It’s nothing dangerous, but I need you to hide it. You must not tell anyone you have it, or that I was here. Don’t open it, either, okay?”

The elf nodded and stared down at the bag.

“I’ve got to go,” he said Harry checking his watch. “Thank you, Perky, I appreciate it.” The elf nearly fell off his perch in shock, but quickly nodded. He then turned on his heel and, carrying the bag above his head, disappeared through a door. Harry just hoped that when he got it back it wasn’t covered in eggs and flour. No, impossible, elves were too clean for that. They would probably scrub the bag and starch the straps.

Harry left the kitchen and headed towards the Room of Requirement. He felt that he had better not risk waking his mother tonight. He had been walking for a few minutes when a sudden feeling of sickness overtook him. He doubled up in pain, grasping his stomach. His Phoenix senses were going hay-wire as he fell to his knees in pain. He felt sick, and was covered in a cold sweat. Suddenly a streak of pain shot through his head. It wasn’t his scar, but something else. Icy pain surged into every corner of his brain. He grasped at his temples as he fell to his knees.

Suddenly, as quickly as it had come, it was all gone. Harry looked up and glanced around, gasping for breath. He was standing outside the Gargoyles.

*This isn’t the way to the Room of Requirement*, thought Harry to himself as he rubbed his aching temples. How the hell had he gotten up here, when he had set off in the opposite direction? He had been deep in thought, letting his feet lead him. He hadn’t been looking where he was going and had probably taken a wrong turn. Idiot. *I’m losing it*, he concluded. *I need rest.*

He felt tired and achy and he was trembling slightly. Must be posttraumatic stress. Even the SAS are said to puke after some missions. It was delayed onset of adrenalin, delayed shock as it were. Nothing a good night’s sleep wouldn’t fix.

Confident that *Artic Thunder* was safe, Harry returned to the staff quarters. At least Voldemort could never get his hands on it. Mission accomplished, no casualties. Tonight, the light had won a decisive victory over the forces of darkness. Now, Harry just hoped that Ron could keep his mouth shut.

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From the Daily Telegraph, Tuesday 26th November 1996...

IRA ATTACKS BRITISH ARMY BASE!

In the early hours of this morning, the Good Friday agreement was undermined as the Provisional IRA attacked an British Army facility in Devon. The cease fire that has held fast for the last few years was shattered as five armed men entered a secret facility by force. While there are no fatalities, this could potentially mark the end of the cease–fire between Crown forces and the IRA.

Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, have issued a statement denying any responsibility for the attack. “The IRA always admit to what they do,” said Sinn Fein leader Jerry Addams in a press conference this morning. “That has always been our policy and I can assure the British government that the IRA had nothing to do with last night’s attacks.”

An investigation has been launched by the Royal Military Police. Police are said to be interviewing those on duty that night and reviewing the CCTV footage. A source in the army has said that five men armed with pistols and speaking with Irish accents forced their way into the facility. It is unclear whether anything was stolen or damaged. The commanding office of the facility, Major Bowden, was unavailable for comment.

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Albus Dumbledore entered the Minister’s own department in the Ministry of Magic. The one man had a surprising amount of man–power considering the times and the recent butchering of Aurors. Two rows of three desks stretched out in front of him, each identically set out with a lamp, quill, ink and parchment. The only things that were missing were the secretaries that worked there. They would arrive at work in about an hour. The Minister had six secretaries, and Albus had never understood why. Apparently, one was for Law Enforcement, one was for International Relations, one was for Muggle Relations, one was the Hogwarts Liaison, though this seemed obsolete and nowadays, Albus and Crouch worked so close that there was no need for a go–between. The last two were the junior and senior undersecretaries. Around the edge of the room were large metal filing cabinets and shelves, all filled with sheets of parchment. Against one wall was a flight of stairs, which led up to the Minister’s office. Crouch’s office was raised ten feet above the rest of the room, and one wall was made completely of glass, allowing him to look down on his secretaries. Albus crossed the room to the stairs and climbed them, stopping just outside the glass door to the room. He could see Crouch sitting behind his desk. On the desk was what looked like an upturned frying pan, with a series of buttons on the handle. From the device, a small fire no more than a foot high and half wide was burning. Atop the flames was a floating head, with which Crouch was deep in conversation. Albus did not recognise the head.

He raised a hand and knocked lightly on the glass, given off a much higher click rather than a deep knock. Crouch glanced up and beckoned Albus inside. The Headmaster opened the soundproof door and entered the office. The carpet was a pale cream colour and the walls white,

adorned with paintings. On the back wall was a black bookcase that covered the entire length except for above three feet on the left edge, where Albus could see a small fridge with a tray full of whiskey tumblers on top. Along the left wall there was a small table with a potted plant on it and along the right wall was a pair of leather sofas on either side of a glass coffee table. There were paintings on the walls. The last wall was made of a single sheet of glass, with a door embedded into it, also made of glass.

Albus waited calmly while Crouch ended the call.

“I don’t care if he has to go to Timbuktu to get it,” Crouch told the head. *Charming as always*, noted Albus.

“Very well, father,” said the head. “I will have them assembled by dawn tomorrow.”

“Midnight,” interrupted Crouch, his voice needlessly harsh even to his own son. “The order specifies midnight.” With that he swished his wand and the head vanished along with the flame. “Albus,” said Crouch, rising from his chair. “Please, take a seat. Would you like anything to drink?”

“Whatever you are having,” replied Albus, taking a seat on one of the dark leather sofas and removing his hat. Crouch went to the fridge and poured two glasses of what Albus was more or less sure was whiskey, though he couldn’t tell the brand. Crouch closed the fridge and walked over to Dumbledore placing two glasses on the coffee table before sitting opposite him. He leaned back and crossed his legs.

“Have you seen the Muggle Papers?” began Crouch sipping his whiskey.

As a matter of fact, Albus had. He knew the Irish were on the war-path again, but he didn’t see how this affected them. It was nothing to do with Tom. Despite the IRA having denied the attack, the criminals had been Irish. Anyhow, the report had said that Muggle weapons had been used, not wands. Tom would not lower himself. Ah, but he had used a nuclear bomb. What was he up to? No, this was not Tom’s work. It was too clumsy and wasn’t big enough. Tom was trying to start a war with the Muggles, not set them against themselves...or was he? Perhaps, he was planning to weaken the Muggles first? Having said that, it didn’t seem like Tom or his Death Eaters. Whoever had done it was a professional, but there were zero casualties, no injuries and no Dark Mark. Tom liked big bold statements. This was someone else entirely.

“I’ve seen it,” said Albus, taking a sip of the offered whiskey. He so rarely drank anything alcoholic that it burned the back of his throat. Not showing his discomfort, Albus continued. “But I see no cause for alarm. Their pithy little Irish war games will always be with us. Let MI5 deal with them, not us.”

“Albus, there is a lot more to this than meets the eye,” said Crouch, sipping his whiskey. “We’ve been caught with our trousers down, Albus. Or rather the Muggles have and we’re the ones who have to wipe their arse.” Albus raised an eyebrow. He did not get the metaphor, nor

approve of its use. Crouch leaned forward in his chair until his head was only a foot from Albus'. "What I am about to tell you cannot leave the room, agreed?"

Albus' ears picked up at that. Something secret and juicy was coming his way. Maybe this was the secret Operation Black Watch. This should be good. "Agreed," he said, masking his eagerness spectacularly.

"This was not any normal facility," said Crouch. Albus raised an eyebrow. It certainly wasn't if it ruffled his feathers this badly. "This base was being used to house a project designed to create a weapon which would enable the Muggles to fight You-Know-Who." Crouch had broken into a cold sweat, and was rubbing his hands nervously together. The high and mighty Minister was very on edge.

"Go on," said Albus, trying to appear calm.

"It was called Artic Thunder," said Crouch.

"Why?"

"No idea, old boy," said Crouch. "I guess they thought it sounded mysterious and powerful. On the other hand it would send us back to the Ice Age. It was supposed to be a stand-by weapon in case our government ever fell to You-Know-Who. It's a device that stops all magic in a five mile radius, which will last for at least an hour." Albus' blood ran cold. If that kind of thing existed, it could potentially disable the Magical world. And that facility was attacked. It was too much of a co-incidence. Sweet Merlin, had it fallen into enemy hands?

"It's a Muggle first strike weapon?" asked Albus, his outer calm remaining intact. Inside his mind was working at Mach Three.

"We found out about it nearly eight months ago," continued Crouch. "That's myself and Rufus Scrimgeour. We know that it was designed for if You-Know-Who ever took over and it came to war, but would not be used against us, even if it had the potential to be. We knew about it and what it could potentially do, but we could not act. Why should we deny them a weapon that could harm us when we have hundreds of spells that could destroy them? For that reason I could not stop the project. Disabling it would be seen as an act of war. Relations with Downing Street were fragile at best."

"Could you not have Obliviated them?" asked Albus.

"Too many people were involved," said Crouch. "If we missed one person who knew or a written record of it, our attempts to wipe memories would also be seen as an act of war. I couldn't take the risk, so I went down the only route still available. I offered him protection. I Obliviated everyone who knew about the project from the Ministry, except myself and Rufus. I had the Aurors erect wards around the facility in Mary Tavy in Devon where it was being held. On top of that, the Colonel in charge was placed under the protection of MI6. He lived in one of their safe-houses, an estate near Leicester. I had wards placed over that as well. If any spells

were used, it would set off the alarms and the Aurors would be there in an instant. I figured that as long as they didn't know what they were guarding and that they were there protecting it, Voldemort would never find out what it was. It was a show of faith, and for five months it worked."

"What went wrong?"

"We didn't count on one thing," said Crouch. "Harry Potter. In August this year, Harry Potter approached a member of Six – as in MI6. From them he learned the name of the man in charge and his location. The Six agent's body was found floating in the Thames the following morning. Two days later, Potter entered the house of the Project's commanding officer, using bows and arrows to get through my wards and the Muggle guards. He killed the family of Colonel Alexander Fortescue, the Army colonel in charge of the project. Before he died, the Colonel must have given up the location of the facility, because the following week the facility in Devon where it was kept was attacked. That was the mission that Potter was captured on."

"Harry is a changed person," said Dumbledore, predicting where this was heading.

"I know," said Crouch. "I can't say why they didn't take the device then. Maybe their information was wrong, but nothing was taken when the facility was attacked. They just broke in and then left. What he was looking for, I cannot say. Anyhow, that put Whitehall and Downing Street in a right flap. They blamed us, naturally, because they didn't want to accept the blame, even though it was clear that their men gave up the information. For security purposes, they moved the device to a new location, but refused my offer of protection. As such, I lost track of the device, though I never stopped looking – quietly, that is. I never got close to the damn thing. That is until last night. I got a call from the Prime Minister on that portrait in his office. He said that the facility in which it was now housed was attacked last night. Worse, he said that the wreckages of two devices were found in the facility, completely destroyed, but a third was missing. Albus, there is a device out there than can cripple us and we have no idea who has it or what for."

Albus took a moment to assimilate the information. He could feel a headache coming on. The Ministry protected a device designed to incapacitate them? He could understand the reason for it, but it was so hard to believe. He, like so many, had believed the Muggles to be more or less helpless when they had in fact been preparing for war for months. It was such a shock to the system. What was worse was that one of them had gone walkies. It wasn't Death Eaters who had taken it and Albus didn't know if that was a good or bad thing? He put down his glass and undid the top button of his robes. It was really getting quite hot in here. Crouch may like it warm, but it was too warm for Albus' taste. Maybe he was just sweating from this new information. Chills ran down his spine, followed by a cold sweat. He took another sip of the chilled drink to cool himself a bit.

"This is disturbing news," said Albus. "First we need to know exactly what this device can do. We need to know who took it and why, and how they even found out about it. We need to keep it out of the *Prophet*. This atmosphere of confusion is just what Tom needs to gain followers."

“We both know he is a very intelligent operator,” said Crouch, undoing his top button. If he was so hot, why not just turn the heating down? Idiot. “We just need to decide what must be done.” Albus knew this wasn’t strictly true. While it was good of Crouch to fill him in on this, he didn’t trust him. He didn’t know what Black Watch was, and Crouch seemed to be on the verge of losing it. He was going to be prone to irrational actions.

“You’ve already made a decision,” said Dumbledore, reading between the lines. “You called me here, to run the idea past me.”

“As shrewd as ever, Albus,” said Crouch, smiling to himself. “Alright. This is what I had in mind.”

“Had in mind, or have already started?” asked Dumbledore. Patience was not one of the man’s virtues.

“Preparation has begun,” said Crouch with a smile. “But no one makes a move without my go-ahead. The way I see it, the gloves are off. I have no military experience, but I can see what is going on here. First he blinds us, then he builds an army. Next he takes out our strongest defences, before going on to our fortress, so to speak. He has recruited more and more spies and has an army to rival the Aurors. He takes out our strongest defence, the Auror Division, then takes advantage of having blinded us, by grabbing Artic Thunder and making it look like the IRA. Now he is ready to come to our fortress. The fortress is either here or Hogwarts. But first, he will need to take out the last remaining defences. The way I see it, he has three remaining enemies. Myself, what’s left of the Aurors, the Order of the Phoenix...”

Albus was unable to keep the surprise from his face; his eyebrows flew up into his hairline and his blood ran cold. How...?

“Come now, Albus, did you think I didn’t know?” said Crouch looking smug. Albus managed to keep his expression neutral. “How else did Potter get involved with the Nuclear threat? You know everything before I tell you – it was so obvious. But anyway, that’s besides the point. Your little Order will be on his list of enemies, and he might even see Harry Potter as a possible threat. You-Know-Who will seek to remove us from power and replace us with his own. He already has standing on the Wizengamot, we can be sure and I would not be surprised if the Aurors and Order were penetrated. Something has to be done.” So Crouch knew about the Order. Did that mean Tom knew too? Albus’ headache was getting worse. He shook his head trying to put it aside. He shook his robes, trying to get a little ventilation inside. It was so hot!

“And what do you suggest?” Albus asked, casting a quick cooling charm on his clothes.

“The gloves are coming off,” said Crouch, his face set and his eyes determined. Even his fists were clenched. “I am proposing the formation of a special group of Aurors, called the Black Watch.” Albus froze at the word. This was his big secret. “Twenty men I can trust,” continued Crouch. “They would essentially be above the law, reporting only to myself. They would be authorised to use any force necessary to wrinkle out the spies.” That was it? A vigilante force? An Internal Affairs department of the Aurors already existed. Why did they need this? And then

there was the danger of this Black Watch being corrupt and potentially giving Voldemort free reign to arrest any member of the Ministry. If the Order were compromised, they could wipe out the Order by legal means.

“I have two concerns, Minister,” said Albus. “Firstly, giving this team carte blanche is only going to create panic. If Voldemort gets wind of it, he will reply in force and it could incite a full-blown battle. Secondly, if this team was penetrated, and Voldemort gained control, he could have loyal workers executed, and his own men placed in positions of power. Nothing could stop him.”

“It’s a bit risky,” said Crouch. He yawned into the back of his hand before continuing. “But we are at war. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and I have complete confidence on the leader of this team. He is assembling them as we speak, checking everyone with Veritaserum.”

“Who would be leading this team, anyway?” asked Albus.

“Someone I trust,” said Crouch, matter-of-factly.

“Who?” repeated Albus.

“My son.”

Albus’ blood ran cold. He remembered his conversation with Harry. Barty Crouch junior was a Death Eater in his world; he had apparently tortured Frank and Alice to insanity with the Lestranges. They had yet to confirm that he was one here, but there were so many leaks in the Ministry. Crouch wouldn’t have checked him with Veritaserum as it was his own son. Merlin, if Crouch Junior selected these men, the Black Watch would be not only corrupt, but a team of Death Eaters with carte blanche over the Ministry.

“Your son?” Albus echoed, suppressing a yawn in his throat.

“Y...Yes,” said Crouch, swaying where he was sitting. He eyes appeared heavy. “He is my...fam...illy.” Crouch suddenly collapsed onto the sofa. Albus could feel his own eyes becoming heavy. What was going on?...The drink! They had been drugged! He instantly threw his drink down, and tried to stand. He should have seen it earlier! He was kicking himself for not having seen it. He was feeling tired but he had thought it was just because of his lack of sleep. He felt hot, but even Crouch was uncomfortable so it couldn’t have been him who set the heating up. How had he missed the signs? He had been so concerned with Artic Thunder and the Black Watch that his guard had dropped. Someone had slipped something into the drink. Was it Crouch? No, he had poured it, but someone must have prepared the bottle.

Albus, staggered wearily over to the desk. He knew he had no chance of stopping the potion. He was certain it was one of two potions, but he didn’t know which. Each worked in five minutes, each caused perspiring, headaches and dizziness and each had no antidote that worked after sixty seconds of exposure. He would pass out soon, and nothing could stop that short of

Phoenix tears. He staggered to the desk, needing it to support his weight. Trying to shake the weariness from his face, he swished his wand at the Firecaller causing it to burst into flame. His legs were feeling numb and his head was spinning. He fought to keep his eyes open.

“Kingsley Sha...” he began, but before he finished the name, his legs gave way. He collapsed onto the floor, knocking the chair over in the process. He landed on back, staring straight up at the ceiling. His breathing was shallow, but still he fought to keep his eyes open. He had to reach the Firecaller!

*Come on, Albus, one last effort,* he encouraged himself.

Just then, the door opened with a small creak. From underneath the desk, Albus could see two figures wearing robes. He could not tell if they were male or female, as the cloaks obscured their footwear. Their footsteps were soundless on the carpet of the office. One of them moved to Albus’ left, towards where Crouch lay, while the other came towards him. Albus’ ears were ringing and his eyes were heavy. The footsteps seemed to vibrate in his ears. He struggled to cry out for help, but he couldn’t get the words out. He gasped for breath as the potion attacked the final centres of consciousness in his mind.

The figure rounded the edge of the desk and came into full view. Albus found himself staring up into the unforgiving red eyes of his former pupil. Albus’ eyes grew wide as he stared up at his former apprentice, who stood staring coldly down at him, a wicked sneer appeared over his lips, and his eyes flashed with malice.

“You father, Crouch?” Voldemort asked, without taking his eyes off Albus.

“*AVADA KEDAVRA!*” roared a voice. The sound of rushing death and a flash of green light invaded Albus’ groggy senses. Despite his throbbing head and heavy eyes, Albus knew that the Minister of Magic was no longer breathing.

“He’s out for the count, Master,” said a voice. A second later, the sneering face of Barty Crouch Junior emerged around the side of the desk, also glaring down at Albus.

“Good,” said Voldemort, allowing himself a smile, as Albus lost consciousness. “Now, we can begin.”

## ~~~~ Chapter XIII ~~~~ The Purges

*It's a fine line between faith and denial,  
And it's a lot better on my side of the line."*

### *Rose - Lost Series 1*

... The statement provided by Antonin Dolohov, under the influence of Veritaserum, during his three-day incarceration in Azkaban prison (01/09 – 03/09 1996) also mentioned a Death Eater spy in close proximity to the Minister of Magic. Following the Death of Senior Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge in the nuclear attack of 30/10/1996, it was believed by some that the spy had been neutralised. However, You-Know-Who is not known to be rash and could have chosen anyone to deliver the device; compromising his source would serve no purpose. This reasoning leads to the theory that there is still a Death Eater spy in close proximity to the Minister of Magic. It is the view of the Aurors that screening should commence on employees, beginning with department heads, looking for any relation or contact with Death Eaters, by a Legilimens and confirmed with Veritaserum. Such screening needs to be completed as soon as possible and as quietly as possible, lest the spy knows the test is coming.

Kingsley Shacklebolt potted his quill and glanced at his watch. It was a quarter to eleven and his stomach was beginning to rumble. It hardly seemed professional that his stomach would dictate his schedule, but since he had skipped breakfast to get started on the report, he figured that he could afford a break, though first he needed to contact Dumbledore to have him check over his report. It reminded Kingsley of primary school, having the teacher checking over his work, looking for spelling errors, or in this case, sensitive information, but he knew that it was necessary and his pride was not a major concern of the Order of the Phoenix.

He got up and walked into the screened-off area of the new Auror Complex. It was still under construction and the intoxicating smell of paint-thinner and other solvents filled the air. Scaffolding was still up around most of the walls and half the people in the room were workmen. Kingsley shot them an annoyed glance. He did not feel comfortable having all these men in a room that should be secret. They were checked for Death Eater relations, but it was so easy to steal something and sell it simply for money. Still, that was not his concern. The screened-off area he was heading to was the kitchen. It contained a kettle, a few bottles of milk under an area-affect Cooling Charm, and a sink.

Kingsley put the kettle on. He then sped it up with his wand so the kettle began to whistle, so it covered the sound of his voice. He checked that he was alone and then satisfied, removed a small piece of cardboard from his pocket and held it up in front of him like a mirror. To any normal person it would appear to be a common Chocolate Frog Card: an Albus Dumbledore Chocolate Frog Card. This was how the Order communicated with each other in secret. No one questioned their presence since although they would never admit it, many grown men still collected them, so they didn't raise suspicion, even in the pocket of a high ranking Auror. At present the card was blank.

“Albus Dumbledore” whispered Kingsley into the card. He waited a few seconds, but still the card remained blank. *Odd*, thought Kingsley. Albus always answered his card. Kingsley tried again, but still there was no answer. Albus was on call twenty-four hours a day. Why wasn’t he answering? Kingsley couldn’t shake the idea that something was wrong. It was an odd feeling he had had all morning and was unable to shake. In absence of Albus, Kingsley tried his second in command.

“Minerva McGonagall,” whispered Kingsley, his lips inches from the card. There was a second’s pause before Minerva’s face appeared in the card, though the name remained Albus Dumbledore. Kingsley breathed a sigh of relief. He had feared that she too would not pick up.

“Minerva, have you seen Albus?” he asked, cutting off any greeting. “He’s not answering my calls.”

“He’s not here,” said McGonagall, sounding worried. Why was she so anxious? Was something really wrong? “No one has seen him and no one can reach him,” she continued. “He had a meeting with the Minister at half past eight this morning, and was supposed to be back before half nine, but he hasn’t returned. The Ministry claim they do not know where he is, and I cannot reach the Minister either. I’ve had to cancel my lessons to take over as Deputy Headmistress.”

“No one has seen him at all?” asked Kingsley thoughtfully. Something was definitely wrong. Someone as powerful and famous as Albus Dumbledore couldn’t just disappear, especially *inside* the Ministry of Magic. Kingsley smelt a rat.

“Not since the Minister this morning,” said Minerva.

“And you can’t reach him either?” asked Kingsley.

“No,” said McGonagall, shaking her head in the card. “Naturally I called there when he was not back by ten. The Minister is ‘unavailable’, or at least that is what they said, though I did get word that the Wizengamot convened shortly before ten this morning. That might have something to do with it.”

“Maybe,” said Kingsley. “But I don’t like it, and the Wizengamot are not scheduled to meet this morning. This doesn’t feel right – I’m going to ask Crouch myself.”

“Call me when you know,” instructed Minerva before disappearing from the card. Kingsley pocketed the card and poured himself a cup of tea to keep up the appearances, and justify nearly a full minute of annoying whistling to anyone who had been disturbed by it. He then headed straight over to the lift, stepped in and pressed the appropriate button. A short walk later and Kingsley arrived in the Minister’s own department. He entered without knocking, as he always did. He would usually knock on the office itself, but not on the department door – there was no need. The first thing he noticed as the doors slid open was the lack of people. The six secretaries were absent, their desks perfectly organised, but clearly no one had worked here since

they left last night. Why was there no one here at eleven in the morning? Kingsley checked that his wand was ready up his sleeve, just in case. He had a bad feeling about this.

Kingsley glanced up at the office on the far side of the room, through its glass wall. He could see two figures moving up in the office, though their faces were obscured by their hoods. One thing he did know was that neither of them was the Minister. Kingsley ducked behind a desk from which he could see what was happening without being seen himself. Something was wrong. Who were these people? Where were Crouch and Albus? Every instinct told him that whoever was in there was hostile. Kingsley drew his wand, ready in case his fear was justified.

Just then, the door to the office opened; Kingsley felt his stomach sink and his muscles freeze in terror. The Dark Lord himself had just emerged from the office. He wore black robes darker than the darkest night. His hood was up, but the whole room seemed to chill, as if he were a Dementor. Kingsley recognised his face from his arrest, but had hoped never to see that face again. He could just about see the red eyes burning with hatred under the hood. His voice was high as he spoke to his companion, but it came in a tone of pure ice that made Kingsley shiver where he hid.

“The authority is now yours,” he said as he descended the steps from the glass office, “*Minister.*”

Kingsley watched in horror as a second figure emerged from the office, also wrapped in black. He recognised him instantly as being the son of the Minister. Barty Crouch Junior’s hay-coloured hair was slicked back over his ears, a wide yet maniacal smile spread over his face.

“Thank you, Master,” said Crouch, bowing slightly as he followed his master down the steps from the office. “And thank you for the honour of disposing of my blood traitor father.”

“I had that pleasure many years ago,” said Voldemort, reaching the bottom of the stairs. “Why should I deny it to my most faithful servant?” Crouch bowed again. Kingsley tried to slow his breath, in case he was heard. The Dark Lord was loose! Crouch Senior must be dead, judging by their conversation. Did that mean Albus was too? Was that why no one could reach him or Crouch, because they had both been murdered?

Crouch followed his master across the room, stopping by the door. “But what of Dumbledore’s Order?” he asked. “They will not accept this change lightly. Potter will certainly know about me.”

“With their leader gone, the Order of the Phoenix will be in disarray,” said Voldemort calmly. Kingsley only just managed to hold in his gasp. The Ministry didn’t acknowledge the Order’s existence, but the Dark Lord knew it existed and who its leader was. How could he possibly know? “Even with a new leader,” You-Know-Who continued, “they have no authority to overturn the Wizengamot, over which I have control. They are a vigilante group, terrorists, nothing more – that is what you will tell the *Daily Prophet*. I control the Ministry and the Wizengamot. Only one thing stands between myself and victory, and that’s Hogwarts.”

“What would you have me do?” asked Crouch, looking eager to serve.

“With the old man gone, the Order will most likely be under the control of Minerva McGonagall and Nicolas Flamel,” said Voldemort. “I know they are the inner core of the Order. McGonagall shall be our next target. I want her power limited and her contacts watched. Do as you see fit, but I want her watched, *not apprehended*. She will know she is being watched, but she must feel safe enough to try and salvage the Order of the Phoenix. I want to know every move she makes. Get in touch with Lucius and the Board of Governors. He should be able to get you a foothold on the school. As for the Order here in the Ministry, do what must be done. You have twenty-four hours to install loyal department heads in every department. I want the Order of the Phoenix eliminated from the Ministry.” Did that mean he knew who was in the Order? He knew Dumbledore, so he may know others. If he did, they could cripple the Order.

“Do you wish them killed?” asked Crouch Junior matter-of-factly, as if human life had no value.

“No,” said Voldemort. “Not for now. Once victory is complete, their executions will mark my inauguration. I will send you a team of my Aurors. Move the old man to the island and your late father to the mortuary at St Mungo’s for a post mortem. After that, you must play the grieving son.”

“As you wish, Master,” said Crouch.

The door opened and Voldemort glided silently out of the door, followed by the Minister of Magic. Kingsley emerged from his hiding place feeling weak at the knees. His head was spinning, just trying to absorb all this new information. The Order was compromised. Voldemort knew everything, and worse, he was in control of the Wizengamot and the Minister. The Wizengamot had convened this morning, according to Minerva. They must have elected a new Minister, Crouch Junior. You-Know-Who controlled the Wizengamot, so that meant they had held a corrupt election. Still, all was not lost; a vote of no confidence could remove the Minister from office, but that required a majority vote from the Department Heads. Amelia Bones, Arthur Weasley, Dawlish, Cornelius Fudge could be counted upon and maybe another half dozen. But in twenty-four hours Crouch Junior would have replaced all Department heads with Death Eaters. In twenty-four hours, Voldemort could have complete control of the Ministry. Harry Potter had been right – this was the beginning of the end!

Kingsley slipped out of the room and down the corridor, pulling the Chocolate Frog Card from his pocket. His head was spinning and his heart pounding in his chest. It was finally happening! How the hell had they missed the signs? Was it already too late? He had to get to Amelia, no, Arthur was closer. In a Vote of No Confidence, only Heads of Department serving at the time of the vote being called for would be included in the vote and they had a chance of removing this corrupt Minister. If they didn’t act very quickly, the Dark Lord would replace Heads of Departments with his own men. After that happened, all was lost. He also had to let Minerva know she was being watched and that the Ministry was going to interfere with Hogwarts. If Voldemort got his hands politically on Hogwarts and the Ministry, it would make life for the Order impossible. After what he had just heard, he knew that they were all in danger.

Had the Order been penetrated? Was it Potter? Was it all an act? Questions plagued the Auror's mind.

"Minerva McGonagall," panted Kingsley into the Card, hurrying along the passage towards the lift. *Come on*, he silently cursed into the blank card.

Minerva's face appeared in the card. "Yes, Kin –"

"Minerva," the Auror cut her off. There was no time for manners. "Voldemort's taking over! Albus and Crouch are..." Kingsley never finished the sentence, for as he rounded the corner, a foot came swinging out of nowhere, hitting him square on the jaw. His momentum carried him forward and the foot drove his head backwards. He did a complete back flip in and the air and landed hard on his chest, his forehead crashing into the floor, unleashing coloured spots over his vision. He lost his grip on the card as he hit the floor. He had bitten his tongue as he had been hit and his mouth was full of blood, and his tongue stung in his mouth. His eyes grew wide as he looked up to see his attacker. The man was dressed entirely in black, with his hood up and a black veil across the bottom half of his face. He was wearing armour, much as an Auror would, except in midnight black rather than scarlet. Kingsley's eyes widened as he read the single word in white written across the man's chest:

## **AUROR**

These were Crouch's new Aurors! It had begun; Voldemort was taking over the Ministry of Magic. No! He could not let them get away with this! He had to get the word out. He was the only one who knew what was going on. He could not let himself be taken. If the Order were unprepared...they would be exterminated.

With a flick of his wrist, his second wand came free from the holster on his right forearm. Before the Auror in Black could react, Kingsley had fired a Stunner right into the man's chest. The man collapsed in a flash of red, and Kingsley was back on his feet before he hit the ground, adrenaline pumping, ready for battle.

Where had the sodding card gone? He had to contact Minerva or Arthur by the card. The chances were if Crouch was on to him, (and he probably was since he had sent an Auror after him), then his path would be blocked. He saw it lying on the floor where he had dropped it, but when he stooped to pick it up, it burst into flames. Kingsley recoiled and turned back to face the corridor. To his horror, he saw three more Aurors in black marching towards him, wands levelled at his chest. Thinking quickly, Kingsley muttered some well-chosen words and a cloud of smoke shot out of his wand, obscuring him from the Aurors. With that he turned and ran, just as several jets of light came shooting through the fog, narrowing missing the fleeing Kingsley. He had to find a way to communicate with the outside world. If he could get to Tonks, Moody, *anyone*, he could get the word out. Dawlish, Potter and Black were out on assignment. Kingsley wondered if they too were meeting this horrid fate. He bolted down the corridor, turning left at the T-Junction. As he turned the corner he skidded to halt. Three more Aurors were coming down the corridor towards him. He spun on his heel, ran back around the corner and set off in the opposite direction towards the lift. He glanced to his right as he passed the junction, just in time

to see three figures emerge from his field of smoke as the other three rounded the corner. There were six Aurors behind him, marching three abreast. All six's footsteps were perfectly timed as they marched, rather than ran down the corridor. They were in no hurry, and the precision of their steps echoed in Kingsley's ears as he ran. It wasn't much further; he was almost at the lift.

*PING!*

Suddenly the lift doors opened in front of him. Kingsley gasped as he saw who was inside. Barty Crouch Junior, the new Minister of Magic, stood in the centre with an Auror in Black on either side of him. A cruel smile was plastered over his face as he stepped calmly out of the lift. Kingsley skidded to a halt. He was surrounded. He glanced around, looking for a way out. There were no doors, no ventilation shafts, no means of escape. He could see six behind him and three in front. There was no way out. He could hope that they all fired and took each other out, but there was little chance of that. He had failed. Now who would warn the Order?

“Ah!” Kingsley cried out in pain as a curse hit him on his calf. One of the Aurors behind him had fired. He fell to his knees, biting back the pain. He found himself looking up into the manic eyes of the new Minister of Magic. Kingsley's eyes grew wide as Crouch stared coldly down at him.

“Take him,” said Crouch simply.

Kingsley never heard it coming; he was unconscious before he felt the impact of the spell.

“We must move quickly,” said Crouch to his Aurors, as Kingsley lay unconscious at his feet. “You all have your targets. Let's make this quick and quiet. MOVE!”

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“OW!” yelled Nymphadora Tonks, as the Healer removed a chunk of glass from the small of her back. She was lying facedown on a metal table in the middle of the Medical Centre at the new Auror Complex. It was a cold room that stank of cleaning potions. The clinical smell of hospitals was not something Tonks liked, and having a Healer, who gave every impression that this was his first assignment after getting his qualification, digging around inside her back was even worse.

She had been called to an incident in which a man had broken into his ex-wife's house and tried to kidnap his children of who he had no custody rights, and was threatening to kill his ex-wife. Tonks had gone in to negotiate and after the conversation had gone pear-shaped they had resorted to violence, which ended up with her being blasted through a window, a few fragments of which were currently being removed from her back. She gritted her teeth as the final fragment was clumsily removed from her flesh.

“All done,” said the healer, smiling. At least he thought he had done a good job – Tonks didn't agree. “I just need to clean the wounds before I close them.”

While I'm here, give me a bloody massage, thought Tonks bitterly. She was normally a friendly person, but some things really made her mad, and a mad Tonks was very different to a happy Tonks, to say the least. Being blasted through a window was one of those things that made her mad. However, having an idiot dig around inside her back afterwards pushed her beyond mad into thoroughly pissed. She just hoped this incompetent Healer got the right potion and didn't pour acid over her.

Suddenly a voice came over the intercom.

"Healer Fletcher, Healer Fletcher, please come to main room fourteen-C."

"I'm sorry, Miss Tonks," said the Healer, sighing deeply. "I must go. I'll be back as soon as I can. Just don't move."

Tonks thought to answer, 'Don't bother, I could do a better job myself', but chose to hold her tongue, resorting to a simple 'fine'. The Healer quickly ran out of the room, leaving Tonks by herself. She shook her head in frustration and sat up. She twisted so she could see the damage in the mirror. There were three large gashes where large shards had dug in dangerously close to her spine, and a few smaller scratches on her shoulder blades. She re-clipped her bra and pulled her robes back up over her shoulders. She wasn't having any more of this clown. Since she had the rest of the day off, she decided to report to Hogwarts, see what was happening. On the way, she could get Poppy Pomfrey to close the wounds and stitch her up properly.

Suddenly there was a quiet crash outside the room. It was only a quiet tinkle, as if someone had knocked over a glass and it had smashed, but Tonks' sharp ears picked it up.

"Hello?" called Tonks, jumping down from the table. She ignored the pain in her back as she walked to the door. The double-doors were white, with a small window in each one. Pushing them open, she stuck her head out into the corridor. She was in the Ministry; there couldn't be any danger. Even the workmen went through intense security before entering the Auror Complex. She glanced either way down the corridor. It looked very sterile, the floor, walls and ceiling all pure white, and the floor shining brightly. To the left of the door was a trolley full of phials of potions. One of the phials was lying on its side, broken and in a puddle of mauve liquid. Tonks glanced either way to find that the corridor was deserted. She knelt down to look at the floor. It had been recently cleaned, so she could see the smears where someone had trodden. She could see the prints of a heavy boot, as well as the prints from the soft shoes that the Healers wore. Someone in boots had been standing here and it wasn't her. She glanced around one more time before standing back up.

Tonks sighed in frustration. It was probably a workman. They were all perverts, constantly eyeing her up, as well as Rachel Shepherd and a few other female Aurors. Tonks swore that if she got one more catcall or wolf-whistle, the builder responsible would find himself on the end of the worst hex she could come up with. It must have been one of them that had upset the phial. One of them had probably been trying to catch a glimpse of her boobs.

"Bastards," muttered Tonks.

She stood back up and turned to leave, but before she could take a single step, she caught a flash of movement from something black in the corner of her eye. She turned just in time to see a glowing red baton come crashing down towards her face.

“Bug...” then everything went black.

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Amelia Bones entered the Auror Complex, having just come from the Wizengamot. They had just had to vote on a new Minister of Magic. Her head was still spinning from what had happened. She had been summoned urgently to the Wizengamot’s courtroom before nine in the morning. She had been told that Crouch was dead and that he had been murdered by Dumbledore, as if she didn’t have enough to worry about with Wizengamot Elder Hyacinth Warren’s daughter being kidnapped. There was no way Dumbledore had murdered Crouch, and Amelia knew it. Something was just wrong, and she didn’t know what. She herself had been nominated to replace Crouch as Minister, which was flattering, but also meant that she was not allowed to vote. Surprisingly, of the other two Order members on the Wizengamot, Griselda Marchbanks and Tiberius Ogden, Tiberius was also up for nomination. This was suspicious in itself, since A, no voting for nominations had been taken; B, it was the two of them against Bartemius Crouch Junior, who wasn’t even on the Wizengamot, nor was he a department head; C, it had been less than an hour since Crouch had died; and D, with two Order members nominated, it only left one Order member able to vote, while those suspected of Death Eater links were free to vote. Crouch had won with a vast majority, and had taken over his father’s role. Harry Potter had identified him as Death Eater, but his father would hear nothing of it, so no investigation was ever launched. What followed the election was a ninety-minute lecture on what was going to happen with regards to the war. Amelia now needed to speak to whomever was now in charge of the Order, for chances are were they did not know that Dumbledore had been arrested.

*Who is now in charge of the Order, anyway?* she wondered.

Amelia marched into the main floor of the Auror Complex. Where the hell was Kingsley? She couldn’t see him anywhere, and she knew he had come in early today. Where was Tonks, for that matter? Black and Potter were on call, Dawlish was with a source, Moody was in class, but where was Kingsley? Something was nagging at the back of her mind. Something felt wrong. Her stomach was tight and a chill went down her spine.

“Okay, listen up!” called Amelia Bones above the racket, bringing the room into silence. “I know we are under a lot of strain with Catherine Warren’s kidnapping, but I have some bad news for you. There is no easy way to put this, so I am going to be blunt. The Minister of Magic is dead. We don’t have all the facts, but it appears he was murdered this morning by Albus Dumbledore, who has been arrested.” There was a gasp around the room. Jaws hung limp, as no one could believe the news. Most of them had been taught by Dumbledore, and although Crouch was a tough bastard, he was a liked and respected man.

“The Wizengamot convened this morning and a new Minister has been elected,” continued Amelia. “Bartemius Crouch Junior has taken over his father’s job. I know this all comes as a shock, but we need to stay focused. Where are we with the Warren kidnapping?”

“Sirius Black has Susan Hart in custody,” said Kimberly Tanner. “We have reason to believe that Catherine Warren is being held by her husband, Connor Hart.”

“Adam, we need an address on him,” said Amelia. “Liam, assemble a strike team. Stun-batons only. Remember that Catherine is the daughter of a Wizengamot Elder, let’s bring her back alive.”

Everyone began to move quickly as they went about the task set. Amelia turned and went straight into her office and sank into her chair. She needed time to deal with this, but she also needed to contact Minerva. With a flick of her wand she closed the door. She leaned back in her chair, and began to wonder just how this had happened.

How on earth had Dumbledore been arrested? There was no way he would kill anyone; he resented killing in all its forms. And then there was the matter of the next Minister. The Wizengamot had been called within ten minutes of Crouch’s death and a new minister elected within an hour. Normally there would be a period of mourning and a funeral before the new minister was elected. This had happened far too fast, and within another half-hour, the Black Watch had been assembled, apparently by Crouch Senior’s order – honouring his last request, as his son had phrased it. Most worryingly, not a single Order member was on the Black Watch. Something felt wrong.

Then there was Dumbledore. No way in hell did he kill Crouch. They had disagreed in the past, but they were friends. He would not want Crouch dead. Thinking tactically, without emotion, keeping the Minister in play was the best move. There was no possible way it would be an advantage to have Crouch killed. Also, how had they arrested him? He was too powerful to be taken in a duel, so he must have surrendered. If Dumbledore was innocent, he would not just allow himself to be arrested. He had not been sent to Azkaban, for Amelia did not sign off on it, and would have been told if he had. She had not been told of a trial either. Dumbledore would demand a trial. He had done nothing as far as Amelia could see. What was going on?

She pulled out her Frog-Card and was about to call McGonagall, when suddenly the main doors to the Auror Complex flew open and in marched eight Black-Watch Aurors, in rows of two.

They were dressed in pure black, with ‘Auror’ written in white across their chests. *They’re a disgrace to the word,* thought Amelia bitterly. *Is this news of Dumbledore though,* she wondered. All movement in the room came to a halt as the Black-Watch marched down the central aisle towards Amelia’s office. They were like a black snake making its way through a sea of scarlet. For some reason a chill ran down Amelia’s spine as she watched them approach. She didn’t know why, but she suddenly felt scared.

*Calm yourself, Amelia,* she thought to herself. *You’re a grown woman.*

The first Auror, and it pained Amelia to think of them as Aurors, pushed open the door to her office and marched in.

“Ma’am, come with us, please,” said the Auror bluntly, his mouth hidden behind the veil.

“What’s this about?” she asked. Deep inside, she already knew, and knew it was too late for her. She could not contact the Order. There was no one else here. Kingsley and Tonks must have already been taken. Perhaps Moody and Dawlish as well. The Order was being hunted down, and they had never seen it coming. Checkmate.

“The Minister wishes to see you,” said the Auror.

Knowing it was futile to resist, Amelia rose from her chair and allowed herself to be escorted from the room. She felt fresh air on her face as she left the Auror Complex for no more than a second before she saw a flash of red light out of the corner of her eye and everything went black.

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‘THE EXAM LASTS ONE HOUR,’ shouted Alastor Moody as he hobbled between rows of desks in the gymnasium. There were approximately one hundred and fifty applicants, who now sat at desks that had been spread out in rows over the floor of the gym. If they were successful, they would go on to the physical exam. Alastor knew he was looking at the next generation of Aurors. He wondered how many were under the influence of Voldemort, and how many would make it to the Aurors. “YOU MAY BEGIN!”

There was the usual rustle as the parchments were opened and the quills picked up. For the last decade since his retirement, Alastor had been training Aurors, and over the years he had seen fewer and fewer Aurors making it through to the end, not to mention fewer applicants applying. People were scared and lacked the will to fight. He was training the front line in defence, but he could only train those who applied. When war came, some people felt patriotic and others felt afraid, and more and more people fell under the latter category.

He hobbled down one aisle, his magical eye revolving quickly, looking for anyone cheating. He could have used a charm to prevent it, but he felt it was good practice to find cheaters himself.

About five minutes passed in silence as the applicants took the exam. After six minutes, the whole exam was interrupted. The doors burst open to reveal eight men dressed in black. Moody’s wand was out in a second and aimed. He cursed himself for not seeing them coming; his eye had been looking for cheaters and he had not checked the passage outside. He had slipped up. *Idiot!* He glanced at the men in black. Each had ‘Auror’ written across his chest. Moody’s eyes narrowed at the sight. These were no Aurors; these were...something else.

“Master Moody,” said the first Auror. “Come with us, please.”

“Aurors, hey?” snarled Moody, hobbling over to the Aurors. “You don’t know the meaning of the word. *And*, you are interrupting my exam. Either sit down and take the damn test or get the hell out of my exam hall.”

“The Minister wants to see you,” snapped the Auror, his hand approaching his wand. “You will come with us.”

Moody glared at the man, both his eyes glaring into his. His magical one could see through the veil; he recognised the man. Moody had trained him, and knew exactly what he was like. He had an aggressive streak and an affinity for violence – hardly the perfect Auror.

“After the exam, I will come to see the Minister,” said Moody.

“You will come with us, now!” snapped the Auror.

Moody glanced at his fellow exam supervisors and nodded. For the sake of the exam, he would comply.

“So be it,” sneered Moody. He didn’t want to go, but to save the applicants from a repeat exam, he complied. He hobbled outside the door and into the corridor. He walked in front, with the Aurors behind him. His magical eye was rolled back into his head, watching them out the back of his own skull. He was not the least surprised to see the Auror raise his wand, nor a jet of red escape it.

“*Protego!*” snapped Moody, wand in hand. The shield snapped into place and the curse bounced back, straight into the chest of the Auror who had fired it. He keeled over backward, landing on the three Aurors behind him. Moody spun to face them, spinning on his wooden leg. Years of walking on it had given him enough practice with balance. He played up the hobble to make people view him as weak.

“*Stupefy!*” hissed Moody. He twisted the handle of his walking stick and a Stun-Baton came loose from inside the wood, glowing a healthy scarlet.

“Didn’t I teach you never to attack from behind,” sneered Moody. He held the baton in one hand and a wand in the other. All thoughts of his walking aid had left him. He didn’t need it anyway. “Especially me! *Paralysio! Shesky! Reducto!*”

Three curses left his wand inside of a second, slamming into the shield of the first standing Auror. The Paralyzing Curse destroyed the shield, allowing the following curses to get through. Two Aurors fell under the barrage. Moody spun on his real leg, raising the wooden one in a spinning kick. The heavy wooden foot slammed into the nose of the nearest Auror, shattering the skull and killing him instantly.

“*STUPEFY!*”

Moody sidestepped the curse, swinging the Stun-Baton as he did. The Auror ducked the swing and aimed his wand at Moody, who swung the baton back towards him. It connected with his arm just before he managed the curse. The Auror collapsed in a shower of sparks. Four down, four to go.

By this time, the first two who had been knocked down by the first Auror's fall were on their feet.

"*Stupefy!*" hissed one of them. Moody noted that they were trying to take him alive, not kill him, but he fought just as fiercely.

"*Accio Auror!*" he shouted. Another Auror was pulled forward, into the path of the incoming curse. Moody launched his human shield at the Auror who had fired at him. The body landed on the man, pinning him to the floor. Moody silenced him with a Stunner. That left two still standing.

"Who wants it first?" growled Moody. Suddenly he felt an impact in his back. His magical eye shot around to see Barty Crouch Junior standing at the end of the corridor, his wand aimed at Moody. Alastor's limbs froze solid and he keeled over, hitting his head on the hard floor.

"Idiots!" hissed Crouch Junior, coming closer to them. "I said be quick and quiet, not start a bloody battle. Wake the others and put this cripple with the others. Potter, Black and Dawlish will be back soon. Get the Weasleys and prepare for their arrival."

That was all Moody saw before a flash of red light plunged him into darkness.

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"Father, I didn't know anything about this," protested Percy. "I know I should, but..."

"Yes, you should," said Arthur, cutting his son off. They were both in Arthur's tiny office, in the middle of an argument. "That is why we risked so much to get you a place there."

"No, father, what I mean is I should have been told, not I made a mistake," said Percy, affronted. He knew that they had pulled strings to get him into the Minister's office, but he didn't like the idea that he could not have done it on his own.

"What do you mean?" said Arthur, calming slightly.

"I mean that the Wizengamot was convened in secret and no word was sent out of Crouch's death until a new Minister was elected. My job would have been to conduct voting to find candidates from different departments, but it never happened."

"You weren't asked to do it? Someone else did?" asked Arthur.

“No, I mean it was never done,” said Percy. “No vote was taken. Three candidates were picked, seemingly at random. Admittedly we were fortunate, two of them were members of the Order, but there was no picking process; as far as I can tell they were just...random.”

“A random pick selected two Order members?” asked Arthur rhetorically. “Not likely. Whoever picked them did it for a reason. The Order must be compromised.”

“Merlin,” breathed Percy. He realised that he should have made this connection. He also wondered why his father had never risen through the ranks with a mind like his.

“Not only that,” continued Arthur., “If the election was rigged as badly as you said it was, then we can assume the winner is dishonest at best, a Death Eater at worst. The Order needs to keep Crouch Junior under a very close eye.”

“We should tell Minerva,” said Percy.

*KNOCK! KNOCK!*

The door opened and two men in black stepped into the room. Percy was about to ask them to come back later, when he realised that they were Aurors, as given by the names on their chests. Since when had Aurors worn black or covered their faces? What was going on?

“Can I help you?” asked Arthur.

“We just want a word with you,” said one Auror, while the other closed the blinds.

“What’s going on?” asked Percy.

He never got an answer, for as soon as the blinds were closed, the Aurors opened fire.

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Minerva McGonagall paced her office at Hogwarts, throwing irritable irritated glances at inanimate objects around the room. What on earth was going on? First Albus disappeared off the face of the Earth; then she got an interrupted Frog-Card call from Kingsley, of which she had not understood a word. He had not picked up when she had called him back, and now she couldn’t get hold of Amelia. If anyone could tell her what was going on, it was Amelia. As Head of Law Enforcement, she would be able to find out, but she could not get a response on her Frog-Card. Minerva had tried three times.

After pacing two more lengths of the room, Minerva pulled the card out again. She held it up to her face, “Amelia Bones,” she said.

The card remained blank. Minerva could have screamed – such was her frustration. First Albus, and now Amelia. Maybe Alastor would know where they were.

“Alastor Moody,” she said. She waited for ten seconds, but still she received no answer. What was going on at the Ministry? Why was no one answering?

“Nymphadora Tonks,” she said. Again the card remained blank. Was her card broken, faulty or something? No, Albus had made them and it had never broken in the years she had had it. So what was wrong?

“Sirius Black,” she said. There was a pause and then Sirius’ face appeared in the card. At least she knew the cards worked, but that didn’t ease her mind.

“What can I do you for, Minerva?” said Sirius, wearing his usual lop-sided grin.

“Pay attention, Sirius,” snapped McGonagall in the voice she used to use to tell him off when he was at school. “This is serious. Albus has disappeared and I can’t raise Amelia or Kingsley.”

“Maybe they are in a meeting, and can’t answer,” suggested Sirius in a much more sober tone. The voice had had its effect.

“All of them?” asked Minerva, shaking her head. “No, they would have let us know.”

“I’ll make a few calls,” said Sirius. “See if I can find out what’s going on. Call you back in five.”

It was the longest five minutes of Minerva’s life. She continued to pace, not caring about the wear on her carpet until she made the mistake of touching the metal fireguard and giving herself a static-electric shock. This only served to add to her frustration. She cursed a word she would never have used in front of anyone, before hearing her name coming from her card.

“Minerva, something is very wrong,” said Sirius, looking worried. “I can’t get a hold of any Order Auror except James and Dawlish. The three of us have just received an emergency message from the Aurors, calling for us to return to the Complex. I called ahead and no one at the Ministry or the Complex knows anything about it. Only myself, Dawlish and James. I spoke to Rachel at the complex. She’s not in the Order but she’s a good girl. Apparently Crouch is dead and Dumbledore has been arrested. Barty Crouch Junior has been appointed Minister of Magic and a new team of Aurors called the Black-Watch has been formed. Amelia and Moody have been arrested, along with Percy and Arthur Weasley. Minerva, the Order is being exterminated; we are dropping like flies.” Minerva’s blood ran cold at Sirius’ words. With every sentence she felt weaker, until she had to lean on the desk as her knees gave way.

The Order was compromised! Albus would never murder Crouch, but he was dead nonetheless. Barty Crouch Junior was a Death Eater according to Harry Potter, so it was safe to assume that He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named was behind this. Albus had been taken, but was he alive? Were they all dead? How had this happened?

“Sirius,” said Minerva shakily., “Retreat. Come to Hogwarts; do not be seen. I’ll send out the emergency abort signal. Let’s just hope James and Dawlish haven’t responded to the Ministry’s signal yet. Hurry, Sirius.”

“What about Rachel?” he asked. Minerva noted that he seemed to care about her, but they had to prioritise, and she was not a member.

“She’s not in the Order,” said Minerva. “And if she is indeed willing to help, we need a contact on the inside. She must stay in place.”

With that, Minerva broke the connection. She took a deep breath before doing the one thing she hoped she would never have to do.

“Attention all members,” said Minerva into the card. The card did not show one face, but many, so many in fact that they became more like dots than faces. “Attention all members,” she repeated. “The Order has been compromised. Abort missions, walk away, repeat, walk away. Albus Dumbledore has been arrested and the Order are being hunted, everyone is to walk away and meet at Headquarters in one hour, do not be seen. No one is to approach the Ministry or the Auror Complex. If you are not at Headquarters in one hour, you will be assumed to be dead and the Order will disavow all associations with you, and your Frog-Card will be remotely destroyed.”

She broke the connection, pocketed the card, and took a few deep breaths to try and calm herself. This proved futile. She had to get to the Great Hall, to A, make an appearance; and B, announce the arrest of Albus Dumbledore. No, better not. There was no way she could legally know about it yet. Better to wait for official word. The Order had lost enough members today; compromising herself would not help. But what if she already was compromised? What if they were on the way to arrest her right now? She had to act quickly. She was known to always look calm, as the ice queen, but image was insignificant now. Minerva sprinted out of her office, looking flustered, but not caring. She was about to set a personal record time of running to the Great Hall.

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Harry Potter was becoming a more familiar sight around Hogwarts and people were beginning to get more comfortable having him around. He was not present very often, but no one really batted an eye when he was.

Harry was very frustrated at the moment. He needed to talk to Dumbledore about the proposed Duelling Club, but he hadn’t seen him all day. McGonagall had said he was at the Ministry and to wait until he got back. That had been this morning. McGonagall had missed his Animagus training, and Harry was getting more and more frustrated. He himself was supposed to have a meeting with Crouch and Dumbledore this morning to discuss the Duelling Club, but when he had woken up this morning, there was an owl waiting for him carrying a note say that said that the meeting had been cancelled. For some reason, Dumbledore seemed to have gone anyway.

He marched into the Great Hall ten minutes into the lunch break and quickly made his way to where Rose, Ginny, Hermione and Ron were sitting, taking a seat beside his sister. “Morning,” he muttered, grabbing a slice of quiche.

“Harry, how’s it going?” asked Ginny as he sat down. She sounded jovial and wore a wide grin.

“Why are you in such a good mood?” said Harry, his bad mood not breaking.

“Because we have the afternoon off,” said Ginny, dancing in her seat. “McGonagall cancelled her lessons this morning and we just heard this afternoon as well. Fancy a fly?” Harry found that he was not remotely interested in flying at the moment, or Quidditch at all for that matter. In fact, he was more worried by McGonagall and Dumbledore’s absence.

“She cancelled all her lessons?” asked Harry, looking worried.

“You say it like it’s a bad thing,” said Rose with a grin. “Lasagne, Harry?”

“Have you see McGonagall or Dumbledore all day?” asked Harry, declining the offered lasagne with a gesture from his hand.

“You think something is wrong?” asked Hermione, reading his expression.

“Something’s *amiss*,” said Harry. “I had an appointment with Crouch and Dumbledore today to discuss the defence of Hogwarts. I got an owl cancelling it this morning, but Dumbledore still went to the Ministry. He hasn’t been seen since. McGonagall is cancelling lessons. Coincidence? I’ve a bad feeling about this.” It turned out that his fears were justified.

“Attention all Members,” said a voice. Harry felt something vibrating in his pocket. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his Frog-Card. McGonagall’s face was in the card. Harry listened to every word she said, blood draining from his face. As she finished, Harry pocketed the card, as white as a sheet.

“What’s wrong?” said Rose. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Harry tried to speak, but all that came out was something that sounded like ‘wibbalossum’. His lips were trembling. He took a deep breath to try and calm himself.

“McGonagall just told the entire Order to abort and walk away,” said Harry. “This is not good.”

Just then McGonagall came running into the hall through the back door, and leaned over the back of the chair between Snape and Flamel, whispering frantically in their ears. Harry saw his mother get up and go over to listen. They spoke for a few seconds, before McGonagall beckoned Harry to go and join them.

“Be right back,” said Harry. He jogged to the table, noticing that everyone was watching him on the way. As he reached the table, Snape cast a sound bubble around them, ensuring that their conversation remained private. That done, he gave a nod to McGonagall, signalling it was safe to talk.

“You all got the message,” began McGonagall, struggling for breath inside the bubble. She looked like she had just run from her office. Her speech was broken, interrupted by her constant panting. “In a nutshell, Crouch has been murdered and they are blaming Albus. We know he never murdered Crouch, he doesn’t have it in him, but he has been arrested.” Harry couldn’t believe it; Dumbledore hated killing. He would never kill. This was a lie, but it did explain why he was not here. If he had been arrested, it was a devastating blow to the Order.

“Can’t Kingsley and Dawlish help?” asked Lily immediately. “Amelia at least should be able to...”

“That’s just it,” said Minerva. “This morning we have lost contact with Kingsley, Amelia and Tonks. Sirius made an inquiry and apparently Moody and Arthur and Percy Weasley have been arrested as well. We’ve learned that this morning the Wizengamot convened. We can assume they bent some rules to elect a new Minister.”

“Who?” asked Snape.

“Barty Crouch Junior.” Harry felt his stomach sink.

“He’s a Death Eater,” he said. He still remembered the manic expression on his face the last time they had met.

“Yes, he is,” said McGonagall. “We can assume that since the Wizengamot elected him, they too are corrupt. Like it or not, You-Know-Who now has both the Minister and the Wizengamot in his pocket. Politically, he is running the show.”

“Surely the Aurors won’t sit back and accept this,” said Lily.

“They’ve assembled an elite team of Aurors loyal to Crouch and presumably You-Know-Who,” said McGonagall. “They have named themselves the Black Watch and they are running the Aurors now, removing anyone in their way. It was them that made the arrests. You-Know-Who has effectively formed his own SS, and we can assume a civilian Gestapo will shortly follow.”

“Is James alright?” asked Lily, looking pale.

“Luckily I was able to alert the Order,” said McGonagall. “Dawlish, Sirius and James have all walked away. They will be here within the hour.” Harry breathed a sigh of relief. At least his father was safe, though that was more than he could say for Ron’s. How could they have let this happen? They never even saw it coming.

“Are the prisoners alive?” asked Flamel.

“We don’t know,” said McGonagall, shaking her head, a note of panic in her voice. “We’ve lost all contact.”

“Dumbledore would not allow himself to be arrested,” said Harry. “When Fudge tried it in my world. He took out four Aurors like that,” – he snapped his fingers – “and that included Dawlish. If they took him, they did so by force, and that can’t be good. If he isn’t dead, he can’t be in a good way. Think of how much it would take to keep him prisoner.” McGonagall nodded in response.

“I’ve ordered the abort before we lose any more,” she said. “We are meeting in an hour to decide what to do. However, we have to assume that there are arrest warrants out there with our names on them.”

“Why?” asked Lily.

“Hope for the best, prepare for the worst,” said Snape. “We have to assume that this Black-Watch are coming to arrest us. If we are taken, the Order will fall. How do we prepare for that? We can’t have a firefight in front of the students; the crossfire could potential kill someone. We cannot fight this by legal means, since the Dark Lord now controls the Ministry; we must seek other methods, but we can’t plan anything with such short notice.”

“I can run,” suggested Harry. “But I don’t know what I’d do. Professor Snape, you have to stay to maintain your cover. Sirius can run too; he’s a natural survivor and an Animagus, which will help. We could rendezvous with dad and Dawlish an from there...we’ll think of something.”

“Running is not a good option,” said Snape. “We would remove ourselves from the only place of safety and would cut ourselves off. We would lose all access to information.” Snape had a point. If they went into hiding, they would not gain enough to be able to fight back. However, if they stayed, they would be arrested. They were between a rock and a hard place.

“I must stay,” said McGonagall. “I cannot leave the school to who knows what fate. Crouch will have Death Eaters here teaching all manner of Dark Arts. With Albus gone, I am acting Headmistress. If this results in my arrest, so be it, but I cannot leave the school to its fate.”

“Self-sacrificing acts are not practical,” said Snape. “That won’t help anyone, Minerva.”

“Do you have a better plan?” asked Flamel, speaking for the first time. The former Death Eater didn’t respond.

“If Harry goes,” said Lily thoughtfully. “They will take myself and Rose-Marie to lure him back. They used her once to get at him. I can’t put my daughter at risk. I don’t like letting Harry run around, but I trust him to take care of himself, but I can’t let you put Rosie in danger.”

“Rose can come with me,” said Harry. “Myself and Sirius can protect her.” He didn’t know what he’d do with her, or whether she could keep up. He didn’t know where to go either, come to that, but just like his mother, he wanted to keep her safe.

“Remember, this is the worst case scenario,” said McGonagall. “It hopefully won’t be necessary, but I agree. If we are arrested before the meeting in an hour, Lily, Severus and myself must stay in place. The rest may run – Harry and Sirius will take control, and Miss Potter will go with them for her own safety. Harry, tell Rose–Marie only what you must. We don’t know who is listening. Are you armed?”

“Yes, Professor,” said Harry; he had both his wands on him.

“Okay, we meet again in one hour,” she said. “Good luck, my friends.”

After a nod from McGonagall, Snape removed the bubble. Harry noticed that the rest of the school were talking, or at least they had been. The noise died down, as if they expected McGonagall to tell them what was going on. They were to be disappointed, as the teachers merely returned to their tables as if nothing had happened. There was a moment’s silence, as it occurred to the school that no one was going to say anything. Harry walked slowly back to his seat, replaying the conversation in his mind. Things had just gone from bad to worse, and he feared there was more to come.

As Harry reached his place on the Gryffindor table, he noticed that everyone seemed to be leaning towards him, trying to hear the conversation. They all assumed he would tell them exactly what was going on.

“What was all that about?” asked Rose.

Harry knew that far too many people were listening for him to answer. “Pass the ketchup, please,” he said casually.

“What happened?” asked Ron.

Harry shot him a glare and stood up to reach the ketchup, bringing his head close enough to whisper to Ron. “Wait until people move away.” Ron glanced around and then nodded. Harry poured a blob onto his plate.

“How far are you with Snape’s essay?” he asked Hermione, as if he hadn’t a care in the world. It took another minute of aimless conversation before they were comfortable enough to talk.

“What happened?” asked Rose, leaning in close. Harry checked that there was no one listening and then replied.

“Let’s just say, I hate being right all the time,” he said. “We just lost half *the gang*. Someone is hunting us down.”

“What?” gasped Ron.

“Louder, Ron,” said Harry angrily, “I don’t think Malfoy heard you.” The other boy shot him a glare, but then sat lower on the bench. He leaned in close to whisper.

“So what’s going on?” he asked.

“Well,” started Harry.

He was cut off as the doors to the Great Hall were suddenly flung open, slamming into the walls with a deafening bang. All eyes turned in that direction as six figures in black entered the room. Four of them had their hoods up, with veils covering their faces and the word ‘AUROR’ written across their chests, but these were no Aurors. They were the new Black Watch, he realised. What scared Harry the most were the two figures in front with their hoods down – Harry knew both of them, but wished he didn’t. In his world, both of them had tried to kill him. The first was Barty Crouch Junior, the new Minister of Magic. He wore jet-black robes with a black cloak fastened with a golden brooch. The other was Augustus Rookwood, the Ministry Worker and spy for the Dark Lord, who had tried to kill Harry in the Department of Mysteries last year. He also wore black, but not as grand as Crouch. Both were Death Eaters and both were bad news. Harry freed the stun baton from its holster inside his robes. He muttered a quick enlargement charm, lengthening it to the length of his sword, in absence of the real thing.

He stared into the hazel eyes of Barty Crouch Junior as he passed. Their eyes locked for an instant, just enough time for Crouch to shoot him a glare. The last time he had seen Crouch, the man had been under the effect of Veritaserum. Harry could picture it in his mind. Crouch’s eyes had been vacant and glazed, yet he still held the poise of evil. Harry remembered his maniacal expression and the sound of his laughter as he told Dumbledore that Voldemort had returned. Harry still remembered it as if it were yesterday; it was not the sort of thing one forgot.

McGonagall, looking distinctly pale, was already walking down the centre aisle to greet them. She was moving rather shakily, and Harry had a nasty feeling that they were here to arrest her. He tightened his grip on the Baton and freed his wand, ready for action. Rose made to do the same, but Harry shook his head.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?” McGonagall asked shakily as she approached Crouch and Rookwood. Crouch never broke stride.

“Please take a seat, Professor,” he said as he marched to the front of the room. McGonagall fell into step beside him. “I bring news of your Headmaster.” He stopped as he reached the front. McGonagall continued, returning to her seat. Taking out his wand, he cast the Sonorus Charm on himself.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,” he began. “MY NAME IS BARTEMIUS CROUCH JUNIOR. I REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT MY FATHER, BARTEMIUS CROUCH SENIOR, THE MINISTER OF MAGIC, WAS MURDERED THIS MORNING.” He paused, allowing his words to sink in. A wave of gasps swept around the hall. Harry could hear people

asking questions, and wondering how the most well protected man in Britain could have been killed.

“THIS IS A TRAGIC LOSS,” continued Crouch. “AND NONE FEEL IT MORE THAN I. NOT ONLY WAS HE A GOOD FATHER, BUT HE WAS A PATRIOT WHO SERVED HIS COUNTRY WELL. WE WILL MISS HIM, AND HIS MURDERER WILL NOT GO UNPUNISHED. YOU WILL BE GLAD TO HEAR THAT WE HAVE ALREADY ARRESTED THE MAN RESPONSIBLE: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE.”

There was a tremendous gasp that went around the hall. Most couldn't believe it. The buzz of chatter was instant. 'How was this possible' was the question on most people's lips.

“What?” gasped Rose.

“It's bollocks, but shut up and listen,” hissed Harry. Crouch was far from done.

“I KNOW THIS MAY COME AS A SHOCK TO YOU WHO KNEW HIM. HE TAUGHT ME WHEN I WAS A STUDENT HERE. HE NEVER STRUCK ME AS A MAN CAPABLE OF THIS, BUT THE FACTS ARE CLEAR. HE WAS ARRESTED SHORTLY AFTERWARDS, AND HIS CO-CONSPIRATORS ARE BEING ROUNDED UP AS WE SPEAK.”

So he was here to arrest McGonagall. Harry tightening his grip on the baton and drew his wand, ready in case it all kicked off.

“Rose,” he whispered. “If it all kicks off, come with me. We will have to leave.”

“What?” she asked.

“Trust me,” smiled Harry. “Keep your head down.”

“I WANT YOU ALL TO KNOW THAT THE SITUATION IS UNDER CONTROL,” continued Crouch. “THE WIZENGAMOT CONVENED AND VOTED THIS MORNING AND I HAVE BEEN APPOINTED MINISTER OF MAGIC. IN MY FATHER'S STEAD, I HAVE CONTINUED HIS FINAL POLICIES BY THE FORMATION OF THE BLACK WATCH, WHO ARE HERE TO PROTECT US ALL.” He gestured to the Aurors in black behind him. “THIS NEXT GENERATION OF AURORS WILL ENSURE THAT THIS MURDEROUS ACT WILL NOT GO UNPUNISHED. THEY WILL ENSURE A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR US ALL. FINALLY, WE HAVE THE POLICING FORCE WE NEED. NOW, FOR MY SECOND ACT OF BUSINESS. ONE OF MY MAIN CONCERNS IN THIS HORRIFIC WAR IS THE PRESERVATION OF OUR YOUTH. THE SECURITY OF HOGWARTS IS MY NUMBER ONE PRIORITY. AS SUCH, I AM APPOINTING PROFESSOR ROOKWOOD, HERE,” – he gestured to the man next to him – “AS THE FIRST HOGWARTS HIGH INQUISITOR. WE WILL MAKE SURE HOGWARTS CONTINUES ITS FINE TRADITION AND STANDARDS. LET US NOT FORGET WE ARE AT WAR, AND DESPERATE TIMES CALL FOR DESPERATE MEASURES; AS SUCH, PROFESSOR ROOKWOOD WILL

INTRODUCE A NEW CLASS. NOT ONLY WILL HE BE YOUR HIGH INQUISITOR, BUT YOUR VERY FIRST DARK ARTS TEACHER.”

Harry glanced over at the Slytherins, who were whispering excitedly. There were those at all tables who looked as though they were intrigued by the idea, but most looked unable to believe what was being said. Dumbledore, a murderer? It was obviously BS, couldn't they see it? Some people hadn't even heard this last bit and were just thinking of Dumbledore's arrest. The chatter had reached fever pitch before Snape released several loud bangs from his wand, bringing the hall to silence.

“So I am being replaced?” asked McGonagall, when she could be heard.

“Certainly not,” said Crouch, acting affronted. “Professor Rookwood is the High Inquisitor, but you, Professor, are still Headmistress, with Professor Snape as your deputy, I believe. The Inquisitor is here to assist you, not to replace you. I am sure, as two mature adults, you can get along.”

“You can't do this,” said McGonagall. “The Ministry of Magic has no control over Hogwarts, we are a privately owned and run institution. You have no right to interfere.”

“Firstly, we are changing the mandate,” said Crouch. “And secondly, we have permission. The Board of Governors has voted to bring Hogwarts under Ministry control. I have the document here, signed by a majority of the board, and delivered by Lucius Malfoy. There is nothing you can do about it. Any questions?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, rising to his feet. “Two.” Crouch turned to face him, wearing a surprised but not fearful glance. The Aurors moved their hands closer to their wands.

“Oh, it's you,” said Crouch in a bored voice.

“Firstly,” said Harry ignoring him. “Are the Ministry aware that you are a Death Eater, and you hang out with the Lestranges?”

“Ah yes, my name was mentioned in your statement to the Aurors,” said Crouch. “An investigation was launched and found nothing.”

“Because your father was blinded by his pride and aborted the investigation,” said Harry.

“Harry,” said Crouch. “You of all people must know what accusations like that do when the press finds out. People still fear to be in the same room as you, the *Dark Knight*. You can try and spoil my image if it amuses you, but I have work to do, so I must be getting on. What's your second question?”

“What if, hypothetically of course, I were to say to you, ‘*you can't do this, this is wrong, get out of the school or I'll throw you and your entire entourage out myself, you slimy bastard*’, what would you say?”

“Well,” said Crouch. “Hypothetically, I would reply that you are no match for my Aurors, and would hasten to remind you that I could have your pardon revoked at any time and you sent to Azkaban. I believe Professor Rookwood might also deduct points for your foul language, hypothetically of course. Now, if we’ve finished chatting, I have work to do. Professor Rookwood is now in charge. Oh, and one more thing Potter, I know that you were never expelled, but I also know that you do not attend lessons here, nor are you a member of staff. Your presence here is no longer appropriate. You can either start attending lessons like a normal student, or you can leave the school. It is your choice. Professor Rookwood, two Aurors will stay to aid you.”

With that he turned and marched towards the door, two Aurors in tow. As the doors slammed shut there was a moment of conversation before it was silenced by a loud bang from Rookwood’s wand.

“Classes are on as normal this afternoon,” said Rookwood after a few seconds. His voice was an icy growl that was heard in every corner of the room. “You will receive your new timetables with added classes within a week. For now, I will evaluate each member of staff and the syllabus they are teaching.” With that he turned to McGonagall. “Show me to Dumbledore’s office,” he ordered. It looked like he wasn’t here to arrest them, Harry noted. But he hadn’t decided whether this was better or worse.

“It won’t open to you,” said Harry with a smirk. “Only the true Headmaster can open the office, so that puts you right out of luck, pal.”

“Shut up, Potter,” sneered Rookwood before following McGonagall out of the room.

“Ronald Weasley, Ginerva Weasley, Draco Malfoy and Susan Bones,” said McGonagall, as she guided Rookwood to the door. “Please wait in my office.” She now had the job of breaking the news that their parents, cousin and aunt, respectively, had been arrested, and possibly killed, not that Draco Malfoy had any fondness for dear cousin Nymphadora. Harry was just glad he wasn’t the one to have to tell them.

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MINISTER OF MAGIC MURDERED!

Early this morning before the Ministry of Magic returned to work, the Minister of Magic, Bartemius Crouch Senior, was found murdered in his office. Minister Crouch appeared to be the victim of the Killing Curse, which carries a life sentence in Azkaban for its use. The murder was carried out by none other than Albus Dumbledore, former Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Motives for the assassination are unclear, but Dumbledore was arrested shortly after the murder.

It is suspected that Dumbledore was not working alone, and his army of terrorists, also known as the Order of the Phoenix, have been

rounded up. Dumbledore had a network of spies in many departments of the Ministry, ranging from the Aurors to the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts, feeding him top secret information and aiding in his treason. Within two hours of the murder, a further six arrests were made. This time, the Phoenix will not rise again.

Given the ongoing war, it was decided by the Wizengamot to forgo the formalities and elect a new Minister immediately. By ten o'clock this morning, Bartemius Crouch Junior, the late Minister's son, was elected to the post of Minister of Magic.

"My Father was a patriot who loved his country," said Crouch in a statement this afternoon. "I look forward to continuing his fine tradition. He last policy has already been passed, and I believe that to be a fitting tribute to a man who gave so much to this country. His legacy has been acknowledged and his murderer brought to swift justice by none other than the elite fighting force he himself envisioned." Crouch took over his father's duties this morning and has already made several changes to forward the war effort. He has introduced a new post at Hogwarts School, which will guarantee the continuing standards and safety of the students there. Augustus Rookwood, Hogwarts' first High Inquisitor, has been greeted with much enthusiasm and has been an immediate success.

The funeral for the late Minister will be one week on Friday, more details to follow.

Harry closed his copy of the *Evening Prophet*, not bothering to read the detailed account of the duties of the High Inquisitor, remembering all too well his experience with the blood-quill. This man was going to be worse than Umbridge. She had been cruel, but Rookwood was a full scale Death Eater.

"Can they do this?" asked Rose. They were all seated at dinner, now that Harry had been forced to join the student body. He could feel the weight of his new timetable in his pocket. He had the new Dark Arts class on Tuesdays and Fridays with Rookwood, beginning a week on Friday. He had been right in that Rookwood could not get into the Dumbledore's office, and now had made his own someone near the dungeons.

"They can," said Harry. "This was all discussed at the meeting. They really do have us backed into a corner. It was a brilliantly planned operation. Lucius Malfoy hands control of Hogwarts over to the Ministry, just as Crouch murders his father and somehow arrests Dumbledore. We have had to retreat. Dad's gone into hiding with Sirius and Dawlish. Most of the others have as well. We've set up a network of emergency communication, but I fear that many of them will desert, thinking it's hopeless."

"Isn't it?" asked Ron.

“No,” said Harry. “We’ve got a lot of problems, but it isn’t hopeless. We just have to cope with Rookwood for now, which is easier said than done. I’ve met High Inquisitors before. They are above the law. Even if he wasn’t a Death Eater, Crouch would not get an honest report of what is going on. If he crosses the line, we can’t go to McGonagall as if she complains, there will be a new Educational Decree and she will be fired. Nothing can stop the Inquisitor.”

“Not even you?” asked Ginny.

“By force, yes,” said Harry. “But it does no good. He would be replaced and I would be arrested.”

“Can’t we go after the Minister?” asked Ginny.

“In theory yes,” said Hermione. “If a Vote of No Confidence is called, and a majority of the Department Heads or Wizengamot say so, then the Minister can be thrown out.”

“Amelia Bones disappeared this morning,” said Harry. “Your father too, Ginny. It is only a matter of time before Crouch has replaced all Department Heads. He already controls the Wizengamot, as he controlled the voting this morning which I believe broke every procedure in the book.”

“So what can we do?” asked Ron.

“The coin has flipped,” said Harry. “We are not in control; Voldemort is. You read the *Prophet*; with him in power, we are the outlaws, the terrorists. The only way for us to take back power is in a coup d’etat, and that makes us no better than him. The world is many shades of grey, no? That is what was discussed in the meeting.”

“So we sit and wait?” asked Ginny. “But what if Dad and Percy are...” she couldn’t bring herself to finish the sentence.

“We have no choice,” said Harry. “I don’t like it and I argued against it, but we have no choice. What I will say is this. I am 99 percent sure that your father is alive.”

“Are you trying to cheer me up?” asked Ginny irritably. “Because it is not working.”

“Fawkes,” said Harry. “He hasn’t regenerated or chosen a new master, which means that Dumbledore is alive. He is more of a threat than your father, and if he is being kept alive, it is safe to assume that they all are.”

“So why don’t we rescue them?” asked Ron.

“Because we don’t know where to start,” said Harry. “They could be anywhere. If we miss, we only risk getting arrested. The Order is in chaos. We have been rumbled, and in walking away we essentially disappear from our covers. We are...” Words failed Harry.

“Screwed?” offered Rose.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” said Harry. It about summed it up, but he had to appear confident for their sakes. “For now, we must play this out and see what happens. This is only the second step. First came the bomb that blinded us, now he takes control in secret, but we don’t know how this is supposed to end. We have two spies still functioning – Snape, and of course our double for Rodolphus LeStrange. We have one more source inside the Aurors, who seems to be on our side. We have to sit and wait until something happens.”

“He’s consolidating his power,” said Hermione. “We must stop him.”

“It’s too late,” said Harry. “He has control of the Ministry and Wizengamot. We are outlaws. He knows who I am and most likely McGonagall, Flamel, Dad, Sirius as well. And now Dawlish has retreated, him too. If we don’t already have arrest warrants, it means he is watching us. He knows we are in the Order and is allowing us to go free. I want to know why. I also think it would be better if we were not seen together, Hermione.”

“Why?”

“Arthur and Percy were arrested, and I am well known. That means that Ginny, Ron and Rose are going to be watched. If you seem too close, you may become a target and your parents are not protected. Hermione, can you do the Protean Charm? Could you do a set of galleons that if one of us changes the date of manufacture to the time of the next meeting, the others all change too and the coin heats up to alert us to the change?”

“Probably, why?”

“If we meet again, we must do so in secret. This order comes from McGonagall. Someone has been sent to watch your parents, but we don’t want to get you hurt.”

“Fine,” said Hermione.

“If you come to see me, make sure no one sees you. Rookwood is not here to arrest us, but to keep an eye on us. Let’s not make it too easy for him. Let him see what we want him to see.”

“Which is?”

“Nothing at all. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get some book from the library because now I have to actually do some work.”

“Do you consider yourself lazy?” asked Hermione.

“No,” said Harry. “But with all that’s going on, NEWTs seem so...pardon me for saying this Hermione, but they seem so unimportant.”

“This will be good for you, Harry,” said Hermione. “You need to keep up an education.”

“It makes a change from trial by fire,” he noted. “I suppose that since I’ve been here, I’ve considered this a holiday, rather than a change of school. When I go back, I’ll need to know what’s in the exams.” He managed to stop himself adding ‘if I am still alive to take them’.

He excused himself and left the hall. He found his mother in her quarters. As he entered the room, he found her on the sofa in front of the fire, an empty glass of something that smelt vile on its side below her hand, which dangled over the arm of the chair. She must have been holding it and dropped it as she drifted into sleep. As much as he needed to talk to her, he couldn’t bring himself to wake her. Her fiery locks cascaded gently over her face, the tips blowing in her gentle breath. Her robes were pulled around her like a cocoon. One arm was draped over the side of the sofa, the other held lightly against her stomach. It was the most peaceful Harry had seen her since entering her life.

He pulled a blanket from the cupboard and draped it lightly over her. He felt oddly paternal towards her in her current state, which was deeply ironic given their relationship. She stirred lightly as the blanket touched her, but fell right back to sleep. Harry couldn’t sleep and knew it. He had practiced his Animagus training earlier to the point of exhaustion and knew that he had an appointment with McGonagall in an hour, so he was not inclined to practice any more. He had only come back in order to fetch a Potions book. He had been told that he could enter any class he chose, so he had opted for those essential to an Auror. Somewhere inside, he still hoped of finding a way home, to do what he had always wanted, even though his head told him he was stuck here. He could get into Defence no problem, but God only knew about the others. Charms and Transfiguration wouldn’t be too hard, he hoped. He needed to Owl-Order those books, but he knew his mother would have plenty of spare Potions books in her cupboard. He picked the top one up and opened it.

To his annoyance, he found the book to have been scribbled all over. Every recipe had been annotated to the point where it was difficult to read. Oh well, at least it was not covered in all manner of stains like the others. It was old, but clean. Its previous owner had obviously cared for it – who wouldn’t if they had added this much to it him or herself.

Harry yawned involuntarily. He was absolutely knackered. He had fifty minutes before his next training session. He didn’t feel up to it, but this was not the sort of thing one could cancel on. He headed to his annex off his mother’s quarters, and to the large four poster bed that was his. Setting a magical alarm, Harry lay down on the bed for a ‘power nap’. He knew that generally with a short nap, you woke up more tired than when you went to sleep. But he needed all the energy he could get for later.

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Just like the previous year, when Umbridge had taken over, a tense atmosphere had descended over the castle. It had been three days since Rookwood had taken over. The headmaster’s office was sealed to him, which gave Harry hope, as it meant that Dumbledore,

wherever he was, was still alive. As such, Rookwood had given himself an office in the East Wing of the castle.

The week had passed just as badly as any under the reign of Umbridge. While she had been a ratty old bag with a vicious streak, Rookwood was vindictive, spiteful, and a Death Eater, which meant that he held the school in a grip of fear far exceeding that of his predecessor in Harry's world. Monday hadn't been too bad. In fact, although he had whinged at the time, Harry now longed for it to be as peaceful as it had been on Monday. Rookwood had merely begun the appraisals of the existing members of staff. McGonagall agreed with Harry that he was trying to assess who was in the Order and who wasn't. Harry hadn't been in Snape's lesson when he had had Rookwood sitting in, but he had heard from the third years that Rookwood had been impressed. No surprises there. Flitwick had won over the High Inquisitor 'in his normal charming way', as Ginny had informed him, slipping in a none-too-subtle pun. Harry had been in one lesson that was being tested, and that was his mother's. While she didn't comment on his sudden appearance in the class, she did expect the same of him as anyone else. He had not told her about his past experience in Potions Class. He had been dreading this lesson for some time, mainly because he feared embarrassment, especially with being taught by his mother.

Luckily, something completely unexpected had happened – the annotations which obscured the recipes were a blessing in disguise. Harry, on a foolish whim, had followed those instead. More specifically, he had tried both ways in the preparation phase, and the written notes had yielded better results. As such he had continued to use them, resulting in a good mark at the end of the lesson, even exceeding that of Hermione, who looked annoyed with him.

"Well done for knocking her off her high horse," said Seamus over Harry's shoulder.

"That was not my intention," said Harry flatly. He had been trying to integrate Hermione into the conversation more over the last week, trying to bring her into the Gryffindor mainstream.

"Yeah, well," said Seamus, "I supposes when mummy teaches."

"Finished?" asked Harry.

His success in Potions continued to the next lesson on Wednesday, but the mood in the school was deteriorating fast. Rookwood was tightening his grip, handing out seemingly erratic detentions, and quashing anyone who questioned him. Silence became the new creed of the school within forty-eight hours. Any conversations were conducted in whispers in the corridor, lest Rookwood or the Inquisitorial Squad were close by. If they ever needed a DA it was now, but Harry had no time to plan one. Also, he remembered how his previous attempt had gone.

Harry was surprised that Trelawney had not been ousted by Wednesday, but it had only been two days. Maybe he just hadn't got around to her yet. The price of his continued presence of Hogwarts was that Harry now had to attend lessons along with the rest of the sixth years. Unfortunately, this brought him under the control of Snape, but that couldn't be helped.

Rookwood seemed to take great delight in punishing Gryffindors, especially Ginny and Ron, because of their father and Percy. This of course sent Ron's temper through the roof, and so he ended up digging himself a deeper hole. The expected Educational Decrees started to arrive, though they differed slightly from Umbridge's ones. Rookwood was much quicker to install his own prefects and within two days, several of the Slytherins were sporting the new Inquisitorial Squad badges, much to everyone else's horror. Pansy Parkinson in particular became infamous for docking points for stupid reasons. The only saving grace was that Malfoy didn't dare to take points from Harry; not yet anyway.

It was just after nine on the Monday, just over a week after the arrival of the High Inquisitor, that Harry sat in front of the fire in Gryffindor Tower, staring at the flames. Although he still lived with his mother, he had gotten into the habit of spending a lot of his free time in the Tower, mingling and doing his homework, something he had definitely not missed over the last three months. That night, he had finished his homework and was sitting with a drink, staring into the flames, trying to work out where it had all gone wrong.

How had they not seen it coming? He knew Voldemort's arrest was a trick, but somehow they had gotten complacent. Now, they were out of office and out of power. The new regime, not that most people knew there was one, was under the control of Voldemort, while the Order of the Phoenix, which they now acknowledged existed, were cast out, labelled as terrorists and murderers. And of course, being in the *Prophet*, the public just swallowed it up. Did they not remember the days when Dumbledore taught them? The man wasn't capable of murder. How could they fail to see that? But then again, with the Black Watch on the prowl, no one would speak out.

As for the Order itself, they were in chaos. Only forty had made it to the meeting last week. McGonagall had done the only thing she could; the Order was sent into hiding. They were to make no move until contacted. Their covers were blown and their names on the wanted list. They had no leader, no sources of information and no manpower. The Order had been crushed in a single blow.

Since that day, there had been twelve more disappearances. Frank Longbottom had not been seen since the Purges, and even after they had gone into hiding eight of them had been taken. With a reward on their heads, hiding was more difficult than they might expect. The Order of the Phoenix no longer existed; its leader was gone, its senior members under the eye of the High Inquisitor and its members were in hiding if not captured or even dead.

As for Hogwarts, it was under the control of a Death Eater. Despite being Headmistress, McGonagall's power was limited. Rule-breakers were sentenced by the Inquisitorial Squad or sent to Rookwood. Harry could tell everywhere he went that he was being watched, if not by the Slytherins, then by others. He could see in some of the eyes of students that they were watching him, that they had sided with Voldemort and Rookwood. Every step he took, someone was there taking notes. McGonagall and Flamel got the same treatment. Of the former Inner Circle, only Snape could move around freely, which, as much as Harry hated to admit it, had been vital. Since they were being watched, Animagus and Occlumency lessons were few and far between and it was a good thing that Harry had yet to return his father's invisibility cloak.

The Muggleborns were the worst affected. Everyone seemed to treat them like dirt these past few days. Hermione's ever-raised hand was not acknowledged once, and her essays marked much more harshly than the Slytherins'. Snape had been biased towards his own house; Rookwood was just plain racist. It seemed that the only smiles one saw around the castle were on the faces of the Slytherins. Any others were quickly hidden, in fear of retribution.

To top it all, the timetables had been added to. There were notices on the notice-board detailing the new Dark Arts classes that were to start on Friday. In two days' time, Malfoy and Parkinson would be taught to hurt people, and with their previous records and impulse control problems, this was going to be a nightmare. They would be so eager to try out their new spells that talking too loudly would merit an Unforgivable. Things were fast becoming out of control.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Ginny, sinking into the seat next to his.

"Where did it all go wrong?" said Harry, shaking his head.

"There was no way anyone could have seen this," said Ginny, rubbing his shoulder. "And anyhow, there's no use crying over spilt potion, we have to decide what to do now."

"Like what?" asked Harry. "The Order doesn't exist anymore. Our every move is being watched and I'm required to attend these bloody lessons."

"You're not Superman," said Hermione, joining them. "Even you can't do everything."

"I just feel so helpless," said Harry, glaring at the flames.

Just then the Portrait Hole swung open and in stepped the most unexpected person: Draco Malfoy. His silver 'I' badge was glistening on his lapel as he straightened himself up. He cast a disdainful glance around the room; he had never entered it in the last five years of Hogwarts.

"What do you want?" sneered Ron. "You can't be in here."

Malfoy didn't respond at first, but he continued his survey of the room before turning to an irate Ron. "Inquisitorial duty," he said calmly. Ron stepped forward, presumably to stop him, but Harry grabbed his arm, holding him back.

"Potter," Malfoy addressed him frankly. "The High Inquisitor wishes to see you in his office immediately."

"Well I wish for a Firebolt made of solid gold, but that's not how the world works," said Harry calmly.

"I am under instructions to escort you to his office," said Malfoy.

"Do my ears deceive me or was that a threat?" asked Harry. He had become aware that the entire room had fallen silent and were watching the exchange, hanging on every word.

Malfoy paled slightly, but held firm. “Oh well,” continued Harry. “I suppose I could clear my busy little schedule for the Lord High Inseminator.” He rose slowly from his seat and pulled himself up to his full height.

“Lead on,” he said simply to Malfoy, who turned on his heel and left. Harry glanced at Rose, who returned a curious glance. Harry shrugged and then followed Malfoy out of the room. The Portrait closed behind him. Together they walked down towards the stairs.

“Is Rookwood in the know?” asked Malfoy. Harry nearly asked what he was talking about, before he remembered that Malfoy thought he was undercover. Harry suppressed a knowing smile.

“Nope,” said Harry. “As far as he is concerned I’ve done a Judas, and that is how it must stay. On a related note, he will put me down and drag me through the muck as much as possible, but do not intervene or show pity. Make him believe you are in his pocket. What I need is to know what he is planning before it happens. He has been given free reign, but his impulse control is a tad better than that of a famished alligator. As such, I need to know what he is doing. If he goes too far, I need to be able to send out an SOS to get a collar put on him.”

“As you wish,” said Malfoy. “If you don’t mind me asking, why not return now? I mean, Crouch controls the Ministry; the Dark Lord effectively runs the country. Why not give up the pretence?” It was a good question. Harry paused for a moment, thinking of a good lie.

“Remember the damage that our boys did to the Ministry in the past?” asked Harry. “Well, now the tables have turned. Dumbledore’s old crew are the outsiders, the terrorists now, and many of them are still at large. No one knows who they are or how many there are. That’s my job.”

“I see,” said Malfoy.

They walked the rest of the way in silence. Harry did not know what used to be in the room that now acted as Rookwood’s office, but he was certain that he had never entered it before. He had probably passed the door over five hundred times, but there were so many doors in the castle that it was nothing special to have never been in a room.

It had a certain cemetery feel to it, as if he was living in a tomb. Shadows were everywhere and the room seemed so cold and bare. Surely it was too dark for Rookwood to even read. If he was trying for a creepy atmosphere, he only served to damage his eyes, give himself pneumonia and look like a fool.

“Potter,” said a clipped voice as Harry entered. A candelabra burst into flame to Harry’s left, illuminating Rookwood, who sat in an armchair, one hand on his wand which lay on the arm of the chair and the other stroking his stubbly beard. His long dark hair encircled his face and his short yet rough beard gave him a haunted look. “Sit.”

Harry did so, but not on the chair that Rookwood gestured to. He sat on the Inquisitor's desk, knocking over a pile of parchments, but making no effort to apologise. He sat and glared at Rookwood.

"Tea?" offered the elder man. One drop of Veritaserum or two, Harry nearly said aloud, but held his tongue. He simply nodded. "Sugar?"

"No thanks," said Harry. "I'm sweet enough." Rookwood shot him an irritated glare and passed Harry the cup. Harry glanced down at the cup, but got no feelings about it. There was no magic in it, and Harry was fairly sure it was safe. He realised that he wouldn't be able to sense Muggle poisons and the truth serum, Sodium Pentothal, but doubted that Rookwood would use it. Death Eaters viewed Muggle technology as below them. The only reason that Voldemort had used the nuclear bomb was to bring the Muggle government to the brink of war. Stealing its most guarded and deadly weapon gave them cause for concern, and the current political climate was a test to that. War was imminent and Voldemort was arming the country.

"Do you know why I called you here?" began Rookwood, sipping his tea and leaning back in his chair.

"Nope," said Harry absently. He had a fair idea that Rookwood was merely trying to flex his muscles and prove to Harry that he was in charge. Violent people always want to be feared and respected. "Do tell; the suspense is killing me," he continued, his voice oozing sarcasm. Harry guessed he had been right; his lack of respect caused Rookwood's jaw to clench in anger.

"I called you here because of this," said Rookwood, throwing a sheet of parchment down in front of Harry. Not taking his eyes off Rookwood, Harry set his mug down and picked up the parchment. He read the first few lines, and suddenly realised what this was all about; the parchment contained a transcript of his meeting with Crouch after Rose's trial. It detailed Crouch Senior's request that Harry build him an army from the students, or at least that was how Rookwood had interpreted it.

"Well?" pressed Rookwood.

"Well it's not Shakespeare..." began Harry, before Rookwood cut him off.

"Stop playing games, Potter," spat the High Inquisitor. "I'm tired of your big mouth. You know full well what that is. Trust me when I tell you that the only reason you are still here is so you can do this for us. You will form your little duelling club and you will teach these children to fight."

"I thought that was what your Dark Arts class was for," said Harry coldly. "Or does that just cover rape, torture and murder, not combat?" Suddenly, coloured dots burst over Harry's vision as Rookwood slapped the back of his hand across Harry's face. He felt the sting on his skin, and raised a hand to his cheek. In the shadows, he had not even seen it coming.

"You slapped me!" protested Harry.

“Going to report me to Crouch?” smirked Rookwood.

“Never mind that,” said Harry, shocked. “You slapped me, you big girl’s blouse! At least hit me.”

Suddenly Harry felt fingers close around his neck. He clenched his fist to fight back, but managed to hold himself back. Rookwood wasn’t squeezing, just holding him still. He could feel the Inquisitor’s garlicky breath on his face, and Rookwood leaned in close to him. He hadn’t expected Rookwood to actually assault him. He considered fighting free, but that would only get him kicked out of school. He needed to stay, if only for Rose’s protection.

“I told you once to watch your tongue,” he hissed venomously. “Now listen very carefully. You will form this club. It will meet twice a week on Monday and Wednesday, and I will teach a third session on the weekends. You will teach duelling according my curriculum and under my supervision. You will attend lessons and be a good little student, is that clear?”

“And if I refuse?” asked Harry, glaring back with just as much venom.

“Your bushy little Muggle friend will suffer for it,” said Rookwood icily. “And as for your sister and mother, well...I have something special in mind for them.”

“If you touch them...” snapped Harry.

“You’ll do what?” sneered Rookwood. “If you hex me, I’ll curse your friends. If you send one of my Inquisitorial Squad to the hospital, I’ll send one of your friends to the morgue. You can’t win, Potter, as time you realise. If you try anything, it will be the ones you care about that suffer. Do what I want, and no one gets hurt during this transition.”

“But hundreds will die afterwards,” said Harry. “You’re planning a war with the Muggles. Jesus, can’t you see that no one can win? They’ll destroy the country long before you get it and even if you win, their allies in the States and Europe will isolate the island and nuke it to high heaven.”

“You have no idea, Potter,” said Rookwood smugly. “Everything is going to change. We are going to *clean this place up*. Every angle has been thought out. Under the Fidelius charm, no missile will find us. No one will know we exist. Wizard-kind will have our own island, our own country. Purebloods will have a safe haven and our race will go on, under the command of a leader who is worthy of the title. Isn’t that worth fighting for?”

Harry had heard what he needed to hear. He had not been trying to get Rookwood to let facts slip, but he was grateful for it. Now the Order would know what was happening. Ah, but was this a plant? Snape had explained the gauntlet theory to the Order. Voldemort had used it before. One person goes in, if he succeeds, the target is taken, if he falls, he is told what to say, and so the target is misled straight into the trap set by the second person. He too is told what to say if he falls and a third person is ready, so effectively the target runs a gauntlet until he is

taken. Complicated, yes, but was Rookwood clever enough to do it? He wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer. Still, he had to tell McGonagall and Flamel.

"You're wrong," said Harry. "And I'm going to be there when you realise it."

"Denial will get you nowhere."

"It's a fine line between faith and denial," said Harry.

"Get out of my sight," said Rookwood. "And remember your friends, not you, will suffer for your rule breaking." He released Harry and turned his back. For a fleeting moment, Harry considered stunning him and posting his unconscious body to Timbuktu, but decided against it. He turned his back and strode towards the door, yanking it violently open. He paused just as he left.

"Remember, Augustus," said Harry icily. "What goes around, comes back and kicks you on the arse."

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Malfoy had not waited for him, which was very convenient. Harry set off at a frustrated run up towards the Staff Wing. He was most likely being followed and it would be stupid to go straight to McGonagall. Harry wasn't even sure that what he had been told was accurate. Snape's gauntlet theory had made him paranoid. He arrived at his mother's rooms in five minutes and went straight into his own little annex. He took a moment to calm himself and to fish out his father's invisibility cloak. His mother was on patrol until one tonight, so she was out in the corridors; not that it made a difference as the Inquisitorial Squad seemed to outrank teachers these days. He assumed Rose was in the Tower.

Wrapping the cloak around himself, Harry headed back out the door. He considered Flooing, but of course Rookwood would be monitoring the Floo network. Harry could remember the sight of Umbridge's hand trying to grab Sirius in the fire. He slipped out of the room and headed up the stairs, higher into the tower. He came to McGonagall's door and knocked quietly. There was a pause and the door opened, revealing McGonagall in a tartan dressing gown and a candle held high. A puzzled expression crossed her face. Harry took the opportunity to slip past her into the room. He dared not remove the cloak in the corridor, in case someone was watching. McGonagall leaned her head out of the door and glanced each way before closing the door and grumbling to herself, then turned back into the room. By this time, Harry had removed his cloak and had made himself comfortable.

McGonagall's face on seeing Harry sitting in an armchair with his feet up was a Kodak moment, but sadly Harry had no camera.

"I trust you have a very good reason for this intrusion," whispered McGonagall, once she had recovered from the initial shock.

“I couldn’t be seen, or talk to you in the open,” said Harry quietly, throwing the cloak over the arm of the chair. “Professor Flamel had better hear this as well.” She shot him a tired glare before nodding. She disappeared out into the hallway, and returned a few moments later with Nicolas Flamel, who wore a red and white striped dressing gown and matching hat. He looked his age at this time of night, Harry noted.

“Yes, Minerva,” he yawned, lowering himself onto the couch. Harry had thrown the cloak over himself as the door had opened, just in case, and now removed it. Flamel didn’t bat an eyelid, which disappointed Harry slightly, but he let it go. “To what do we owe the pleasure of this pyjama party?” he simply asked.

“I’ve just come from Rookwood’s office,” said Harry.

“Oh, please tell me you weren’t stupid enough to go rooting through his office,” said McGonagall in a pleading voice and shaking her head.

“Of course I didn’t,” said Harry, affronted. He was not stupid. He started to tell them exactly what had happened. The two teachers listened calmly as Harry recalled all that Rookwood had told him.

“...and then I left,” said Harry, ending his tale. “I did consider that this could be Snape’s gauntlet theory, but I’m not sure.”

“It certainly is a disturbing bit of news,” said Flamel. “It certainly would fit with what we have seen so far, but would Rookwood really give away the whole plan like that? I do not believe so, even if he was as angry as you say.”

“If it is true, what can be done?” asked Harry. “We have no influence anymore. No men, no nothing.”

“As Albus once said,” said Flamel., “Hope can be found even in the darkest place, if we simply remember to turn on the light.”

“That doesn’t help us,” said Harry, shaking his head.

“Well, then, let’s break this down,” said Flamel. “It is now Tuesday morning. You have to teach the Duelling Club tomorrow, and then on Friday Dark Arts lessons are to be introduced.”

“I can’t refuse or he’ll hurt Hermione and Rose,” said Harry. There was no way he was going to let them suffer on his account. “I can’t distort the lessons, as he will be there to supervise.”

“You can buy us time,” suggested McGonagall, “If you tell him that in order to get everyone up to the same standard, you wish to stick to simple spells for the first fortnight. Even better, split the group into good and poor duellers. Spread it out into two sessions and half the

speed of the classes. As for his Dark Arts classes, those we must stomach for now.” Harry didn’t like the idea of allowing people to learn the Dark Arts. Once you got used to the temptation, you could never turn it down. Stronger wizards than these students had been lost to the Dark Arts. He wanted to stop the lessons, by force if he had to, but he knew that McGonagall was right. He couldn’t stop them. But maybe...

“Could we Obliviate everyone who takes them?” asked Harry.

“Risky,” said Flamel. “And if we miss one person, that person will wonder why no one else remembers and the game is up. No, I fear we must tolerate them for the time being. I will advise the staff to come down like a tonne of bricks on anyone who uses them outside the lessons, but I’m afraid that is all we can do.”

“What are you doing to protect Rose and Hermione?” asked Harry. “I told Hermione to keep her distance like you suggested, but it seems Rookwood already knows. I’d better keep her close, or she will be in even more danger. She’d better go around in twos. I don’t want Pansy Parkinson cornering her in the girls’ toilets, where I can’t follow, or the girls’ dorm.”

“Parkinson could not get into Gryffindor Tower,” McGonagall assured him. Sadly in this case, she was wrong.

“Not anymore,” interrupted Harry. “Malfoy walked right into the Tower to fetch me. The Inquisitorial Squad can go anywhere under Rookwood’s new rules.”

“We truly are in a corner,” said McGonagall, ceasing her pacing and sinking into a chair. “Yesterday’s events have limited us even further.”

“What events?” asked Harry. He had not heard of anything else happening.

“Hestia Jones was found floating face down in the Seven, just north of Bristol,” said McGonagall. “Diggle was found with Feather. Crouch claims that one killed the other, and then turned his wand on himself. Yin–Sun was killed resisting arrest and Sylvester Faulkner was found crucified to the gates of Hogwarts last night with the words ‘Property of OotP’ burned into his chest. His eyes had been cut out along with his tes....”

“That’s enough, Minerva,” said Flamel gently, resting a hand on the shoulder of the distraught Headmistress.

“Jesus,” said Harry. Even more of the Order were dead. Someone knew exactly who was in the Order. Since they were in hiding, how had they been found? Voldemort was doing a royal number on the Order. There were so few still left. Those that did survive couldn’t speak in public, and had to meet in secret like they were now doing. Hogwarts wasn’t safe anymore – nowhere was.

“There is one more,” said McGonagall, carefully.

“Who?” asked Harry.

“Crouch has issued an order requiring all half-breeds to turn themselves in,” began McGonagall. Half-breeds? Harry suddenly realised who they meant.

“Lupin!”

“They came for him last night,” said Flamel. “He went without a fight, though we can’t say if he is dead or alive. Werewolves are being rounded up to raise public opinion of Crouch, but they are finding their way into the Black Watch. Lupin has disappeared.”

“Is there anyone left?” asked Harry.

“Aside from the people in this room,” said Flamel. “Only your parents, Sirius, Dawlish, Pettigrew we don’t know about, Frank if he is still alive, Severus, this Rachel Shepherd girl in the Aurors, and that is about it. There are others in hiding, but I cannot get through to them. We must assume they have gone dark.” Gone Dark? Traitors! They were in a corner, but there was still hope. The slimy gits had given up.

“They betrayed us!”

“Disappeared,” said Flamel. “Gone off the record. They have destroyed all links to the Order and gone into hiding, or perhaps left the country, or taken a new identity.”

“The point is,” said McGonagall. “We are on our own. Of that list, only us and Severus can enter Hogwarts without raising suspicion, and even when we do, we are watched around the clock.”

“So what are we going to do then?” asked Harry. He was completely out of ideas. He only hoped McGonagall was not.

“We will need to contact the Prime Minister,” said McGonagall. “Preventing a war that will kill millions is our number one priority.” Did she have the power to do so, or would they have to break into Downing Street? To Harry it seemed wrong to break into the Prime Minister’s house. Still, if they did the Prime Minister would be able to lend them firepower.

“He won’t listen,” said Flamel. “Given recent events, and the fact that we are not from the Ministry, he will not believe us. Especially if Crouch has told him we are terrorists. We can try, but I fear it will be fruitless.”

“If we could get to him,” said Harry., “ We could commandeer the SAS, we could....”

“Start the war ourselves?” McGonagall cut him off. “We would be starting the war earlier than expected, as well as unleashing machine guns on our own friends. While force will be required in the end without a doubt, we can’t go yet, not like this. That kind of rash decision would only add to the death toll.”

“Every second we wait, he is getting stronger,” protested Harry. Voldemort was in power. He was taking over the Aurors and setting them on Order members. They had to do something quickly.

“Correct,” said McGonagall. “However, we only have one shot at this, so let’s do it right. Jumping in will get us killed and nothing more. For now we must gather intelligence. If we act and get it wrong, we will forever be lost.”

“And in the mean time...?” asked Harry. He was restless. He couldn’t stand the idea of sitting on his arse all day.

“In the mean time we prepare,” said Flamel. “Severus must stay in place and convince Rookwood that he is loyal to Voldemort. Miss Shepherd, our only source within the Aurors, will not be contacted for now, in case we give her away. Remember, we don’t even know if she is loyal to us. Peter would have been able to use his rat form to infiltrate the Ministry and find out what is going on, but he seems to have gone dark.”

Sided with Voldemort, more like, thought Harry bitterly. Wormtail would have gone to whomever was winning, and now that seemed to be Voldemort. The little rat had betrayed them...again. When he and Harry next met, someone was going to get hurt.

“As for Dawlish, Sirius and James,” continued Flamel, “they must stay in hiding until we are ready. They must not be seen, as their faces are fairly recognisable.”

“The Aurors amongst us may have other uses,” said Harry thoughtfully. “If we are portrayed as the bad guys, then it can do no harm to act like it. Being Aurors, knowing the criminal underworld, they can secure us weapons from the black market.”

“You are still thinking about nothing but force,” pointed out McGonagall.

“It may come to that,” said Harry. He could see no way to take the country back by political means, or by any other passive means. The only thing he could think of was by force. Did McGonagall think he wanted this? Did she think he wanted to unleash the SAS on his own people? No, he didn’t but he knew that there was only way to do this, and sadly it was by force. He hated it, but it was the only means open to them.

“But not yet,” said Flamel, less dismissively than McGonagall. “For now, we must prepare. You, Harry, are going to have a harder time than most.” There was regret in Flamel’s voice as he said this.

“Why me?” asked Harry.

“Prophecy or not, you will be vital to this conflict,” said Flamel gravely. “Tom wants you dead, and we need you both as a soldier and the contents of your mind. For the time being, we need to get you proficient in Occlumency and get your Animagus form complete as soon as possible. You will need every edge you can get. From now on, when you are not in classes or at

the duelling club, you are to come to us. Minerva and I can do your homework for Rookwood while the other teaches you. We will reach out to old friends, call in favours and find out just what is going on. James, Sirius and Dawlish will tap the Criminal Underworld for resources, as Harry suggested. We need spare wands, armour, as well as rumours and news, and maybe even recruits, if they are successful. We also need to know ways into and out of the Ministry as well as Hogwarts, just in case.”

Harry blinked. That was a hell of a list. Animagus and Occlumency classes were now going to take over his life, but at the rate he was progressing, they were still talking about months, rather than days, until they could form any sort of attack. It was good, but there were major flaws in the plan.

“Obviously, this is far from ideal as you will not be learning much,” continued Flamel. “But it is essential that you train as much as possible. Minerva?” He glanced at McGonagall, seeking her opinion.

“I don’t like the idea of putting all this stress on Harry,” she said slowly, wearing a grave expression.

“Neither do I,” conceded Flamel. “But I fail to see another option. Whether we like it or not, Harry is as involved as you or I, if not more so. Lily will most likely resist this, but he needs to be able to defend himself. We need to complete his Animagus form as soon as humanly possible, and allow him to block his mind. He is essential to this war. I believe he is one of the few who has a chance to best Tom, and in his mind may be the key to doing so.”

Harry was fast becoming irritated that they spoke as if he were not in the room. He shot each of the teachers an irritated glance, but neither noticed. They continued as if they were alone.

“Nicolas,” said McGonagall exasperatedly. “With proper tuition I could teach him in sixth months, cramming, I think four at best. He has been at it for just over one, and now you want me to get him up to scratch in what, a fortnight, a week? It’s impossible!”

“We have no choice, Minerva,” repeated Flamel with a calm that rivalled Dumbledore. “If we take enough strengthening potion and amphetamines, we could keep going twenty-four hours.” What? Amphetamines? Did Flamel want them drugged up to high heaven? Harry didn’t think he could keep going for twenty-four hours, even if he could stay awake. The strain would be too much.

“This borders on torture,” protested McGonagall, and Harry agreed. “We’d be killing ourselves and Harry. If not physically, we’d tire our minds beyond repair.”

“I know,” conceded Flamel, bowing his head. “Forgive me, Harry,” he said, addressing him for what felt like the first time in ages. “I feel as frustrated as you. My thoughts too are becoming irrational and erratic.” Harry nodded, glad to be acknowledged once again. He knew what Flamel was getting at, even if the drugs idea was pushing it too far. He had to get up to

speed as soon as possible. He was in no great rush to meet Voldemort again, but thousands of lives would be lost if he didn't.

"What would it take to get me able to transform completely inside of a fortnight?" asked Harry.

"A miracle," muttered McGonagall.

"It's almost Christmas," said Harry. "The time of miracles."

"But I fail to see how you can fit enough Animagus classes as well as normal classes in a day," said McGonagall. "You don't have time to go to every class. There aren't enough hours in the day." Hang on! Something in her words rang a bell in the back of Harry's mind.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I said, you can't go to every class and then the extra ones. There aren't enough hours in the day," repeated McGonagall.

Suddenly a thought struck him! Bells were ringing in the back of his mind. He suddenly remembered how Hermione learned impossible amounts in little time and attended lessons that were held at the same time.

"Professor," he said suddenly. "Would a Time-Turner work?"

"How could you possibly..." she began, raising an eyebrow, before realising how he might know of them. "Oh."

"I didn't steal one or kill for it," said Harry, affronted. "In my third year, you gave Hermione one so she could take every option available to third years and attend several classes at the same time. She had to keep it a secret, but she went to more than one lesson at one time. If we could acquire one, perhaps I could do three hours of Animagus training, then turn back time and do three of Occlumency. That way we save time. If we double our lessons from three per week to six, we half the time and doubling back to cover more we could cut the amount of time needed in four."

"Harry," said McGonagall. "It is not just about how much time you practice. It is about you being able to accept new abilities as second nature, not whether you can do it once."

"Once is enough to get me out of trouble if I am up the creek," said Harry recklessly.

"You also don't appreciate the mental strain this will put on you," emphasised McGonagall. "Mentally and physically, you will be exhausted. You will be falling asleep all through the day. If your mind is tired, you will learn more slowly. It won't work."

“I can also turn back a few hours to get more sleep,” said Harry. “We can work most of the night and then both go back and have a good night’s sleep.”

“Harry has a good idea, Minerva,” said Flamel. “While I do not believe it will be as simple as Harry believes it will, it is a good idea nevertheless and would give us a great advantage. Acquiring one will be hard, but if we can get one, we could have him trained up in no time.”

“Very well,” said McGonagall. “How do you plan to acquire the time–piece, Harry?”

“Steal it,” said Harry. His feelings on theft were usually very bleak, but this situation called for desperate measures. He was thinking like a soldier again. It worried him, but it was what was needed at the moment.

“How?” pressed McGonagall. He hadn’t actually thought about it, but it shouldn’t be too hard. He knew where they were kept.

“I’ll fetch one from the Department of Mysteries,” suggested Harry. “I can flame in and out before anyone notices, I think.”

“Flame in?” echoed McGonagall. “You mean by Floo?”

“Oops,” said Harry, realising he had meant to tell McGonagall about this, but had never quite gotten around to it. “Well, I may have accidentally found my own form of Apparation. I should have told you about it, but I kind of forgot.” He took a moment to explain to them exactly how he had escaped his attacker when he had been with Redgrave. He left out exactly where he was, who he was with and why. He told them he was attacked in the Ministry and that he had escaped. He daren’t tell them about Arctic Thunder, which at present was stashed in the kitchen with a House Elf called Perky.

“You never thought to mention this?” asked McGonagall, outraged. Harry realised that if he didn’t tell them about the device, he would have to endure a telling off now. No, he had to keep the device a secret. He had promised it to Christine.

“Didn’t seem important,” muttered Harry, staring at his feet. “Could have been a common mugger.”

“It was nothing of the sort, idiot child,” said an icy voice, causing the others to spin on the spot. For a second, Harry thought they had been discovered.

Severus Snape stood in the doorway, candelabra in one hand and a steaming mug in the other. He was not dressed in his night–clothes, but in robes of the deepest black.

“You’ve been at a meeting,” said Harry, instantly recognising the robes as those of a Death Eater. Snape didn’t make any response. His hood was back, revealing his face, but Harry

recognised the distinctive pointed hood, reminiscent of the KKK. An apt comparison, Harry noted. He would recognise those robes anywhere.

“Bellatrix Black has just learned that an Unspeakable was killed on the Dark Lord’s orders,” said Snape, pocketing his mask in a clipped movement, the black orbs of his eyes never leaving Harry for a second. “She has also learned that he was not alone. In the darkness, it is not known who, but they are hunting for anyone present in the Ministry that day who fits the description of a Caucasian male, short, dark hair, and capable of Apparating through the Ministry’s wards. Personally, I think it is rather obviously you, but you are not known for disappearing in a ball of flame, nor did you leave an Auror’s sight that day, according to the debriefs. You have got away with this one by the skin of your teeth, Potter. A little consideration for the safety of others, in future. Though now that you are here, what were you doing with an Unspeakable?”

“I...” stammered Harry. He focused on the waves and avoided Snape’s eyes, staring at McGonagall instead, the only one not proficient at Legilimency. Employing his Occlumency to cover the lie, he gave his answer. “I was visiting the room where my Sirius died. The Unspeakable caught me where I shouldn’t be and was guiding me out when we were attacked. He was killed and I escaped. I didn’t mention it because...well, I got that man killed. They must have been following me, not him.”

“It was the other way around, stupid child,” snapped Snape. “You report to us, because as grown-ups, we know what we are talking about, but people like you think you always know better.”

“Severus, enough,” said Flamel. “We cannot change the past, and it is not a mistake Harry will repeat, is it? Now, are you certain he is not suspected?”

“No, they are suspecting someone older and more powerful,” said Snape. “Apparently the Apparation was so powerful it ignited the air around the intruder. Potter isn’t known to be that powerful.” Snape did not question Harry further, which led him to believe that Snape had not detected his lie. He was mad at Harry for nearly getting caught but he had believed the visiting the Veil story, so he wouldn’t investigate Redgrave, therefore presumably Arctic Thunder was safe. This was a relief to Harry, as he still didn’t trust the former Death Eater, especially one in a world where the Dark Lord had never fallen. In his opinion this made Snape even less trustable.

“I’d wager that that is worrying Black,” said Flamel. “If she believes that there is someone out there with power to rival the Dark Lord’s, it may cause enough confusion to allow us to still function.”

“She will endeavour to make sure He is not disappointed when they next meet,” said Snape. “And at this point we can assume it is when, and not if. Bellatrix cannot enter the Ministry yet, but it is only a matter of time. We know He is still in the Ministry, though He is still running both Crouch and the Wizengamot. In the last forty-eight hours, twenty-seven lifers have been officially pardoned by the Wizengamot and incorporated into the Black Watch. These are some of the most perverse and evil minds the human race has ever seen; all of them there for

multiple murders and use of Unforgivables, and all of them under the thumb of the Dark Lord. Anyhow, reverting back to the point, Bellatrix will divert significant manpower to finding out who this mystery wizard is.”

“So if we give her something to chase,” said McGonagall, reading ahead., “We could spread their resources more thinly, and maybe force an opening.” This sounded more like a plan. Finally, something to do. Harry could Flame in, scare Crouch and Flame out. He could have them up in arms in no time. So simple, so easy, so exciting.

“No time like the present,” said Harry, “I need a mask or something like that.”

“Potter, this is not a game,” sneered Snape. Harry felt a flash of anger at him for putting him down, when he now had a purpose. Why couldn’t he stop being a hindrance? Did he not want them to harass the Dark Lord?

“No it isn’t,” said Harry. “So let’s stop fannying around and be serious. Get me a disguise and I’ll have the Minister of Magic up in arms in seconds.”

“You already have one,” said Snape.

“Too many people have seen it for it to be of any use,” said Harry, knowing that he meant his half mask that had covered his burns. He had already worn it around school and even to the Ministry and half of his face would also be on show – it couldn’t be used without giving him away. However, if they could make it cover his entire face... “I need something new. Nothing that can link it to Hogwarts, Gryffindor, the Order or any of us.”

“If you are not quick enough,” Flamel pointed out, “A summing charm could dislodge it. I can stop this with a charm, but I need the mask to work with first.”

“You are actually going to let the boy wonder go on this expedition?” asked Snape, unable to believe it. “He’s a boy.”

“With as much to lose as you or I, Severus,” said Flamel. “Let’s get a move on. It’s nearly one o’clock. We need to get this done by dawn and get you to classes with every impression of having had a good night’s sleep.”

“You will not need me for this foolish trip,” said Snape. “I bid you good night.” He nodded to McGonagall and then turned and left, his robes billowing out behind him. Harry felt quite proud of himself. At the moment, he was more valuable to the Order than Snape was. Haha, That showed him!

“Let’s rock,” said Harry once they were alone.

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Janus Firth felt like skipping as he made his way down the freshly polished, yet darkened corridors of the Ministry of Magic. It was quarter past one in the morning, and the building was almost deserted, but he still felt excitement burning inside of him, even on a dull patrol like this. Just walking and not encountering a brick wall after six feet was such a novelty after eleven years in Azkaban prison. Fresh air in his lungs, light in his eyes; he felt these as only a free man could. A free man, who quite literally had time to kill. He was back in the Dark Lord's service and that meant that soon, eleven years of suppressed tension and rage would be unleashed in a spray of arterial red. Oh, how he had missed the feeling, how he had longed to be free to kill, to feel the rush, to be freer than most thought possible. The Dark Lord had shown him the path of glory in his youth, but that had all come crashing down thanks to Alastor Moody, who at this moment lay beaten black and blue in a puddle of his own vomit or faeces, or maybe both. Still, he was out now, and war was on the horizon. Real action was soon to come and he couldn't wait. He would serve as was expected, and continue this patrolling of the Ministry, tedious as it was. He could wait; Azkaban had taught him patience. Soon, he would be rewarded. He was buzzing in anticipation. A storm was coming, and he was ready, oh Merlin, he was ready.

*WHOOSH!*

The darkened corridor was suddenly alive with flame. Instantly he raised his hands to cover his eyes. The flames reflected off the polished floor and walls, straight into his eyes, which were still accustomed to the gloom. The flames disappeared just as quickly as they had come. As Janus removed his hands from his eyes, he saw a figure standing in his path. He was dressed from head toe in white. Boots, trousers, jumper, gloves, cloak and hood, all brilliant white that seemed to glow in the gloom. The figure's face was covered in a mask as white as his clothes. It was completely blank, and covered every inch of his face. It was almost like a white Death Eater.

"Boo," said the figure.

This was him! It was the figure Bella had spoken of. This wizard was almost as powerful as the Dark Lord. He could apparently Apparate through the Ministry wards with enough power to set the very air on fire. The Dark Lord himself had added to the wards that very afternoon, and still this figure came through them like a hot knife through butter! He must be inhumanly powerful. No one knew who or what this figure was, but it was plain to see that it was not on Janus' side. His hand flew to his holster, and was leveled at the intruder in half a second flat. As his wand came level, Janus found that the figure was no longer there. Where the hell had he gone? No one dressed in white could hide in the shadows. He had to be here somewhere. Janus glanced each way, only to see an empty corridor in both directions. He glanced up at the ceiling and all around, but there was nothing.

"Face me like a man!" he growled into the darkness. Still nothing. The silence was unnerving. The corridor seemed deserted, but somehow he knew that he was not alone. He had broken into a cold sweat, and his wand arm was shaking. How powerful was this person? Could Janus stop him? Would he leave this passage alive?

*CLICK!*

Something moved behind him. Heart pounding, Janus turned to face the direction of the sound. The shadows seemed to be closing in and the walls felt tighter. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. For a second, he was sure he felt a warm breath on the back of his neck, but it was gone as he turned to face it. He felt terrified. What could make itself totally invisible? What was so powerful that it could appear through the Dark Lord's wards as if they were nothing?

"OOF!" He never saw it coming, or leave, but something hit him sharply in the gut, knocking the air out of him. He tried to yell out in surprise, but no words came out. He fell to his knees, holding his gut. Panting, grasping his neck, trying desperately to get air back into his lungs, Janus fumbled for the wand he had dropped. He could hear breathing now, and knew that who or whatever it was was still here.

At last his fingers grasped his wand. "What do you think you're going to do with that?" hissed a bodiless voice in his ear. He squawked in surprise, turning his wand over his right shoulder, unleashing the first hex that came to mind towards the ceiling. There was a tremendous crash as the curse hit a lighting orb, which shattered instantly, raining down shards of glass over the fallen Janus.

He covered his face with his hands, but they in turn were torn to shreds by the cascade of razor-sharp glass. Janus cried out in pain, beneath the hail of razors. Suddenly, silence filled the corridor. No breathing, clicking, whooshing; nothing. Janus raised his head cautiously and peered ahead.

*CRUNCH!*

Someone had trodden on a shard behind him. Success! He had him now! He spun instantly, a curse on his lips, wand ready, straight into the path of an incoming white boot. The kick connected with his jaw, launching him off his feet. He landed hard on his back. In an instant, he was looking at the tip of a wand, held by the masked intruder.

He was dead now, he knew it. If it was Janus the intruder's shoes and he had his enemy disarmed and on the floor as he now lay himself, Janus would kill his victim. Why should the man in white be any different? Janus stared up into the masked face that he knew would be his death. Then suddenly, without warning, the figure burst into flame. Janus rolled to the side, darting for his wand. His fingers closed around the wooden handle and he whipped it back around to face the intruder, only to find himself in an empty corridor.

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Gunther Weiss hurried out of the lift, followed by his two companions, both of whom were new recruits. One was fresh out of Hogwarts, the other an older, fatter man who used to be a chef. Both had only just joined the ranks of the Death Eaters, or the Black Watch as they were now referred to. The corridors were all lit up, leaving no shadows anywhere. They were on high alert. Someone had broken into the Ministry and attacked a highly capable Death Eater. Rumours were running riot that this intruder equalled the Dark Lord himself in power. Personally, Gunther

didn't buy it, but he had to investigate. He had been given level four to search. Reinforcements would be arriving momentarily.

The three of them hurried down the corridor towards the last door on the right. It made sense to start at the far end and work backwards. They had gone perhaps half way when they were forced to divert from the plan. Suddenly the lift doors opened with a *Ping!* The floor was supposed to be deserted, and it was too soon for reinforcements. All three 'Aurors' turned to face the new arrival, wands drawn. Confusion spread over their faces as they found themselves staring down an empty corridor. The lift doors were wide open, but it was empty.

POP!

Suddenly the lighting orb nearest the lift went out with a pop, flooding the end of the corridor with shadow.

"What the..." began Gunther, but he never finished. Suddenly, the next light went out, and the next. The darkness came closer and closer to Gunther. It was as if something was coming towards him, draining away the light. In the next three seconds, the entire corridor was plunged into darkness. The shadows loomed over them, and their eyes – formerly accustomed to the bright corridors but now plunged into darkness – played tricks on them. Gunther was sure he saw movement to his right, but on his double take, he found nothing. The corridor was in near complete darkness, and the silence chilling. The only source of light was in the lift, now a square of light on a distant wall. Still, it was a way out. A chill ran down his spine, and his hair stood on end. He felt another presence in the darkness. Something was wrong. He was a grown man, and a rational one at that, but fear was setting in. He had to get to the lift, back to the light.

"Hey!"

A whisper in the shadows echoed softly in his ears. It was all Gunther could do not scream. He glanced frantically around, trying to see in the gloom. He saw nothing but his two accomplices, who were both sweating and looked terrified.

"Lumos!" he hissed, igniting his wand. His companions followed suit. Three beams of light spun around, searching high and low for any sign of movement. There was nothing; the corridor was completely deserted. The only light came from the lift. In there it was safe. He shivered in his robes. The corridor was suddenly filled with icy air. This was very wrong. Whatever was doing this was scaring Gunther half to death.

"Sir?" questioned one of his companions in a strained whisper.

"Shhh!" hissed Gunther. He thought for a second that he heard movement. There had been a gentle scrape somewhere close, was sure of it. He gestured for his accomplice to be silent, allowing him to listen. For a second he thought he heard an intake of breath, and then something connected sharply with his right buttock. He yelped in surprise at the attack, stumbling forward under the force of the impact. That was enough for him. They were not alone. Whoever was doing this was too much for the three of them.

“RUN!”

The three of them darted towards the lift, towards the light. In the light they were safe; they had to be. If he could only get to the lift, he could get home. Gunther made the distance in what felt like record time. He turned as he entered the lift in time to see his accomplice enter the lift, but only one of them.

“Where’s Cox?” he hissed hurriedly to his only surviving companion, his wand aimed out of the lift, but the light finding no trace of the third Death Eater.

“He was right behind us,” replied the terrified Smart. “I saw him just a second ago.” They both shone their wands down the corridor. There was no sign of Cox, or his body. The corridor was deserted. He had simply disappeared. Where had he gone to?

Do we go back for him? wondered Gunther. He had once been an Auror, and the idea of leaving a man behind tugged on what little conscience he had. No, it was too dangerous. If they left, they had the intruder cornered on one floor and could return with reinforcements. They had to withdraw.

“Press the button, Smart,” said Gunther, his wand levelled down the corridor, providing cover. There was no sign of movement in the corridors; it was utterly and creepily still. The silence was added to by the absence of a reply.

“Smart?” hissed Gunther. He glanced to the side, but saw no other person. What? Gunther whipped around, but there was no sign of Smart. He had been right beside him a second ago. They were in a lift, for Christ’s sake. Where could he go? He spun again, but there was no sign of him. He hissed in anger, and then reached for the button. Just before he reached it, a hand wrapped in white clamped over his wrist. He gasped in shock. His eyes widened as he stared at the man in white, who had not been present just a second ago. He was dressed in white from head to toe, his face covered by a featureless white mask. Gunther was too surprised to move.

“What the...” he started for the second time in five minutes, and for the second time he didn’t finish. The intruder pushed him backwards, over his leg, tripping him. Gunther landed on his back, with his own wand pointed at his face. The intruder had bent Gunther’s elbow so his own wand pointed at his head. He was pinned and he knew it.

“Merlin!”

The intruder didn’t reply. Gunther saw the tip of the wand glow red and then everything went black.

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“You’re *certain* this is for real,” asked Crouch as his two aids hurried him down the corridor towards the lift. He had been rudely interrupted while relaxing in his office, enjoying a glass of whiskey on the rocks. The two aids had come in and dragged him roughly out,

screaming something about a security breach and an attack. Apparently someone had broken into the Ministry without being seen and attacked a Black Watch Auror, recently released from Azkaban. It seemed too impossible to be true. Who could have done it? The Order of the Phoenix was dead in the water and didn't have the resources to plan this, or a member powerful enough to do it since Dumbledore was captured.

"Positive sir," replied the taller aid. "Firth saw him and then he disappeared right in front of him, setting the air on fire. Now we've lost contact with a search team two floors below us. Someone has broken in, and we can't find or stop him."

"Where are we heading?" asked Crouch, assimilating this information and trying to think clearly.

"The safest place there is," replied the aid. "The Dark Lord's chamber." It made sense. If anyone could dispose of this intruder, it was the Dark Lord himself. They hurried towards the lift at the end of the passage, but before they got there, the doors opened, and it was not empty. All three froze as the lift doors opened, revealing a figure dressed all in white.

"It's him!" breathed Crouch, unable to believe his eyes. Three wands came quickly level, and three flashes of green light left the tips. The lift was suddenly filled with smoke and dust. The three curses shot through the smoke and impacted on the back of the lift, sending dust and smoke up into the air. "Careful, you morons," hissed Crouch furiously. "Hit it too hard and we might pierce the radioactive level above us!" He shot a final glare at the aid before stepping forward. The lift was about four metres away, and the smoke was spilling out into the passage.

The smoke was beginning to clear and Barty could almost see into the lift again. As the wisps of smoke faded, he caught his first view of the lift. The back wall was shattered beyond repair and floor littered with rubble, but no body, no white cloth, no nothing. Whoever it had been had gotten away. Had he imagined it? No, the aids had seen it too. So where was he?

"Where'd he go?" asked Crouch, turning to face his aids. As he turned, he found himself staring at empty space. The aids had vanished, and he was alone in the corridor. Barty Crouch began to panic. The silence was unnerving. Where had they gone? Had he got them? Where was he? Suddenly he felt very claustrophobic, as if the walls were closing in around him. He kept turning, trying futilely not to let anyone get behind him. Where had they gone? They couldn't just disappear into thin air. What the hell was going on?

"ARGH!" Something yanked his foot out from underneath him and high into the air, leaving him hanging by his ankle in mid air. He lost his grip on his wand and ended up flapping like a dying fish in mid air, suspended by his ankle. Slowly he began to rotate, until he found himself face to face, or rather face to mask with the masked intruder, dressed from head to toe in white. His clothes almost glowed in the darkness. How had Barty not seen him? Who was this man?

"What do you want?" hissed Crouch, in terror. "Who are you?"

The figure cocked its head and continued to stare at Crouch. He couldn't see the intruder's face or eyes, but somehow he knew he was appraising him. Who was this? How had he gotten past security? Suddenly the figure made his move; he grabbed a handful of Crouch's hair and yanked it out of his head. Crouch yelped in pain, water flooding to his eyes as the intruder pulled out a handful of his hair. Barty could only watch as the intruder pocketed the hair with his left hand. The wand in his right never left Crouch.

*"CRUCIO!"*

One of the aids had regained consciousness, and had made his move. The Intruder had not kept an eye on the fallen aid, who was hidden by a Disillusionment charm. Crouch could only see him when he moved, but he knew who it was. From the floor, he had cursed the intruder, who fell to the floor, thrashing like a reed. The attack broke the intruder's spell and Crouch plummeted to the floor, landing painfully in a heap. He scrambled to his feet as the figure thrashed under the curse. Whoever he was made no sound as he thrashed, noted Crouch. Barty was sorely tempted to let it continue, but he needed answers; the Dark Lord needed answers.

"Enough!" hissed Crouch, waving to the aid. The man lifted the curse, and set about removing the charm that was placed on him.

"Now," said Crouch, glaring at the figure he now held at wand point. "While I'm impressed that your washing powder can get your costume so clean, I still have some questions for you. Who the bloody hell are you?"

The figure didn't reply; he simply raised a hand, gloved in white, and raised two fingers to the Minister in one final insult before disappearing in a ball of flames. Crouch let out a gasp of surprise as the air around him flashed with flame and then was gone an instant later.

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"You were successful last night, I take it," noted Flamel, as Harry sank onto his sofa. It was quarter to nine the following morning, and almost time for Harry's next Occlumency lesson. Flamel himself was due to teach a class in ten minutes, which would be resolved through use of the Time Turner. Harry had successfully pocketed one last night before he had gone off to harass Crouch and his cronies. The previous night had been a success on several levels. Firstly, he had gotten hold of a Time Turner, secondly, he had put Crouch in a right flap, and thirdly he had tested a spell he had found amongst the annotations in his new Potions book. He had had no idea what to expect, but he had managed to hoist Crouch up by his ankles. This had potential, Harry noted. It was a simple, effective, painless restraint spell that could be administered silently, and since it gave off no light, it was hard to detect where it had come from. On the down side, it didn't disarm the victim. Still, it was useful knowledge. On the whole, it had been a good night. Suffering under the Cruciatus Curse had been a major let down. Luckily he had silenced himself so he couldn't scream, only removing the charm to speak when he had to. He had only been under the curse for five seconds at the most, so it wasn't too bad, and he hadn't suffered any after-effects of it, besides minor aching this morning.

“I was indeed,” yawned Harry, pulling the golden chain out from under his robes. “I was tempted to turn it back and have a few hours more sleep this morning,” he added as a half joke.

“Unwise,” said Flamel, smiling slightly and taking the Turner to inspect it. “Unless you would wish to share a bed with yourself.”

“He, or I, or whatever, would have to sleep on the floor,” said Harry with a wink. He could have the bed and his other self could have the floor.

“You wouldn’t have been so happy about that when you were in his shoes,” Flamel pointed out, while inspecting the Turner underneath a magnifying glass. Harry took a second to decipher what that meant, and realised that either way, he would spend one cycle on the floor. He made a note to consider that if he tried to be lazy in future.

“Okay, enough,” said Harry, ending the conversation. “This is making my head hurt.” The trip with Hermione had confused him, so this whole experience was going to be interesting.

“It also makes you appreciate the danger with this,” said Flamel, returning the Turner to Harry. “Every time you use this there will be two of you in one time, and so this is in fact very dangerous. The first time you use it, you must get used to seeing yourself. In fact, I believe we are about to receive a visit from our future selves.”

“Why?”

“After this hour we must set the turner back so I can teach my class and you can attend yours,” explained Flamel. “If we assume we will never leave this room, we will appear any second now, if we give ourselves time to get to our lessons. I suggest we stay out of that corner; that way we cannot reappear on top of ourselves.” He pointed to the corner to Harry’s right.

“But won’t the Turner take us back to where we were at that time?” asked Harry.

“No, it only changes time, not space,” said Flamel. “Think four dimensionally. We will appear in the same space we left, just in a different time.” But that didn’t make sense.

“With Hermione’s one,” protested Harry, shaking his head, “We used it in the Hospital Wing and ended up in the Entrance Hall.”

“They can be made to always return to a specific location,” said Flamel. “This one has not been.”

POP!

In the corner of the room that Flamel had pointed to, stood Harry Potter and Nicolas Flamel. It was a strange sensation to behold himself standing in the same room as he was. It was like looking in a mirror, only not. He and his future self locked eyes for a second, long enough

for the other him to wink at him. The two new arrivals glanced around the room quickly, taking in the environment.

“Well, I’d say that our first test was a success,” said the future Flamel, eyeing Harry and Flamel.

“Cool,” agreed Harry’s other self.

“Don’t talk to yourself,” said the future Flamel quickly. “You may affect the lesson you have just had.”

“Won’t I just speed it up if I help him?” the future Harry asked his teacher.

“No, you may make it worse,” answered Flamel. Harry glanced at his teacher, who was watching the two new arrivals with interest. “Remember, your future self never said anything to you when it was your turn. We must not change that this time around. What has happened has happened, and we cannot change that. Remember, even in the Hippogriff incident you mentioned, you did not change anything. Even time travel cannot change time. Now remember, you must come to Severus’ office at lunchtime today, okay? But for now, let us proceed to our lessons.” Without even glancing at Harry and Flamel, the two new arrivals crossed the room and left.

“That was strange,” noted Harry, once the door was closed. He had heard what had been said, but none of it seemed to make sense to him. Surely you can change time?

“I heard that!” his own voice answered from the other side of the door. Flamel smiled to himself and crossed the room to the door and locked it.

“There,” he said. “We shall not be interrupted.”

“What was all that about changing time and not speaking?” asked Harry. Maybe Flamel could make more sense of it.

“I believe first you should tell me what Hippogriff incident he, I mean I, referred to,” said Flamel.

Harry took two minutes to outline how he and Hermione had gone back in time and saved Buckbeak. “But he, I mean you, were wrong,” said Harry once he finished. “We did change something, we did change time.”

“No you didn’t,” said Flamel. “You repeated what had already happened.”

“But without us, Buckbeak would be dead,” said Harry.

“Yes,” conceded Flamel. “But that was always meant to be. Had you waited an extra few minutes before going back in time, Minister Fudge would have come back screaming that Sirius

had escaped. Just because you had not done it yet, does not mean that you would not have done it later. You were living in the future of what you changed, whether you made that journey then or ten years later, but sometime you would have gone back, because you were living in the future of that event. You never know any different, so you would not want to change what you didn't know. You cannot change time."

"But surely I could go back in time and, for example, kill Hitler and prevent World War Two?"

"No," said Flamel. That made no sense to Harry, but luckily Flamel began to explain. "You could in theory make the trip, even though no one has ever gone that far back, you just could *not* kill him."

"Why not?"

"Because we know he lived," said Flamel. "He is in the history books. You could try, but you would fail, or decide to stop. We are living in the future of Hitler, so we can deduce that he was never killed before the war. Take, for example, our future selves. They mentioned cycles. You see, just as they appeared to us, we shall appear to ourselves from an hour in the past when we make the same journey. They were visited by themselves from another hour in the future. At every instance in time, there is a you, and there is a me, on our own personal timeline, that is. There are two of us in this chronological time, but only one of you on your personal timeline. What you will do in one hour is being done by the you from an hour in the future in what is to him the present, understand?"

"I think so," said Harry.

"So if you plan to go and kill Hitler in an hour, the you from one hour in the future is doing it now. The you from an hour and ten minutes in the future would be in the past, doing it, but since Hitler survived we know he doesn't do it; he can't."

"Maybe he hasn't done it yet," suggested Harry.

"But the him from even further in the future is doing it now, in his personal present," said Flamel. "Since Hitler lived, we know that none of your future selves killed him or we would not remember him now, and if we don't remember him now, our future selves would not remember him nor want to kill him. We and our future selves were born in Hitler's future; if anyone changed time, we would never have heard his name. They would never have heard his name as they would have been born after he had died, so would therefore never want to make the trip. You see, because we know he lived, you can never change that; even with a Time-Machine it is impossible to change the past. What has happened has happened and could not have happened any other way."

"What about people who killed their other selves when messing around with time?"

“What about them?” asked Flamel. Harry thought it was a strange answer. Surely they were relevant. They interfered in the past and were killed for it, by themselves, no less. That was a dead end, being killed in your own past. But Flamel, as it turned out, did have a point. “They were always meant to die that way and nothing can change that. We know Hitler’s future, because he lived in the past, but we don’t know our own future, because to us, it hasn’t happened yet. We don’t know it. You cannot look to the future so you cannot change it. Events are already in motion; you cannot change time.”

“What if my future self appeared to me and gave me a message?” asked Harry. “That would affect my future.”

“Your future self in turn would have been visited by his future self,” said Flamel. “He would always have been meant to do it. Time is infinite. There is no beginning and no end. No ‘version’ of you was the first and didn’t know what he was doing, but affected his past selves, and no version of you will be the last and never have to make the trip back himself. Time is infinite and cannot be changed.”

Harry sort of understood, but it seemed so confusing. Surely he could go back and change something. Surely his very presence there, would change time?

“I see you are still confused,” said Flamel. “Understandable, this is not easy. Let’s say that you were to go back to the fifteen hundreds and leave yourself a note on the wall of a building for you to read when you are sixteen. That message is there when you are twelve, you just haven’t seen it yet, but anyone else passing that spot would see it, including someone in for example the eighteen hundreds. Now, consider this simpler scenario. In the future you go into the past for example, Christmas 1900, and you are killed there. You won’t know you are going into the past until the time you make the journey. You won’t know you die until the moment you do, but at any stage of your life, if you had gone to the archives, you would have read about a boy who came from nowhere and dies on Christmas 1990 in the newspapers of the time. You see: you were born in the future of what happened to you in 1900, even though it had not happened to you yet in your personal timeline. You would never know it was you, and never try to change your future and survive. And before I forget, we must make sure we don’t speak to our previous selves when we appear to them.”

“As you wish,” said Harry. “My head is spinning. It’s all one huge cycle.” It was so confusing. If time didn’t end or begin, then what was it? It just...was. For some reason, trying to grasp a concept of such magnitude made Harry believe that maybe there was a God of some sort, who created all that. How else could something that huge just come into being? If he threw in multiple universes, perhaps infinite numbers of them, existence was just too big to grasp.

“Confusing, isn’t it?” said Flamel. “I think perhaps we should get on with our lesson. We only have fifty minutes.” Harry wanted to return to a level he could actually grasp, so had no objections, but surely with a Time Turner they had more than fifty minutes. They had all the time in the world, and as he had just discovered, there was a lot of it.

“Why only fifty?”

“Because a Time Turner turns back one hour and it’s been ten minutes since they arrived,” said Flamel.

“How do you know they didn’t come back after two hours?” asked Harry. He was fairly proud of himself. He didn’t understand completely, but he had just picked a hole in Flamel’s logic.

“Because the me from the future thought the same thoughts an hour ago that I am thinking now, and I am thinking we are going to practice for fifty minutes.” *Damn!* thought Harry. *Not too brilliant after all.*

“What if we lose track of time or forget?”

“We know we don’t forget,” said Flamel. “And why is that?” Flamel was testing his grasp of the workings of time.

“Because they did appear,” answered Harry.

“Precisely,” said Flamel. “You are dealing with the ideas of time travel very well, though be warned. Every hour you use the Time Turner is an hour off your life, and the magical effects of long-term use of one could potentially be damaging. We have very little idea what long-term use of one will do to you. Frequent users in the Department of Mysteries are prone to angry outbursts, mood swings, stress, and violence.”

Harry thought back to the previous year. Hermione had been like that. Always so angry, so stressed. She had hit Malfoy and up until then she hadn’t had a violent bone in her body. Harry had no idea it had affected her that badly. He had thought it was just stress from all that extra work. He hated to think what he would do if stressed, with his lethal talents. He remembered Hermione missing a lesson once. She had been angry with herself. He remembered thinking once he found out about the Turner that she could have gone back and attended the lesson. Now he knew that since she was not in the lesson, she would never go back and attend it. Her choice. time travel was not dangerous in itself, but it was confusing as hell and there was a price. He had once considered using one to prevent him going to this Unholy Land. If he got back to his world, he could go back and stop himself from being sent here. The trouble with that was that then he would never have met his parents, met Rose, or gained these new powers. It was at this point obsolete, as now he knew that since he was here, he could never change that, because his future self had not appeared to save him when he had been sent here. *What’s happened has happened and nothing can change that.*

“Righty–ho,” said Flamel. “Shall we begin?”

“Let’s,” said Harry.

For twenty minutes they went over the basic exercises. After that Flamel decided it was time for Harry to suppress emotion, while allowing his mind to be searched. This was essential for lying under Legilimency.

Harry felt the initial stab as Flamel entered his mind. He passed slowly through the previous night's intrusion into the Ministry. The images of hiding under the Invisibility Cloak and Disillusioning stunned bodies flowed into his mind's eye as Flamel browsed his thoughts.

"You took his hair," noted Flamel.

"I thought it could be useful for Polyjuice if needed," said Harry. Talking about the subject while being searched was another means of distraction and made the entire exercise harder, but Harry was getting there. Luckily, these were not the thoughts he was supposed to be hiding.

"Good," said Flamel.

"Occlumency or last night?" asked Harry.

"Both," said Flamel. "You played a risky game, but the show was impressive. You have spooked them royally."

"Thanks," said Harry. Flamel moved on, leaving those memories, and moved on to his interview with Voldemort in the cell. Flamel was testing for emotional reactions to harsh memories. Harry fought to keep calm, to push all emotion to the side, to keep his mind blank and allow Flamel to search.

"Do we reckon he is still in his cell?" asked Harry, as the image flowed into his mind.

"Could be," answered Flamel softly. "He's running the show from the inside, through Crouch and the Wizengamot on the inside and Bellatrix on the outside. As far as we are aware, they are out of direct contact, but Crouch talks to Bellatrix. Tom is in the cell, but it is most likely more equipped now than it was and he can leave whenever he wants to and return just as..."

He cut off as a surge of electricity lashed out at his mind. Both Harry and Flamel hissed in pain as the shock spiked into both their minds. Flamel broke the connection as Harry thrust his hands to his temples, trying to block out the pain. It was gone as soon as it had come.

"What the hell was that?" asked Harry, rubbing his head to numb his aching brain.

"A defence mechanism," said Flamel, rubbing his forehead, "and a powerful one at that."

"To defend what?" asked Harry.

"My guess is a Memory Charm or even a Cap."

"What's the difference?"

“A Charm covers one area of memory permanently and cannot be changed. A Cap can be temporarily removed and returned. It merely hides the memories for further use, but it cannot be done on oneself. It’s a Dark Spell that was very popular a few years back, especially when combined with the Imperius Curse. You see, the best type of assassin doesn’t know he is the assassin, so is immune to Veritaserum, Tom would take a person, implant the Cap, then activate them later. They could kill their target, and then the Cap kicks back in and they never remember doing it. A false memory takes their place.”

“You found one in me?” asked Harry horrified. He could have killed hundreds and not remember it.

“No,” said Flamel. “We found a spell designed to protect something in your mind. It could just be a standard charm, or even accidental magic on your part, but we need to find out. We need someone stronger than me to break it.”

“Who?” he asked, though he already knew. He just didn’t want to acknowledge it.

“Our future selves gave us the name,” said Flamel, thoughtfully.

“Snape,” said Harry, remembering what had been said. The idea of Snape going through his mind again was not a pleasant one. Still, he would have his wand and if Snape did anything he shouldn’t, Harry’s shield would be up before he could say ‘idiot child’.

“I shall arrange a meeting for later today,” said Flamel. “This cannot wait.”

Another ten minutes and it was time to turn back the clock. Flamel didn’t dare to enter his mind again in case they disturbed whatever spell was in effect. Harry’s mind was too wound up to concentrate. Who had done this too him? When? When had he ever been vulnerable to anyone? Flamel was the only one who Legilimised him. There was no one else who could have. What was going on?

These questions were still running through his head during the following Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson. Snape was becoming increasingly annoyed with Harry’s lack of attention. They were covering basic duelling today, and there had been a scuffle over who got to go with Harry, the idea being that no one wanted to face him in a duel. In the end, Snape decided that Eloise Midgen who was the only one left, was no challenge and so swapped her for Malfoy.

“This class is where you will learn a more realistic form of duelling,” said Snape. “More so than your Duelling Club, which is more a sport than a fight. This class, combined with Professor Rookwood’s Dark Arts class, will equip you to face the best of the best and the worst of the worst. The Dark Arts are a never-ending, ever-changing and unstoppable avenue of spells. You have to learn not to fight the spells, but the opponent. As in poker, you must play the man, not the cards, and like bridge, you must think moves ahead. This lesson is designed to teach you adaptability. You are with duellers outside your social groups; you must adapt to their unfamiliar style and ultimately best them. We will start with one duel each. The winner will hold up the loser’s wand. Once you are all done, I will comment and rearrange groups. Anyone who

loses three duels in a row will be attending extra evening ‘classes’ with me.” That was not a happy prospect, but no one dared to whisper anything to their neighbour.

There was a certain truth to his words, but Harry still disliked the tone of his voice as he described the Dark Arts. There was almost a longing in his voice, and that disturbed Harry. Snape’s instructions were that the duels were to be done silently, but that was it. He had said that there were no holds barred, but be sensible with the spells. Roughly translated, that meant that the Slytherins could use dark curses if they knew them, but anyone else would get detention.

“Begin,” sounded Snape’s icy voice.

Almost everyone moved instantly, except Malfoy and Harry. In the corner of his eye, he could see other duels going on, and flashes of light. He and Malfoy stood in ready stance, neither moving, both waiting for the other to make a move. They stared into each other’s eyes. Harry could see an element of fear in his eyes. While Malfoy thought Harry was on his side, he also thought that Harry would do whatever it took to maintain cover and he also knew that Harry was still the Dark Knight, a trained killer.

Malfoy moved quickly, once he realised Harry was not going to attack. He brought his wand down diagonally in a slashing movement across his chest, unleashing a band of red light towards Harry. Harry instantly leapt forwards, ducking underneath the spell and rolling towards Malfoy. He came back to his feet right in front of the startled Slytherin. Harry grabbed the wrist of his wand arm, forcing it to the side and his robes with the other. Harry twisted, while sticking his leg out. He threw Malfoy over his leg to the floor in a judo throw.

Malfoy had the sense to keep rolling as he hit the floor, as Harry quickly fired a Disarming Charm at him, but missed. Malfoy scrambled to his feet and threw another curse at Harry.

Sanctius! he shouted inside his mind. The small turquoise umbrella formed at the end of his wand. He batted the curse back. He was impressed that Malfoy had already gotten off a second curse, which Harry also batted away. Harry decided to turn up the heat. Wielding his wand like a whip while thinking the incantation, he thrust a long fiery whip at Malfoy. Luckily, the blond saw it coming and conjured a shield. The whip wrapped itself around the Slytherin, shield and all. Harry suppressed a smile. These were the results of his Occlumency sessions with Flamel; he could search through the other Harry’s memories and use his spells, some at least. He remembered that Dumbledore used this one against Voldemort. Malfoy didn’t seem so confident as the whip surrounded his shield.

Harry gave it a tug, and the spell enhanced his strength, throwing Malfoy across the room, shield and all. He hit the wall and bounced off. Luckily his shield should protect him from physical injury. Harry noted that there was no other movement. They were the only couple still duelling. Harry looked back at Malfoy just in time to see him cause a pot of quills to shoot at Harry, who levitated a desk into the way. The quills were sharp enough to dig into the wood.

As Harry cast the desk aside, he saw anger in Malfoy's eyes. He had a bloody lip. His shield evidently had not held up that well, and he was hurt. Harry never heard the incantation, but his phoenix senses told him something dark was coming. Malfoy swished his wand and unleashed a thick trunk of orange light at Harry.

Sheltanto! The enhanced shield sprang into place in front of him, a near invisible barrier against the curse. Harry was nearly knocked off his feet as the spell hit the shield. It held, but the pressure was phenomenal. His feet began to slide backwards across the ground. There was a gasp from the spectators as the Dark Knight struggled to force off a spell from a suspected Death Eater. Harry glanced at Snape, who made no effort to stop the duel. He sat calmly, watching the proceedings.

Harry broke into a cold sweat. The curse was strong as hell, and was pushing him backwards. It was hot and Harry could feel the power through his shield. He had no idea what it did and didn't want to find out. He could feel his shield weakening. It was already losing its shape and becoming hazy.

"Harry!" screamed Hermione. "Finish him before someone gets hurt!"

"Silence, Granger, this is their duel," Snape put her down.

Harry glanced to his right, where there was nothing but empty wall. Hermione was right. He took a deep breath and threw the shield and the spell along with it to his right and dived to his left. The curse rocketed into the wall, blowing away a good section of it and knocking over a bookcase. Harry rolled over and then up onto his feet.

Levicorpus! Malfoy's ankle was hoisted up into the air, not three feet from him. He was left dangling, his robes up over his face. Harry pivoted on his ankle, delivering a spinning kick to Malfoy's gut as he released the spell. Malfoy flew across the room upside down and hit the wall. He bounced off and hit the floor, losing his grip on his wand. Malfoy quickly reached for his wand, but Harry was a step ahead. He had summoned a knife from his Potions set and hurled it at Malfoy's arm. It pierced his sleeve and pinned it to the wall, leaving Malfoy unable to reach his wand. Harry summoned it and held it aloft as gasps sprang up from those who witnessed the knife throw.

"That's what happens when you let the Dark Arts into your lessons," he added icily to Snape as he passed on the way back to his seat. There was utter silence in the room and no one dared to move. That duel had nearly killed its combatants. The class was in shock. Harry reached his desk when a thought occurred to him. Snape hadn't replied. Harry turned, to see Snape standing by his desk. He wasn't tending to Malfoy, nor was he looking angry. He looked as if he had seen a ghost (although in Hogwarts that was not an unusual experience).

"Where did you learn that spell?" he asked slowly, his voice showing more shock than anger.

“In a book, where else?” replied Harry. He pointed at Malfoy, who was pulling the dagger out of the wall. “He’s the one you should be asking; he nearly killed me.” How could Snape have a go at him for using a restraining spell when Malfoy had tried to kill him?

“You’re a big boy, you can take care of yourself,” muttered Snape dismissively, though still looking thoughtful. “We’ll continue this next lesson. Class dismissed. Potter, come with me!” Harry couldn’t believe it. Why was he being punished for defending himself? He hadn’t even used a serious attack in that duel. It was all basic spells, except for the whip. Malfoy, on the other hand, had been using Dark Spells from start to finish. Harry picked up his bag and followed Snape out of the room. He didn’t say a word to Snape as they headed up the stairs. He felt another glimmer of anger in his stomach. This was why he hadn’t missed the lessons during his months off. Even in this world, Snape was a twat!

“Where did you find that spell?” repeated Snape after a minute of walking.

“From my father,” said Harry. It was more or less true. He had seen it in Snape’s Pensieve.

Snape didn’t reply. He shot Harry an unreadable glance, but thankfully made no further comment.

“Where are we going?” asked Harry, bored of the silence.

“You’ll see,” said Snape, dismissing him again.

A few minutes later they arrived in Flamel’s office. The old man was sitting behind his desk, reading a book and making notes.

“Busy, Nicolas?” asked Snape as he barged in unannounced.

“You’re early,” noted Flamel, putting down the quill and removing his glasses. He didn’t seem at all surprised. “And I was supposed to come to you, but no matter. I was just translating this book for Harry.”

“For me?” asked Harry. Why would Flamel translate a book for him?

“Yes,” said Flamel. “It’s an ancient Greek text. It speaks of theories about possibilities of other universes and worlds, black holes and ways of travelling between them.”

“You’re trying to get me home?” echoed Harry. It was odd; he had completely forgotten about it. It was almost as if he didn’t care about home any more and just accepted this world as home. It was not true, he did still think about home, but he had given up actively trying to get back there. He had more important things to do.

“As promised,” said Flamel. “They claim to have built a working device, or Node as they call it. It’s quite clever really, I don’t understand how it works, but it breaks down a magical

signature using Arithmancical equations. From this you can derive seven digits, as a sort of address of the world with similar Nodes. They tried and failed, but then eventually got it right. There is a working Node somewhere. However, there is also a key that was buried to prevent its use. Apparently they found a world torn apart by war and were nearly invaded by an army from another world, so they destroyed the other world's Node and then buried their key to protect this world. It hasn't been seen since."

"Does it say where?" asked Harry, his curiosity bubbling over.

"Not yet," said Flamel. "It's mainly technical jargon. Still, I am confident that between myself and Professor Vector, we can break down your magical signature and derive your world's address. If we find this key and the Node, we can in theory get you home, assuming it still works."

I'm going home! Harry realised. His legs suddenly felt weak. There was a way home. He could get home and see his friends again. He felt like crying and laughing all at once. He sank into a chair, as his legs could no longer hold him. He stared at the book on Flamel's table that was his ticket home.

"Of course," said Flamel, "I *will* need more time to translate the book and then to follow the clues and find the keys and the Node."

"Don't rush, I'm not going yet," said Harry. "I can't leave you in this state." He couldn't drop everything and leave. He couldn't leave Rose and his parents in a world that was collapsing on itself. They would certainly be killed if he left. No, this was where he was needed, and where he must stay.

"Well, I find this all fascinating," said Snape, his voice dripping in sarcasm. Harry had almost forgotten Snape was there. "And while I am interested in anything that will rid me of the boy, I believe you summoned me here for a reason."

"Ah yes, Severus," said Flamel. "Please take a seat." Snape sank delicately into the seat Flamel offered. "Firstly, how did your meeting go last night?"

"As expected," said Snape. "They are all up in arms about this man dressed in white. Whatever you did, Potter, you spooked them well enough. A massive man-hunt is now underway, but they believe that it was not related to the Order." Harry felt a tingle of pride in his work, but he daren't show it, as Snape would undoubtedly put him down.

"Excellent," said Flamel. "Now, Severus, as you know, I have been attempting to teach Harry Occlumency. This morning we were practicing and I came across a foreign spell embedded in his memories."

"What spell?" asked Snape, appearing intrigued. Harry was watching for any sign that he already knew about it. He was one person Harry wouldn't be surprised to learn had done it to him.

“It electrocuted us both,” said Harry. “Professor Flamel thinks it was a defence spell, protecting a memory charm or a cap.”

“Interesting,” said Snape, his brow furrowed. “So what can I do?”

“You are a highly skilled Occlumens and Legilimens,” said Flamel. “I wanted to know if you can find a way around the cap.”

“Unlikely,” said Snape. “Anyone who can install a cap and the spells to protect it are going to be highly skilled. It is unlikely that they have left anything out. I may be able to force it open, but not without causing pain to myself and to Potter.”

“Are you sure you can?” asked Harry sceptically. This was suspicious. He could probably electrocute Harry for a few minutes just for pleasure and then say he couldn’t do it.

“Almost positive,” sneered Snape. “As long as you can take the pain.”

“It is essential that we find out who put this thing in there and why,” said Flamel. “If it is a cap, it is entirely possible that you are a walking time bomb, Harry.” He knew he didn’t have a choice, he just resented Snape for being the one to do it.

“Very well,” said Snape. “Potter, open your mind. First I must find the blockage. Just relax.” Snape pointed his wand at Harry’s temple and stared into his eyes.

“Legilimens,” he muttered. Images began to flow through his mind. Harry was impressed that Snape could assimilate everything he could see so quickly, and discard what was not needed. He really was a master of Occlumency himself, even if he was an awful teacher. He didn’t know if Snape could hear these thoughts or not, but he didn’t care...argh!

Suddenly, a shock invaded his brain again. His entire head felt the power of the shock. Snape immediately stopped.

He shook his head and regained his composure. “There we are,” he said simply. “Brace yourself, Potter. This is going to hurt. *Legilimens!*”

Suddenly the pain returned. His head was being prodded from every side with razorblades. The charge invaded every corner of his brain, mind and sense. His head was aching, throbbing, pounding and stinging at the same time. He bit down hard, trying to block out the pain, but that only served to annoy Snape.

“Block it out and you make my job harder,” snapped Snape. “Take it like a man.”

Suddenly the pain increased. Harry felt like screaming, but he refused in front of Snape. The pain was so intense it was blinding. He opened his eyes, but could not see beyond the pain. He slammed them shut and bit down. His whole body was shaking as Snape battered his mind

from all sides. Suddenly, something clicked. His mind seemed to burst and then the pain was gone. He opened his eyes and found himself back in Voldemort's cell. Voldemort was speaking.

“What of honour?”

“You forfeited the right of honour when you took human life,” said Harry.

“Then by implication, you deserve no better,” said Voldemort icily. “It matters not, for I have a plan to remedy this dilemma.”

“What?” asked Harry, raising an eyebrow.

He didn't have time to react. His pounding head was too weary to think clearly and the Dark Lord moved so fast. In a flash he was out of the chair and against the blue wall of light. His arm shot straight through the shield towards Harry's face. He felt those icy fingers wrap tightly around his neck, not squeezing, but holding him firmly in place. Harry tried to cry out, but he couldn't get a word out. He stared helplessly into those burning red eyes.

“Hold him!” hissed the Dark Lord. Suddenly two arms grabbed him on each side. His head spun and he saw the two Aurors who should be guarding the doors. They were Death Eaters! He had to get away; he had to tell Dawlish before it was too late!

Suddenly Voldemort grabbed his cheeks with both hands and twisted his head back to face him.

“And now, Potter,” said Voldemort, “You are going to divulge every last secret you hold. Legilimens!”

Images began to flow through his mind. He saw the Dursleys, Aunt Marge and Hagrid coming to take him away. His entire life was literally flashing before his eyes. No! He had to stop this, before Voldemort learned anything important. Empty your mind, Harry, you can do it!

He tried to empty his mind, but Voldemort was too strong. Suddenly something hit his cheek. His eyes widened in pain as his cheek began to sting. One of the Aurors had slapped him to keep awake and to allow Voldemort easier access to his thoughts.

“Don't fight, Harry,” soothed Voldemort. “It will be over soon.” Images raced through his mind as he was forced into another dimension, landing in a field. He saw his arrest, escape, trip to Voldemort, his capture by Dumbledore and his time at Hogwarts. Suddenly Voldemort released him, but the Aurors kept a firm hold on him.

“Interesting,” said Voldemort, turning his back on Harry, who stood mentally exhausted, thrashing against those who held him. He had failed! Voldemort knew everything. He knew he was from another world, he knew Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived, not his Harry. Who knew what he could do with that information?

“Petrificus Totalus,” muttered Voldemort, freezing Harry without even using a wand. “Imagine,” he said, thoughtfully. “You, Harry, are my downfall. A one-year-old boy, defeating the Dark Lord. But surely you can see that it was not you. Your mother died for you. You are nothing special yourself. Before you came here and gained this body, you were nothing. You can do all these wonderful things because I taught my Harry Potter; you just stole his body. You are nothing without me. But I see you will never join me again because you still hold the sentimental values of this Boy-Who-Lived. You are Dumbledore’s loyal little terrier. Pitiful. You have bounced from one year to the next, from duel to duel by blind luck, nothing more. You are nothing special, but you still win. How is this possible? All luck runs out in the end, Harry. I believe today is that day for you. The Prophecy doesn’t apply here; you are not my equal. But then again, it could be talking about me all along, knowing you were going to be sent her. I did mark you my equal, after all; you do carry my soul. But you are a danger to me – you have proved that; by all rights, I should kill you now.”

“Then do it, arsehole!” hissed Harry. “Dawlish and Bones will be in soon when I don’t reappear and you’ll be put to death. They’ll execute you! Who has the last laugh?”

“Come, Harry,” said Voldemort icily. “I would not be stupid enough to kill my own Horcrux. I have a better use for you.” Voldemort stepped forward, clean through the barrier that should have held him. He took a wand from the Auror who shouldn’t even be carrying one. That meant the Auror who operated the scanner was also a Death Eater. Voldemort raised the wand to Harry’s temple. Suddenly a bolt of electricity entered his mind and he relaxed. His body untensed and he stood, free from the Aurors, yet unable to move.

“Now, Harry, this is what you are going to do,” said Voldemort. “I want you to enter Dumbledore’s study. I want a complete copy of his Pensieve. Inside will be the names of every member of the Order of the Phoenix, and all operations they are running. After that, you will arrange a meeting with Dumbledore and Crouch for the last day of November in Crouch’s office.” With another flick of his wand, a halo of blue light surrounded Harry’s head, hovering an inch from his eyes.

“You’re having a laugh,” said Harry. “I’ll die before I help you!”

“Unnecessary,” said Voldemort dismissively. “And to make sure no one tampers with you, my little soldier,” he muttered. A white light poured out of his wand and wrapped itself around the blue halo like barbed wire.

“Positions,” said Voldemort to the Aurors.

They picked up their weapons and returned to the door, while Voldemort stepped back into the cell and grabbed Harry by the neck. Their eyes locked and then Voldemort activated the spell. The halo closed around his head and was absorbed into his mind, covering up the memories of the last few minutes. Harry found himself staring into the eyes of the Dark Lord, never remembering what had just happened. He thrashed under the Dark Lord’s grip, struggling to break free.

Then suddenly, for no apparent reason, Voldemort just released him. Harry grasped his throat and rubbed it in pain as he gasped for air. He felt horrible. His mind seemed so tired and his body ached all over. He felt sick inside and dizzy. He turned to see the Aurors surging forward towards him. When he turned back, Voldemort was standing two paces back from the barrier, calmly watching him. Harry coughed and doubled up in pain as the Aurors grabbed him around the arms and dragged him away from the cell.

“We said, don’t cross the bloody yellow line,” snapped one of them, as Harry was thrust through the door and out into the corridor.

Suddenly the scene changed.

Harry left the kitchen and headed towards the Room of Requirement. He felt that he had better not risk waking his mother tonight. He had been walking for a few minutes when a sudden feeling of sickness overtook him. He doubled up in pain, grasping his stomach. His phoenix senses were going haywire as he fell to his knees in pain. He felt sick, and was covered in a cold sweat. Suddenly a streak of pain shot through his head. It wasn’t his scar, but something else. Icy pain surged into every corner of his brain. He grasped at his temples as he fell to his knees. He gasped for air and shook his head, trying to shake away the disorientation. Suddenly his body relaxed, and he felt strangely light-headed. He somehow knew he had something to do. He rose to his feet in a calm movement and began to walk slowly up towards Dumbledore’s office. He arrived at the gargoyle and gave it the password. He ascended the stairs and approached the door, disappearing in a ball of flame. He reappeared inside the locked office. It was deserted except for Fawkes, who was asleep with his head under his wing. The bird stirred as Harry appeared. He gave him an appraising look, and then tucked his head back under his wing. Harry crossed slowly to the Pensieve. He removed his wand and uttered the spells that seemed to come to him from the great beyond. In seconds, he was holding an old wine bottle, full of memories. They were an exact copy of Dumbledore’s Pensieve. With that full, he crossed to the window and opened it. Outside, the owls were out on their nightly hunts. Harry took out his wand and cast a summoning charm. The indignity of being yanked out of mid-flight was not lost on the owl, who stood on the sill and gave Harry an evil glance. Harry attached the heavy bottle to the bird’s leg.

“See this finds its way to Bellatrix Black,” he told the owl, before shutting the window in its face. That done, Harry turned and disappeared in a ball of flame, reappearing at the top of the stairs that led back down to the gargoyles. He had gone perhaps three steps beyond the gargoyles when the dizziness returned. A piercing pain struck his mind and he fell to his knees, the pain stabbing every corner of his mind. His hands shook as he tried to massage his temples. The memories were being sealed painfully behind the cap, ensuring he would never recall what he had just done, unless a very powerful Legilimens should find and break the cap.

Suddenly, as quickly as it had come, it was all gone. Harry looked up and glanced around, gasping for breath. He was standing outside the gargoyle.

This isn’t the way to the Room of Requirement, thought Harry to himself as he rubbed his aching temples. How the hell had he gotten up here, when he had set off in the opposite

direction? He had been deep in thought, letting his feet lead him. He hadn't been looking where he was going and had probably taken a wrong turn. Idiot. I'm losing it, he concluded. I need rest.

Snape ended the spell and lowered his wand. He and Harry locked eyes for a second. Harry couldn't read his expression, but Harry's was plain to read: horror. He should have known that Voldemort would not just release him. He knew someone was looking after Voldemort, but he never told Dawlish of his suspicions. Tonks had even said that he had been in there longer than ten minutes, and now he knew why. How had he been so stupid? Of course he would have done something. And worse, Harry had given them Dumbledore's Pensieve. That was how they knew exactly who to target in the Purges. They had a list of who was in the Order as well as those Dumbledore suspected. They knew exactly where and when to hit them. Harry had effectively handed victory to Voldemort. He felt sick as he sat in the chair. His mouth opened and closed, but no words came out.

His expression neutral, Snape began to convey what he and Harry had just seen to Flamel. It took no more than a minute, but Harry wasn't listening. The images repeated over and over in his mind. He was not on Voldemort's side, but he was still Voldemort's weapon. It was all his fault. If he hadn't been so stupid, he could have prevented this. How many would now die for his stupidity? He felt sick.

"It's all my fault," he muttered, not even realising that he had said it out loud.

"There's no way you could have known," said Flamel gently, laying a hand on his shoulder. He was just trying to comfort Harry, but his words had no effect. It was all his fault!

"I should never have gone to see him," said Harry. "Snape here even warned me. You said he couldn't be tricked so easily, but I went in."

"Albus and I agreed with you," said Flamel. "We were all taken in by the lie. If you want to assign blame, do so, but not all to yourself. You are not alone. We all made mistakes along the way."

"How'd we miss all the signs?" asked Harry. Where had it all gone wrong? "I can't believe it's gotten so bad. There doesn't seem to be a way back."

"Hope remains," said Flamel. "We are here, and we shall not give up. Now let us think rationally. The cap is removed so you are no longer a threat, so let's move on. Damage assessment: he knows about where you come from. If he is knowledgeable he may try to search for this book, or even beyond it to this Node. Your world could now be in danger. Also, he knows about the Order, every last one of us, but he doesn't know that the cap has been destroyed and won't until he tries to use you again."

"Professor," said Harry. "What did Voldemort mean when he called me a Horcrux?" Harry glanced at Flamel, who visibly paled.

“Harry is a Horcrux, Severus?” asked Flamel. Presumably, Snape hadn’t passed that on to Flamel. Snape nodded. Flamel looked very pale. He took a deep breath.

“From Severus’ reaction,” began Flamel. “I assume that he does not know what one is either.” Snape shook his head slightly. Flamel put his head in his hands and sighed deeply. He brought his head back up, suddenly looking older than he had moments ago. “A Horcrux is perhaps the most foul invention in the whole of magic. No book in the library will speak of them. They are pure evil, and it takes pure evil to make one. What I am about to tell you must never ever leave this room, understand?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

“Severus?” asked Flamel, raising an eyebrow. Any hint of fun was gone from his eyes. This was Flamel at his most serious. Harry felt, for the first time, a little afraid of his teacher. Snape seemed to come to the same conclusion. If Flamel was treating even Snape like a pupil, this was very, very serious. Snape seemed to understand that too.

“A Horcrux,” said Flamel. “Is an object or person, in which one can encase part of one’s soul. It takes an act of pure evil, i.e. a murder, to rip the soul in two and bind it to that object or person. If the person is killed, they will not truly die, for part of their soul still exists. They will be less than human, less than a ghost, but alive. It is then theoretically possible to regain their body.”

Harry had broken into a cold sweat. The words seemed so familiar. Voldemort had never died when the Killing Curse rebounded on him. He remembered his words in the graveyard:

“Less than a spirit, less than the meanest ghost...but still, I was alive.”

He had split his soul; somehow, Voldemort had made a Horcrux. That was how he survived, and how he regained his body.

“Bone of a father, unknowingly given,” said Harry softly, breaking the silence that had descended on the office. “Flesh of a servant, willingly given. Blood of an enemy, forcefully taken.”

“What?” asked Snape.

“That was the potion that my Voldemort used to get his body back,” explained Harry. “That was why he never died. His curse rebounded on him, but he never died. He must have had a Horcrux.”

“It does sound like it,” conceded Flamel. “But I am not an expert on them. My old friend Horace Slughorn, (you should remember him Severus, as a former member of Slytherin), he was more of an expert. But let us put that aside. The point is, is Harry truly a Horcrux?”

“I think I am,” said Harry. “I remember when he spoke to me. He said I begged him to use me, that I picked the Attacus woman to be the sacrifice. It all fits.”

“Caitlyn Attacus was murdered at the Devil’s Cauldron,” said Snape. “It was part of the ceremony that made Potter the Dark Lord’s heir.”

“It was all for show,” said Flamel. “He needed to murder a person to make one. It was all done to show his power and to mask what was really happening. I don’t believe a single Death Eater knows what he was doing, in case they betrayed him. He wouldn’t take the chance.”

“So I am a Horcrux,” said Harry. “I have to die before he will.”

“Not necessarily,” said Flamel. “Remember, you are not the Harry he chose. When a living person is used, does the soul reside in the host’s soul or the body? In your case, this is significant. I do not honestly know the answer. It may be you, or it may be the other Harry.”

“Either way,” said Harry., “Locating him has just become a high priority. Also, we should warn every informant still out there that they are compromised.”

“That will be simple enough,” said Snape. “Our only problem is Grymes.”

“Who?”

“Our double of Rodolphus Lestrangle,” said Snape. “He is in deep cover.”

“But surely if I compromised him, he would be the first killed?” asked Harry.

“He still sent us inform...” Snape trailed off. “Information that led us straight into Tom’s hands.”

“The real Lestrangle must have taken his place,” said Harry. “We were fed false information.” Harry glanced at Flamel to see if he agreed with his theory. To his surprise, the Professor was white.

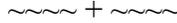
“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” said Harry.

“Lestrangle contacted me this morning,” said Flamel shakily. “He said he had information that he needed delivered in person. I sent someone to meet him in The Hog’s Head garden. It was supposed to be about now that they meet.”

“Who did you send?” asked Harry, rising to his feet.

“Your mother!”

Harry didn’t hesitate. He disappeared instantly in a ball of flame.



Lily poked her head around the corner, peering over the wall and into the overgrown beer garden of the Hog's Head. The walls were covered in ivy, the flowerbeds covered in brambles, and the paving slabs stained with green moss, while grass filled the gaps in the stone. On the furthest table, in fact the only one in one piece, sat a figure in black robes. That must be Grymes.

Lily stepped out of the alleyway and into the garden. Her soft shoes made no sound as she crossed the garden, approaching the figure. There was a drink on the table in front of the figure, though it had not been touched.

"Grymes?" said Lily softly as she approached.

The figure looked up and Lily found herself looking into the eyes of Rodolphus Lestrage. Lily knew Grymes from her days at Hogwarts, where he had been a year below her, but she would never get used to staring at Lestrage's face and speaking to Grymes. There was just something creepy about the way he looked at her.

"You wanted to meet?" she asked, sitting down.

"You came alone?" he asked. "You weren't followed?" The voice was so cold. He was the perfect double for the murderer, even if it did send shivers down her spine.

"No," said Lily impatiently.

"Good," said Grymes. "Follow me."

He rose from the bench, leaving his drink untouched, and headed for a gate in the wall that led out the back of the garden and into the woods. He opened the gate and gestured for her to go through.

"Ladies first," he said, smiling slightly.

Lily stepped through, into the woodlands at the back of the pub. Lying in an unnatural position on the floor and covered in blood was the naked body of a man. Lily gasped in surprise at the site of the obviously deceased body.

"What's going..." she trailed off, as she turned to see him standing behind her, a wand levelled at Lily's neck. What on earth was going on? Who was the body? Why was...?

"Look familiar?" asked a sweet female voice to Lily's right. She turned to face the speaker. A robed figure stepped out from behind a moss-covered tree and stepped carefully into the clearing in which they stood. "Desmond Grymes," continued the robed woman, her voice strangely familiar. "Of eleven Caldwell Street, Nottingham, thirty-four years of age, former Auror whose hobbies include fishing, bowling and Quidditch, and until very recently, was a member of the Order of the Phoenix." Lily's mind was reeling. How did they know so much, and

if this was Grymes, then who was Lestr...it was the real person! They had been discovered and now, the real Lestrangle was back in place. This was a trap. Lily grabbed her wand.

“Expelliarmus!”

Her wand flew out of her hand, flying into the undergrowth and disappearing into a patch of nettles.

“Now we’ve been here before, haven’t we Lily?” said the robed woman, lowering her hood to reveal a head of platinum hair. Lily knew now where she had heard the voice before – on the lips of one person she loathed more than any other alive.

“Narcissa,” said Lily, her blood beginning to boil. Her fists clenched in anger at the sight of the woman. “Though this time,” continued Narcissa. “There is no Dumbledore or Potter to protect you, while I have Rodolphus here.”

“Still getting men to fight your fights?” sneered Lily. “Not that I didn’t enjoy the sight of James hexing Lucius and that psychotic sister of yours, but it is just plain cowardly, Narcissa.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” snapped Narcissa.

“I know you would screw anyone who could get you ahead,” said Lily. “Nothing changed. You screwed, you married, you got your money, and where did it lead you? A life of servitude to Tom bloody Riddle.”

“Who, if you hadn’t noticed, is taking over,” snapped Narcissa as she stepped closer, her wand now drawn. “I’ll be at his side when he does. I will survive, which is more than I can say for you.”

“I’d rather live for one year than survive for ten,” said Lily. “You’ve never felt what love is, never felt part of something, not even a family. Even your son was an accident. You can kill me and help Riddle take over, but it won’t bring you happiness. You have nothing of value, Narcissa, just numbers on a cheque, nothing more. Your money won’t help you any more than it can help me now, only love can.”

“You know nothing, Mudblood,” sneered Narcissa. She was erratic and couldn’t argue, just insult.

“That didn’t used to matter, did it?” asked Lily. “Where did we go wrong?”

“We never were,” said Narcissa. “You’re right in your case. I gave you my time, simply as a means to an end. I have no further use for you, and now I’m going to prove it. You are going to die, Lily Evans, and die alone. Let’s see if love and family which you hold so dear can protect you.”

“They can!” said another voice.

Narcissa whirled to her right, just in time to get hit by a Disarming Charm. Her wand flew through the air and landed in the dirt. Suddenly, a familiar figure dived out from behind the tree while unleashing another disarming charm in mid-air. He rolled back to his feet, just as Lestrage's wand flew out of his hands. Harry had come! He had come to save her. She had never been so glad to see her son, yet at the same time, she was angry that he had put himself in danger for her. He was her son and she wanted him safe in the castle.

He stepped carefully into the clearing, a wand in each hand. One was pointed at Narcissa, now wandless, and the other at Gry...Lestrage. Harry glanced quickly from one to the other. There was a coldness in his eyes that worried Lily. She had never seen him in a fight before, and the look he gave Narcissa and Lestrage scared her a little.

"Mum, catch," he said. Harry threw Lily's wand, which he had been holding in his left hand, back to her. Harry kicked Narcissa's wand into the undergrowth as Lily caught her own wand and levelled it at Narcissa. It would be so easy just to... No! She was better than that!

"Lestrage," Harry called out to the other Death Eater who had made no move to escape nor hex anyone. "Why don't you ask Bellatrix to marry you? Scared?" What? What was he on about? They should bind the Death Eaters and get out of here as soon as possible.

"Put your wands down," said a voice behind Harry. As Lily turned, she saw that no less than ten Death Eaters, in full robes and masks, were coming towards them through the trees. Jesus! That was why Narcissa didn't look worried.

"You can't escape Lily," said Narcissa as she lowered her arms. "There are wards all over the woods. Give it up, you too Harry."

"Mum," said Harry, turning to face them and lowering his wands. "When you have a cold, what does your nose do?" What? She didn't have a cold. What did he mean? Was it a riddle? This was no time for jokes. The answer was 'it runs', but what did that have to do with...oh. RUN!

Harry suddenly fired a spell into the ground. Whatever it was, it sent a cloud of mud ten feet into the air, masking their escape as he darted towards her, grabbing her arm and running to the side. They had gone perhaps ten feet, when there was a shout behind them.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Lily threw herself to the ground, right into a patch of brambles as the curse flew over her head. She could feel the power of the curse as it rocketed past her and the sharp thorns of the brambles where she lay. Harry was next to her in an instant, lying on the ground. He grabbed her by the arms. What was he doing?

"Hold on!" he said.

A second later, she felt a tremendous whoosh, and her whole body was being crushed just like Apparation. Flames filled her eyes, but she didn't feel hot or burned. The next thing she knew, she was in Nicolas' office, at Hogwarts. The owner was sitting at his desk, speaking into a Frog Card. He glanced up as they appeared.

"Never mind," he said into the card. "She's back, safe and sound." He pocketed the card and turned to face Lily.

"You're not hurt?" asked Flamel instantly. "Severus is already on his way to the pub."

"We're fine," said Lily, brushing herself off. "What on earth was that, Harry? And how did you Apparate into Hogwarts?"

"It's complicated," said Harry, avoiding her eyes and the question.

"Lily," said Nicolas gently. "New evidence has just come to light, which raises as many questions as it answers. I will fill in you and Minerva when she arrives. For now, we must excuse Harry, for he has a class to attend. Harry, we will meet again tomorrow, okay?"

"Fine," said Harry. "See you later, Mum." He pocketed his wand before leaving the office.

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"Good evening," said Harry from atop of the teacher's table at the front of the Great Hall. The tables had been cleared to the side, leaving room to practice. Harry was impressed by the turnout, though Rookwood's words about what would happen if he didn't teach as Rookwood wanted, still bothered him. What did he know that Harry didn't? What was going to happen to Hermione and 'her lot'? He could see most of the upper years and quite a few from the lower years. The houses naturally stuck together, and even Hermione, a noted loner, was in with the sixth year Gryffindors. Since the trip to the army bunker in Princetown, Ron had been a lot less discriminating towards her.

Harry had rehearsed what to say earlier that day. He had spent the morning with Flamel and the afternoon with McGonagall, as well as attended his lessons, courtesy of the Time Turner. He had discussed it with them and his mother, and he knew he had to slow the progress as much as possible and keep the Dark Arts out of it. It was just a matter of doing all that as well as teaching the students to defend themselves. It was a fine balance. The incident with his mother had reiterated the need for urgency with this club. In fact, Lily herself had gone off to meet James, somewhere to the North. Harry wanted to go and see his father and Sirius, but he knew he had to stay. He had been a bit distracted all day since news of the Horcruxes theory and the discovery that he had handed the war to Voldemort. He tried to put all that pressure to the side as he spoke to the group. He was not comfortable with talking to a group of people, but his experience with the DA last year had given him a little more confidence.

“Welcome to the Duelling Club,” he continued, ever more aware that Rookwood was standing in the corner of the room, keeping an eye on him. “This is essentially an extension to the Defence Against the Dark Arts lessons you already take with Professor Snape. As you can see from the *Prophet*, the scum-bags in the Ministry are up to their necks in the Dark Ar...”

“Potter!” snapped Rookwood, rising angrily to his feet. Harry stopped and glared at the High Inquisitor. He couldn’t sit back and let him fill their heads with the Dark Arts.

“So duelling is a high priority,” continued Harry, glaring at Rookwood. “These lessons are designed to give you the ability to defend yourselves, *not* to hurt other students – that’s what the new Dark Arts lessons are for...” There was a laugh from the Gryffindors, which was quickly quashed by the High Inquisitor jumping angrily to his feet again.

“Potter, I’m warning you!” snarled Rookwood.

“Don’t get your knickers in a knot,” said Harry calmly. As before, the lack of respect caused Rookwood to go a deeper shade of red. Harry smirked and then turned back to the students. “If I had my way, I’d ban the Dark Arts, but since I can’t, those lessons will start next week. What you learn in those lessons stays in those lessons. If anyone uses the Dark Arts here, they’ll answer to me.”

“It is not better to give them a broader spectrum of spells?” said Rookwood in a clipped tone. “Doesn’t it bother you that they will only have experience with half the spells that can be used against them?”

“No,” said Harry icily. “*You* sold your soul for power, but most of us have more moral fibre than that.”

“You’re on thin ice, Potter,” said Rookwood. Harry didn’t even dignify him with an answer.

“In answer to the question,” he continued, addressing the hall. “You will learn enough to be able to defend yourself, and bring an enemy down, alive, without starting down the Dark road, which has only one outcome. If you want more details about becoming a Death Eater, head to the Dark Arts class; if you want to know how to learn how to bring one down, you’ve come to the right place.” Rookwood didn’t interrupt this time, but shot Harry a look of daggers.

“But enough of an introduction,” said Harry. “You will all be at different stages, so today will be about finding out where you are in the great scheme of things and putting you into groups accordingly. From there, we’ll teach you to kick arse. Year groups would be a good start, so get together in your year groups and then I’ll alter them according to ability. I want you to duel in your pairs, but I emphasise, no Dark Arts, or you will incur my displeasure.”

Harry demonstrated three spells to the Club, using Ron as a guinea pig. The spells in question were the Disarming Charm, Stunner and Shield. He directed everyone to find a partner in their own year group and practice duelling, sticking only to these three spells. Than done, he

began to circulate, visiting each year group in turn and asking the older years to demonstrate various spells, hexes and defences. He grouped the first two years together and the top two, resulting in five different groups. To each of these groups he gave a list of spells, based on their level to incorporate them into the duels they were having. He was not really teaching much, more assessing how everyone was doing. The results were disturbing. Even with spells they had never done before, the Slytherins and several others from other houses were very aggressive, even though the spells themselves were relatively harmless. This was an ominous sign of how the group was to go. Harry stipulated that the top group of sixth and seventh years had to perform all spells in silence. He rearranged the groups slightly as he toured. He brought Rose and Ginny up to the top group, along with three others with potential or experience. He moved seven, including Crabbe and Goyle, down a year to go with the OWL class, but resisted the urge to demote Malfoy, despite Ron's frantic not-so-subtle gestures. This was partially because Malfoy was his source in Riddle's camp, and partly because if Harry was being honest, it was where he belonged. Malfoy had been avoiding Harry since his display in the DADA class, but Harry had cornered him last night. He had made it clear that he was off the hook, but if he wanted to serve the Dark Lord he would have to learn to control his impulses. Personally, Harry thought he deserved an Oscar for his performance.

*“Do you think I don't yearn to throw curses around this bloody school at the bollocking Mudbloods?” he had said. “Do you think I am enjoying having my hands tied? No, I'm not, but I too serve the Dark Lord and for him I have to put up with a lot of crap from McGonagall as well as Rookwood in his ignorance, and the last thing I need is you adding to my list of problems.”*

“These groups,” shouted Harry, bringing the duelling to an end., “Will remain for the time being. If I feel you are progressing or falling behind, I will move you later, but for now this will do. Next time I will come around to each of the groups and give you each some tricks of the trade and additional spells to learn. The OWL group will go over everything in the OWL Defence Exam as well as my own additions, and the same with NEWTs. This is a two hour club, so from next week on, the seven 'till eight session is for the lower years and the eight 'till nine session is for the OWL and NEWT groups. I know this whole club may seem daunting, but remember this is not a class. You cannot fail and you will not be left behind. My objective is to make sure you have fun as well as learn an important lesson. Another thing I must emphasise is that you are safe in this class. Outside this class, bear in mind that these spells are for defence only. Anyone, and that includes the Inquisitorial Squad, *anyone* who uses these spells for attack or bullying will find themselves in detention for a month. Understand?”

There was a general nod that went around, though Pansy Parkinson looked pensive. Harry had a feeling she was thinking of a loophole.

“Now,” he continued, ending her thinking time. “Hermione, you know the spells on the NEWT list already. If you would be so kind as to guide the three lower groups through their lists? OWL and NEWT groups will come with me. Let's take a ride on the wild side.”

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“My neck and arm still hurt from last night,” Ginny informed Harry the next day at breakfast. It was Thursday and all the sixth years had a lesson first period. Ginny continued to massage her shoulder and neck with her hand while attempting to eat with the other, the result being that she dropped some soggy Rice Krispies down her top, much to Dean Thomas’ amusement. Harry considered informing Ginny that she and Dean were an item in his world and he most likely had feelings for her in this world. Harry was not entirely sure what to look for, but he was fairly certain that his theory was correct.

The meeting of the Duelling Club had gone downhill when Rookwood hijacked the club and insisted that Dark Arts be incorporated into the lesson, which had sparked a demonstration with Harry in which Rookwood had given Harry a bad headache. They had had half an hour of decent practice, when Rookwood had decided the lists were inadequate and had added to them.

Harry shot a dirty look at Parkinson, across the Hall. She was with her usual crew, all of whom seemed very much amused by her impression of Ginny the cripple. Theodore Nott had removed all feeling and movement from her arm with one spell last night, but in Rookwood’s presence, Harry could not intervene. Harry was annoyed that as well as Horcruxes and a war, he had to cope with detentions and stupid little bullies. His life just seemed to get harder and harder.

Across the hall, Parkinson leaned back in her chair and then twisted her body, allowing her arm to flap around like a rubber glove, making the audience roar with laughter. Harry remembered all too well what it was like to have no bones in his arm, but made no comment to anyone about it. Rookwood had not exactly cared about Ginny’s arm, and so Harry had led her to the Hospital Wing, which involved leaving his sister and friends alone with Rookwood. Not what he had wanted to do, but he had had no choice.

“So what are we all doing today?” asked Harry, finishing his breakfast, trying to raise the mood, which was easier said than done these days.

“Lessons, library, lessons, lunch, lessons, library,” said Ginny sadly. “Rookwood, Snape, and McGonagall have all set an essay in for Friday. We’re in the shite at the moment.”

“That’s how Rookwood wants us,” said Hermione, bitterly. “Pinned down so we don’t have the time to organise against him.” Harry was impressed that she was complaining about work being set rather than Harry’s not having done it. It was a change, and it fuelled his hope that maybe she would become the Hermione she was capable of being.

Harry wondered if Voldemort knew he might try to form a DA from having seen Harry’s memories of the DA when he Legilimised him. It was entirely possible, but Harry didn’t think he was being watched any more than any other Order member. Still, he made a mental note to be more careful when going to see Flamel and McGonagall. He felt that there was weight behind what Hermione was saying. As long as they were buried in work, they didn’t have the time or the energy to defy him. He wished the twins were still at school so they could wreak havoc, but sadly they had left last year. So what was Rookwood waiting for? Why was he appraising the staff first? What other changes did he have in mind, besides Dark Arts classes? Being a Death Eater, there was no telling, but it had to be subtle or the parents wouldn’t stand for it. What had

he meant by ‘cleaning this place up?’ He seemed to be waiting for something, and it wasn’t coming.

“Post’s here!” announced Ron as the fluttering of wings became audible high above them. The owls came swooping into the hall. Harry’s first thought was that there was a lot mail. The room seemed almost full of owls. Despite the air being thick with owls, Harry received nothing, but then again he had not been expecting to. He had no one to send him mail in this world, and it was too easy to intercept. Ron didn’t get anything, but one owl landed in front of Hermione and another in front of Dean.

“What’s all this?” asked Ron. Harry too was wondering.

“The Ministry are probably sending out another leaflet to everyone,” said Ginny. “Happens every few months. We’ll get some tomorrow probably. Probably ‘what to do if you see a member of the Order of the Phoenix walking down the street’.”

“It’s worse,” said Hermione weakly. Her voice cracked and when Harry turned to face her, tears were running down her cheeks.

“What’s wrong?” asked Harry. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that others were having similar reactions. Crying was all around the hall and many people were angrily reading the letters that had arrived. Hermione offered hers to Harry. He took it and began to read.

Miss Granger,

Given the current war raging in the Wizarding World at this time, the safety of the students is our first priority. It has therefore been decided that your presence at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is no longer appropriate. The Ministry of Magic has deemed that for their own protection, all Muggle-Born students should be returned to the Muggle world for their own safety and their wands destroyed. In accordance with these new regulations, it is with deep regret that I must ask you to leave the school.

The Hogwarts Express will arrive this coming Sunday at midday to take you all back to Kings Cross Station. Please notify your parents/guardians and arrange to be collected. You are to be clear of your dormitory by eleven and submit your wand for destruction before eleven thirty.

You have done great things in your time here, but the time has come to return to where you belong. Good luck in your new life.

*Sincerely,
Prof. A. Rookwood
High Inquisitor
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*

“Jesus,” breathed Harry. Looking around, he could see that she was not the only one to get this letter. Justin Finch-Fletchley and Dean Thomas were both staring, crestfallen, at the letters. Around the hall, people were gathering to read the letters that were causing so much distress. The noise was getting louder as crying broke out, as well as angry conversations in hushed voices, for fear of the Inquisitorial Squad.

This was wrong. Didn't anyone see? This is where they belonged! They were wizards and witches, not Muggles. They had grown up in this world and here they should stay. This was what Rookwood had been planning. The meaning of 'Clean this place up' was now perfectly clear. This was his attempt to create a Pureblooded society.

Tears and other reactions were growing. Harry glanced at the head table. People were trying to comfort their friends who were shortly to be sent home, never to return. McGonagall had noticed the disturbance, but had yet to see the letters. Rookwood was casually eating his breakfast, oblivious to the anger and sorrow he was causing all around. He was casually eating a sausage and smiling to himself. The git couldn't seriously be pleased with himself, could he? By the look of it the answer was yes.

Harry had a good mind to go up there and scream at him in the middle of the hall, but thought better of it. He needed to consult with McGonagall. She had risen from her seat and was walking towards the Gryffindor Table. Flamel and Lily had stopped eating and were watching McGonagall. Snape had gone over to talk to Rookwood. Whose side was he on?

“What is causing this disturbance?” asked McGonagall as she drew nearer to them.

“Rookwood is kicking the Muggleborns out of Hogwarts,” said Harry angrily. There was no point tiptoeing around the problem. “He's creating his perfect society. Professor, is there anything you can do?” There was no way they were going to accept this. Hermione was a witch and she was staying here.

“I can speak to him,” said McGonagall with a sigh. “But I fear he outranks me at this time.” Damn! Harry thought back to Umbridge. McGonagall was right; Rookwood would not be changed by the Headmistress. He'd kick her out too.

“If you complain, he will pass an education decree at best, and fire and arrest you at worst,” said Harry. “I've seen this happen before.” Umbridge had been bad, but there was no telling what Rookwood was capable of. Harry slammed his fist down angrily on the table, turning a few heads. He realised that there was only one choice. Defying Rookwood risked punishment, not against him, but against Hermione. “I'm sorry, Hermione, but we must sit this one out.”

“But this is my home,” protested Hermione desperately. “I'm a witch.” Tears sparkled in her eyes, and her voice shook as she spoke. Harry didn't know what to say. He knew he wanted her to stay, and that she wanted to stay, but he also knew of the price she would pay for it if she stayed in the castle with him. Her parents would be made to suffer. It would also be unfair for all

the others who were being sent home. He couldn't offer a home to Dean, Justin and the others. No, as much as it hurt, he had to accept this for the time being.

"And a brilliant one at that," said McGonagall, sitting next to Hermione to comfort her. "Rest assured, we will do all we can to get you back. However, if you stay you will become a target. Your parents will be picked off, and your life made hell. At home, at least you will be safe. I know this is hard, Miss Granger, but I urge you not to appeal. Remember who is the Minister of Magic. You will be thrown out and charged with wasting Wizengamot time, I shouldn't wonder."

"I have no choice, do I?" said Hermione, putting her head in her hands. Harry gently rested a hand on her shoulder and gave her a gentle squeeze.

"We'll get you back," said Harry. He didn't know how, but he knew that eventually, Hermione would return to Hogwarts. He would see to it. "We'll show them that it's wrong to screw with us." Hermione looked up from her hands at Harry, her eyes still spilling tears down her cheeks.

"That's right," said Ginny. "Consider this a holiday. You'll be back before you know it." She gave Hermione an encouraging wink.

"Or even a reading week," suggested Rose. Even Hermione cracked a smile at that before dissolving into tears. Harry sank into the seat next to her and put an arm around her. "Shhh," he tried to comfort her.

"In my world you drove the High Inquisitor out into the Forbidden Forest and saved my life in the process," he whispered in her ear. "I promise you, Hermione, I am going to repay that debt. I'll drive Rookwood from this school. You'll make Head Girl yet." She was trembling in his arms, but he felt her squeeze him, in what he hoped was thanks.

"Can I have your attention, please," called McGonagall above the din. "The letters some of you have received have just been brought to my attention. For now, please attend lessons as normal. During the lunch hour today, there will be a meeting for all whom this concerns in here, at which Professor Rookwood will be available to answer any questions you have on the subject, won't you Professor." She added icily, addressing Rookwood, who had risen from his seat.

"There is a copy of the new legislation on your desk, Professor McGonagall," said Rookwood matter-of-factly. "All the answers are on there. You can host this meeting yourself. I have better things to do." With that, he pushed past McGonagall and made towards the exit. Harry was on his feet in a second, his arm out to block Rookwood. Something about his uncaring tone pushed Harry past his limits.

"Remember what I said, Rookwood," hissed Harry in his ear. "What goes around comes around."

“These orders come from the Minister himself,” said Rookwood. “Take it up with him.” With that he pushed past Harry and left. Harry considered cursing him in the back, but it would only make things worse.

“I’ll..just...I’ll just go and pack then,” Hermione muttered, getting shakily to her feet. She staggered off towards the door. Harry glanced over at the Slytherin table, many of which’s occupants were wearing smirks and exchanging excited chatter. Malfoy wasn’t hiding his pleasure at the morning’s events; neither was Parkinson. Harry’s and Malfoy’s eyes met for a second, and Harry gestured to the door. With that he stormed out of the room.

He waited to the side of the door for no more than a minute when Malfoy emerged. Harry grabbed him by the lapels and lifted him clean off his feet, slamming his back into the wall.

“Why didn’t you tell me this was going to happen?” he hissed, seething with anger. Malfoy was supposed to be his spy. He had never mentioned this to Dumbledore, so Voldemort never got this information from the Pensieve. His cover was not blown, so why had he not informed Harry as instructed? Was he too scared to come to him after the duelling incident?

“I tried,” coughed Malfoy, his eyes wide with fear. “I couldn’t find you. You disappear between lessons, I never see you. I daren’t knock on your mother’s doors in case she answers. I did try, honestly I did.” Harry dropped him in frustration and turned away, kicking the wall in frustration. “Is this really a bad thing, anyway?” Malfoy asked, straightening his robes.

“Yes,” said Harry as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Does that man not know the meaning of ‘softly softly catchy monkey’? He was supposed to be subtle.”

“Why?”

“Because this is so obviously wrong that it draws attention to the changes we are making,” said Harry. “We are trying to be discrete, which is why you are hearing nothing in the *Prophet*.”

“Shall I get a message to father?” asked Malfoy. “I could get it undone.”

“No,” said Harry. “What’s done is done. I’ll make sure he slows this down a bit. That’s all for now. Make no mention of this to Rookwood.” With that, he stormed off to his mother’s living quarters.

She had recovered from the shock of her ambush a few days earlier, but being Muggleborn herself, she was deeply affected by these letters. While she had not received one herself, she was very on edge; when Harry found her, she was pacing her rooms in anger, ranting to herself. Harry feared that as soon as a Pure-blooded Potions Professor could be found, she too would receive a letter.

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On Friday morning, Harry entered Rookwood's dungeon at nine o'clock for his first Dark Arts lesson. Flamel warned him about the detrimental effect this would have on his mental health and Occlumency skills. He offered to give Harry a sick note and allow him to do something more useful, but Harry insisted that he needed to attend. He had secured a Skiving Snackbox from the twins, just in case, but he didn't think he'd need it. Glancing around, he noticed Malfoy and the other Slytherins looking quite excited. Hermione was in the lesson for her final day of classes. She had not attended any yesterday, but had locked herself in her dormitory and refused to come out. Today she was braving the world and the spiteful Slytherins, who taunted her wherever she went. Now though, they had something to distract them: Dark Arts classes. She looked distant and crestfallen as she sat near the back, staring into space.

"This is how Dumbledore should be doing it," Malfoy was telling the Slytherins. "Father nearly sent me Durmstrang where they teach this kind of stuff, rather than the poxy defence stuff Dumbledore has us do. Finally, someone has seen sense. Rookwood is probably the best thing to happen to this school." He looked around at his audience, beaming. His eyes locked with Harry's over the heads of the Slytherins. He shot Harry a wink. Harry felt a rush of anger at him, but managed to control himself. He shook his head at Malfoy with a small glare. Malfoy got the message. The smirk faded for an instant at Harry's put down.

The other Slytherins nodded in agreement as Malfoy continued. Harry took a seat just inside the door, on the far side of the room from Malfoy. All of the sixth year was in this class, and the room was full. Harry glanced around, noting that he was surrounded by Hufflepuffs. The Gryffindors were sitting near the back in two rows.

Harry was interrupted from his thoughts by the arrival of Rookwood.

"Good morning, class," said Rookwood, sitting down behind his desk. "I will not waste time with introductions, as we only have two years to fit in seven years of learning. It is a great shame that no such subject has been introduced before. Contrary to their name, the Dark Arts are not evil, merely another avenue of magic ripe for the picking. Most of you will have been raised with the black and white notion that anything containing the word Dark is wrong."

"Dark Lord, for instance," muttered Harry. Those around him heard, but unfortunately, so did Rookwood.

"You have something to add, Mister Potter?" he sneered at Harry. "We both know your history, so please bestow your knowledge upon us."

"If the word Dark does not mean evil," said Harry just as patronisingly, "Surely the *Dark* Lord is a lovely bloke once you get to know him. I can just imagine him donating his slippers to charity, doing the tea at the Sunday cricket game and arranging flowers at the old people's home."

"Ten points from Gryffindor," snapped Rookwood. "And detention this evening."

“As I was saying,” continued Rookwood. “Many people see the word ‘Dark’ and turn their noses up, but to the more rational of you, the Dark Arts represent a limitless avenue of magical advancement. Those of you raised by traditional and open-minded parents may even have been given a basic introduction into these arts. Is that the case?”

A few Slytherins nodded, but by and large the room looked black. Malfoy and the Slytherins were practically on the edge of their seats.

“Today we begin with some basic attacks used in duelling. Up until now, you will have done the Stunning Spell and maybe a few more, but nothing with any kick to it. An average wizard can block a Stunner without breaking a sweat, so we need a curse strong enough to break through a shield. I have three in mind for you today. The first is called the *Palarius* Curse. The nature of the curse is that it induces an asthma attack kind of reaction, by crushing the lungs of your opponent. Yes.” He pointed to a girl with her hand raised. Harry was sure Rookwood didn’t know or care about her name.

“Is this really something that should be taught to children?” asked Hannah Abbot. “Isn’t this training to hurt each other?”

“Certainly not,” said Rookwood. “It is to be used responsibly, and in a duel, it is a powerful technique. If your opponent can’t breathe, he can’t curse you.” Was Rookwood listening to himself? Didn’t he realise how wrong this was? He was teaching them to seriously injure each other. He wasn’t even building it slowly; he was throwing them in at the deep end.

“Surely that could kill them, though,” interrupted someone behind Harry.

“Put your hand up if you have a question,” said Rookwood casually, and didn’t answer the question. “The second curse is called *Sectumsempra*.” Harry froze. He had seen that spell in his annotated Potions book. Whoever had owned it was a little darker than he had imagined. “*Sectumsempra* is a very powerful attack,” continued Rookwood. “The curse can cause death if hit on say the heart or the head, but it is not lethal if say hit on the leg or arm.

“The third is called the *Fieracus* Curse,” said Rookwood. “It has the effect of badly blistering the affected area. This, again, is one to use responsibly.”

“Like on a Death Eater raid, for example,” said Harry. “When you have an innocent child to torture, and the tickling charm just won’t do.”

“Mr. Potter, that is your second and final warning,” said Rookwood. “Now, Mr. Malfoy, would you be kind enough to demonstrate the *Sectumsempra* Curse on the dummy in the corner. I will provide the shield. If successful, your curse should puncture my shield and hit the target.” Malfoy rose from his desk and smirking, walked to the front of the class. Harry hoped the shield would hold and Malfoy would get it right back in his face. At least he would get a chance to see what *Sectumsempra* actually did. Malfoy took out his wand and after a nod from Rookwood, he swung his wand in in a slashing movement at the dummy.

“*SECTUMSEMPRA!*” he shouted. A very dark blue light shot out of his wand towards the dummy.

“*Protego!*” shouted Rookwood. His shield snapped into place around the dummy, but it did no good. The shield burst like a balloon and the curse shot through to the chest of the wooden dummy. The curse hit in the heart and below the entire left shoulder off the dummy, causing the left arm to drop to the floor with a loud clatter.

“Excellent,” said Rookwood, clapping. “The wand movement was perfect. It is a slashing movement, much like if you were using a sword. Now class, I know that Mr. Malfoy has had some prior training, so this first fortnight is about bringing you all up to speed. The incantation and wand movement are on the parchment in front of you. I want each of you to do it in turn. Now, the movement and words are not enough. As with most of the Dark Arts, you need to really put some welly into the spell. Concentrate hard, tense your body, think of something that really gets your blood flowing, something that really winds you up. Now, we have seen a Slytherin, so now a Gryffindor. How about you, Mister Potter? You were so vocal earlier, let’s see you do it.”

“Afraid not, Professor,” said Harry casually. There was no way he was going to succumb to the Dark Arts. He had so many stored inside him; he daren’t try any more. He didn’t want the darkness to return, not after working so hard these last few months.

“Excuse me?” said Rookwood.

“I said no,” said Harry. “I don’t deal in the Dark Arts any more. I quit and I will not start again.”

“You will do as your you’re told,” said Rookwood. “Ten points for being rude. Now get up.”

“No.” He didn’t care about detentions. He would not return to the Dark Arts!

“Professor,” said Harry. “As a law-abiding citizen and member of the Ministry of Magic, you must be concerned about my returning to my wicked ways. Surely putting me in the path of temptation is not a smart idea. What if I cannot resist the lure of power again? What if I turn back to who I was before, killing those who annoy me? You see sir, the person annoying me at present sir is you. I only have your safety in mind.”

“Potter, stop stalling and do it,” said Rookwood.

“If I want the dummy destroyed, I’ll use a Reducto Charm or an axe, not a Dark curse,” said Harry. “The Dark Arts are dangerous and unnecessary.”

“Enough,” shouted Rookwood. “If you will not do as I say, you will sit out for this lesson. *STUPEFY!*” There was a gasp from the class as a jet of red light burst from Rookwood’s wand. Harry stepped to the side instantly. He was at the front of the room, so he was close

enough to touch Rookwood. Harry grabbed his wrist and twisted the wand free from Rookwood's grip. He spun away from him. *Levicorpus!* Rookwood was instantly suspended in mid-air by his ankle, a stream of profanities coming from his mouth that made the class gasp.

"How are your Dark Arts going to help you now?" asked Harry, staring down at the High Inquisitor's flustered face.

"Put me down, now!" hissed Rookwood dangerously. His eyes burned with anger; he was practically foaming at the mouth. "Draco, do something." Harry turned instantly. He released the charm on Rookwood, who clattered to the ground, landing painfully on his head. Harry instantly levelled his wand at Malfoy, just as the Slytherin managed to get his aimed. He and Harry stood a metre apart, each with the end of the other's wand an inch from their neck.

"This looks familiar," said Harry icily. "Want to make it best of three?"

"Kyesko!" hissed Rookwood from the floor, once he'd recovered his wand. Harry snapped around to face him. *Jurofacio!* The familiar ring of blue light was on his hand in an instant. He caught the curse effortlessly, and with a flick of his wrist sent the curse back to Rookwood. The curse hit him in the stomach, and instantly, bolts of blue light snaked over his body like electricity. They looked like lightening and as they snaked over his limbs. Rookwood screamed and thrashed on the floor. Harry thought for a second that he should let it continue – Lord knew he deserved it – but he couldn't. He wasn't a monster... anymore.

"*Finite Incantatem!*" said Harry, releasing the professor from his own curse. Rookwood's steaming body lay on the floor, as the High Inquisitor groaned and tried to sit up. "Let this be a lesson, gentlemen," said Harry to the class. "The Dark Arts may seem fun, but once they are used against you, they are not. You may feel big using Dark Arts, but they are not big and not clever. Incidentally, that charm will be taught at the next Duelling Club to those with enough moral fibre to control it."

"Potter," panted Rookwood from the floor. "You are hereby banned from this class. Others want to learn and you are preventing them doing so. You will have detention with me every night this week."

"So does that mean that this class is now optional for everyone?" asked Harry coolly, summoning his bag back to him.

"GET OUT!" shouted Rookwood. Harry was only too happy to oblige.

"Just remember, Augustus," said Harry. "Live by the sword, you'll die by the sword." With that he slammed the door, leaving the room in silence. He took a moment to calm himself before he did something he might regret later. He now had fifty minutes before his next class. He knew McGonagall and Flamel were both teaching, but it wouldn't hurt to do a bit of training. He made his way quickly up to the Room of Requirement. The room was kitted out with a sofa and a fire, all cosy and ready for him. He settled himself on one of the two sofas and took a deep

breath. He was just about to start when there was a pop in the corner of the room. He glanced up to see himself standing in the corner.

“Well, at least now I know I’m in for at least an hour of practice,” said Harry.  
“Successful?”

“Average,” said the other Harry.

He worked for an hour and then set the turner back. He then spent another few minutes on the transformation before he started on some Occlumency. Only McGonagall knew why he turned up to Transfiguration looking so tired only forty minutes after he left the Dark Arts room apparently in perfect health.

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The remainder of Friday, Harry spent in Occlumency and Animagus classes with McGonagall and Flamel. His progress was astonishing, now that he was doing most hours twice. He had managed all of the big changes, i.e. wing shapes, claws and neck and head. Feathers were continuing to be a problem, and so was size. He continued to be too big. Still, practice made perfect. Harry collapsed, exhausted, on his bed Friday night. Saturday was Hermione and the Muggleborns’ last day and so McGonagall had gone over Rookwood’s head and organised a Hogsmeade visit. Harry spent most of the day with Hermione, along with the Weasleys and Rosie. They spent three hours in Hogsmeade before returning to the castle. Harry had an Animagus lesson before dinner, but the evening was his, and he spent it at the farewell party in the Gryffindor common room.

The atmosphere was sorrowful. A total of nineteen Gryffindors were to be lost the following day, including Hermione and Dean. It was a sombre occasion, but everyone tried to give them a nice seeing off. The emotion soon became too much for Hermione, who retreated to her dormitory. Ginny went to check on her.

“It suddenly seems more real, doesn’t it,” said Rose, standing to Harry’s right.

“For me it always has been,” said Harry. “For some of these people, this is the closest the war has come to them. I just wish there was something I could do. It sounds awful, but I can’t help wishing it was someone else.”

“I know what you mean,” said Rose. “I keep thinking about Hermione and then I start to wonder about Mum. Have you heard about Remus?” Harry nodded. “How did it get so bad, Harry? How did we let it happen?” Her eyes were sparkling with tears.

“Hey,” said Harry softly. “Come here.” He wrapped his arms around his sister and she sobbed into her shoulder. She trembled slightly against his chest. “There’s still hope, Marie. Dumbledore once told me something that kind of stayed with me. When Lucius tried to evict him, he said, ‘I shall only truly be gone when none who remain are loyal to me’. We’re loyal, Rose. As long as we remain loyal to Dumbledore, to the cause, there is still hope.”

“But they are so many,” said Rose. “They control the school, the Ministry, the Wizengamot, and the Aurors. What can we do against that kind of evil?”

“We must all face the choice,” said Harry, quoting Dumbledore., “Between what is right and what is easy. Dark and difficult times lie ahead, but as long as we have hope, as long as we do what is right, we can win.”

“Viva la resistance,” muttered Rose, smiling a teary smile.

“Something like that,” said Harry, smiling back. The party atmosphere had practically died. Harry couldn’t be bothered to stay. He returned to his mother’s quarters for some rest.

Hermione’s wand was snapped before her eyes the following day by Rookwood. There was no grace to the procedure, no respect, not nothing. Rookwood just grabbed it and *snap*, before looking at Hermione as if to say, ‘are you still here?’, despite the tears streaming down her cheeks. Almost the whole school turned out to see off the departing students. The train was strangely empty as the Muggleborns climbed aboard. It was odd, Harry noted, that he had always seen it as a sign of hope as it carried him away from the Dursleys to the world in which he belonged, but now it was no longer a symbol of hope, but of prejudice and evil. He shook his head as it the train filled with students.

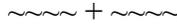
“Goodbye, Harry,” said a voice behind him. Hermione was standing there, dressed in jeans and woolly jumper. She looked different without robes. He had seen her dressed like that before, but now it was just symbolic. Before, she had chosen not to wear them, now she had been stripped of them, of her life and dreams. It wasn’t fair!

“Goodbye, Hermione,” said Harry, bowing his head. The next thing he knew, he was enveloped in a warm and firm hug. Hermione Granger was not known for giving hugs, so this drew many eyes. He wrapped his arms around her. He could feel her trembling, but then he felt her breath on his ear.

“That which you have promised,” she said. “You must deliver.” He felt something warm and soft touch his cheek as she kissed him lightly.

“See you soon,” said Harry as she pulled away from him. As she left, she held his arm, until they were too far apart to touch anymore. God, Harry hoped she would be okay. He hoped Voldemort didn’t do house calls. He stood motionless as the whistle blew and the train began to pull away. He watched as the train disappear towards the horizon and beyond, until the plume of steam from the engine was no longer visible on the horizon. As she left, he felt like part of him had gone. Ron and Hermione had always been there for him, and now he felt naked without them.

“Come on, Harry,” said Rose, taking his arm. “Catching pneumonia won’t help.” He smiled slightly at the joke, and with one final glance into the distance he turned back towards the castle.



The castle seemed oddly deserted, the common room even more so. Gryffindor had lost nineteen students. Multiply that by three (as no one was lost from Slytherin), and Hogwarts had lost roughly sixty students. The corridors seemed less crowded, and the buzz of conversation was all but gone. Conversations occurred in whispers or not at all. The cloak of fear had fallen over the castle. The Inquisitorial Squad ruled with an iron fist, with Rookwood handing out punishments for next to nothing. Even the common rooms were depressed. The atmosphere was mournful at best and fearful at worst. Motivation was an endangered feeling in Hogwarts. In absence of any form of fun, no one could raise the enthusiasm to do anything beyond sleep, eat and work. The Duelling Club was now run exclusively by Rookwood. The Junior Death Eater ranks were growing. Many recognised the futility, even in the Gryffindor camp, and chose to side with Rookwood. The Weasleys and Potters were watched wherever they went. Harry now had to flume to McGonagall and Flamel at the given times. While no one else had motivation, Harry did. Fuelled by anger at Rookwood, Harry threw himself into his Animagus training, pushing himself beyond endurance, working inhuman hours in an effort to master the arts. He didn't think beyond to how he would use them, but he knew he had to finish as soon as possible. It took another week before he was complete. He was barely seen outside of lessons, yet his homework was all done. He had no idea what the effects of the Time Turner on his body were, but he kept on going. He was determined to master the transformation. The following Wednesday, he managed to hold a complete transformation for two minutes, and by Thursday he had achieved walking and flight.

For this reason, Wednesday ended on a high for Harry. He kind of wanted to show off that he had done it, but he daren't for fear of being discovered. So far, that and his alter ego – the white wizard or whatever Voldemort had dubbed him – were the only things they had going for them. Still he spent the evening finishing his homework. The Time Turner was now stowed in his drawer in his mother's living quarters. He no longer had a need for it, but he couldn't risk returning it.

Thursday passed uneventfully. The melancholy that had fallen could not be broken. Classes passed in a blur for Harry. Used to having such long days, it all seemed to fly by. He hardly paid attention in classes, thinking about nothing but the war they were now losing, and a promise made to an old friend. What could he, a few ex-Aurors and a few teachers do against the combined Ministry? It seemed so hopeless, but he knew he could not give up. While he did spare a thought for the book Flamel was translating, he never once considered using it to escape this place. He just couldn't think of a way out. But there had to be one, there just had to.

It was nearly nine that evening when he was called to McGonagall's office. Since his training was officially over, he couldn't help but wonder what it was about. He Flamed into a nearby classroom and then slipped out and crossed to her office. Inside, he found what remained of the inner circle of the Order. Snape, Flamel, and Professors Potter and McGonagall were sitting around a desk with an empty chair meant for him. If the inner circle were gathered, this had to be something serious. Jesus, what had happened?

“Have a seat, Harry,” said McGonagall. “Now, we don’t have much time so I will be brief. There was an incident today, when a poisonous creature was let loose in the castle. Were it not for the quick intervention of Professor Snape, we may well have lost a student. This represents a major breach in security.”

“Rookwood could bring in anything he likes,” said Flamel. “He would bypass security. Standard checks would detect most dangerous things and creatures, but as High Inquisitor he can bypass them. There is no telling what he could bring into the castle.”

“Which is why this is so dangerous,” said McGonagall. “We cannot plug this leak. As such, we need time to search and then ‘bug’ his office, in order to see what he is doing. We need to know what is coming in advance, otherwise we may be caught off-guard again like we were with the Muggleborn evictions.”

“How do we get into his office?” asked Lily.

“We need a diversion,” said Flamel.

“Time for me to visit a few more old friends?” asked Harry, referring to his white costume.

“No,” said Flamel. “That will not be enough. In absence of Rookwood, the Inquisitorial Squad watch everything, and we have no way of knowing how many silent partners they have in the student population. We need something more. Essentially, we need the castle deserted.”

“Set controlled fires,” suggested Lily.

“Too easy to put out,” said Minerva.

“I could do it,” said Harry, an idea forming in his mind. “Give me time, but I think on Monday, I could have the castle almost empty, Rookwood running to Crouch for help and even get you an afternoon off classes.”

“What are you planning to do?” asked Lily.

Harry outlined his plan briefly. “No one will be in any danger. Crouch won’t dare confront us because we are nothing but students.”

“If this works, we’ll have plenty of time,” said Flamel. “What do you need, Harry?”

“I need someone to shut down the Floo network in the castle. He will be flustered, and I need him to be unable to use the fireplaces and have to go to the Ministry in person; having to clear the grounds will buy you more time. The Inquisitorial Squad will be tempted by a day off school and head to Hogsmeade, leaving you home free.”

“It’s easy enough to block the Floo,” said McGonagall. “I can disable the system, but I want more details.”

“Okay,” said Harry. “Here is my plan...”

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“So are we all ready?” asked McGonagall as she accompanied Harry towards the stairs. “And why are you not in robes?”

“Uniform for the day,” said Harry, grinning. He was dressed in jeans and a custom-made T-shirt courtesy of Rose and an old friend. “We’re all sorted. Fliers have gone out, T-shirts ready, and we have a majority of the school on our side, and will not be in lessons this afternoon. They have tasted the life under Voldemort via Rookwood, and are coming back to us at the sign of us standing up to him. Of course, many neutrals who sided against us are here as they just want a day off.”

“I hope it’s mainly the first group,” said McGonagall. “Under pressure some people pull it together, others go to pieces. Some have pulled it together and joined us again; others have gone to pieces and flocked to the Dark Lord seeking protection. I hope we have the right group here.”

“Me too,” said Harry. “We’re ready, and I’ll keep them safe. Crouch will never attack schoolchildren. You just sort out your end. Our guests have arrived, so I must go.”

“Guests?” asked McGonagall, halting mid-stride.

“Hello, Professor,” said a cool voice to McGonagall’s right. Both she and Harry turned to see Hermione Granger approaching them dressed the same as Harry and armed with a replacement wand Harry had brought her.

“Welcome back, Miss Granger,” said McGonagall, taken aback. Harry hadn’t mentioned her to McGonagall. In fact, almost all of the Muggleborns had returned today. “Have a nice day and be careful.”

“Always,” said Hermione. The Professor nodded and left.

“Good to see you again, Hermione,” said Harry, giving her a quick hug.

“You too,” said Hermione. “God, I miss this place. It was nice to visit my mum and dad, but this is where I belong. It’s been a week, but it feels like I’ve been gone a whole year. “

“Hopefully, you’ll soon be back for good.”

“I hope so,” said Hermione. “I must say, you worked bloody quickly in organising something, and something this big.”

“No worries, kiddo,” said Harry. “And thanks for the T-shirts. We couldn’t have done them here without being discovered.”

“All thanks to the new wand you brought me,” she beamed. “Shall we get started?”

“Are we all here?”

“Yep,” said Hermione. “I counted one-fifty to two hundred on my way up. Dean and Justin are here. Fred and George and Oliver Wood have even turned up. It’s a bit of a reunion down there.”

“Fantastic,” said Harry. “Let’s go.”

Harry could hear the ruckus from the top of the stairs. Peeking over the banister, a smile formed on his scarred face as he took in the sight below. Over two hundred students had turned up for the March for Freedom. Hermione and Rose had done a wonderful job with the T-shirts. Everyone was dressed as a Muggle. Half were wearing the freshly arrived March for Freedom T-shirts, with “Open Your Eyes!” on the front above a picture of Barty Crouch Junior’s face with the Dark Mark stamped across his forehead. The T-shirts were white with red writing. Others bore pictures of a little girl crying on the front. The caption read *She was gonna be a Healer – now who’ll save your life?* On the back was Rookwood with the Dark Mark on his forehead. Some of the elder Muggleborn girls had gotten tighter T-shirts, that showed their figure, while those not from the Muggle world gazed at them in amusement. It was very uncommon for a witch to wear the kind of skimpy Muggle clothing Harry knew Muggles would wear. The final type just showed the Hogwarts emblem, and underneath it read *‘Give us back our future!’* It was the latter that Harry and Hermione wore.

He could see some of the Gryffindor organisers, and Luna ready with a stack of fliers ready to hand out on the way through Hogsmeade. An excited atmosphere radiated from the crowd as the buzz of chatter grew. They were all standing in the entrance hall, and by the look of them were raring to go.

The students had all been to their morning classes, though Harry had the impression that they had not done much. Harry was amazed that no one had alerted the High Inquisitor, or Inquisitorial Squad. It seemed almost impossible that no one had.

Several people saw him coming, and he received a few waves and claps as he approached the bottom of the stairs. He marched straight over to the door, where Hermione, Ginny, Ron and Luna were waiting. They were practically holding everyone back, as everyone seemed to want to make it out.

“Where are the gruesome twosome?” asked Harry, shouting above the din.

“Rosie’s gone to get them,” said Ginny. “They’ve gone to spike Rookwood’s drink.”

“Idiots,” said Harry. “The idea was not to draw attention to ourselves yet.”

“Good luck with a crowd this size,” said Hermione. “What a turnout I was expecting about half this.”

“Yeah,” said Ron. “I thought half of them would bottle it. I don’t see many Slytherins around.”

“Did you honestly expect the Inquisitorial Squad to show?” asked Rose, returning with Fred and George in tow. Harry shook each of their hands in turn.

“Got the fireworks ready, lads?” he asked.

The twins exchanged a knowing look with each other before Fred answered.

“Right here,” he said, gesturing to the backpacks they both wore.

“We have “Give us our future back”, “The Minister is a Death Eater” and “Rookwood is a...” Fred trailed off under the glare from his brother.

“Is a what?” asked Harry, raising an eyebrow.

“It changes,” said George. “Each one is unique. It ranges from git, to arsehole, to...”

“If they are too crude they won’t help our cause,” said Hermione. “We will look like jobs.”

“They’re fine,” George assured her. Harry had a nasty feeling that they were anything but fine.

“As for the Slytherins,” Harry answered Rose. “Some have turned up but not many. Once we set off, McGonagall and the other teachers will abandon lessons. They’ll come down for a free day in Hogsmeade. Just plaster them with leaflets when they do come.”

“Harry!” called a voice. Seamus Finnigan emerged from the crowd wearing his T-shirt and holding a bottle of Jack Daniels.

“Oh, I know you haven’t been drinking’,” said Harry exasperatedly.

“Makes the day pass more smoothly,” he replied in broad Irish.

Just then the bell sounded, announcing the end of lunch and the start of afternoon lessons, not that there were many in attendance.

“Ginny, will you do the honours?” asked Harry. Ginny nodded and stuck the smallest finger of each hand into the corners of her mouth and let out an ear-splitting whistle. Harry had always wished he’d been able to do that, but had never been able to manage it. The chatter died down almost instantly.

“Okay, listen up,” called Harry above the din. “Thank you all for turning up. I’d like to take a moment to welcome back all students who were asked to leave following the recent unpleasantness, it’s great that they can be here today.” There was thunderous applause as those Muggleborns who had been expelled were clapped on the back and subsequently turned a brilliant shade of pink. Harry also noticed Flitwick emerge from the Great Hall, having finished his lunch. He gave Harry a nod and a wink before continuing on his way. McGonagall must have mentioned to him that his lesson would be a bit empty and why.

“Right,” continued Harry. “Remember, this is not just a Hogsmeade day. You don’t all charge for Zonko’s and the pub as soon as we get there. Stay together, don’t go anywhere alone, keep your wits about you. Having said that, we have plenty of T-shirts and leaflets, so knock on doors, let’s get people out of their homes and make a bit of a racket. Be warned; Crouch and Rookwood will try and stop us. Under no circumstances draw a wand – only if there is no other choice. Just like Ghandi, and Martin Luther King Junior, we will not use violence. No one is to fire a single curse, understood? If anyone does, we will be seen as hooligans and Aurors will take us by force. Don’t make a nuisance of yourself. We are protesting for the return of our friends to school and for control of the school to be returned to the Headmaster. Bear in mind that we may end up in detention for quite some time for this. If you don’t want to be a part of it, go to your lessons. No one will think any less of you. Other than that, I hope you all have a great day. Let’s get the message out there.”

“Let’s tell our enemies, that they can take our lives,” shouted Dean about the din. “But they’ll never take...”

“OUR FREEDOM!” roared the Muggleborns amongst the group, and anyone else who had seen Braveheart, which had been released that previous summer.

There was thunderous applause in the Great Hall as nearly three hundred including the late arrivals, roared in unison. It died down after a few seconds, as if waiting for Harry to give the word.

“ALRIGHT, BREAK IT UP!” came a voice from the Hall.

Harry could see, from his position a few steps above everyone else, that Rookwood had finished his lunch.

“I SAID, BREAK IT UP!” he shouted again. “All of you, get to your lessons, and take those stupid tops off.” Some of the younger students nearer to the High Inquisitor began to move.

“Stop!” shouted Harry, bringing them to a halt. He quickly pushed his way to the front.

“Potter,” said Rookwood. “Why am I not surprised? I knew I was wrong to let you stay, but you’ve done it now. You are officially expelled.” Harry noticed over his shoulder that the Inquisitorial Squad were at the entrance to the hall, a few paces away.

“Give me your wand,” said Rookwood, holding out a hand.

“No,” said Harry calmly.

“What do you mean no?”

“As in, piss off,” said Harry.

“What’s going on?” asked the Inquisitor.

“We’re having a protest,” said Harry, just as McGonagall appeared at the entrance to the hall. “Lessons have been cancelled, we are going to Hogsmeade.”

“You will disperse and get to your lessons now!” barked Rookwood.

“Oooooooooooooooooooooo,” called someone from the crowd provocatively. Harry was sure it was Seamus.

“I am the High Inquisitor!” he shouted.

“Shove your title up your arse, do–dah, do–dah,” called an Irish voice from the crowd. As the colour drained from the High Inquisitor’s face, the rest of the resistance joined in with, “shove your title up your arse, all the do–dah–day.” The chorus followed, and Harry was glad to see the smirks fade from the faces of the Inquisitorial Squad, especially their blond leader. There was a pause, as the chorus came to its conclusion.

Harry managed to keep a straight face. He opened his mouth to announce the start of the March, but Seamus was far from finished.

“He’s shit, he’s scum, he takes it up the bum, Ro–ok–wood, Ro–ok–wood,” shouted the Gryffindor. The alcohol was taking affect, but he knew a good variety of football chants. As the song came to its close, Harry spoke quickly to cut it off.

“As you see, Rookwood,” said Harry calmly. “We are not coming to classes. We don’t care who you are, or who appointed you. This march is a protest against you, against your Minister and against your master.”

“STOP!” ordered Rookwood as Harry turned to the crowd. “I promise you Potter, if you walk out that door, you are never coming back.”

“Take that up with Dumbledore when he returns,” said Harry.

“Dumbledore isn’t coming back,” said Rookwood. “He is going to Azkaban for murder. and you’ll join him. Minister Crouch will make sure of this. You’ll regret this, Potter, it’s all your doing, this pithy little march. **MARK MY WORDS! WHAT HAPPENS NEXT IS ON YOUR HEAD AS WELL!**” The man was seething with rage and almost glowing red.

Harry simply shrugged before shouting to the crowd. “Let’s go, people!”

The sun outside was surprisingly warm for the time of year. As Hogwarts fell into winter, it was usually bitterly cold with snow falling all around, but the heat-wave last summer and the one before that seemed to have pushed back winter's grasp. There was a light breeze, but nothing to complain about. The T-shirts were more than enough to keep them warm, though many people wore them over the top of a jumper. Harry had his body-armour on under his shirt, as he did whenever he left the castle. The sun was shining, evaporating the shimmering dew, which delicately coated the mountainside. There were birds in the sky, and robins on the fences as the sun reached the top of the sky. In the valley, Harry could hear the buzz of shoppers in the village. The morning was quiet, with only the songs of the birds and the faint buzz from the village. That was, of course, until the students arrive.

"You are my Hogwarts," piped up Seamus, enjoying the afternoon off. "My only Hogwarts."

"You make me happy," joined in Dean. "When skies are grey."

"WHEN SKIES ARE GREY!" roared the crowd.

"You'll never know just," sang the students., "How much I love you, so please don't take my Hogwarts away!"

There was a cheer as the song finished. Harry glanced over at Rose, who gave him a smile. Everyone seemed to be getting well into the swing of things. Even those who had looked nervous under Rookwood's wrath had cheered up immensely as Seamus and Dean, the two biggest football fanatics in the castle, launched into song again.

"BUILD A BONFIRE, BUILD A BONFIRE," began Seamus, before Dean took over.

"PUT CROUCH ON THE TOP!"

"PUT THE DARK LORD IN THE MIDDLE."

"AND WE'LL BURN THE BLOODY LOT!"

Harry walked at the front with Rose, Ginny, Luna, Hermione and Ron. Luna had done a tremendous job of advertising the march. Her father was going to be in the village that day, covering the march for the Quibbler. He had been promised interviews by Hermione, another three Muggleborn students and Harry and Rose.

Despite having told people not to dive straight into shops, Harry suddenly felt the need for ice-cream, but he shoved the thought out of his mind. They were nearing the village now, and everyone in the town could hear and see them coming down the hill.

"Everywhere we go-oh," sang Seamus at the top of his voice, before taking a swig from his drink while the crowd shouted the line back to him.

“People want to kn-ow,” he sang, giving Harry a wink, who smiled back. “Who we ar-re,”

“Hermione,” shouted Harry above the singing.

“AND WHERE WE COME FROM!”

“Start passing out leaflets and talking to people,” he told her. “We’ll all stop in the square, by the fountain. Then we’ve got the Three Broomsticks on one corner, Zonko’s opposite and we’re right in the middle of things.”

“SO WE TELL THEM,” bellowed Seamus, this time with Dean and Justin Finch-Fletchley aiding him. “WE’RE FROM HOGWARTS!”

Hermione took a handful of students and began to post fliers under doors of the outskirt housing.

“THE MIGHTY MIGHTY HOGWARTS!” Some people were in their gardens and even got a few words from Hermione explaining what was happening. Doors opened and faces appeared at windows as the unlikely and unscheduled procession passed. Normally residents had plenty of warning of these visits, so they knew to avoid town in fear of queues and annoying students, not to mention drunken seventh years. This visit was completely unplanned. Harry had been worried that his presence might mar the innocence of the march, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“AND IF THEY CAN’T HEAR US!”

People seemed to be coming out of their houses to see what was going on, or what was making the noise.

“WE SHOUT A LITTLE LOUDER!”

*WHOOSH!*

Harry looked up in time to see one of George’s fireworks rocket into the sky. It exploded in a burst of Gryffindor red, leaving the words

*Give Us Our Futures Back!*

In the sky. Beneath it was the picture of the crying little girl. The twins really had done a wonderful job with them. Although they loved their jokes, and scored low in OWLs, they were exceptionally clever when it came to it.

Doors opened and people began to appear in their gardens. The students who were giving out pamphlets were being swamped by residents asking what this was all about. The trouble was

that this was slowing them down and separating the procession. Safety was in numbers and it made more of an impact with more people.

*WHOOSH!*

*The Minister is a Death Eater!*

The message hung in the air for a few seconds before fading.

“Keep up!” shouted Harry. “Rose, Ginny, Ron, help bring up the stragglers. We need to get to the square.”

As his friends disappeared towards the back of the procession, an elderly lady came up to Harry.

“What’s all this about then, laddie,” said the lady in a shaky voice. She wore a long flowery dress, topped with a beige coat and burgundy scarf, which covered her chin. Her grey hair was sprouting out in a perm, making her hair double the size of her head. She wore large dark glasses, which covered her face, and walked with a stick.

There was something about the woman that Harry didn’t like. Her voice didn’t sound right and her face was covered, either by her scarf or glasses. Also the fact that she wore summery glasses at the same time as a scarf and thick jacket didn’t seem right. Harry was just reaching for his wand when he recognised the stale tobacco smell that surrounded the woman. Sure enough, a pipe was protruding from the pocket of the jacket. Suddenly he realised who he was talking to.

“You must be very hot in all that, Dung,” said Harry with a grin.

“I bloody well am,” said Dung in his normal voice, lowering the glasses enough to wink at Harry.

“Want a free t-shirt?” asked Harry. “They’re much cooler. I assume you’re here to keep an eye on us?”

“Yep,” said Dung. “Mackey G’s order’s. With Albus gone, she’s taken over the Order. Your parents are in the pub. Rookwood is pissed, but Lily dismissed the two who did turn up to her class and came for a day out. Obviously, your father is in disguise. Some randomer’s hair and Polyjuice Potion.”

“Cheers,” said Harry, summoning a T-shirt and giving it to Dung. The elderly lady disappeared and a few minutes later, Harry saw Dung dressed in his new T-shirt and jeans enter the Three Broomsticks.

They reached the square in five minutes, and after another ten, a huge banner, reading HOGWARTS MARCH FOR FREEDOM, which Ginny and her fellow fifth year girls had made,

had been hung between two lampposts. The whole square was swarming with students, and Harry could see a handful more running down the hill to join their friends. They must have been let out of lessons by kinder teachers like Flitwick or Sprout. Almost anyone who entered the square was immediately set upon by Hogwarts students offering them leaflets, T-shirts and telling them why Muggleborns should return to Hogwarts. Harry watched students disappear into shops, here and there. He didn't mind as long as they kept a real presence in the square. They were out of lessons, which had proved a point; bureaucracy would not contain them. They had raised awareness, which had helped, and on top of that, the students were having a bit of fun; just what they needed in times like this. Also, with the numbers who were now joining them, the castle must be empty for McGonagall. Rookwood, since he couldn't reach Crouch, would have gone to the Ministry for help. It was working!

Hermione was using the Sonorus Charm to speak above the hustle and bustle of square. Her voice rang out over the village.

“Does he really think we don't know what is going on?” she asked the crowd. “Albus Dumbledore was arrested without reason and he hasn't been sent to trial or prison. That is illegal. We know something is going on. We know Death Eaters are all over the place and we won't stand for it. Our ancestors fought for this freedom we enjoy and You-Know-Who won't take it from us.”

Harry glanced around, surveying the audience as shoppers stopped to listen to her. He noticed a familiar figure in the beer-garden of the Three Broomsticks. Excusing himself, Harry walked over to the garden, where his mother sat with a cocktail, opposite a man Harry had never seen before. Harry slipped into the seat next to whom he assumed was his father.

“How's it going?” asked Lily, sipping her Long-Island Ice Tea.

“So far so good,” said Harry. “We're making a lot of noise and it looks like people are listening. Rookwood is not best pleased, and is threatening to expel me. How's McGonagall doing?”

“In the office now,” said Lily.

“Old Snivvy's checking through half the Slytherin's personal possessions,” added James. “And I quote, ‘some mild contra-ban’.”

“Which translates as, they are all up to their necks in the Dark Arts,” said Harry cynically. “And he is covering for them.”

“Albus trusts – trusted him,” said Lily. “I do too. Severus may allow some contra-ban, but he wouldn't allow anything that would endanger us. He has to allow some things to slip, otherwise Draco would tell Lucius, and Severus may find himself questioned.” Harry supposed that was allowed, but he didn't like Malfoy having anything like that in his possession.

“But that compromise could be exploited,” said Harry. “What if he was asked to allow someone in his house to bring a weapon into Hogwarts? If he intercepts it, he is blown, if it is used, someone dies. Where do we draw the line?” It was a fine balance, and Harry didn’t trust Snape’s judgement.

“That is why your sister and your friends are kept out of the Order,” said James. “Sometimes we have to make choices like that.”

“I know,” muttered Harry. “It doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Have a Butterbeer,” offered James. “My treat.”

“Have they got any Coke?” asked Harry. “It is Muggle Day, after all, and I need something icy cold.”

“I’ll see,” said James, disappearing in the direction of the bar. Turning back to the street, Harry noticed a certain figure bent double over the fountain, Dean Thomas rubbing his back. *God damned, idiot!* thought Harry.

“Mum,” he said. “Have you got anything to sober up that stupid Irish...?” Harry trailed off, trying to find an inoffensive insult. His mother glanced at Seamus before rolling her eyes.

“His liver will have packed up by the time he leaves school,” she muttered. She’ fished a small phial out of her robes. “Hold this under his nose. They work like smelling salts. It will wake him up, but it won’t remove the alcohol from his bloodstream so don’t let him drink anymore.”

“Got it,” said Harry, shaking his head in frustration and taking the phial. He marched over to where Seamus was standing, just in time to see him vomit into the fountain. Once he had finished, Harry grabbed him by the back of the neck and held the salts up to his nose. Seamus recoiled sharply, snorting through his nose.

“What was that?” he asked, rubbing his nose.

“Something to wake you up,” said Harry. “Now stop drinking, or I’ll send you back to the castle, understood?”

“Yeah,” muttered Seamus unconvincingly.

“WHAT DO WE WANT?” shouted Hermione’s voice rang out across the square, magically magnified by the Sonorus Charm.

“OUR FRIENDS!” shouted the crowd, now a mix of both students and townsfolk, most of which were wearing the T-Shirts.

“WHEN DO WE WANT IT?”

She never got a reply as suddenly a series of pops filled the square. Along the roofs of the buildings on one side of the square twenty figures in Black had materialised. They had the word AUROR written in white over their chests. Black material covered the bottom halves of their faces and their hoods were up, leaving only their eyes visible. Their wands were drawn and levelled at the protesters. They were not Death Eaters, but they looked far from friendly. There came another pop as Bartemius Crouch Junior materialised in the middle of the square, near the crowd. Harry immediately made his way towards him, breaking into a cold sweat as he moved. Surely he wouldn't do it! Hermione, Rose, Ginny and Ron were at his side instantly.

“Get to the front,” hissed Harry, “Remember the *Sheltario* Shield? Have them ready.”

“You can't be serious,” said Hermione. “He wouldn't!”

“I won't take the chance,” said Harry, pushing his way through the crowd.

*Why were they here?* he wondered. Surely they wouldn't fire on unarmed students? They had come in force, but they would never resort to violence, would they? Suddenly Rookwood's words came back to him. *What happens next is on your head too!*

Harry made it to the front to find Crouch staring emotionlessly out over the mass of people all wearing the protest t-shirts. Crouch glanced at Harry as he emerged from the crowd, and gave him a glare. Harry glanced up at the Aurors on the roof-top. Silence had fallen over the square as the Aurors appeared. Crouch seemed unfazed by the size of the crowd. Harry reached for his wand. It couldn't surely happen, but he had to be ready. Those he knew could duel were at the front, hopefully with wands ready. Harry glanced over at the Three Broomsticks. Lily, James, Dung, and a stranger he assumed was Dawlish under Polyjuice Potion were all in the garden, watching the exchange.

“YOU ARE TO DISPERSE IMMEDIATELY!” Crouch bellowed. “RETURN TO YOUR HOMES OR SCHOOL NOW!”

“STAY WHERE YOU ARE!” shouted Harry, gesturing for people to stand fast. They were not breaking any law. It was his right to be here. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his friends emerge to the front of the crowd. He could also see Dawlish and James moving towards the scene, their wands out and ready.

“POTTER,” shouted Crouch. “ORDER YOUR FRIENDS TO BREAK UP NOW!”

Harry didn't move, he stood still staring defiantly back at the so-called Minister of Magic.

“WE'RE NOT BREAKING THE LAW,” shouted Harry so everyone could hear. “WE HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO BE HERE. WE'RE NOT HURTING ANYONE.”

“LISTEN TO ME!” shouted Crouch to the crowd, rather than Harry. “YOU HAVE FIVE SECONDS TO BREAK UP OR WE WILL USE FORCE!” There was no way they would attack an unarmed crowd! It would be impossible to cover up.

“HE’S BLUFFING, STAND FAST!” ordered Harry. “You don’t have the guts, Crouch! You haven’t arrested us all yet, you can’t kill us, not in broad daylight.”

Crouch glared for a second before turning and nodding to one of the figures in black.

“READY!” ordered the Auror. Ten wands were immediately aimed at Harry.

“AIM!”

“FIRE!” Harry watched them coming, but made no move to defend himself. Ten curses hit the floor immediately in front of him, spraying loose soil and bits of pavement into the air. One fragment hit Harry’s shin, but he was determined not to look scared. He had been right. The curses were aimed at the ground. They were trying to scare him off.

Harry defiantly stepped forward before the dust had even settled.

“THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE,” ordered Crouch. “RETURN TO YOUR HOMES OR WE OPEN FIRE. YOU HAVE FIVE SECONDS TO COMPLY. FIVE...FOUR...”

“HE’S BLUFFING!”

“...THREE...TWO...ONE...”

Harry never heard the incantation, but a barrage of curses hit the crowd from all sides. Forty curses were unleashed at once, ripping into the crowd. They had done it! They had actually attacked the crowd of students. Panic erupted as twenty members of the crowd fell to the ground, having been hit by the incoming curses. God, Harry hoped they weren’t fatal. Screaming erupted as the crowd fell apart. People ran in all directions as a second barrage left the Aurors’ wands, flying into the crowd. This time fewer were hit, as everyone was moving.

“FALL BACK!” shouted Harry, withdrawing his own wand. This was inhuman. He had to stall them to let his friends escape. He had to protect them. *Stupefy!* he shot a stunner at one of the Aurors, who effortlessly blocked it.

“Potter attacked an Auror,” screamed Crouch manically. “TAKE THEM ALL DOWN!”

~~~~~ Chapter XIV ~~~~~  
**One Man's Terrorist
Is Another Man's Freedom Fighter**

*"Fear will hold you prisoner,
Hope can set you free"*

~ Tagline from the Shawshank Redemption

The air was suddenly alive with curses as a full-scale battle erupted in the streets of the quiet village of Hogsmeade. Beams of light shot through the air like morbid rainbows, cascading down into the street. Members of the crowd raised shields in time to deflect some curses, which rebounded into shop windows, shattering the glass. Displays burst into flame as volleys of curses ricocheted through the air. Another volley of curses left the rooftops as the Aurors fired again.

"INCOMING!"

Harry raised his shield in time to block an incoming curse, which bounced back, shattering the canopy of a shop to his left. He turned, his eyes sweeping for the nearest exit. To his horror, he saw lines of men in black with 'Auror' written across their chests at every entrance and every exit to the square: they were cut off! The Black Watch looked sinister marching in unison with their faces hidden and their wands levelled at the crowd.

Suddenly a curse impacted near Harry's feet, spraying him with debris. Shrugging it off, Harry turned back to the Aurors on the roof and balconies above them. The protesters were surrounded, and Crouch had the high ground. But this wasn't a battle; this wasn't a war! This was a protest and the protesters were children. How could they get away with this? How could they fire on helpless children? If they fought back they would be arrested, if they did nothing and they would be killed! They had passed the point of no return; Harry aimed a curse at the balcony above him, where three Aurors were raining curses down on a crowd now running around in panic. Several members of the crowd were firing jinxes back at the Aurors, while others ran for cover. It was pandemonium. Harry's aim was true and the curse he sent shattered the support beam of the balcony, causing the whole thing to collapse. The heavy metal and brick structure combined with falling bodies came crashing down on top of the Black Aurors on the street beneath it. What had been a sinister row of black-clad killers had been crushed by a cascade of brick, metal and bodies. It opened up an exit from the square, allowing people to escape. They had to get as many people out as possible.

Most of the students were running around in blind panic. Harry grabbed anyone near enough and practically threw them back towards the castle; towards the gap he had created. He saw one young girl heading straight for one set of Aurors. What the hell was she doing? He could see that they would not hesitate to kill her. He could only think of one thing to do.

"Stupefy!" he shouted, unleashing a red ball of energy towards the girl. It hit her in the small of the back and she fell flat on her face, unmoving. At least she was alive. *God damn it! How dare Crouch do this? The son of a bitch was killing children!* All around him he could see

bodies; some of them were first years. *Christ, what have I done?* wondered Harry, staring in shock into the lifeless eyes of a young girl.

"Harry!" Ginny emerged from the scramble and grabbed him, pulling him out of the way of a curse he had never seen coming. "Harry, we have to go!" she panted in his ear.

"What have I done?" muttered Harry, staring at the fallen girl. "It's all my fault."

"Harry, snap out of it!" said Ginny, slapping him across the cheek. "You have to focus. Most people are alive! We are all really scared and we need you! Only you can get us out of here. Let's get the others home; now focus, soldier!" Harry nodded, the slap having awoken him from his stupor.

"BACK TO THE CASTLE!" shouted Harry. He could see that his parents had taken cover behind the upturned garden bench and were firing hexes at the Aurors in black. Dung was positioned by the Post Office, in a bush by the front door. The Order were taking heavy fire as they tried to distract the Aurors. There were so many! There were six entrances to the square, and all but one was blocked by five Aurors. There were another twenty or so on the roofs. That made fifty of the bastards!

He grabbed the nearest students and spun them around to face the castle, shouting 'RUN' at the top of his voice. He could see his parents, Dung and Dawlish firing hexes into the ranks of the Black Watch. The ground in front of Harry suddenly exploded; he was sent flying, along with three other students. He had never seen the curse coming! His ears ringing from the explosion, Harry lay on the hard cobbled street, groaning in pain. Struggling to sit up, he fired a Blasting Curse straight back at the Aurors, blowing a hole in the wall just in front of them. His aim was off due to the throbbing in his head and ears. He glanced around to see Ginny shepherding people out of the free entrance. She and her brother had taken cover near the exit and were firing curses at the Aurors. The square was surrounded on three sides, and the enemy were professionals. The students didn't have a hope in hell! Harry could see the devastation everywhere he looked. Most of the students had started back up the hill, curses raining down around them. Harry guessed there were around forty-to-fifty bodies in the street. A handful of them were Aurors, a handful were villagers, but the majority were students. Harry didn't know how many were dead and how many were merely incapacitated or unconscious. Harry was suddenly reminded of the photograph he had seen of the day Sirius had been arrested for the murder of Peter Pettigrew.

Harry had led his friends into the valley of death, and they would pay with their lives. It was all his fault. Turning his anger to Crouch, Harry dived into cover and took aim at the Aurors on the roof. A series of blasting curses left his wand, hurtling towards the roof opposite him. Only one actually hit an Auror; the others just blew apart the roof and chimney, causing the Aurors to duck for cover. Using this to his advantage, Harry ran out from under cover, hurtling as fast as he could towards the building on the far side of the square; the one he had just blasted. Curses rained down like hail around him, missing him by inches. He was vaguely aware of Crouch screaming "KILL HIM" but he ignored it, running faster and faster until he was almost there and then he jumped.

Wingardium Leviosa!

Turning his wand on himself, Harry levitated himself upwards, effectively jumping from the ground up onto the roof of the building. Harry landed a little shakily on the roof, now full of holes from his earlier curses and the battering it had taken from others. Parts of the tiled roof had fallen through, leaving a hole through which Harry could see a bedroom. Glancing around to other roofs, the situation was the same. On the two thatched roofs across the square, fire had erupted, shooting plumes of black smoke into the sky. The smell of burning reached his nostrils. The street was in ruins, and the buildings all had large holes in them and scorch marks on the walls.

Harry turned his attention back his own roof where the three surviving Aurors were getting to their feet. Harry didn't hesitate. He kicked one of them in the ribs with enough force to send the Auror over the edge. With a scream, the man disappeared from the rooftop. Harry turned to face the next Auror, who levelled a wand at him. Harry grabbed the wrist, twisting it so that the wand faced the other Auror, just in time for the Killing Curse to be fired. Harry had used the first Auror's spell to kill the second. Harry's manoeuvres left only one Auror remaining. As the man lunged at him, Harry sidestepped, leaving the man running towards the edge. He only just managed to stop in time, leaving himself wobbling on the edge. All Harry had to do was kick and the final Auror plummeted down to the hard street below. Harry glanced to his right. On the next building were three Aurors firing down on where his parents had been minutes ago, but had now disappeared. Beyond that was a building on fire and then in the corner stood Crouch on a cottage rooftop, overlooking the devastation. The shouts of curses, the screams and the thundering footsteps had died down, but the smell of death and fire was getting worse.

Harry ran towards the edge and turned his wand on himself, levitating himself over the gap and onto the next building. Without stopping he ran to the far edge; the Aurors hadn't even noticed him as he passed. He jumped again, using his wand. He was launched twenty metres into the air, over the top of the fire. As he emerged from the plume of smoke, he saw Crouch stare up at him as he sailed down towards him. Crouch reached for his wand, his eyes never leaving Harry. To his horror, he saw Crouch remove a can of Coke from his pocket.

"NO!"

With a last sneer at Harry, Crouch tapped the Portkey and disappeared with a pop. Harry landed half a second later, right where Crouch had stood.

"DAMN IT!" he shouted. Cursing to himself, Harry looked down over the square, or what was left of it. The burned pamphlets now blew in the breeze over the sea of fallen bodies. The gutters ran crimson with blood. There were still one or two survivors. Harry jumped down from the roof, using a hovering charm to soften the impact. His knees complaining against the impact, Harry ducked behind some dustbins in the alley behind the Three Broomsticks. The building had taken many hits and the woodwork was splintered and full of holes. Luckily it wasn't on fire. It seemed that the battle was over.

Harry counted at least ten Aurors in black stepping over the fifty or so bodies that littered the streets. Harry could not see any other movement. He glanced up at the rooftop, which now seemed deserted as more Aurors emerged from the houses, having descended the stairs and joined their team mates in the square, looking for survivors. The banner the protestors had erected had been ripped down and the street was in ruins following the conflict. Looking up the hill, Harry could see flashes of light as the students were pursued up the hill, towards the castle.

"Get a Mediwitch from St Mungo's here ASAP," ordered one of the Aurors. "Get our lot back to the Med-Centre at the Complex and get any survivors to St Mungo's. Take names."

"What of those that got away?" asked an Auror.

"Rookwood can deal with them," said the boss. "We only want the Potter brat anyway."

This had all been about him! It really was his fault. Harry clenched his fists in anger from where he was hidden. How could he have been so stupid? Crouch was a monster; this was never beyond him. Harry had misjudged the situation and many had paid with their lives. He had to make sure the rest got back to the castle; he had to make sure Rose was okay.

Harry took a deep breath. Calling up his Phoenix power, he disappeared, reappearing half way up the hill, just a little way ahead of the front-runners of students. Suddenly there were four cracks as four more Black Aurors appeared in front of them, blocking their escape. The students stopped running as they saw that their path was blocked. Harry pulled out the Stun-Baton again.

"Ellectio!" he shouted. The baton burst to life, emitting a bright blue light. Harry charged towards the Aurors from behind. They never saw him coming, but the students did. Harry crashed into the back of the middle two Aurors, knocking them to the floor ground.

"Keep running!" shouted Harry, rolling back up onto his feet. He slammed the baton into the head of one Auror, then into the mid-section of another. The curse was pure lightning and so electrocuted anyone it touched. The Aurors crashed to the ground, blue lightning snaking over their bodies until they were unconscious.

"Expelliarmus!" shouted one of the Aurors. Harry cursed as the Baton was forced from his hands. He was knocked backwards and ended up on his arse on the street, and was forced to roll to the side, narrowly avoiding an incoming curse. Withdrawing his wand, Harry turned in time to conjure a shield to block the next. The curse bounced back off the shield and hit the Auror who had cast it. Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"Backup!" shouted the last Auror to someone or other. "I need backup now. I'm at...."

"Silencio!" shouted Harry, preventing the Auror from calling for help. *"Stupefy!"* Since the man could not speak, he could not conjure a strong enough shield to block the stunner and he crashed to the floor.

"Harry!" shouted a voice. He spun to see who had shouted his name. His blood ran cold as he saw an Auror holding Rose around the neck with one hand and around the waist with the other. She was thrashing in his grip, but he was too big and strong. As he began to drag her away, she screamed again.

"Harry!"

The Auror moved the hand from her throat to cover her mouth. They were thirty feet away from him, and Harry had no chance of hitting the Auror without hurting Rose. Igniting the baton with a stunner, Harry began to charge forward. Suddenly a series of pops filled the air. There were now another ten Aurors between Harry and Rose. Harry stopped in his tracks as his sister was dragged away down the hill.

Rose was his sister; he couldn't let them get away! He was outnumbered, but he didn't care. He charged forward, the baton raised and his wand unleashing a stunner. He had taken about three steps when a pair of hands grabbed him.

He instinctively threw his elbow back towards the man's head.

"Harry! It's me!" hissed a voice. He turned to see his father holding him. "Come with me!"

"But Rose...!"

"Come with me!" hissed James, dragging him into the forest, narrowly escaping a volley of hexes that blew apart the trees. They ran for about thirty seconds, deep into the forest where no Auror could find them. Luckily, by now the students were all back in the castle - those who were conscious that was but where the hell was dad taking him? Why didn't he care about Rose?

"Dad," said Harry, running alongside him. "We have to go back for Rose."

"No, *I* have to go back for Rose," said James, stopping and turning to face Harry.

"I can help!" protested Harry. She was his sister and he had to help her. He couldn't sit around while she was in danger.

"No!" hissed James. "Listen to me, Harry. After this, you will be arrested, that is if they don't kill you on sight. I will go after Rose. You must start running again. I don't know if the Prophecy is true, but even if it isn't, your mother has been captured, and Rose along with her. My place is with my family."

"And mine isn't?" snapped Harry.

"You and Sirius are the only surviving members of the Order with any form of combat training and experience," said James. "You are part of our family now, but you are also a soldier. You and Sirius must go on, for the sake of the country. I can protect our family, but who will be

out there to find us, who will keep the world safe for us to come back to? You must go on, Harry, please. Sirius will meet you in the Hog's Head at three o'clock."

"But Rose..." insisted Harry. He had to find her.

"...is my daughter," said James. "The Order must survive. I will take care of our family, Harry. You take care of the students, of the Order. You are in command, now; they are your responsibility."

The next thing Harry knew, his father had pulled him into a hug.

"I'm proud of you, Harry," said James, wrapping his arms tightly around him. "I know this hasn't been easy, but I want you to know, I believe in you. Lily too. You are more of a son to us than he ever was...now, go, Harry, and as your mother would say, Godspeed." With that, he turned and ran back towards the Aurors, disappearing through the trees.

Harry stood still for a few seconds, debating whether to follow. He could help him. He could get Rose back. In that moment, Harry felt closer to Rose than he ever had before. You really don't know what you have until it's gone...to think he had wasted all that time thinking that he shouldn't get involved, trying to distance himself from her and the rest of the family! *Idiot!* He should have enjoyed the moment, for now she was gone. He had been such an idiot, on so many levels. He wanted her back, but at the same time he had a duty to do. It wasn't fair! Forcing her out of his mind, Harry tried to focus on the job at hand. Cursing to himself, he disappeared in a ball of flame.

He reappeared down the alley behind the Three Broomsticks. Peering out, he could see Healers tending to the piles of bodies that littered the streets. He bowed his head as he noticed a handful with sheets over their heads signifying that they were dead. This was all his doing. He remembered Rookwood's words:

What happens next is on your head too!

Harry disappeared and a millisecond later reappeared at the gates of Hogwarts. He ran across the lawn and into the Entrance Hall. The Hall was full of students crying in each other's arms, while Mediwitches tended to the injured. The sounds of sobbing could be heard from outside. Harry glanced either way before running off towards McGonagall's office. He had to let her know what had happened and he didn't need the guilt trip of walking into the Hall.

Harry did not see a single person on his way. He made it to McGonagall's office in less than three minutes, grateful not to have met anyone on the way; he barged in without knocking. He froze at the sight that greeted him.

McGonagall was sitting behind her desk looking very grim. Snape stood to one side, his face as neutral as ever, while Flamel sat to the other, his eyes weary. On the other side of the desk stood Rookwood, flanked by two Aurors. The scene looked oddly familiar.

"Ah, Potter, do come in," said Rookwood, his usual smirk shining through. "Sit!" he pointed to a chair.

"I'll stand," said Harry, glancing at McGonagall and Snape, both of whose expressions were impossible to read. Harry felt his stomach shrink, knowing that he was now caught. His father's words came back to him. He had to go on, he had to survive. Yet he had done this; he had caused this pain. He had made the situation worse, much worse, and he had gotten so many people killed because of his insane hope that Crouch was honourable. He had miscalculated, and hundreds had paid with blood.

"Are you proud of yourself?" asked Rookwood, ending his stupor. "You violated my order and sent a large number of students into danger. Sixty are injured, nine unaccounted for and the damage to Hogsmeade reaches into the millions of galleons." If Harry didn't know better, he would have thought Rookwood cared. But no, this wasn't his fault. Crouch had knowingly fired on children. How dare he!

"I didn't lead them into danger," snapped Harry, his anger breaking free. "Your Minister ordered the Black Watch to fire on unarmed students, some as young as eleven."

"They wouldn't be there if it wasn't for you!" snapped Rookwood, saying aloud what the voice in Harry's mind was screaming.

"They wouldn't be injured if Crouch hadn't ordered them to fire," retorted Harry, his hand reaching into his belt for his wand.

"The Minister would not launch an unprovoked attack on children," said Rookwood, dismissing Harry with a wave of his hand. "However," he said, turning back to Harry, his eyes glowing with anger. "I have heard that several Aurors were injured in the battle. You have assaulted several Aurors, men and women who serve the law."

"I was there," snapped Harry as he approached Rookwood, his fingers grasping his wand, his anger flowing through him. He was ready to kill Rookwood, ready to choke the air out of him with his bare hands, to watch the life leave his eyes. "He ordered them to fire on us. He turned a peaceful protest into a God damned massacre."

"These *defenceless* children took out fifteen fully trained Aurors," sneered Rookwood. "Your little Duelling Club has been training an army, or perhaps the Order of the Phoenix, or whatever is left of it, was there." Rookwood had seen through the plan, but Harry's anger put him beyond the point of caring, he was so livid.

"Perhaps," said Harry. "Or perhaps I killed them because they were firing at me." He ignored the warning glare from McGonagall, who subtly shook her head, while Snape rolled his eyes.

"Are you admitting that you attacked Aurors?" asked Rookwood, raising his eyebrows, as if seeing a present on Christmas day.

"You heard," said Harry, unable to control his anger; his fingers itched on his wand.

"I told you this morning," said Rookwood, "that if you ever came back I would arrest you." The bastard didn't have the courage to do it himself and Harry would kill anyone who touched him!

"Only a fool would try and arrest me twice in one day," sneered Harry.

"Take him!" Rookwood snapped at the Aurors. Thank God, he had given Harry an excuse to hit him.

"*STUPEFY!*" yelled Harry, aiming his wand at the nearest Auror, just as McGonagall sent a similar spell at the other, and Snape at Rookwood. The three Ministry officials collapsed in a shower of red sparks. Harry felt so relieved to have taken one of them down. He gave Rookwood's fallen body a kick for good measure.

"Well this is another fine mess you've got us into, Potter," sneered Snape, putting his wand away.

"Shut up and listen," said Harry, cutting him off. "My parents and Rose have been captured, Dawlish as well. Dad told me to run. I am to meet Sirius and lie low. As he put it, we are the only ones with combat experience. Rookwood now controls Hogwarts and the two of you will be under even more suspicion."

"What do you propose to do?" asked McGonagall, ignoring his rudeness.

"We'll probably go to the Ministry. If we can find out where Dumbledore and the others are, we may be able to get them out. We also need to find Voldemort. With him dead, Crouch's power is broken. In my world, when he fell his power broke. His Death Eaters were in a panic, running blindly around. Most surrendered to Aurors, claiming bewitchment. If we can take out Voldemort, we have a chance at taking the country back."

"That's suicidal," said Snape.

"If you have a better idea, I have my Frog-Card," said Harry. "But right now, I have to run. Tell Ginny that Rose and I are safe. There is no need for her to know Rose has been captured." Harry was aware of how similar the situation was to that of Dumbledore last year, when Fudge had tried to arrest him. "Now, before I go, I have to Stun the pair of you. It has to look like you tried to detain me and I broke free. Rookwood will wake up in a few minutes and revive you."

"He may have us sent to Azkaban and assume total control of Hogwarts," said Snape.

"Got a better idea?" asked Harry. "We are out of time."

"So be it," said McGonagall. "Good luck, Harry."

Harry nodded and drew his wand. He muttered two Stunners, before disappearing in a ball of flame.

He reappeared in the same alley he had hidden in half an hour earlier. Healers were still running about, tending the last of the wounded. The Black Watch were still walking around, 'keeping the peace' - or so they called it. As one came near the end of the alley, Harry muttered a summoning charm, and as the Auror flew over to him, he swung the stun baton at him, catching him in mid-air. One minute later, Harry was dressed as a Black Watch Auror. The veil covered his face, and the people were scared to try and stop him. It seemed like a good cover.

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At three o'clock, Sirius Black Apparated to the forest on the edge of Hogsmeade. He peered out through the trees at the destruction. Two buildings had smoking thatched roofs, though the fires had been put out, leaving a blacked roof and walls. All the buildings had chunks missing from the walls, and scorch marks over what was left of them. There were perhaps twenty bodies covered in sheets in the square; some of them looked pretty small for adults. Merlin, they had fired on school children. He had heard the news from James that it had gone tits-up, but he had no idea it was this bad. How could Crouch justify this? Sirius knew his face would be wanted, so he quickly changed into a dog. Cautiously, he made his way out into the square, and over towards the alley that led to the Hog's Head. As he passed, he could see more of the grim details of the bodies. His sensitive canine nose supplied him with the magnified smell of death, stronger than a human would have smelt it. Sirius felt sick as he padded over towards the alley.

"HEY!" shouted a voice. Sirius froze, worried that his registered form had been recognised. An Auror was running over towards him. "Bastard dog!" he snapped, throwing a rock at Sirius, who jumped out the way. "Leave these people alone. They are not food! Go scavenge somewhere else!" Sirius didn't hang around; he bolted towards the alley and disappeared into the shadows. He found himself outside the door to the Hog's Head. He pushed it open with his nose. Once inside, he reassumed his human form. He had had the sense to change his clothes from his Auror robes and into a long black cloak with a hood.

He walked over to the bartender, who looked so familiar to Sirius. He had never met him, but he knew who he was, for he closely resembled his brother.

"Aberforth," said Sirius, reaching the bar. "Is the room ready?"

"All ready, kiddo," said Aberforth. "The boy is already there." Sirius nodded and climbed the stairs, glancing at the other patrons of the bar. He was not aware of any eyes following him, but he knew the pub's reputation. He knocked on the door, keeping his hood raised and his wand in his hand beneath the cloak.

He opened the door slowly and stepped in. He gasped in horror as he saw a Black Watch Auror sitting in the rocking chair by the fire. His wand was out in an instant, a spell already on his lips. The figure rocked backwards hard enough to upturn the chair. The curse sailed over the

top of the fallen Auror and chair. As the Auror fell, his hood fell back in the process and Sirius sighed with relief as he recognised his godson.

"Christ, Sirius, it's me," said Harry.

"Sorry," said Sirius, pocketing his wand. His heart was still pounding and his limbs trembled with adrenaline as he tried to calm himself. He had also broken into a cold sweat, and was breathing deeply. "I thought you were..."

"The clothes, I know," said Harry with a smile, as he climbed to his feet and put the rocking chair back on its feet. "I convinced an Auror to part with them." Sirius didn't want to know what that meant.

"Harry, what's happening?" asked Sirius, taking a seat opposite Harry. His curiosity couldn't wait. He had gotten a cryptic message from James on the Frog Card telling him that it had gone tits up, to avoid Hogsmeade and to come to the Hog's Head in disguise at three p.m. Sirius had only heard him that agitated twice before; once was the night that Rose had disappeared, the other the night Harry had done the same. Harry leaned back in the chair, a look of pain and guilt crossing his face. Merlin, what had happened?

Harry leaned forward, putting his head in his hands. After a moment, he looked up and took a deep breath. For the next fifteen minutes, Harry laid out the situation in full. The more he spoke, the more helpless Sirius felt. With every word, his stomach knotted tighter and the shakes returned. The Order was scattered, divided and weak. For all intents and purposes, there *was* no Order. Merlin, how many had died today? Children as young as eleven, or even younger if they were villagers. What kind of monster could do that? He could see that his godson was immersed in guilt for what had happened. Sirius sat for nearly a minute in silence after Harry finished.

"We're alone in this," said Sirius after a long pause. "There's no one else. The Order was nearly one hundred strong, but most of those were informants. They are all in hiding now. We can't involve them."

"McGonagall said to keep communication to a minimum," said Harry. "She and Snape are being watched; it's the two of us against the whole Ministry."

"I never dreamed it would get this bad," said Sirius, massaging his temples and looking tired.

"I know," said Harry. "Those were friends of mine who died today. Rose, Mum and Dad are gone, and it's my fault. I led people into that."

"You did what you thought was right," said Sirius, brushing Harry's guilt aside.

"Last summer, in my world, I did what I thought was right, and you were murdered in front of me," said Harry. "Some of the worst things imaginable were done with the best

intentions." Harry realised that he was placing his mistake alongside the creation of the atomic bomb. It seemed about as bad. What had he been thinking?

"So, what do we do now?" asked Sirius.

"That's the big question," said Harry.

"Forget the war for the time being," said Sirius. "We can't do anything if we are caught or dead, so let's start with self-preservation. We have to get out of here and to somewhere safe, a place to regroup."

"Right," said Harry, his brain beginning to work again. It was odd how his mind worked so much better in combat situations than at any other time. Another present from the Dark Knight, no doubt. "It's only a matter of time before the previous owner of this uniform is found. They may be Death Eaters under a legal name, but the Black Watch are also Aurors, so they will have protocols to follow. Am I right in thinking they will want statements and things from villagers?"

"Yes," said Sirius, nodding. "Standard procedure."

"Then we cannot stay here," said Harry. "If we wait, they'll come knocking to ask what we saw. So, let's grab some food quickly and relocate, though I don't know where to." He tried to think of places to go. In the old days, Hogwarts was a stronghold, where he could always go. Failing that, there was the Burrow or Grimmauld Place. Death Eaters now controlled the latter, but the first was a possibility.

"Godric's Hollow and my place will be watched," said Sirius, his brow furrowed in thought. "I wouldn't recommend the Burrow. We don't want to put Molly at risk. With Arthur having been arrested, we don't want to draw more attention to her. They will be watching all friends and family and will have wanted posters in all hotels and hostels by now as well as having Aurors with our pictures all over the streets. Unless we break and enter, we are almost out of choices, but that leaves us vulnerable if someone comes home and catches us."

Harry was racking his brains, trying to think. He didn't like the idea of breaking in somewhere, or holding a resident hostage in their own home. There was no telling how long this would last.

"Wait," said Sirius, clicking his fingers. His eyes were alight with an idea. That was fortunate, as Harry was coming up empty. "We could go Muggle," continued Sirius. "I've got enough cash. If I convert it to pounds we could get a room for the night. That gives us a little time to calm down and think of a better long-term plan. Crouch will need to contact Downing Street or the Met to get our photos into the Muggle world, so that buys us perhaps twenty-four hours; time to think."

"Good enough," said Harry. At least it was legal. It wasn't a permanent solution, but given time and a cup of tea, Harry was sure he could come up with a better solution. He smirked

to himself. Only an Englishman could think about tea at a time like this. "We don't know when the next time we can eat will be, so I'll order something to ea..."

*BANG! BANG!*

He was interrupted by the sound of a fist pounding on the door. The whole frame shook under the force, and an authoritative voice shouted through the woodwork.

"OPEN UP!"

Harry stared at Sirius, his jaw dropping in surprise and fear. They had been found! They were trapped!

A second later, the door was blasted off its hinges. The doorway was full of smoke as the red sparks faded into nothingness. Harry coughed as the smoke filled his lungs and watched in horror as two figures in flowing black robes with veils covering their faces emerged from the smoke. The Black Watch had arrived. Harry had his veil down and his face was visible to all. It took only a fraction of a second for the leading Auror to recognise him. His eyes flashed with anger behind the veil.

"DON'T MOVE!" sneered the Auror, levelling his wand at Harry's head before he could move. Harry's hand was nowhere near his wand and if he moved, the Auror would kill him. He dared not try anything. He raised his hands slowly in a surrendering movement. "Watch him!"

The second Auror sidestepped the first to keep his wand on Sirius. "You're under arrest," announced the leader, moving his wand to Sirius. "You for treason," - he returned his wand to Harry - "and you for murder. Secure Black." The second Auror took a step forward, then paused. He turned to his commander.

"Ayden," said the second Auror, his voice emotionless, yet somewhat familiar.

"What?" hissed his partner, turning to face him. Without warning, the second Auror brought his black-gloved hand up sharply into the nose of his commander with a sickening crunch. Harry ducked away as blood splattered him from the Auror's broken nose. The attacker pushed his victim into a wall before grabbing a handful of his hair, pulling his head down and then thrusting it backwards, slamming his cranium into the wall and plunging him into unconsciousness.

Standing over his fallen colleague, the second Auror turned back to face Harry, who by this time had his wand aimed at the Auror's head. Sirius also had his wand drawn and ready.

"You can lower those, boys," said the Auror, raising a gloved hand to his face. He pulled his veil down and his hood back, revealing his face. Harry found himself staring into the eyes of Frank Longbottom. The son of a bitch had betrayed them! How could he?

"You're one of them, Frank?" hissed Sirius, taking the words right out of Harry's mouth. Both of them stared in loathing at Frank, their wands aimed at his throat.

"Yes," said Frank matter-of-factly, glaring at Harry. "I was approached by Crouch Junior. Did I want revenge on you, Potter, he says. Of course, says I. Join him, and I get you; that was the offer." So Frank had betrayed them all, just to get even with the Dark Knight. Didn't he understand that he and Harry were two different people? All this because he was too stupid to see that? *Bastard!*

"Son of a bitch," said Harry, shaking his head, the anger flowing through his veins. He didn't know who he hated the most, Frank or Crouch. At least Crouch was open about his beliefs.

"Hold your hippogriffs," said Frank impatiently, waving Harry aside with a flick of his hand. "Do you honestly think I would join Voldemort after what he did? Do you think I'm stupid?" What was he saying? Was he faking? Was this a lie?

"Are you saying you haven't?" asked Harry, looking Frank in the eye. It couldn't be. He was wearing Black Watch robes and hadn't been seen for several days. "Excuse me, but evidence to the contrary," said Harry condescendingly, pointing at Frank's uniform. The Auror shot Harry an annoyed glare before continuing.

"With Dumbledore out of the picture, I made a tactical decision," said Frank. "Crouch cornered me in the Ministry fifteen minutes before the purges started. I had no time to tell anyone. I was on my own and I did what I felt was best for the Order."

"Got half of us arrested?" offered Sirius, taking a step forward, a glare on his face. Harry was caught between the urge to hold Sirius back and to dive at Frank himself.

"I knew the Order was compromised," said Frank. "I knew that I would be arrested if I didn't. I could see what would happen. If I had resisted, then what? I would have joined the others under arrest and been no use to man or beast. Instead, I inserted myself as a spy. Sure, they far from trust me, but we have a pair of eyes and ears inside the Black Watch."

"You knew we were compromised and you never told us?" sneered Sirius. It was Harry's exact thought. Surely he had a Frog Card and could have told the others to run.

"I only found out fifteen minutes before it happened," said Frank. "For two days I didn't see a single person. They kept me isolated, training me so to speak, testing my loyalty and ability until they let me out. By then it was too late. It took another day to find the time to make contact with the Order. Since then I have been passing information to Snape."

"Off all the people," said Sirius, trying to keep his voice down, echoing Harry's thoughts. Snape hadn't passed on his information. Why not? Was Snape a spy for Voldemort? "The man is as dark as it gets," continued Sirius. "Why not anyone else?"

"I knew there was a leak," said Frank. " We both did, and I didn't know who to trust. Albus trusts him with his life and I will trust his instincts, even if it means working with Potter here. It was Snape who told me where you were tonight. Unfortunately, Ayden here came with me to check the pub." Frank glanced down at the fallen Auror. "He shouldn't have come. He's seen you, and knows too much." Frank glanced up at Harry. "We all know he must not leave this room alive, or I will be compromised," said Frank, his face and voice neutral. Before anyone could say a word, Frank bent down and grasped the fallen man's head with both hands.

Harry turned away as Frank twisted the Auror's neck sharply. He shivered at the sound of the sickening crunch as the man's neck broke like a twig. He hated people cracking their knuckles, so this was just plain vile. Frank seemed unfazed as he stood up. It seemed that Frank was indeed on their side, though the thought hardly thrilled Harry, or Frank himself for that matter.

"So what are we doing?" asked Frank, addressing Harry. "You can't stay here and they are looking high and low for you. Where are you going to stay?"

"Step one, we get rid of the body," said Sirius, lowering his wand. "Next we go to Gringott's; we need money. Then we find a hotel." Harry noted that Sirius left out the word Muggle from his reply. It seemed that he didn't trust Frank either. The Auror stared at Sirius for a second.

"Diagon Alley is crawling with the Black Watch," said Frank. "You'll need to be in disguise." Luckily, Sirius had a disguise: a fur-coat, in a manner of speaking.

"Got it covered," said Sirius. "We'll call you when we're settled."

"Fine," said Frank. "Be careful, and don't be seen. I'll take care of the body." Sirius nodded and stepped over the dead Auror and walked towards the door, gesturing for Harry to follow. Harry shot one final glance at Frank before following Sirius out of the door.

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Ten minutes later, two figures walked into the reception of the Eagle Cross Hotel in Nottingham. Neither looked out of the ordinary, except for the fact that they wore sunglasses in the middle of December. The younger one turned to the side, waiting just inside the door, gazing through the window at passers by in the street. Harry watched carefully for any sign of movement, any sign they had been followed. Frank had returned to the Ministry to report on Ayden's death and to maintain his cover. After a quick trip to Gringott's, Sirius and Harry had come to a relatively small hotel in the south of Nottingham, a city that neither of them had ties to, and had no Ministry presence. At the same time, it was large enough that strangers would not be noticed and they could disappear in a crowd.

Satisfied that they were not being followed, Harry joined Sirius in the queue to check in. In front of them were a family of four. Two children, looking thoroughly bored, probably at the end of a long journey, held their parents' hands as they waited for the elderly lady in front of

them to be served by a young receptionist, who wore so much makeup that her false smile was permanently glued into place.

"This place smells," announced the son of the family in front. He was about thirteen, with platinum blond hair swept across his head in a side parting. He wore smart beige trousers, brown leather shoes, a cream shirt and a dark green sleeveless v-neck woolly jumper. Aside from the clothes, he reminded Harry of a certain Slytherin. Harry tried to hide his smile, but found it hard. "I don't like it here."

"It's only for one night, son," said his father. Harry glanced at Sirius, who rolled his eyes.

The boy had his nose in the air, his arms folded across his chest and a scowl etched into his face. He looked like a golfer. His father wore a neatly pressed suit and his wife a beautiful cream suit with an expensive pearl necklace. The daughter was dressed in a summery frock that made her look a little stupid in Harry's opinion, but he was no fashion expert.

"Why can't we stay at the Hilton?" the boy demanded. "This place isn't fit for dogs."

What a stuck up twat, thought Harry, shaking his head. *A Muggle Malfoy.*

"There, there, darling," said his mother, stroking his hair. "Tomorrow we catch the plane and then it's three weeks of sun in Auntie Sue's mansion in Australia. It's only one night, sweetie." She was large, with no neck and several chins. Her busy hair and huge waistline reminded Harry of another woman.

Suddenly a thought occurred to Harry, a wicked thought, but one that had potential. He leaned in to whisper to Sirius.

"If the Minister are clever, they will know we have gone Muggle," said Harry. "Remember, true Aurors will view us as enemies, and they will do their duty and help Crouch find us. Some of them are clever. Now, we need to go somewhere they won't suspect or think to look, somewhere out of the way. I think we need to go back to where this whole nightmare started."

"Where do you mean?" asked Sirius. Harry winked, before turning on his heel and walking away, gesturing for Sirius to follow.

Harry set off into the toilets in the lobby. He entered the lavishly decorated toilets and was relieved to find it empty. Crouching down, he peered into the cubicles, all of which were empty. "We need somewhere off the map," said Harry, satisfied they were alone. "Somewhere we know, so we can escape if we are found, and somewhere where no one will come looking, and like I said, I think we should go back to where this nightmare began." He held out a hand to Sirius; it was better to travel his way, as it couldn't be detected like Apparation. "Hold on."

Sirius hesitated for a second before taking hold of his arm, while Harry tried to picture the destination clearly from his memories of his home world. With a whoosh, they disappeared in a ball of flame, inadvertently setting off the smoke detector and evacuating the entire hotel.

Harry landed on rough gravel that crunched beneath his weight. He was relieved not to have twisted his ankle on the uneven trail. Sirius had his wand out and ready, and was taking in the surroundings. The gate had been the best picture Harry could remember of the entire place, so that was where they had ended up.

They stood in the middle of an uneven lane, bordered by high hedges thick with brambles. There was a light breeze blowing up the muddy lane, bringing the smell of the countryside and cool Devon air with it. In front of them at the top of the hill was a large wooden gate, held shut by a spring and sealed with a large bolt. Attached to the centre of the gate was a large ornate sign.

Higher Croft Farm

He was back, and this time the reception would be colder, as was his intent. Harry hopped the gate, followed by Sirius.

"Where are we?" asked Sirius, following him across the courtyard towards the large wooden door, which was surrounded by flowerbeds. The table and chairs on the porch that would have seemed almost inviting at the end of last summer, were it not for the owner, now were tucked away neatly, gathering frost in the bitter winter's weather. The hanging baskets and flowerbeds were almost barren, except for brown stalks sticking up through the frosted soil. The sun was low on the horizon; it would be dark soon, and it was only four o'clock. Dark and difficult times lay ahead, literally.

"This is where I came to this world," said Harry. Harry reached the front door, careful not to trip over the hosepipe that lay dripping on the porch. Harry noted that he could not hear the dogs, which worried him slightly. He knocked sharply on the door and waited. There was no note this time. After a few seconds he tried again. He glanced at Sirius, who was staring out over the countryside, taking in the picturesque sunset.

They were five minutes' drive from the town of Mary Tavy and ten to Tavistock, but even then it was a full minute up a thin winding road that only led to the farm. Unless you were coming here, there was no reason to take it. No one would bother them. After another twenty seconds had passed and there had still been no reply. Maybe it was better this way. Harry drew his wand.

"*Alohomora!*" The door clicked open and Harry stepped into the familiar farmhouse, the smell of farmhouse cooking combined with dogs invading his nostrils as he reached for the light-switch. "Come in, Sirius," said Harry. "She's out."

"Who?"

"The foulest woman on earth," said Harry, bitterly. Sirius slipped into the house and closed the door behind him with once final glance down the road. "Right, we need to make it secure."

"I can have basic Apparation and Portkey wards up in ten minutes, but anti-Muggle are more of a problem," said Sirius. "You see, if the owner isn't here, he or she will be coming back. Anti-Muggle wards aren't strong enough to keep them away. The homing sense is too strong, just like you can't hypnotise someone to death because of the survival instinct."

"So we need to wait for the lady of the house to come..."

"HARRY, LOOK OUT!" Sirius' eyes were wide as he rushed forward.

Harry spun in the direction of Sirius' eyes. He came face to face with the exact woman he had been referring to. To his horror, he also came face to face with the barrel of a shotgun, aimed at his chest.

BANG!

It seemed to happen in slow motion: the flash, the deafening bang, the impact in his chest and his feet leaving the floor before the impact on his back. He hadn't even realised what had happened until he found himself staring up at Aunt Marge as she pumped the shotgun for a second shot.

"*STUPEFY!*"

The huge woman was forced backwards by the spell and launched into the wall, the gun coming loose from her grip in the process. She landed in a heap at the base of the wall, unconscious. Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

"Harry! Are you alright?" asked Sirius, lying at his side.

"Near enough," said Harry, sitting up. "It hit my armour. Hurt like hell though." His ribs complained as Sirius helped him to his feet. The shot had hit just below his heart. Aunt Marge had not been aiming to wound him: *bitch!*

"Good thing it was point blank," said Sirius.

"Good?"

"Otherwise the buckshot would have dispersed and you've have lost most of your shoulder," said Sirius. "So what do we do with her?"

"Keep her sedated," said Harry. "Obliviate her when we leave. No one will miss her; she isn't exactly a contributing member of society."

"Fair enough," said Sirius. "I'll see to the wards."

Harry made his way into the kitchen and put the kettle on. It took twenty minutes for Sirius to get the wards up. He kept them to just the building, fearing that anything bigger might be noticed by passing wizards.

"Let's get some sleep," said Harry as Sirius came in, having finished the wards. "Tomorrow, we need to sort out what the hell we do now."

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### ***HARRY POTTER STAGES ATTACK ON AURORS***

In October, when the world first learned that Harry Potter had suffered amnesia, many still felt that he was untrustworthy. When he was pardoned, many felt it was a travesty of justice. Whether he really did lose his memory, or it was all an elaborate hoax, Harry Potter has turned back to his dark ways. In a secret campaign to undermine the Hogwarts High Inquisitor, Augustus Rookwood, Harry Potter has been training a student army under the disguise of a Duelling Club.

Yesterday, the members of this club coerced a majority of the student body to follow their leader down to Hogsmeade village, boycotting lessons in favour of civil unrest activities. The people of Hogsmeade cowered in their homes as the riotous students approached. One student in the sixth year has spent in the night in Auror custody to sober up before being returned to Hogwarts.

The unrest could perhaps be forgiven, but when Ministry Aurors arrived to direct students back to Hogwarts and restore peace to the village, Potter's duelling club opened fire on the Aurors. Two Aurors were killed and five more injured in the following firefight.

"Potter was not alone," said one Auror, who cannot be named for legal reasons. "He fired first, demolishing half a building on top of my team-mates; three of them are dead now. The other students starting throwing hexes at us, and there were others - adults, ex-Aurors. Even the children were using the Dark Arts. I've never seen things as sick as what Potter's friends were throwing at us. People were dropping everywhere. It was a simple crowd control assignment, and Potter turned it into a massacre."

Seven students died in the conflict and a further two remain in critical condition. Two buildings have been burned to the ground, while others are scarcely standing. The cost of rebuilding is expected to reach into the millions. Arrest warrants have been issued for him Potter and his accomplices. It would appear that Potter is now in charge of Albus Dumbledore's terror network, the Order of the Phoenix. As long as Potter is at large, we can expect further attacks.

"This is all bollocks," whispered Ron to Ginny, at breakfast the next day. Almost everyone was crowded around copies of the *Prophet*, trying to read. Ginny glanced up from her cereal as he spoke. "We were there; it didn't happen like that." Those who had been on the march were now back in school. Eleven were still in St Mungo's and seven students had been confirmed dead, as well as eleven villagers and several Aurors. Rookwood had allowed the protesters to return to classes, the grip of fear created by the Black Watch enough to keep them in line. Ginny was perfectly well aware that she was being watched around the clock. Rookwood was waiting for something before he had them arrested; Ginny just didn't know what.

"Shhh!" hissed Ginny. "If Rookwood hears us, we'll end up in detention." No one spoke loudly anymore. Any conversations in the corridors were conducted in whispers, if at all. The Inquisitorial Squad had free reign, and Malfoy used it to his advantage, using intimidation to get what he wanted. There were those who did what he wanted out of fear, even in Gryffindor. That meant that all conversations had to be very guarded indeed.

"But we can't do nothing," protested Ron.

"What can we do?" asked Ginny, frustrated that he didn't see the hopelessness of it all. "Harry's gone, Rose and Hermione too. It's you, Luna, and me and that's all. The duelling club has been abolished, or didn't you read the notice board last night? We can't even talk without fear of being overheard."

"We need to see McGonagall," said Ron, folding the paper away. "She'll know what to do."

"Perhaps," said Ginny, not as confident as her brother. Her thoughts were going beyond him to something Harry had said when they first met. It had potential, and if there was ever a need for it, it was now. "Ron, we know we are not an army, and the article was a lie, but it is a good idea, isn't it?"

"What? You want to form one?" asked Ron, picking up her meaning. Ginny nodded.

"Why not?"

"No one is going to join after this," Ron hissed. He glanced around the room. "Look at them. They're all scared. We all know someone who died. They just want to keep their heads down and be safe."

"On the other hand, it might have strengthened resolve," said Ginny. "They know that the Ministry and the *Prophet* are corrupt and liars now. If we could get a handful of us together...do you remember what Harry said about his world, about the DA? They fought against Umbridge; *we* fought against Umbridge. In his world, *we* fought and won. We can do it again."

"Sounds dangerous," said Ron. "If we are caught this time, it won't be detention, it will be arrest."

"No more dangerous than staying here waiting for Voldemort to take over," said Ginny. Ron grimaced at the word.

"Don't say his name," he hissed.

"Grow up, Ron," said Ginny, not bothering to hide her frustration. "We have to do something." It was just a matter of finding out what they could actually do. Rookwood's spies were everywhere, the castle was run like a prison and there was so little time to be alone with anyone. It would be noticed if ten or twenty students met on a regular basis. Having a DA was all well and good, but unless they could regularly meet to practice, it was all for nothing.

This was going to be a bitch to organise, especially with schoolwork now taking over. Five minutes ago, the school had been informed that Professor Snape had replaced Professor Potter teaching Potions. This of course left the post of Defence teacher available. Ginny had had a feeling that Rookwood would scrap it altogether, but instead, he had inserted one of his Aurors into the post. By controlling both Defence and the Dark Arts themselves, Rookwood would train a bunch of school kids into a gang of killers. This whole situation was spiralling out of control; they were nearing the point of no return.

"I'll ask my year if they want to join," said Ron. "You do yours. We can try Ernie, Luna, maybe Terry. I don't know about seventh years; Katie Bell might, I know her well from Quidditch." He appeared thoughtful as he stuffed his mouth with scrambled eggs.

"Gannet," muttered Ginny, sipping her tea. Her mind was going over whom she would ask to attend. Who did she know who was reliable? With the Muggleborns gone and the Order under arrest, not to mention Rose's disappearance, they would be very short on numbers.

"Keep it quiet, Ron," said Ginny, rising to leave. "This is no game. Tonight at nine in the Room of Requirement." With that she began to walk away, planning how she could speak to her recruits. She was conscious as she left of a great many eyes watching her every movement. She had to be careful. A shiver ran down her spine at the thought of being caught.

At nine o'clock that evening, Ginny and Ron entered the Room of Requirement to find several armchairs in a circle waiting for them with a kettle over the fire and a cup ready. It was a good thing that Harry had made them aware of this room. Ginny noted that it was so convenient, on a great many levels, as Ron began to help himself to a plate of biscuits he had found. Ginny remembered how Harry had made it into a tropical beach. That had been nice, but it was not serious enough for the occasion. This was a secret meeting of the utmost importance, and it was imperative that everyone understood the full gravity of the situation they were in. As they had seen the day before, this was a deadly game of cat and mouse, and they were definitely the mice.

Seamus Finnigan, looking glum now that Dean had gone, and Katie Bell, looking nervous as the two of them arrived together. Katie looked pale as a sheet as she sunk into an armchair without a word. Ginny poured the poor girl a cup of tea to calm her nerves. It reminded Ginny exactly how much they were asking them to risk. The door opened again and Ernie Macmillan entered, looking sad ' his best friend had died in the conflict. Luna Lovegood and Terry Boot

also came into the room, Terry checking the corridor outside for anyone following them before closing the door softly and joining the others by the fire. Over the next five minutes, Susan Bones and Hannah Abbot also arrived. It was half of what Ginny had hoped for, but it would have to do; yet nine was not enough to challenge the Inquisitorial Squad.

"Okay," said Ginny, getting the meeting started. "Help yourself to tea and biscuits, but as time is short, I'll get started. We were all there yesterday, and we all read the *Prophet* this morning. We know it's all a load of bollocks. Harry Potter did not train us to be an army, the Order of the Phoenix is not a terrorist network and Dumbledore did not murder Crouch."

"The Order of the Phoenix exists?" asked Ernie, staring at her intently, his eyes eager. Ginny hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should tell him. It was probably for the best. They had risked a lot to be here and so treating them like children was not a good idea, especially as she needed their help.

"Yes," said Ginny, her voice level. She paused for a second to let the fact sink in. "It was a group of freedom fighters designed to fight Voldemort's Death Eaters." Again she paused to let the effect of the name wear off. "The trouble is that now a Death Eater is Minister of Magic and another is High Inquisitor, so it's them that write the *Prophet*. They say that the Order are terrorists, but it's all a lie. We know Dumbledore; he is not a murderer. We also know Harry Potter; he is many things, but he tried to protect us out there yesterday, and we all saw it. He tried to keep us safe, but Crouch gave the order to fire. We are here today because we can't just sit here and accept this. Rookwood must never find out about this group. What I am proposing is dangerous, but unless we wish to submit to Voldemort's rule, I don't see another choice."

"What exactly are you asking of us?" asked Seamus.

"The Duelling Club was never meant to be an army," said Ginny simply. "This one is."

"You're kidding," said Terry, spraying crumbs all over the chair. His eyes were wide in shock. "You can't expect us to be an army, to fight, to challenge Rookwood. Sure, I'd love to have a go at Malfoy, but there are Aurors in the school around the clock, trained killers. Ginny, I agree with what you're saying, but you don't expect us to fight off Aurors, do you? It can't be done."

"No," said Ginny. "I don't expect you to challenge the Aurors head on, or even the Inquisitorial Squad. I propose we train to fight. We look up new curses by day, and train by night. I have a way to contact Harry that doesn't involve owls, so Rookwood can't trace it. Harry is hiding with Sirius Black, an Order member and a true Auror, not one of these Black Watch thugs. Black Watch is just another name for Death Eater. I am proposing that we be ready for any form of action they decide on, because two men standing alone are no match for the Ministry. They need all the help they can get, and you're right, Terry, we are not trained Aurors, but we can do our parts. We are not helpless and they need us. Now, I know this is a risk. We may get expelled, but I say that it's better to be at risk out there and trained, than safe in here and unable to defend ourselves."

"But you're not just talking about detention," interrupted Ernie, leaning forward in his chair. "You said it yourself. Crouch is a monster and we'll be arrested, not expelled, if we are caught. We are talking about Azkaban if something goes wrong." Ginny wished he hadn't said it out loud. She had been thinking the same thing, but to say it aloud would scare the others. They needed everyone they could get.

"True," said Ginny, slowly. "I know what I propose is dangerous, and that there are consequences to failing, but I will not give in to Voldemort's rule. If we do nothing, what then? Once in complete control, he will hunt us down; The Malfoys and the Weasleys have hated each other for generations. Lucius Malfoy will have free reign to kill my family when Voldemort takes over, and I know he will do it. I won't sit around and wait for it. If we fail, it will be no worse than if we do nothing."

"I don't know, Ginny," said Ernie. "My friend was killed yesterday because he wanted to do his part."

"And his death will be in vain if Voldemort takes over," said Ginny, hoping Ernie didn't take offence. "This is your chance to make his death mean something." Ernie sat back in his chair, staring into the fire. The room was silent, save for seven for the crackling of the fire.

"Envy the country that has heroes," muttered Ernie. "Pity the country that needs them."

"Real heroes are not super strong or fast or clever," said Luna, dreamily. "They just do what is right, when all others turn and run." It was probably the most profound thing the girl had ever had said; even Seamus who openly didn't take her seriously bowed his head and nodded at the remark.

"I'm in," said Seamus, raising his head. "One way or another, it's going to end soon. Let's show the bastards where to shove it." There was a sad smile on his face as he said it.

"Me too," said Ron.

"And me," said Luna dreamily. Ginny wasn't sure that she had heard a word of what was said, or knew what she was doing, but Ginny appreciated her help. Even the smallest person had the power to change the future.

"What about the rest of you?" asked Ginny, addressing the silent ones. She looked at each of them in turn, staring into their eyes. One by one, their heads shrank into a nod. Ginny breathed a sigh of relief at the unanimous vote.

"Thank you," said Ginny. "Starting tomorrow, we need to start research; we need new spells and curses. We'll meet here tomorrow at the same time to begin practicing. I know this seems rushed, but we have very little time. I hope you understand."

The others nodded.

"We should leave now," said Ginny. "One more thing - we must not be seen together outside meetings. The risk is too great with the Inquisitorial Squad sneaking around."

"So how do we communicate?" asked Hannah.

"I'll figure something out," said Ginny. "Good night."

When Ginny got back to Gryffindor Tower that night, a note was pinned to the Notice Board.

*EDUCATIONAL DECREE 22*

By order of the High Inquisitor, all clubs and societies without  
express permission from the High Inquisitor are banned.

*Prof A. Rookwood.*

Up in her room, Ginny cast a silencing charm around the bed and pulled out the Frog-Card. She knew that the notice meant that Rookwood knew something was wrong. Maybe he just didn't want people to group together, but Ginny had a feeling he knew a little more than that. They had to be very careful with this and they needed help from the outside.

"Harry Potter," she whispered into the card.

After a few seconds, a very sleepy looking Harry Potter filled the card.

"Yeah," he yawned. Ginny felt a tad guilty for waking him, but it was necessary. This couldn't wait.

"Harry, it's Ginny," she whispered.

"What's happened?" he asked, suddenly wide-awake.

"Me and Ron put together a small team for a new DA," said Ginny, feeling oddly proud of herself. "We are going to learn new curses, so when the time comes we can help." She had been expecting him to grin broadly, congratulate her, or something to that effect, but her sentence was met with stony silence. Harry stared at her from the card, his expression unreadable. He paused for a second before sighing deeply.

"Ginny" said Harry. "This puts you all in danger, and you'll get more than a slapped wrist if this goes pear-shaped. Hang on, I'll wake Sirius." His face disappeared from the card, leaving it black. Ginny was somewhat taken aback by the response. She had expected him to be proud, grateful, even in awe, but not hostile to the idea. This affected them as much as it did him. It was their right to help, and Harry couldn't do this alone. Ginny waited for nearly a minute before the card began to vibrate again. She raised it to her face. Harry stared out at her once more.

"Okay, Ginny, you're on with myself and Sirius," said Harry. "You said you have set up a new DA, right? How many are there and who's in it?" His tone was glum and his face calculating.

"Not many," confessed Ginny. "Nine of us. I can recruit more if we need it," she added as an after thought.

"No," said Harry, urgently. "You'll draw attention to yourself and that is what you need to avoid; you can't even be seen together, though if you and Ron avoid each other it will look odd. Just act natural."

"We won't speak of it in public," said Ginny. "But we already have attention; I think Rookwood knows." Harry look puzzled for a minute, then his eyes widened in understanding.

"Educational Decrees?" he asked. Ginny guessed that he must have suffered the same thing under Umbridge. She nodded, before elaborating.

"All clubs and teams are banned..."

"...without permission from the High Inquisitor," finished Harry. "The Quidditch teams will need to go to get permission; it will look suspicious if you just accept this. Gryffindors need to be seen to argue a bit to keep up appearances, but don't land yourself in detention. They will be vicious. In the mean meantime, stay away from each other. They will be looking for groups who might be hiding something. This whole thing is designed to shake you up, catch you out; don't let it. Be calm and patient."

"There's another problem," said Ginny. "We have no way to communicate, and this is the only card."

"I'll have Hermione make a batch of coins that will allow you to communicate," said Harry. "They'll be sent tomorrow." Ginny breathed a sigh of relief; Harry had solved her problem for her, although there were still plenty more to solve. But what of Harry? What had happened to him? Where was Rose? What had gone wrong?

"What's going on, Harry?" asked Ginny. "Where are you?"

"We're safe," said Harry cautiously. "I won't say where, but we are safe. We have a plan, too." The words were music to Ginny's ears.

"What can we do to help?" asked Ginny, eager to serve.

"At the moment, nothing," said Harry, again cautiously. "For now, stay out of sight and train yourselves. Don't take risks. If our plan works, we may need your army, but don't let them know that yet."

"Okay, Harry," said Ginny, half glad that they would be needed, and half terrified that there were. "One more thing."

"What?"

"Where is Rose?" asked Ginny. Harry's face twitched at the name, and his eyes narrowed slightly. He was hiding something. "Harry, I need to know."

He sighed deeply.

"She's not..." began Ginny, horrified. Harry stared out of the card at her, his emotions hidden.

"She's not dead," said Harry. "She was captured with my parents yesterday, but they are alive."

"Are you sure?"

"Voldemort will use her to lure me," said Harry. "She's more valuable alive."

"But..."

"Get some sleep, Ginny," said Harry. "You'll need your strength. Good night."

"Good night."

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"Not entirely honest, Harry," said Sirius as Harry pocketed his card, the image of Rose being dragged away still imprinted in his mind. Harry was sprawled out on one of three leather sofas around the fire in Higher Croft Farmhouse. He wore what he had been wearing the day of the protest, except for the t-shirt, which now lay somewhere on the floor of the bedroom Harry had picked to get changed in. He had thrown it across the room in a fit of stress and wherever it had landed was where it now lay, while his borrowed Black Watch robes were draped more or less tidily over the back of the chair next to the desk in the same room. He had been lying awake brooding for the last hour, having had four hours of sleep, with nothing but a glass of water to keep him company.

"Eh?"

"You made it sound like we have a plan," noted Sirius. "If you do, please share it, because I'm coming up short." He grinned, and Harry knew that he knew Harry had said that comfort Ginny. He didn't have a plan, or anything resembling it.

"I don't," confessed Harry, "but she doesn't need to know that."

"Smart move," said Sirius, sinking onto another sofa.

"How's it going?" asked Harry, sitting up for the first time in ages, his clothes stuck to his back with sweat from having been curled up for so long.

"Finished," said Sirius. "The alarm system is completely frozen, Muggle repelling charms line the boundaries of the property, and I've put down anti-Apparation and Portkey wards. Nothing can get through without us knowing about it, but it won't stop this place being found by wizards." It was good, but far from perfect. Harry didn't like the idea of a wizard walking by and wondering what the wards were for and wandering in. Wasn't there anything else they could do?

"Can't we put it under the Fidelius Charm?"

"Do you know how?" asked Sirius, raising an eyebrow in mock seriousness. "It's an immensely complicated charm. I know of three people alive - at least I hope they are still alive - who are able to do it, and unfortunately, none of them are in any position to help us. I've done the best I can."

"Okay, good," said Harry, brushing his hair back with his hands and gently massaging the back of his neck. "Now what?" They had slept a little and eaten, but still had come up with no plan of action, or even a vague idea.

"That's the big question, isn't it," muttered Sirius, sipping Harry's drink. "If you can think of a way to get us out of this mess, you're smarter than I am, because from my point of view, we're well and truly up the creek without a paddle. In fact, we're so far up, we've gone beyond the creek, beyond the spring and at present are right at the top of the mountain."

Harry looked blankly at Sirius, unable to understand the analogy. Sirius read his expression and smirked to himself.

"As in 'we're buggered'," translated Sirius. "We were caught with our knickers down and he jumped in and..."

"Thanks, I get the picture," Harry cut him off, not wanting the mental image.

He had to hand it to Voldemort; it was a brilliantly conceived plan. First he made every effort to find and eliminate the one thing he feared - the Door in the Department of Mysteries. He failed and in so doing, he lost his best man, but it didn't matter; he had a contingency plan. Did he not trust Harry Potter in the first place, then, to have plans like his ready to go, or was he simply adapting? Lord knows it must have been a quick re-adjustment. He lost his lieutenant, but then with no more than a few days' notice, put Harry in the middle of a distraction that broke his supporters out of Azkaban.

But that had not been the end of it. Even though Harry hadn't known it at the time, he was doing exactly as Voldemort had wanted, and burrowed his way deeper and deeper into the Order of the Phoenix, putting himself into a perfect position to acquire the Pensieve. Voldemort

then turned himself in, getting past any security, and into the hands of loyal supporters on the inside of the Ministry. His request to see Harry then got him everything he needed to bring down the Order. It was perfectly planned, perfectly executed and as it turned out, unstoppable.

One thing still bothered Harry. If Voldemort had the Pensieve, then why was Snape still at large? Surely he would have seen in the Pensieve that Snape was in the Order, having turned spy. Why was he letting Snape go? Unless Snape was truly on his side...if he knew Snape was a loyal Death Eater, posing as a traitor to get close to Dumbledore, then he would expect to see him in the Pensieve. It seemed that Dumbledore and Voldemort both truly believed Snape was loyal to them, and them alone. God, Harry wished he knew once and for all if he could trust the bastard.

Of course, that wasn't the only thing bothering Harry; the events of the last few days played over and over in his mind. They had all been hoodwinked, taken in by a lie, and now they were backed into a corner. Was the protest a good idea? Was it worth all they had lost?

"Was I right?" he asked himself absently, not realising he had said it aloud.

"About what?" asked Sirius, catching Harry off guard. Embarrassed that he had been speaking to himself, Harry rested his head against the arm of the sofa, his arm draped across his eyes, blocking out the light.

"Everything," said Harry, despair apparent in his voice. Looking back, from the time he arrived here it had been one cock up after another. Every time he thought he was doing the right thing, the situation turned on him, usually with many casualties. It had been hard when the bomb had killed Muggles in the tube but these were his friends who had now suffered, perhaps died. He had not had time to check up on Hogwarts. How many had died, nearly died or been injured because of his miscalculation?

"I put them in that situation," said Harry, speaking more to himself than Sirius. "I've always tried to keep my friends out of danger, away from the front line, even before I came here. What made me change my mind? What the hell was I thinking putting children in the line of fire?"

"There was no way you could have known Crouch would open fire," said Sirius.

"Yes, there was," said Harry, sitting up. "I knew what a monster he was and what he was capable of."

"He will have trouble justifying it," said Sirius. "There will be ripples in public circles."

"He's beyond that now," said Harry. "Total control of government and press. No one now has the strength to oppose him. I knew this before I set foot on the march. I was holding on to a fool's hope that it would turn out okay. Pretty stupid, hey?" The guilt was swelling in him. His sleep had been haunted by the burning, the screams and the panic of the massacre. Why had he not seen it coming? He wished he could go back in time and stop himself from doing it, but he

couldn't. Nothing he did could bring those people back, people who had believed in him. He had let them down.

"You did what you thought was right," said Sirius. "No one can fault you for that."

"Snape could," Harry pointed out. "He always says that I never think, and this time it was true. What am I talking about, I never think! Everything I've done since I got here has been a mistake and only made things worse. I gave him what he wanted. I practically handed him the country."

"No," said Sirius. "You have done good, Harry. Look at the Gryffindors now. Okay, so there are some little bastards who have joined him from terror, but look at the Weasleys. You have given hope back to them."

"And then swept it out from under them with that stupid march," said Harry. "Even I was holding onto a fool's hope. I'd seen what he was capable of. He murdered his own father. How could I have ever believed that he wouldn't fire on children?"

"Because you believe in the goodness of human nature," said Sirius. "And that's what makes you better than Riddle and your other self."

"I know, I know, my ability to love and feel is my strength," said Harry, hotly. "Dumbledore already gave me that speech - my Dumbledore, that is. Fat lot of good feelings will do me now. We walked right into his trap, with myself as a catalyst. Every time we thought we were making things better, they got worse."

"It was no one's fault but Riddle's," said Sirius.

"How the hell did we end up like this!" said Harry. "Why weren't we able to see the signs that we missed? I can't believe that things have gotten so bad that there's no way back. He controls everything now; we're the terrorists, and all the hundreds of people out there aren't even questioning this. What can we do? Any attack makes us look more guilty, not that we have enough power to attack."

"You said it yourself," said Sirius. "The people follow Crouch blindly and while they do, he controls the country. At that march you were more than a person, you were a symbol, an idea."

"But he's plastered the papers, showing me as a symbol of evil," said Harry.

"There's a saying in the USSR," said Sirius. "*Pravda* ne novosti, a novosti ne pravda. *The Truth* is not the news and the news is not the truth. The State newspaper is called *Pravda***, *The Truth*, which is not the news; i.e. what's happening, and is the news, what we see, is not the truth."

"Okay," said Harry, not understanding the reference. This was no time for riddles. "So how does that help us?"

"Give people an alternative," said Sirius. "The educated Russians know that *Pravda* is a load of rubbish, but for lack of an alternative, the masses believe it. I know Crouch will shut down any paper that opposes him, but even one article can raise a little doubt. Doubt is enough, because it proves Crouch fallible and from there, opinion can change."

"I know," said Harry. "Yet doubt is meaningless when he uses his methods. Fear and awe are a powerful combination. Last year I had to give an interview to put the message out there that Voldemort had returned. But this still is not enough. He's in control, and it's only a matter of time before he declares war on the Muggles. Thousands will die."

"At the very least," said Sirius.

"More than thousands?" asked Harry.

"Remember the politics of this world," said Sirius. "Moscow will notice if London suddenly falls, and march westward. East Germany is crawling with tanks in response to terrorist attacks by Pureblood fanatics in Germany and Austria. I don't think they're anything to do with Voldemort, because you said Rookwood wanted the islands of Britain taken off the map, i.e. be isolationist. But never the less, the Muggles think that they're under attack from the underground or the West. Baader-Meinhof a Marxist terror network, have declared war on West Germany. If Britain falls, the Kremlin could decide to march westward, taking back all of Germany. France's reputation for war being what is, about two weeks between two world wars, means that Moscow could control the whole of Europe and Asia, dividing the world into two giant land-masses."

"What are you talking about?" asked Harry; his history was sketchy, but he knew a little. "The Cold War never got this bad. Even in Cuba. That's why it's called the Cold War; there was no fighting. It ended in 1990 because the USSR collapsed financially, politically and economically, not because of violence." How could Russia justify that kind of conquest? The Yanks would nuke the world to hell in retaliation.

"It's amazing," said Sirius, shaking his head. "You've actually seen peace, proper peace. No Cold War, no Voldemort, but ten years of peace and content."

"I wouldn't call it that," said Harry, thinking back to living with the Dursleys, and also somehow managing to nearly get killed every school year despite Voldemort being as good as gone. Still, by these standards, it was bliss. On reflection, his world, despite its imperfections, was much better than here.

"But you've known peace," interrupted Sirius. "You have walked down a street without having to look over your shoulder. You've left the house knowing for sure that you will return. It sounds so simple, but none of us have done so in years. We live in constant fear, Harry. The fact that you have seen a time without Voldemort gives me hope. It is possible to beat him; he is not invulnerable."

Harry didn't have the heart to tell Sirius that Voldemort wasn't really gone, so he left it, merely nodding.

"But going back to the Cold War," said Sirius. "In recent years it has escalated. There are tanks and armies from both sides in Germany. Having two armies in such close proximity is dangerous. Something as influential as London falling could tip the scales. There is more at stake here than we know. A British civil war could plunge the entire world into a nuclear holocaust, all because of one wizard."

Great, so there was even more at stake, and they were just as helpless as they were a few minutes ago. This day just got better and better, Harry thought bitterly.

"But what can we do?" asked Harry. "We have no army, no weapons, no information. We are cut off. Frank is all we have and he's being watched. Even with Ginny and the DA, we don't have enough to make a difference."

"Voldemort," said Sirius, his tone deadly serious. "It starts and ends with him." No, it was impossible. He was too well guarded and too powerful.

"That doesn't help us," said Harry, shaking his head. "There's no way of getting in; the Black Watch are everywhere. We need more men and time to plan an assault. If we knew where Dumbledore and the others were, we might have a chance, but we don't. The two of us have no chance of getting past his security and even if we did, he may be too strong for either of us."

"What about Muggles?" suggested Sirius. "This affects them too. It may be time to bridge the gap between our societies. Working together, we might be able to stop him." It had potential, but there were so many more problems, security not being the least of them.

"Mr Prime Minister," said Harry sarcastically. "My people are trying to kill you all because they think you're sub-human. I am one of these people but I want you to trust me over the Minister of Magic and give me your troops to try and stop this war. Yes, that's really going to be believable. And let's not forget that in order to get to the Prime Minister, we need to breach security in the most secure house in the country with the exception of Buckingham Palace."

"Do you have a better idea?" asked Sirius, putting Harry in his place. Harry blushed under the retort, his mouth hanging open. Okay, he didn't have a better idea, but it didn't make Sirius' a good one. It seemed whichever way they turned, they were in deep trouble.

"No," confessed Harry.

"It's the only thing I can think of," said Sirius.

There was a pause. Harry tried to think of a better plan. Voldemort had changed his entire plan in a few hours, to include Harry's arrival. There was no way that was planned as it was so unlikely to happen, so his plan was spontaneous, yet Harry had spent hours thinking it over and

come up with nothing. Voldemort was a natural leader; Harry, it seemed, was not, or at least, certainly not a tactician.

"Have you ever thought about what you'd do if we win?" asked Sirius, taking Harry by surprise. It was a good point. He had not given any thought to what he would do if they were successful. What would life without Voldemort be like? He had been part of Harry's life for so long that he couldn't imagine life without him. It was not a happy thought. Images of Dumbledore telling him he was obsolete, and his purpose was complete filled his mind. He imagined himself cast aside by society, wandering the streets alone.

"Not really," replied Harry, forcing the image out of his mind.

"Me neither," said Sirius. "The war's been on for so many years, I've come to accept it as normal. I can't imagine a world without it ' you're the only one who has seen one. We can't change what we are. What is a soldier to do when there is no one left to fight?"

"Welcome to my world," muttered Harry bitterly.

"What's your world like?" asked Sirius, putting his feet up on Aunt Marge's sofa.

"So similar, yet so different," said Harry following suit, smirking at the thought of what his version of Aunt Marge would say if she walked in right now. "When I look around here, I see familiar faces worn by strangers. Ron and Hermione I have known for years, but these are not the people I know. People I know there are different here, or missing, like Neville Longbottom for instance. But you're right, I have lived in a time of peace, but it's no better. Peace does not mean utopia. There is still crime, people trying to get one over. The need for Aurors is just as strong. We got complacent, though. We became so weak that when he returned, he was unopposed. Politicians refused to acknowledge it, preferring to label me insane and continue life as normal. It wasn't for another year until they acknowledged his return, until the night I found out about the Prophecy, and a night that cost you your life ' seeing Voldemort with his own eyes was enough for Fudge. A year was wasted, and now my friends back home are paying for it with blood, I know they are."

"I thought you said you hardly knew me," said Sirius, his tone softer as he eyed Harry. Harry put his head in his hands. He had to tell Sirius everything. He had a right to know and Harry needed to say that he was sorry. He had gotten him killed. How many people got a chance to apologise to the person they killed?

"When my parents were killed," he began slowly, "I should have gone to you, but I didn't. I ended up with my aunt and uncle for two reasons; A, because Dumbledore felt that her blood would protect me more than anyone else could, and B, because you were in Azkaban."

Sirius raised an eyebrow. He sat up on the sofa, watching Harry intently. "My parents knew they were a target and went into hiding, via the Fidelius Charm. Who else would he choose as his Secret Keeper, but his best friend? Dumbledore knew there was a spy, but surely it couldn't be you, could it? On Halloween, Voldemort came for them. The Secret Keeper had

given them up, and Voldemort had killed them before turning his wand on me; I survived and he was destroyed. The next day, with everyone cheering, partying and celebrating, you were found, but not by Aurors - by an old friend, Peter Pettigrew. You blew him to pieces in the middle of a crowded Muggle street, and all they found was his finger. It wasn't until my third year, when you escaped from Azkaban, that I learned the truth. You were too obvious, and Voldemort was sure to come for you, so you switched it. Peter Pettigrew took the role, and he turned them in. You tracked him down and he faked his own death by blowing apart the street, leaving the finger he had cut off himself and disappearing as a rat down the drain."

"That's why you nearly killed him at the Order meeting," reasoned Sirius. "Merlin. I knew he had a knack for survival, but I never imagined him doing something like that."

"In the current climate," said Harry. "He will side with the apparent victor."

"I could have killed him here, but not back home," said Harry. "In one of life's little ironies, it was my fault. You and Remus wanted to kill him, but I stopped you. I wanted to give him to the Dementors looking for you, to win your freedom, but he escaped. You were forced to flee again, and he went free. That night, everything I wanted was offered to me a platter: Justice for my parents, someone who cared about me and a reason to leave the Dursleys. Because of my weakness, because I forbade you to kill Pettigrew, I gave away what would have made me happy." He closed his eyes, trying to block out the memories. He would not let the tears come. He was stronger than this!

"And you'd have lived as a murderer with death on your conscience," said Sirius, his tone firm, but not angry. "You did the right thing, however hard it must have been; you know that it was the right choice." His voice was reassuring but Harry was sure he didn't understand the full horror of what he had done.

"It robbed you of your freedom," said Harry. "You should have been free; you deserved to be free and my weakness took that away from you."

"It is not weak to value life," said Sirius. "Do you think you, or I for that matter, could have lived, knowing that the price for our happiness was a murder? You did the right thing; the fact that he escaped is unfortunate, but nothing more. I wouldn't blame you for that, and you certainly should not believe that I would."

"Maybe," said Harry. It made sense. Perhaps he was right, but what happened two years later definitely was Harry's fault. "But it certainly was my fault you died."

"I died?" asked Sirius, raising an eyebrow.

"You fell through the Veil in the Department of Mysteries," said Harry. "I allowed myself to be tricked into going there; you came to get me out, and you died. I should have practiced Occlumency, I should have gone to Dumbledore, but instead I led you into a trap." It all came bursting out; months of pent up pain gushed out his mouth. Sirius stared unblinkingly at him.

"I came to your rescue," said Sirius. "If I was in hiding, I made the choice to come to you. It is a choice that and even if I knew where it would lead me, I would make the same choice again. You are powerful, Harry, and you are worth fighting for. I'm your godfather here as well as there, and I can see the sort of person you are. I would make the same sacrifice here as well. You shouldn't blame yourself for my choice."

"But if I hadn't fallen for it..." stammered Harry.

"He would have found another way to trap you," said Sirius. "We've seen how resilient he is. Don't believe for a second that you could have prevented it. Remember, death smiles at us all."

"I know," said Harry. "Dumbledore always says that to a prepared mind, death is but the next logical step."

"Then you should know that I certainly would not blame you for my dying," said Sirius. "You have to let go and move on. That is the best thing you could do both for yourself and for my other self. He wouldn't want you to be sad, and neither would I."

"I guess...." said Harry, unable to find the words.

"So as a tribute to him," said Sirius, "Kick some arse." Harry smirked at his appalling American accent and shook his head, wiping the forming tears from his eyes. "In two hours you can make a start. We've got a meeting with Macky-G at midnight," said Sirius. "I suggest you get a little shut-eye."

"Okay," said Harry, kicking off his shoes and sprawling out on the sofa as Sirius rose to leave. Harry had a lot to think about.

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It was exactly midnight when Harry and Sirius appeared in a ball of flame in the centre of McGonagall's office. The lights were out and the room was in darkness as the two new arrivals peered around, their eyes unaccustomed to the darkness. The office was silent, dark and apparently deserted. Harry stared into the darkness, unsure whether to use his wand light, in case it gave away that someone was here.

Suddenly the candles around the room burst into life, giving the office a dim orange glow. McGonagall sat on the sofa, still dressed in her usual teaching garments. Next to her sat Flamel, dressed for bed, while Snape hovered in the corner, his flowing black cloak wrapped tightly around him. His black eyes were only made more sinister by the dim flicker of the candlelight as he eyed Sirius with utmost loathing.

"Punctual, I see," stated Flamel pleasantly. He was unwrapping a sweet as he spoke, and he popped the sweet in his mouth before looking up at Harry and Sirius.

"Please sit," said McGonagall, "time is short." Harry sat down on the desk, while Sirius conjured a stool from mid-air. Neither said a word.

"I will assume you've been completely out of the loop," began McGonagall. "Since you two have fled, the Black Watch have been all over Hogsmeade and other public locations looking for you. There are ten of them in the castle at all times now on a rotating shift. They are ruling with an iron fist, taking in anyone whom they think is one of us. Crouch has also moved swiftly to put the lid on the Order's coffin. We've had more arrests, so it seems that all that's left of the Order is in this room. People resisted at first after your protest, due to the public outcry created by killing children. There was a protest in the Ministry Entrance Hall this morning led by the stepfather of Madeline Price, one of the second year Hufflepuffs who died in the march. Mr Price, and his two collaborators were all found dead that evening, himself having cut his jugular whilst shaving. Of the other two, one left the oven on and his house burned down with him inside, while Mr Defoe drowned while fishing on Lake Windermere. Hermann Glosteen, the last free member of the Wizengamot, raised the legality of Crouch's actions in a session of the Wizengamot. He was arrested on the spot and hasn't been heard of since. The Wizengamot are now entirely under You-Know-Who's control. He had begun to fortify his position. It is not common knowledge that Crouch is a Death Eater yet, but he is recruiting more and more people to the Black Watch, and more lifers are being released from Azkaban into the ranks. In short, all diplomatic means of protest have now been crushed. Michael Hargreaves was the editor of *The Magical Gazette* until he printed a story about the Hogwarts protest and questioned Crouch's motives. He has been removed and Crouch now controls the press. The public are blind to what is going on."

She paused, allowing her brief summary to sink in. Harry digested the information slowly. It left only one option available. The situation was almost hopeless. How had they let this happen? Why had they not seen it coming?

"So where do we go from here?" asked Sirius. "The only path left open is an attack." Harry was thinking along the same lines, though he wasn't sure exactly how to do it.

"This risks further loss of life," said McGonagall, dismissing the idea.

"As much as it grieves me to admit it," said Snape icily from the shadows, "I agree with the mutt. Naked force is the only tactic left. However, Gryffindor bravado will not help, and neither will getting yourselves caught in a folly attempt to regain control." Sirius shot a glare at Snape, who leaned forward into the light, allowing the candles to highlight his face. "Though I am curious as to whether the Boy-Wonder has realised exactly what is involved here. If you somehow get to Crouch, there is only one action left open to you. You cannot make him order the Black Watch to stand down. He himself is just a stepping stone to the real architect, but in order to disrupt the Black Watch, both must be removed."

"You mean killed?"

"They are too dangerous to be left alive," said Snape, his eyes fixed on Harry, assessing his reaction. "Your role must be to kill, and you cannot have any qualms about it. Hesitate in this

game and you will be lost forever. The time for arresting is over. You must become the assassin. In one of life's little ironies, what is needed here is..."

"...The Dark Knight," said Harry, finishing the sentence. Snape's head sank into the smallest of nods.

"Of course," said Snape, "even if you managed to remove the Dark Lord and his puppet, the Black Watch would cut you to shreds in their panic and confusion. You would need some backup, and the four of us are not capable. Somehow, you need to get some support, some people who can keep the Black Watch at bay."

"Are we any closer to finding Dumbledore?" asked Harry, looking at McGonagall. She shook her head. "Our last contacts in the Ministry have disappeared. We are out of the loop." Great. So there was no back up, no support coming.

"Even if we did," said Sirius, "we'd need to be Arnold Schwarzenegger to get him out. With Dumbledore's reputation, he'll be guarded day and night."

"Who's Arnold Swaggerer?" asked McGonagall.

"Good idea," said Harry, not realising he'd said it out loud. At the name, Harry had thought back to Dudley's action films. Sirius had suggested it back at the farm, but now it made a little more sense. It was the only option left. Muggles may in fact be the answer. "We could go Muggle," said Harry.

"What?" asked Snape.

"Recruit help from the Muggles," said Harry, staring him in the eye. "The Prime Minister is in contact with the Minister of Magic, but the chances are that Crouch wouldn't have deemed a Muggle worthy of his time so he wouldn't have visited. If I could convince the Prime Minister to help us, we would be in a much stronger position, if only to get Dumbledore free. From there a better plan could be made."

"And if you fail?" asked Snape. "He would go to the Ministry claiming that a stranger and a former murderer - remember, he helped in the hunt for you and may remember you - has been to see him. Crouch would know. Then you would have both Magical and Muggle government forces looking for you. "

"Also bear in mind the political climate," said Flamel. "Remember that there have been many attacks on Muggles recently, and he knows it is wizards who are doing it. He will not trust you lightly and as Severus has said, he will remember you."

"He will do what's right," said Harry. "If only to stay in power, he will do what's right, to prevent a war."

"If you tell him that there is a war coming," said McGonagall, "he may risk a pre-emptive strike and even more will die."

"Is that better or worse than being caught unprepared, now that Voldemort is in control?" challenged Harry, ignoring the gasp at the name.

"Better," said Snape, "but marginally."

"I agree with Harry," said Flamel slowly. His brow was furrowed in thought. "We need more men, and those whom we know are loyal; we know Muggles, for instance, will not be traitors."

"The Dark Lord will expect an attack," said Snape. "He will try and draw you out, present you with a target and wait until you strike." For once, Harry and Snape agreed.

"He's expecting me," said Harry. "Only me. He isn't expecting us or any other help we get. We can flip the trap by offering me as a diversion while the real trap is sprung on him. All we need is more men."

"You are playing a dangerous game," said McGonagall. "Getting Muggles killed will create more tension in an already unstable environment."

"I have to try," said Harry. "We're at a stage where it's all or nothing. Time is an enemy, not a friend here."

"So our timing must be perfect," said Snape. "Such rash moves are predictable."

"He despises Muggles," said Harry. "He wouldn't lower himself to using them, and he won't expect us to. His arrogance will be his downfall."

"So even if you recruit Muggles," said Snape. "What then?"

"Locate Dumbledore, free him and regroup," said Harry.

"And how do you find Dumbledore?"

"Only Crouch will know that," said Harry.

"So you will use the Muggles to storm the Ministry and get Crouch?"

"Of course not," said Harry. "It only takes one to go in and kidnap him. The more people go in, the more chance of screwing up."

"So you regroup, this time with Dumbledore and the Muggles," said Snape. "To what end?"

"Dumbledore will know," said Harry. "And this time, he'll have an army at his disposal. This time, we will be equipped to fight back."

"We have to decide quickly," said McGonagall. "Before anyone realises you're here. A vote: yes, and Harry goes to the Prime Minister. No, and we adjourn to a later date. Nicolas?"

"Yes."

"Sirius?"

"Yes."

"Harry?"

"Yes."

"Severus?"

"Since the majority have voted yes," said the Defence Master, "my thoughts are irrelevant."

"We move as one," said McGonagall, "It must be unanimous."

"Yes," said Snape.

"And I vote yes," said McGonagall. "Go on, Harry, but be careful. He is not as stupid as You-Know-Who thinks. Remember, he can play you as much as you can him. Be on your guard."

"I will," said Harry.

"Now go, quickly," said McGonagall.

Harry nodded and took Sirius's arm before disappearing in a ball of flames.

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Large black iron gates stand some twenty feet high at both ends of the most famous street in England. At each gate stands a policeman on patrol, while another stands on guard outside the famous black door of number ten.

As Harry stood at the north end of Downing Street, he realised just what a fortress this deceptively calm and common-looking street was. Rumours varied, but apparently the cabinet room, where meetings were held was in essence a nuclear bunker with metal walls several feet thick, that could keep the PM safe from an attack by the USSR. Harry reminded himself that in fact the Cold War was still on and that the USSR were still the enemy. Harry stared down the

road towards the polished black door that could stand a direct hit from a tank. This was simple on paper, but in practice it was nothing of the sort. He had no idea which room was the PM's office. He also had no idea where people were, so Flaming in would be a nightmare.

It was almost one o'clock in the morning and the clouds had come in, blocking out all light. Harry was dressed all in black with a balaclava pulled down over his face, making him almost invisible against the darkness. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small instrument that had once belonged to Dumbledore. It looked like an odd cigarette lighter, but was much bigger. Harry raised the Put-Outer towards the nearest street lamp and clicked the top. Instantly the lamp went out, allowing darkness to creep a little closer to the steps of the Prime Minister's house. He aimed for the second light and clicked again. Both of those on top of the gate were now out, much to the confusion of the policeman standing guard. Harry clicked the Put-Outer a third time to remove the light next to the door. Half the street was in darkness now, and it would be all too easy for Harry to reach the door.

The policeman guarding the gate was glancing from side to side, fear growing on his face. Who said Muggles never noticed anything? This man wasn't stupid; he knew something was up. Three lights going out at the same time was suspicious. The policeman reached to his hip and unbuttoned his holster, removing a service revolver. Harry was mildly surprised; coppers in Britain didn't usually carry guns, but since they were guarding the leader of the country and given current affairs, it was understandable. It didn't make his job any easier.

Aiming his wand at the policeman, Harry took a deep breath. It was now or never.

Petrificus Totalus!

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It was nearly one in the morning but the Prime Minister was still up and hard at work. There was always something that needed doing. Many people thought he just sat around being advised, made a speech every now and then and on the odd occasion said yes or no to a plan. They seemed to think this was an easy job, but it wasn't. It was his head on the block if things went wrong. The slightest glitch or scandal, even if he had no knowledge of it, and he was the one dragged through the mud by the tabloids. Jesus, if they ever got hold of the Edwina story, his career would be over. The Prime Minister shook his head at the thought. No, he needed to keep his head down. He had enough to deal with on his own.

Only a few weeks ago the accursed painting in the wall had announced the arrival of Barty Crouch, the Minister of Magic. The Prime Minister had met Crouch on several occasions over the years and it seemed that every time he came he brought worse news. The Prime Minister had not understood most of it, as the explanations had been filled with incomprehensible words like Kwidditch, Floom, Porto-something-or-other and God knows what else. As he understood the situation, there was a man out there, a psychopathic murderer they called You-Know-Who, who was murdering normal people left, right and centre. It seemed that this hidden community were on the edge of a race riot, fighting amongst themselves over the purity of blood. From the

very first meeting this seemed to be a cause from concern. They seemed like a culture of barbaric racists, intent on killing normal people.

While Crouch had assured him that the situation was under control, he had never resolved it. Every time they met things seemed to have been getting worse; more deaths here, an attack there, mysterious occurrences in London and all sorts.

Then a new name had been brought to his attention. Apparently Harry Potter, whoever he was, had been causing havoc for the last year. He was rumoured to be as bad as this You-Know-Who. Things had gone from bad to worse over the years, so that eventually the Prime Minister had been forced to brief COBRA on the situation. They had thought him mad at first, but luckily the representative from MI5 had been able to secure evidence of their existence. The Army had begun construction of a contingency plan for if the civil war in the magical world ever spilled over into their world. Things had continued to go from bad to worse when the head of the project was murdered by this Harry Potter. They had relocated the project to Princetown but that had not been enough; the base had been attacked, allegedly by the IRA. The old enemy were rearing their heads again.

And then there was the nuclear incident last month. According the Crouch, the device had gone off but underground where it had been contained. It was safe, but the country was not. You-Know-Who was still murdering innocents, and as far as he knew the civil war was still raging, yet the normal people now had no defence. The Prime Minister had thought that things couldn't any much worse until a fortnight ago when Crouch had come to him claiming to have You-Know-Who in custody and that the war was over. The Prime Minister had been delighted at first, but was soon devastated to hear that there were still attacks up and down the country on normal people. You-Know-Who may be in custody, or Crouch could have been lying, the Prime Minister didn't know, but as long as these attacks were going on, he couldn't stop worrying. Then a few days ago things had gotten much worse: The painting in the corner had announced the imminent arrival of the Minister of Magic.

When the wizard stepped out of the fire, the Prime Minister had been surprised to see a young man with mousy coloured hair and a thin, rodent-like face. There was something about him that made the Prime Minister shiver at the sight of him.

"Where is Mister Crouch?" the Prime Minister had asked.

"I'm afraid I have bad news," the stranger had replied. "The Minister of Magic was murdered this morning." The shock had been enough to make the Prime Minister collapse back into his chair. If wizards could murder the Minister of Magic...that meant no one was safe. They could be coming for him now. The blood drained from his face.

"Rest assured, we have already brought the men responsible to justice," the stranger had told him. The Prime Minister had had a feeling that he was hiding something, but he let it go. The stranger had continued. "I am Barty Crouch Junior, and I have taken over my father's responsibilities as Minister of Magic." It had all been a little much for the Prime Minister. He

clearly remembered how he had sat there flabbergasted as Crouch Junior had brought him up to date.

"The terrorist group calling themselves the Order of the Phoenix had been arrested," he had begun. This had been a good sign, the Prime Minister noted, but there had been something about Crouch, the way he looked at him as if were an insect, that had made the Prime Minister nervous. "I have formed a team of Aurors to sweep through the community, wrinkling out the last members of this organisation. Rest assured, Prime Minister, within days we will have gotten them all."

"And You-Know-Who is still in prison?"

"He is," Crouch has assured him. "We can hopefully put this horrible conflict behind us and get on now."

"And Harry Potter?"

"He is being taken care of," Crouch had said. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I have work to do."

Before the Prime Minister had been able to object, Crouch had disappeared into the fire. There had been something about his manner that worried the Prime Minister to this very day. He looked at him as if he were nothing, an inferior. He just seemed to embody the viciousness that his father had mentioned the Dead Eaters, or whatever they were called, seemed to embody. He was so cold and yet the Prime Minister was sure he was hiding something. He also had not given him a decent answer about Harry Potter or You-Know-Who. He seemed to give a blunt answer, but the Prime Minister was certain there was more to it.

But what could he do? Arctic Thunder had been destroyed; allegedly by the IRA, but most likely by these so called Dead Eaters. He was well and truly backed into a corner, but he had done what little he could. Special Forces were at present on high alert; the trouble was that they could not be told why or what they would be facing. Maybe he should just go public and announce to the world that wizards existed. But they could probably wipe people's memories and have him committed to a mental institute, unless he had cast iron proof. It was a possibility, and it would allow the wizards time to arm themselves. However, it would only make the wizards more hostile and segregated. Also, it would be admitting that he had helped cover them up for years. It would be political suicide. But it was the right thing to do...the public might see that and sympathise, an honest man in power rather than a slimy politician. No, it was too great a risk. He would be out before he could say a word.

"Good evening, Prime Minister," said a voice suddenly. The Prime Minister was so shocked he knocked over the cup of herbal tea on his desk, covering his notes and documents in tea. Cursing to himself, the Prime Minister looked up at the speaker. The room was dimly lit, but he could see a figure standing by the door, dressed all in black and wearing a cloak. It was one of the wizards! Was it Crouch? Usually, he was announced by the painting, even the new one. So who was this? The Prime Minister's hand slowly began to move towards the underside of his

desk, where a panic button was located. If he pressed it, armed police would be through the door in three seconds flat.

"There is no need for that, Prime Minister," said the speaker calmly. "I have frozen the button. It will not work." The Prime Minister's hand flew to the panic button and jabbed it, but nothing happened. He stared at the door for one second and then another. After five, nothing had happened, not even the sound of running feet.

"I'm sorry to do this, Prime Minister," said the intruder. "Rest assured, I mean you no harm, but it is essential that this conversation remain private." The Prime Minister's face drained of blood and shivers shot up his spine as he realised he was trapped. The wizard stepped forwards into the light. The Prime Minister found himself staring at a short thin man wrapped in a black travelling cloak with the hood up. He looked like the villain from the old Star Wars films that the Prime Minister had enjoyed as a child.

"Allow me," said the intruder, producing a wand from the folds of his robes. The Prime Minister recoiled in fear. The intruder swept his wand over the desk and the spilt tea disappeared, leaving the documents unharmed. It was as if the tea had never been spilt, which was a relief as the pile contained many very important documents.

"Er...thank you," mumbled the Prime Minister. He always found that his voice seemed to run away when there was a wizard present. Words seemed to be an issue for him. The Stranger seemed not to notice this. He put the wand away and raised his hands to his hood and lowered it to reveal his face. The Prime Minister found himself staring at a boy of no more than sixteen years of age. He had messy raven black hair and sparkling green eyes.

"I know this is not how these visits should proceed," said the boy, "but unfortunately the situation has been so severe that this is the only way I could speak to you. As you might have realised, the Ministry of Magic does not know that I am here, and would probably arrest me if they found out. I am breaking several laws in being here, but in order to save lives I am willing to do so. May I sit?"

The Prime Minister was too worried to disagree, not to mention that he had lost his voice. He nodded and the Stranger sank into a chair in front of the desk.

"Forgive this intrusion," continued the Stranger. "I know that our world must confuse you and judging by what is happening to us, we must seem barbaric. You must feel as though you are a stranger in an unholy land. This is something I know a great deal about. We have much to discuss, but I will try to make this as simple as I can. First, and this may startle you, but allow me to introduce myself. My name is Harry Potter."

The Prime Minister's jaw dropped. He had thought the boy looked vaguely familiar. He had seen mugshots of the boy. This was the so-called Dark Knight, a Death Eater, a murderer. Blood drained from his face and his hands gripped the arms of the chair so hard his knuckles turned white. He was here to kill him! The Prime Minister glanced down at the panic button, wishing to god that it had worked and that there was merely a delay.

"Your reaction tells me that you have heard of me," said the boy, bowing his head in what might be interpreted as shame, but the Prime Minister was not stupid enough to fall for crocodile tears. "First, let me assure you that I am not the person you have read about. This summer something happened to me and I changed. It's hard to explain without an in-depth knowledge of magic, but let's put it like this. Have you ever seen the film *Back to the Future*, where someone changes time and Marty gets back to his time and everything's changed and everyone thinks he is someone else? That is essentially what has happened to me - but no flying cars or time travel. I am not what everyone thinks. That guy is gone, hopefully forever, but everyone still thinks I am him. I can appreciate that this is hard to believe but it is the truth. Please just hear me out."

"Okay," muttered the Prime Minister, though he had not believed a word that was said.

"You will no doubt have been told that the Dark Lord Voldemort has been fighting a civil war for years," said Potter.

"Yes," replied the Prime Minister, finding his voice. "But he was arrested and his terror network the Order of the Phoenix and the Dead Eaters are being rounded up. Minister Crouch told me."

"I'm afraid that Minister Crouch has not been honest," said Potter. "I know it is only my word against his, but please listen. Minister Crouch is a Death Eater. He is one of the enemy we are all trying to defeat. The Dark Lord handed himself in, making it look like he was arrested. It was a trick in order to get him into the Ministry of Magic building. On the last day of November, he murdered the Minister of Magic and arrested the only man strong enough to defeat him, Albus Dumbledore. Since then he has appointed Crouch as Minister of Magic and posted a Death Eater as head of every department in the Ministry. Hundreds of prisoners, most of them on a life sentence for murder, have been released from the prison of Azkaban. He is building an army ready to attack your people, Prime Minister. Crouch is merely keeping you quiet until they are ready."

"I...you...what?" stammered the Prime Minister, the information washing over him like a tidal wave. How was this possible? Surely Crouch hadn't deceived him. This Potter was a murderer; it had to be a trick.

"I know this is a lot to take in, Prime Minister," said Potter calmly. There was something in his tone that made the Prime Minister want to trust him. If it were not for the fact that he knew he was a murderer, he might even fall for this trick. Potter continued. "Voldemort hates all Muggles - that would be normal people - and any wizard born to non-magical parents. I don't know exactly what he has in mind, but the long and the short of it is to build an army, take the country by force and then dispose of all non-magical people. He is almost powerful enough to do this. The Order of the Phoenix, who you have been told are terrorists, are actually a group of people fighting the Dark Lord. Unfortunately, now that the Dark Lord's servants are in power in the Ministry, the Order of the Phoenix have been arrested and there is a warrant out there with my name on it. There are a few of us who have survived. We are still trying to stop this war."

"So let me get this straight," said the Prime Minister. "You are a wizard, and a former Death Eater, and a war is coming yet for some reason you are warning me and fighting on our side?"

"I am on no one's side," said Potter. "I am trying to save lives by preventing a war that will kill thousands on both sides. Your people and mine will be killed unless we find a way to stop this."

"And let's say I believe you," said the Prime Minister. "What would you want from me?"

"What I am about to say cannot leave this office," said Potter. "You remember Project Arctic Thunder? We knew about it all along and what its purpose was. It was not the IRA that broke into the facility, it was me. I have one of the devices safe. With Voldemort in absolute power, there are no political routes left to fight him. We must resort to force, and there are no lengths he will not go to stop us. I led students into the village of Hogsmeade in a peaceful protest. The Dark Lord ordered his Aurors - that's his special forces - to fire on students. Children were hurt and killed in the incident. He has kicked all Muggleborn people out of Hogwarts school. What we will ultimately have to do is break into the Ministry of Magic. I would like you to place a team of SAS soldiers at my disposal."

"What?"

"When we have a plan and are ready," explained Potter. "We will still only be a dozen or so strong, including people my age. We need a bigger force. Once we start resisting, more people who joined Voldemort out of fear will come back to us, but only if we can start a resistance with a chance of success."

"So there is a war brewing and you want me to place my soldiers at your disposal so you can start one?"

"No," said Potter. "I need them to liberate a country in the grip of fear. If we don't act soon, there will be no one left to fight him. You cannot win. You can place the entire SAS in front of Voldemort's army and he will keep coming. Remember the attack on the Devonport Naval Base? How many Royal Marines Commandos were killed? Give me a squad who will know exactly what they are up against and how to take them down. Let us stop this war by going after the source, not the soldiers caught up in this mess."

"The ludicrous thing is," said the Prime Minister, "I almost believe you. I just can't forget your past."

"True," said Potter. "But rest assured that was not me, and the guy is gone; but I have no proof. It's my word against Crouch's. Crouch murdered his father and tortured my friend's parents almost to death. You can see it in Crouch's eyes; he's a monster. Now look at me."

The Prime Minister was shaken slightly. He had gotten a horrible feeling when Crouch Junior was in his office. There was something about him that spooked the Prime Minister, while this boy seemed genuine.

"Have you read reports on previous attacks?" asked Potter. The Prime Minister nodded. "There would have been a light in the sky afterwards in the shape of a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth. It is the Dark Mark, His Mark. If you look at Crouch's left arm, you will see it branded into his arm. It is how the Dark Lord summons his followers. Look at my arm."

Potter rolled up his left sleeve, revealing a well toned, scarred, but unmarked arm. The Prime Minister had read the reports from Crouch Senior on Death Eaters; he had heard of the Dark Mark before. It was not exactly proper proof, but he felt that the boy was genuine. But was he basing this judgement on the fact he didn't like Crouch Junior? That was not a proper reason, and if he were wrong it would kill thousands. Who should he trust? *"Villainy wears many masks, none more dangerous than the mask of virtue"*. Ichabod Crane had said that in the book *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Potter or Crouch? Neither had offered any proof. Potter didn't have the Dark Mark, but the Minister didn't know if Crouch did. He had to come to a decision quickly. Potter had come here unannounced and illegally, but Crouch was the Minister of Magic and it seemed they didn't get on. But Crouch had said his father had been murdered and Potter confirmed this. Neither showed much pity for the late Minister. The Prime Minister at last reached a decision.

"Fine," said the Prime Minister. He wrote down a number on a piece of paper and handed it to Potter. "This is the number of the Hereford barracks where the SAS are. I will telephone them and have them put a team on full alert, fully armed, and to expect a call from someone called Pandora. Tell them you are Pandora and they will put you through to the commanding officer, Colonel Evans. They will be at your disposal." What Potter didn't know was that the CO of the SAS would then phone him and let him know exactly what Potter was up to. The boy would be on a very short leash and watched all the way.

"Thank you, Prime Minister," said Potter. "You have my word, I will do everything I can to minimise the risk to your men, even if it means putting mine at more risk. If you wish for more proof, you can look at Crouch's arm or feed him this; it is a powerful truth drug called Veritaserum. Put three drops in his tea when he comes around and he will tell you everything. After that, you cannot let him go, or he will bring the wrath of his new army down on you. If you do this, let me know."

"How?"

"The Launceston Gazette," said Harry. "It is a local newspaper in Cornwall. Put an advert in the obituaries announcing the death of Barry Clark, aged 99, and I will come and visit you again."

"Very well, Mister Potter," said the Prime Minister, rising to his feet and extending a hand. "I am taking a great risk here, so don't make me regret it."

"You won't," said Potter, shaking his hand.

"Missus Yates will show you out," said the Prime Minister.

"No need," said Potter. He pulled his wand out from within his robes again and pointed it at the desk. "Your panic button is working again. Good night, Prime Minister." The Prime Minister gasped in surprise as Harry Potter burst into flame. He raised a hand to shield his eyes, but when he looked again, Potter had disappeared. The room was empty and there was no sign that he had ever been here except for a bottle of the truth drug on the desk.

The Prime Minister stood for a moment in thought. No, he would not kidnap Crouch. That only risked insulting him and starting this war too early. For the time being, they needed time; he would have the armed forces recalled and put on alert. Training exercises, especially those in urban warfare, would be carried out immediately. MI5 would bring in as much information as they had on these wizards and what was left of Arctic Thunder would be salvaged if possible. Potter still had one, which he could eventually demand back if push came to shove. This was a dangerous game, but he had work to do.

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Harry and Sirius reappeared in a ball of flame in a darkened corridor deep within the bowels of the Ministry. They were fortunate that Harry could Flame from place to place, otherwise their method of entry might have been detected. There were Anti-Portkey and Anti-Apparation wards all over the building. No one could enter without being detected - no one except Harry, that is. He released Sirius and glanced around the corridor. Sirius was a classically trained Auror, while Harry was a recklessly trained killing machine. Both had the instincts of a warrior, and instantly glanced around, weapons drawn. The difference was that Harry wasn't sure his instincts were there to protect him. He still did not trust his feelings yet. Between the phoenix and the other Harry, the voices inside his head were very confusing. Fully armoured and with his wand drawn, he stared left then right down the darkened corridor. It was quarter past three and the lights were off. The Ministry employed only a skeleton staff between midnight until six in the morning. Harry considered using his stun baton, but it was so easy to spot and recognise as a weapon. Instead he stood motionless, allowing his eyes to adapt to the dimness.

It took nearly five minutes before he could see adequately in the gloom. Sirius was standing against the opposite wall, staring down the corridor.

"Last chance to back out," he whispered.

"There is no other way," hissed Harry. "Short of bombing the hell out of the building, but that would kill hundreds of innocents. Ready to go?"

"As I'll ever be," said Sirius. Harry smirked at his casual manner. "Come on," said Sirius. He headed to the left and started off down the corridor, his boots making no sound on the hard floor of the passage. They had gone about fifty feet when they came to a crossroad. Sirius paused at the corner, pressing his back into the wall and keeping himself in the shadows. Cautiously,

cat-like, he stuck his head around the corner, peering in both directions before darting across the passage and disappearing into the shadows on the far side. Harry glanced around before following suit. Their pace was quick, but silent. It was another thirty feet before Sirius stopped again.

Something felt wrong. The lack of obstacles was unnerving; it was much the same feeling as Harry had had in the maze during the third task. He shuddered as he remembered how that one had turned out. Surely his luck wasn't that bad?

Suddenly he heard something. His heart skipped a beat. Footsteps! Someone was coming. He glanced at Sirius, who was looking around for a way out. There was no time to go anywhere; they were trapped.

"Hold on," whispered Sirius. He put an arm around Harry and pointed his wand at them. What was he planning? Surely a disillusionment charm would never work.

"*Gravitate Invertus!*" hissed Sirius. Without warning, Harry's feet left the ground, himself unable to do anything about it. It took all his effort not to yell in surprise. His body was spun in midair. He felt like he was falling, only he was moving upwards. He landed surprisingly gently. He was glad to be back on solid ground and glanced at Sirius, who abruptly pulled him down. As they lay flat on the ground, Harry glanced around, trying to make out what had just happened. He was astonished to find himself looking up at the floor. He was lying on the ceiling, staring down the corridor. They were concealed behind a metal support beam on the ceiling. Harry glanced over at Sirius and was surprised to find that his longer hair was not dangling upwards towards the floor above them, but the ceiling on which they were lying. Their world had quite literally and laterally been turned upside down and gravity seemed to have reversed itself for the two of them.

Sirius winked at him, just as the new arrival came around the corner. It was a Black Watch Auror, his face hidden behind his mask. The footsteps were light but echoed softly in the polished corridors of the deserted ministry. As the Auror neared them, Harry could hear that the Auror was mumbling to himself, only the voice was far too high; it must be a woman. There was something oddly familiar about the voice, but Harry couldn't place it.

"Wait!" called a voice, causing Harry to jump, but luckily he managed not to make a sound. He glanced 'up', which was in fact down, at the new arrival. A second Auror was running down the corridor in pursuit of the female Auror. He caught up with her directly below Harry and Sirius. Harry cursed silently to himself. Off all the places on all the floors, they had to stop in the two square feet beneath them. It had to be Murphy's law.

"What?" asked the woman impatiently.

"The Minister wishes to speak to you," said the man. The woman reached up and lowered her veil and her hood. Harry's teeth gritted and his fists clenched at the sight of Bellatrix Black. His fingers crept to his wand.

"Does he have any idea what time it is?" asked Bellatrix, a glimmer of frustration on her face. Harry glanced at Sirius, who was eyeing Bellatrix with a look of utter loathing on his face. His eyes met Harry's and he shook his head. Both of them had a score to settle with Bella but both knew that they had a job to do. It was hard to walk away when she was so close, but they had to. On the positive side, she would lead them to Crouch.

"I apologise, ma'am," said the man. "These orders come from the Dark Lord himself."

"Then we should not keep him waiting," said Bellatrix, heading off to the north. This was their chance. They could follow her to Crouch and take them both. But what if Voldemort was there himself?

"We should follow," Harry whispered to Sirius.

"If Voldemort is there, we have to abort; neither of us can take him in this state," said Sirius. "It's becoming too risky."

"Let's follow them," repeated Harry. "We won't get another chance at this. We'll have to wait until Crouch is alone, but at least we will know where he is." They had to succeed here. There was no turning back.

"Just don't do anything stupid," muttered Sirius. He removed the spell and Harry again experienced the falling and spinning feeling and once again found himself lying on the cold hard floor of the ceiling, though this time up was up and down was down. He stood up quickly, and with Sirius a pace behind, set off in the direction that Bellatrix had gone.

They crept on tiptoe down the passage in pursuit of the Death Eater and whoever this other guy was. The heels of Bellatrix's shoes made a sharp clicking as she stalked off in the direction of her boss, but hopefully not her master. The soft padding of her accomplice followed and then behind them came Sirius and Harry, making little to no sound as they slipped in and out of the shadows in the dimly lit corridors of the Ministry. The place was a labyrinth of tunnels, doors and offices, but Bellatrix seemed to know it disturbingly well. She had been here for some time, or at least had studied the building, which was a disturbing thought.

They had walked for perhaps five minutes when at last they came to a familiar pair of large ornate double doors that slid open as Bellatrix approached. Inside, the room was dark. Harry and Sirius could see into the Minister's own department as the doors opened. The room was in shadow. The only lights on were the ones in Minister's office, which filtered down through the glass walls to the larger room below. The six secretaries were absent, leaving the room still and dark. Bellatrix crossed to the stairs and began to climb. Sirius and Harry slipped into the room and dived behind a desk before the doors could slide shut. Bellatrix marched up into the office without knocking, followed by the messenger.

Once the door shut, Sirius spoke.

"We don't know how many are in there, or who," he whispered. "This is tactically dangerous, not to mention stupid."

"I know," said Harry, eyeing the office. "We need to wait until they come out. We need to grab Crouch, but Bellatrix would also be a good idea." There was a personal satisfaction in getting her as well. Crouch was the primary objective, but scoring one on Bellatrix was a pleasurable second objective.

"If she is walking more or less freely in the Ministry, then things are more serious than we feared," hissed Sirius. Harry agreed. If people like her could walk the streets unimpeded, nothing was beyond Voldemort. It also meant that the final stages of the plan were in motion if he was bringing in the big guns. "If Voldemort can pull strings to let her in, then he must be in complete control. He will be building an army. Whatever he has planned will happen soon," said Sirius, reading Harry's mind.

"If only we had Extendable Ears we could listen in," muttered Harry.

"What?"

"Fred and George's inventions in my world," he hissed back.

"We don't have any way to listen in," said Sirius. "That's why we need Crouch alive. We need to wait until he comes out and hopefully, he'll be alone." Great. Patience was not one of Harry's virtues. He was cramped behind the desk, and there was no telling how long they would have to wait.

The meeting seemed to go on for hours in Harry's mind. In fact it was no more than fifteen minutes, but it seemed like one hell of a lot longer. Harry and Sirius remained crouched behind the desk, hidden from the office above. After what seemed like an eternity, the door opened and out stepped the errand boy who had come to get Bellatrix. He scooted off out the door, sprinting away down the corridor. It was another few seconds before the door to the office opened again and Crouch stepped out, followed by Bellatrix. The two made their way down the steps and headed over towards the main door, passing right by Harry and Sirius.

"We won't get a better chance," hissed Harry as the doors slid open for Bellatrix to leave.

"Fine," said Sirius. "Wait here. I'll make the first move." He crawled on hands and knees between the desks, snaking towards the office from which they had come. Harry was not sure what he was going to do, but he had to get ready to stop their escape. He too began to crawl towards the door, closer to where Crouch and Bellatrix were talking. Whatever Sirius was going to do, Harry had to be ready to cover him.

"And Bella," added Crouch as an afterthought as Harry approached. "They are not to be killed or harmed, according to His orders, so try to curb your enthusiasm." She shot him an evil glare and turned to leave.

"ello, cuz," said a voice from the other side of the room.

Bellatrix whipped around to see Sirius casually sitting in a chair with his feet up on the desk. He looked perfectly at ease, sprawled out on the seat. Crouch's face showed pure shock as he recognised the Auror. Sirius didn't even have his wand raised.

"How in the hell did you get in here?" Crouch snapped, levelling his wand at Sirius. Harry slipped between the desks, arriving at the one nearest the door. He was ready.

"Same way you did," replied Sirius boyishly. "Through the door." Harry crawled out from his cover, getting closer and closer to Crouch, approaching from behind. He rose silently to his feet, two feet behind the Minister.

Petrificus Totalus!

Harry caught Crouch as his frozen body keeled over backwards. Bellatrix turned, a look of surprise on her face as she recognised him. Her wand arm started to move as her eyes grew wide in recognition. She never got halfway as a disarming charm hit her in the back, courtesy of Sirius. Glaring at Sirius, she regained her balance. She looked from Harry to Sirius and back again, her eyes darting around, looking for a way out. She glared at each of them in turn. Sirius banished her wand away, launching it across the room. Bellatrix paused for a second, regaining her composure.

"Ah," she said, apparently calmly. "The prodigal son returns."

"Lose the wand, Les...Black," said Harry, aiming his own at her throat. She flashed an irritated glance at him before sliding a hand into her robes and calmly removing her second wand with two fingers and dropping it on the desk. Sirius sent that one away to join her original.

"You haven't lost your touch, getting in here," she said coldly to Harry. "But you've clearly lost your mind if you think you can walk out of here with him." Harry glanced down at the fallen Crouch. It wouldn't be too hard. He could Flame them out, but Bellatrix mustn't see him do it, or his abilities would be compromised.

"Hope springs eternal, Trixy," said Sirius, rising to his feet. Bellatrix scowled at the name. "Now be a good girl and get down on your knees, hands behind your head."

"And if I refuse?" asked Bellatrix icily.

"We put you down," replied Sirius, a look of utter loathing in his eyes - a look he normally reserved for Snape.

"Let me acquaint you with the latest security measure that has been put in place," said Bellatrix casually. "The Black Watch can now monitor all magic in the building, which means that every spell from a Cleaning Charm to the Killing Curse will be picked up by the Aurors.

Therefore, should someone break in at half three in the morning and put a full body bind on the Minister of Magic, this happens."

She raised her hand to the door before Harry could stop her. The double doors slid open, revealing five men in jet-black robes with the word *Auror* embossed in white across their chests. Harry felt a sinking feeling in his stomach as the Black Watch stepped into the room. He didn't have to react before a disarming charm struck him in the shoulder. The wand soared out of his hand. Instead of rectifying his balance from the force of the spell, Harry used the momentum to roll, picking up Crouch as he did. As he came back up to his feet, he withdrew his second wand and aimed it at Bellatrix. He positioned Crouch as a human shield.

"Let him go, Potter," said one of the Aurors, stepping forward, his wand raised. Harry glanced at Sirius, whose wand had been removed and who now had several wands aimed at him. Looking smug, Bellatrix summoned her wand back to her and levelled it at Sirius' neck before glaring at Harry, the message all too clear.

"Do it," said Sirius after a second. "Kill the bastard! Go!" Harry moved his wand up to Crouch's neck, but no further. His eyes shot from Bellatrix to Sirius to the others. He could get Crouch out of here, or he could kill Crouch, but if he did either of them, Sirius would be left alone and would die; Bellatrix would see to that. Either way, his godfather was dead. He had a duty to do, to end this war. However, it wouldn't end with Crouch; it had to end with Voldemort. He couldn't let himself be captured. Christ, this was hard.

"He won't do it, cousin," sneered Bellatrix. "He has become so used to the Potter way that any hint of a killer is gone. He doesn't have the power any more, or the sense to do it. Look at him; all he's thinking about is his godfather. How touching." Harry wished to scream at her as she mocked him, but had the sense to remain calm. Christ, if he didn't let Crouch go, they would kill Sirius. If he let Crouch go, Sirius would probably die anyway. Harry had no way to get them out; he couldn't get to Sirius, who was ten feet away, and disappear quickly enough.

"Don't hesitate," said Sirius. "Do it!"

"We both know he can't," said Bellatrix. "Let him go, Potter."

Harry didn't move, staring from Sirius to Bellatrix to Crouch. The other Aurors had their wands aimed at him, but were not going to move without orders.

"I'm going to count to three," said Bellatrix.

"She's been practicing," added Sirius, earning himself a smack from the back of Bellatrix's hand. She glared at him before turning to Harry.

"If you haven't let him go by the time I get to three," said Bellatrix, "he dies. One..."

Harry levelled his wand at Bellatrix, but the Aurors stepped forwards, asserting their position. If he fired, he would have no time to get a shield up to defend himself.

"Two."

It was hopeless.

"All right!" said Harry, before Bellatrix could get to three. "Finite Incantatum." Crouch, able to move once more, stepped forward and away from Harry, coughing and spluttering as his lungs filled with air. He picked up his wand and turned on Harry, shooting glares of daggers.

"What made you think you could lay your filthy Mudblood hands on me?" he seethed, the vein in his temple throbbing. "No matter," he continued. "There's someone who wants to see you. Bring them!"

Harry couldn't believe they were surrendering, but there was no way out. They were outnumbered and trapped. He could Flame out, but that would reveal his power. Unless he was near enough to touch Sirius, he could end up leaving him behind, which wasn't an option. He had lost his godfather once; he would not do it again.

Harry felt a wand press into his back as a voice hissed in his ear. "March!"

Harry followed Crouch out of the room and into the corridor, ever aware of the wand pressed into his back. He walked with his hands on his head, with Sirius somewhere behind him. The nine of them formed an ominous-looking procession as they were led through the icy corridors. The gloom around them seemed eerie as they passed, perhaps because of whom they were going to see. If Crouch answered to them, it could only be one person. It looked like they were going back to the cells to visit the old man again.

Had Harry exhausted his purpose this time? Would he kill him on sight now? What of Sirius? More questions filled his mind as he was led towards the stairs. They descended in single file, spaced far enough apart for the Aurors to keep their wands aimed at Harry and Sirius, so that they weren't close enough for them to try and escape.

They reached the right floor and were guided out of the staircase and into another dim corridor. Harry didn't need the lights on to know where he was. They were approaching the hidden cells and the Department of Mysteries. The painting of a hanging scene on the right up ahead concealed the entrance. Harry shuddered at the thought of the last time he had been through those doors. The last time he had inadvertently given Voldemort the key to destroying the Order.

They had to do something, and quickly. There were five Aurors, plus Crouch and Bellatrix, against Harry and Sirius. The situation was almost hopeless. Suddenly a door opened behind them, revealing a man in blue overalls who looked like a cleaner. His shock was as apparent as the Aurors', but it was enough. Harry reacted instantly as the Aurors turned. He grabbed two of them by their wand arms, forcing them into each other's rib cages.

STUPEFY!

In a flash of red sparks, both the Aurors fell to the ground, unconscious. Crouch and Bellatrix turned back to face them, realising their mistake. Sirius had already disarmed one Auror and broken another's nose. Harry grabbed his wand, diving onto the floor to avoid the incoming curses as he did. Sliding on his belly, Harry took aim at the last Auror and sent a Stunner his way. The spell missed. Harry jumped up onto his feet again, just as Bellatrix sent a purple curse towards him.

Sanctius!

The turquoise shield appeared at the tip of his wand, not more than a foot in diameter. Harry held it like an umbrella against the spell. It collided with the shield, ricocheting off, back towards Bellatrix. The Death Eater ducked, but the Auror behind her was not so quick on his feet. The man fell to the ground, screaming in agony, and judging from the blood pouring out of his mouth, bleeding internally.

As Harry watched, Crouch was launched off his feet by Sirius' spell and slammed into the wall, dropping like a rag-doll to the floor. With a scream of fury, Bellatrix sent a Killing Curse towards her cousin. Sirius ducked just in time as the curse shot over his head. Bellatrix recoiled, raising her wand above her head again. Sirius was lying on the floor, helpless as her wand began to descend. In a second Harry was at her side, his fingers locked around her wrist, forcing it upwards towards the ceiling. It rained plaster and debris as the spell blew apart the ceiling. There was a scream and Bellatrix's arm went limp in Harry's hand as she fell to the floor, having been knocked unconscious by a piece of falling debris.

Sirius climbed back to his feet while Bellatrix lay at Harry's feet, breathing but unconscious, blood seeping from the wound on her head, gluing her hair together like dreads. She seemed so pathetic.

"I could do it," said Harry suddenly, staring at her vacant face. She had killed Sirius, nearly killed Harry several times, had tortured Neville's parents and God only knew how many others. If anyone deserved to die, it was her. Harry felt his hand reach for a piece of rock. One moment's courage and it was done. She was defenceless. How many lives would be saved if he brought the rock down on her head? The world would be a better place and Sirius would be avenged.

"Harry," said the very man Harry had been thinking of. "She's not worth it."

"She'll kill again," said Harry, thinking of the families whose lives she had ruined. "We know she will."

"And she'll face justice one day," said Sirius, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Remember what you told me at the farm? Justice and vengeance are not the same thing. The world cannot work if everything is an eye for an eye. Your words."

Harry stared at the seemingly lifeless face before him. All he had to do was lift the rock; gravity alone would do the rest. It was so simple, but it was murder, plain and simple.

Suddenly Harry heard footsteps coming along the corridor. Glancing up, he saw several figures in black robes round the corner. "Aurors!" announced Sirius. "Quick - in here." Harry glared one last time at Bellatrix before rushing past Sirius through a door as Sirius conjured a cloud of smoke from his wand.

As Harry passed through the door, he realised exactly where he was. The familiar room with many doors began to turn as Sirius closed the door. It spun for a moment and then remained still. The horrors of his last visit surfaced, flooding his mind with images.

"Which one?" asked Harry.

"Any one," said Sirius, marching towards one on the left. He pushed the door open and disappeared through it. Harry followed, freezing in horror at what he saw. Standing on a stage on the far side of the room stood an archway, covered by a veil, which seemed to float in the wind. Harry stood transfixed by it as memories penetrated his mind's eyes. He could see Sirius falling; he could see his death.

"Sirius, NO!" shouted Harry as Sirius headed across the room towards the veil. "Keep away!"

BANG!

The door on the balcony above them burst open and the stamping of feet announced the arrival of more Aurors. Two jumped down from the raised area, landing in front of Sirius. Harry grabbed one from behind, pulling him back over his leg while stabbing his wand into the back of the other and releasing a Stunner point blank. Harry quickly brought the wand up to the neck of the other Auror, Stunning him as well.

Releasing the body, Harry turned to find another target. Sirius was duelling with another two on the far side of the room. Suddenly, there was a scream from above as Bellatrix came running down the stairs, a jet of green light escaping her wand. Sirius summoned one of his attackers into the path of the curse, then launched the body at his descending cousin.

Harry stepped closer to Sirius to back him up, when he found his path blocked by another Auror. Harry jumped back to escape the hammer of a fist that was swung at his face, withdrawing his Stun-Baton as he did so.

Stupefy!

The rod burst into life, emitting a healthy scarlet light. The Auror ignited his own and lunged at Harry. Harry slipped to the side, swinging the baton down in a sweeping movement into the backs of the man's legs. He swept his feet out from under the Death Eater and then, as the body fell backwards, brought the baton crashing down on his chest to make sure he stayed down.

"Come on," shouted a voice behind him. Harry turned in horror. "Surely you can do better." Sirius stood up on the stage, only a metre in front of the veil. He ducked the curse Bellatrix had sent at him, a big grin on his face. It was like D'j' vu; Harry watched as the red curse left Bellatrix's wand and zoomed towards its target. The curse struck Sirius in the chest, sending his body sailing backwards. It seemed to happen in slow motion. The curse struck. Sirius' face turned from a mad grin to shock and surprise as he sailed gracefully backwards, descending towards the veil.

"NO!" screamed Harry, running forward.

Once was enough.

Accio Sirius!

His body stopped in midair, his head inches from the veil. Sirius hung suspended for a moment before zooming over towards Harry. He stepped aside so Sirius wouldn't land on him before sending a Stunner at the startled Bellatrix, who had no time to block it. For the second time that night, she fell to the floor, unconscious.

Sirius let out a groan as he climbed to his feet. He seemed a little shaken but all right.

"My arm," he groaned. Clearly, Harry had been wrong. Sirius's arm was hanging at an unnatural angle. "It's dislocated," said Sirius, clearly in a lot of pain.

"I don't know what to..." began Harry.

"I do," said Sirius. "Take my arm and on the count of three, pull as hard as you can; I'll do the rest." Harry felt his stomach tighten as he took Sirius' arm. Harry had never liked cracking fingers, let alone relocating someone's arm. Sirius's arm was like jelly; it moved so unnaturally. Harry held it firmly and prepared himself, trying not to think about what he was doing.

"One," said Sirius. "...two...three!" Harry pulled the arm as hard as he could while Sirius twisted; there was a sickening crack and Harry felt the arm pop back into place. He felt a little bit of sick rising in his throat as Sirius' bones creaked. Harry shook his head, trying to put the thought aside, and took a deep breath of air.

Sirius stood rubbing his shoulder for a few seconds, clearly in discomfort. "Let's go," he said. "We're blown, let's just get out of here and live to fight another day." Harry nodded; there was no point trying anything new. It was all gone tits-up, and their only choice was to abort.

"Ahhh!" hissed Sirius. He rolled up his sleeve to where Bellatrix's curse had hit. His shoulder was now one large bruise, a nasty shade of blue. This wasn't normal. He was bleeding internally, thanks to Bellatrix's spell. They had to get out!

"FREEZE!"

Harry spun around to see a line of at least ten Black Watch Aurors blocking the exit, their wands aimed at Harry and Sirius. They were trapped again and this time there was no escape.

Suddenly there was a clink as a small metal cylinder the size of a Coke can sailed through the door and landed at their feet. A thick purple cloud of smoke gushed out of the cylinder as it hit the floor.

CLINK!

Another metallic cylinder rolled through the door, leaving a trail of purple smoke as it rolled towards the Aurors. Harry and Sirius moved instantly, diving into cover; Sirius beneath the stairs and Harry behind a desk. He peered around the corner of the desk, trying to find a target to aim at. As Harry watched, the Aurors began to cough and splutter, and then slowly, one by one, fell to the ground. It must be some form of sleeping gas.

Quickly, Harry applied the Bubble-Head charm to himself, just in case; he kept his wand trained on the door as a figure walked slowly into the room, emerging like a ghost through the fog. She was tall, with flowing brown hair and sparkling blue eyes. She was pretty, with pale white skin and ruby red lips, and dressed in the scarlet robes of an Auror. Around her head was the familiar fishbowl of the Bubble-Head charm.

"Rachel?" said Sirius, rising from his hiding place. "What are you doing here?"

"I followed them," said the Auror called Rachel, stepping over the fallen bodies. "I'm well aware of who Crouch really is, so I keep an eye on Black Watch communication. My job does have one or two advantages."

"Who's this?" asked Harry, rising to his feet, but keeping his wand aimed at the woman.

"Harry Potter," said Sirius. "This is Rachel Shepherd, one of the old crowd of Aurors. After an accident a few years back she's been confined to a desk and now handles communications. Looks like she's been tapping Black Watch channels for some time."

"Bingo," said Rachel. "And you're the Dark Knight," she said, staring at Harry. "I've spent many hours hunting you over the years, and now here you stand as our only hope. I assume it is true that you two are all that's left of the mysterious Order of the Phoenix?" Harry picked up a condescending element to her voice when she referred to the Order. Was she mocking its failure? Harry decided that he didn't like the woman.

"Correct," said Sirius. Harry was going to add that Frank was also still loyal, apparently, but he didn't fully trust this woman yet.

"Well let's go," said Rachel, heading towards a bookcase behind Sirius. "There is a whole battalion heading down here, so I suggest you leave at the earliest opportunity." What the hell was she doing grabbing a book at a time like this? Surely the Black Watch wouldn't believe she

had been down here reading while all this was going on. Apparently Sirius had been thinking the same.

"What are you doing?" asked Sirius, as Rachel began to browse the bookcase.

"My Aunt was an Unspeakable," said Rachel. "And this was how I used to smuggle myself in to see her." She grabbed a book and pulled. Harry breathed a sigh of relief as the entire bookshelf swung away from the wall, revealing a long, dark passage. "It slopes upwards," said Rachel. "At the end is a manhole cover. You'll come out on the surface, just watch out for cars."

"What about you?" asked Sirius. Was Harry imagining it, or was there an attraction there? Anyway, it was beside the point. He was grateful to the woman; he had reconsidered his opinion of her. She pulled a small pocket mirror out of her pocket, along with her wand.

"I have a Portkey to the little girl's room," said Rachel. "No one will question me." With that she tapped the mirror with her wand and was gone with a pop. The sound of footsteps was coming from the corridor ' Aurors were coming. There was no time to talk. Harry and Sirius ducked into the passage and began their ascent.

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### ***MINISTER OF MAGIC SURVIVES ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT***

In the early hours of this morning, armed intruders broke into the Ministry of Magic in an attempt to kill the Minister of Magic, Bartemius Crouch Junior. While the Minister escaped unharmed, several Black Watch Aurors are said to be in critical condition after the attack. The assailants have been identified as Harry Potter and former Auror Sirius Black, both members of the terrorist network the Order of the Phoenix.

Potter and Black broke into the Ministry of Magic shortly after three a.m. last night. It has not been confirmed how they were able to do this, but it is suspected that very Dark magic was involved to circumvent the wards. The objective of the Order of the Phoenix was to assassinate the Minister of Magic, and they very nearly succeeded.

"I would like to thank the Black Watch for their swift intervention," said Crouch in a press conference this morning. "Were it not for their rapid action, I would not be here addressing you today. I confess I am saddened that there are still people out there who would do a thing like this, but I can promise you that they will never succeed. They tried to scare me - instead they have strengthened my resolve. As of today, the Black Watch now have more rights to arrest, hold and interrogate anyone they deem to be a threat to national security. The last of this Order of the Phoenix will be captured and made to answer

for crimes against humanity. I, we, will not let them dirty our perfect society!"

"Jesus Christ," muttered Harry. The Black Watch had been given a carte blanche. Those people McGonagall had talked about were only the beginning. They would arrest anyone who opened their mouths now. He rose from his seat and walked into the bedroom of Aunt Marge's farm. Sirius was lying on his back, apparently asleep. He was not wearing a top and Harry could see the full horror of his arm. It had been freshly bandaged this morning, but a red blob was already visible through it and the area around it was a violent purple in colour. Sirius had beads of sweat all over his face. Harry could see lines of purple extending beyond the bandage down his right tricep. Whatever curse Bellatrix had used had done more damage than they had first thought. Harry shook his head. They needed a miracle. He needed to get Madam Pomfrey here ASAP to look at Sirius. He also needed more help and more information. It was time to call in a favour.

Harry took out his Frog-Card. "Frank Longbottom."

"Yes," came an irritated voice after a few seconds.

"Frank," said Harry. "I take it you know?"

"Of course." Harry was about to ask why he had not shared the information sooner, but he didn't want to anger the man further.

"We need a little help, Frank," said Harry. There was a pause, probably as Frank enjoyed hearing Harry say that.

"What do you need?"

"Here is what I want you to do..."

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The next morning, on December twenty first, Frank Longbottom appeared in the Ministry of Magic's entrance hall. He walked away from the entrance point towards the security checks. He walked straight through, people clearing a path for him as he went. The advantage of this disguise was that everyone feared the Black Watch so much that he could get anything he wanted. Frank noted the added security as he passed. The main entrance now had five guards, not two, along with the wizard who checked wands in and out.

He walked into the Ministry and along the corridor. He encountered two Black Watch patrols, each consisting of two men, on his way to the lift. He nodded to both of them, though he had no idea who they were ' veils covered all four men's faces. He entered the lift and went down one floor. The next floor was much the same story. There were patrols everywhere. And the workers seemed terrified of the Black Watch.

"As you wish," hissed a familiar voice suddenly. Lucius Malfoy was coming along the corridor with the Minister himself. Crouch seemed to be giving orders. Frank had watched Lucius Malfoy before and knew him well enough to know that taking orders from another Death Eater and not Voldemort himself would really be tugging on the short and curlies. Frank smirked behind his veil, thankful that they could not see who it he was.

"How is our new Healer getting on?" Crouch asked Malfoy as Frank fell into step two feet behind them.

"Well enough," replied Lucius. Frank could hear the bitterness in his voice, and suppressed another smile. "All Muggleborn witches and Squibs will be invited in for a test and made sterile." Frank managed to stop himself from gasping out loud. They could not be serious! That was genocide. Well, they were into genocide before this, but the occasional attack seemed so timid compared to this. This was the systematic extermination of an entire race, carried out with medical precision. Frank felt a bit queasy for a second at the idea. He should have suspected something like this, or perhaps imagined it in his worst nightmares, but to hear it said out loud was horrifying. And their voices: they found it funny, were excited by it. What kind of sick monsters were these people? Lucius was far from finished. "He estimates that if he begins on New Year's Day," continued Malfoy. , "He can have fifty percent of the Mudblood witches infertile by the end of January and total sterility by the end of March."

"After that, the Boss has ordered him to work with the Archive," said Crouch. "They are to go through the marriage records. Anyone who has married a Muggle is to be made sterile." Merlin, thought Frank. They had covered every eventuality, rooting out everyone related to a Muggle. They were ruthlessly efficient, and the death toll would be catastrophic. Frank was sickened by their lack of caring, even more than their actions.

"It will be done," said Lucius, nodding. "But what becomes of the Mudblood men? Infertility amongst women can be passed off as unexplained infertility, but if we start castrating men, it will be noticed." It looked like they hadn't thought of everything. Then again, they had gotten away with the Hogwarts Uprising through the use of fear and the media. Could they get away with it again?

"The Dark Lord already has a plan," announced Crouch smugly, rubbing Lucius' nose in the fact that he hadn't been told. "You are to begin transferring men to the new Commandos Department."

"The what department?"

"Commandos," said Crouch. "Our new army of Muggleborns. Camouflage robes will be arriving tonight or tomorrow. Draft all impure men into this army and find an Auror to give them basic training - well, enough to fight - to serve a purpose before death." Frank felt shivers run up and down his spine as they spoke. They would use the Muggleborns to fight a war. This meant that the Purebloods didn't have to fight, and that the rest would be killed.

"Is that not risky?" asked Lucius. "And it does not provide a final solution."

"It will," said Crouch, waving him aside. "War is on the horizon. They will be the first attack. Heavy losses are expected."

Frank realised that his fists were clenched and he was sweating. They would round up the Half Bloods and Muggleborns, marching the men to their deaths and sterilising the women. They had already kicked the Muggleborns out of Hogwarts. Soon all but the Purebloods will be eliminated. Frank felt faint.

He paused for a second, before continuing after Crouch. He was the man with the knowledge. Crouch entered the lift with Frank right behind him. Crouch gave him a small nod as he entered the lift, which he returned as Crouch pressed the button marked Auror Complex. The whole lift Apparated to the Auror Complex, opening like a normal lift. It could be called by the Aurors, giving them the ability to move from the Complex to the Ministry far more quickly than running outside the Apparation wards and then running back in at the other end.

Frank followed Crouch out of the lift and into the Auror complex. He gasped as the doors opened. It was a sea of black, with only a few specks of scarlet. The Black Watch were everywhere. With their hoods down, Frank recognised a few faces. Some of his old colleagues were there; some, who had left, presumably to join the Death Eaters, had returned. Frank slipped away into the crowd, walking amongst old friends and older enemies. As he passed James Potter's desk, he found that the name had been changed to Rabastan Lestrangle ' Taskforce Chief. Frank asked the nearest Auror about the name change. Apparently, Lestrangle was now in charge of a taskforce that was still looking for the last remaining members of the Order of the Phoenix, not that he knew that one of the final three active members was standing right behind him.

Looking around, he saw many other suspected Death Eaters. Those who were proper Aurors were still wearing red, though they seemed confined to their desks. Those in red sat working, while those in black roamed around freely.

"Where do you think you're going?" growled a voice to Frank's right. The Auror turned, and was relieved to find that it had not been him who had been shouted at. Lionel Crane, an old colleague, who still wore red, had got up from his desk, and a figure in Black had challenged him. So the Black Watch had the Aurors under house arrest? That made things harder.

"To get myself some tea," he replied impatiently to the Auror who had challenged him. The Auror hesitated and then stepped aside. Even the law enforcers here were under the grip of fear. As the Black Watch numbers increased, there would soon be no loyal Aurors left to oppose them.

Frank moved through the main floor and up the stairs to the training facility. As he walked though, he saw more old comrades wearing black, rather than red. They were being trained by new masters, and these lessons would never have been taught in Mad-Eye's day. There was a line of ten Aurors, facing dummies thirty feet away. On the call from the instructor, the ten stepped forward and fired the worst of the Unforgivables.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" shouted ten voices at once. Ten bolts of green light shot out of their wands, and ten dummies were blasted to pieces. Frank grimaced behind his veil. These Aurors were being trained to kill; this was an army, not a police force. This was preparation for an invasion. Frank's mind was suddenly full of images of Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley and Hogwarts, with the Black Watch patrolling the streets, people scared to come out of their homes. He could imagine the Black Watch marching into Diagon Alley and firing randomly into the crowd; they had done it in Hogsmeade during Potter's protest. What was stopping them from continuing? Fear would keep the population in line until they became accustomed to the change. With the new procedures to sterilise witches, all but the Pureblood elite would fade away. Frank hated to think what they would do to Muggle children who showed signs of magic. Would they leave them? Watch them? Kill them? With Voldemort in charge nothing seemed too extreme.

Frank turned back and headed down to the main floor, passing through the interrogation rooms as he did. As he passed he glanced into one, pausing as he saw an Auror in red being interrogated by two Black Watch Aurors. Frank watched through the one-way glass. To his horror, he realised that this was not an interrogation, but an interview. Frank watched for a few minutes. The questions ranged from the purity of his blood to the lengths he was willing to go to in order to ensure a conviction. As Frank watched, he began to wonder just how this man had gotten into the Aurors. He was a spiteful little git.

Frank walked back to the main floor and looked around. He was looking for a specific Auror, one he couldn't see amongst the sea of black and red. With the true Aurors confined to their desks and the Black Watch everywhere, it was hard to talk to someone in private. He headed over to where his quarry *should* be. He had gone about half way when a shout rang out over the room.

"CAN I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE," shouted Crouch, his voice magically magnified. "INTERVIEWS FOR THE BLACK WATCH WILL CONTINUE THROUGHOUT THE REST OF THE WEEK. PLEASE SEE WALDEN MACNAIR FOR AN INTERVIEW TIME. EVERY AUROR IS TO COLLECT A SET OF BLACK WATCH ROBES AND BE IN COURTROOM TEN AT MIDDAY TOMORROW FOR A FULL DRESS REHEARSAL. YOU WILL FIND OUT WHAT FOR WHEN YOU ARE THERE. UNTIL YOU HAVE PASSED AN INTERVIEW, YOU ARE REQUIRED TO WEAR A RED BAND ON YOUR ARM, SIGNIFYING THAT YOU HAVE NOT YET JOINED THE BLACK WATCH. AGAIN, SEE MACNAIR TO SORT OUT AN INTERVIEW TIME."

Frank glanced quickly around at the others. Some were beginning to move towards Macnair's desk, while others went straight back to work.

As Frank made his way between the stations, he spotted who he was looking for. Rachel Shepherd, once a fine Auror but now confined to her desk after an injury to her knee left her unsuitable for fieldwork, was sitting at a desk, making notes on parchment. Frank wondered why she had not been allowed to return to active duty; she didn't even limp anymore. It was probably one of Mad-Eye's calls. Frank knew that she was on their side; she had proved that last night. His first task from Potter - not that he considered Potter to be his boss - was to deliver a Frog-

Card to her. He pulled out his own card and, snatching up a quill, scrawled a few words on the back of it.

Satisfied, Frank slowly made his way over to her, checking that no senior members of the Black Watch were close enough to hear. She glanced up as she saw him approach, a glare pasted on her face. She was clearly no fan of the Black Watch. The question was, would she trust him or not?

"What?" she sneered as he stood over her. Frank smirked behind his veil. Temperamental, wasn't she?

Frank didn't waste time; he knelt by her desk and parted his veil so she could see who it was. Her expression didn't change as she beheld his face. Frank realised that to her, it looked like he had betrayed her, rather than was in disguise.

"What do you know about Harry Potter?" he whispered.

"Apparently he's running the Order of the Phoenix now," replied Shepherd impatiently, reciting what she had been told by Crouch. "It's all in the *Prophet*. Lestrangle is in charge of the taskforce looking for the boy. It's him you need to talk to. Now, if you'll excuse me." Frank smiled; she was clever and was giving nothing away. Frank could easily be a spy, especially with the uniform; Crouch was most likely looking for informants. This could be interpreted as a test of loyalty.

"Did you know it was he last night that broke in to kidnap Crouch?" asked Frank, his voice a whisper. He paused to let a member of the Black Watch pass before he continued. "He and Sirius Black."

"I didn't," said Rachel, not giving away anything. She was eyeing him appraisingly and he glanced each way to make sure it was safe to talk.

"They wanted to remove Crouch and use him to find Dumbledore," whispered Frank. "They were cornered, but somehow they got out of a sealed room. How do you expect they managed that?" Frank was impressed that she didn't even flinch as he accused her of treason. She continued to eye him coldly.

"In the old days Harry Potter got into places more heavily guarded than this," she said calmly. It was true, but it was irritating as this conversation was lasting far longer than it should have. He had to end it now, bollocks to subtlety.

"True," conceded Frank. "But we both know that's bollocks. *You* showed him the bookcase. If you want to help again, take this." Her eyes grew wide at the mention of the bookcase.

He stood up, dropped the Frog-Card on her desk and walked away. He made his way quickly over to the Recreational Room. It was essentially a staff-room for the Aurors when on

their breaks - if they ever got them these days. It contained a small kitchen with a kettle and enough to make a snack if needed. It also contained a few armchairs. Luckily it was deserted at this time. He lit a fire on the stove with his wand and put the kettle above it. He needed a cuppa. Frank added the milk and teabag to a cup and poured in the boiling water. The advantage of magic was that the kettle boiled almost immediately. After a few seconds, the door opened and Rachel Shepherd swept into the Rec-Room, showing no signs of a limp. Frank opened his mouth to speak, but then he stopped sharply as she placed a finger over his lips. He glared at her for cutting him off. He knew they were alone, so what was she complaining about? Didn't she trust him? Women were all so paranoid. She mouthed the words 'shut up' to him, so he bit back his response.

"Fancy a cigarette?" she asked, her voice inappropriately pleasant. She seemed to be acting, but for whose benefit?

"Thanks, I don't," said Frank, waving her aside. Rachel gave him an exasperated look and suddenly he realised that she wanted to get him out of the building. They couldn't smoke in the building, so anyone who wanted a cigarette had to go to "Smoker's Corner" - an area outside the complex and away from the front entrance. She wanted to move this conversation outside the building and he had missed the signs. Frank could have kicked himself for being so slow. Quickly, he thought up a solution. "Got my tea, though."

Rachel gave him a look that all too clearly said 'finally' and then gestured for him to follow her. "How about a breath of fresh air?" asked Rachel, heading towards the door. She led him out of the Rec-Room, around the edge of the main floor and out of the Auror Complex holding open both sets of glass doors for him to pass. The two sets of glass doors were separated by an area of floor tiled in the pattern of the emblem of the Aurors. They emerged into a grassy area that was essentially a small garden. There was an area of flat grass that stretched out from the walls for about twenty metres on all sides of the building. Beyond that was a dry-stone wall topped with a line of thick bushes that housed Muggle Repelling Charms. The bushes had no leaves, given that it was the depth of winter. They looked almost dead, which was ever so fitting with the atmosphere inside the Complex. Beyond the hedge, grassy hills were covered with bracken and gorse that moved in the breeze and dotted with sheep. Frank wasn't sure, but he was fairly sure they were in the Brecon Beacons in Wales.

Rachel didn't stop at the entrance; she turned right and headed to the corner of the building some fifty metres away and once there turned the corner.

A look of disgust passed over Frank's face as the smell of stale tobacco filled his nostrils. The ground was littered with cigarette butts and packets. Frank had no idea that so many Aurors smoked. Luckily for them, it was deserted at the moment.

"Since when have you started?" asked Frank, gesturing to the packet of cigarettes in Rachel's hand.

"I don't smoke," said Rachel. "I think they're vile, but I stole them so I had an excuse to talk to you outside. Crouch installed a lot of listening devices in the Complex. He suspects there

is someone on the inside helping what's left of Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix." In hindsight it was perfectly obvious that Crouch would have listening devices all over the Complex. Not all Aurors were part of the Black Watch. There was goodness left in the Aurors, one just had to look hard to find it.

"Having something stolen from within the Auror Complex," smirked Frank, eyeing the cigarettes. "How ironic. Better keep up the pretence."

Rachel shook her head before taking one out and lighting it with her wand. She held it in her hand, but made no move to smoke it.

"I hate these bloody things," she groaned. "If you are stressed or need a release, go to the gym, go for a run, listen to some music, eat something, just don't resort to this kind of stuff. Clearly a smoker's mind is so weak they can't think of anything better and need a drug, and then they can't quit, which only demonstrates a feeble mind. And it doesn't look good; they ruin photographs. Honestly, nothing is more unattractive than a cigarette. Tasting it on a man's breath, yuck."

"Fascinating," said Frank dryly, wondering how they had gotten so far from the point.

"Okay," said Rachel, seeing Frank's frustration. "So what do you want, and what's with the card?" She held up the card he had given her.

"Are you willing to help us?" asked Frank, watching for a reaction. He didn't want to give any more away before he knew she was on board.

"Us being...?" asked Rachel.

"We both know who I mean," said Frank. "You met them last night."

"Come on, Frank," said Rachel. "I get a note saying 'kitchen, two minutes, don't be seen' and you expect me to trust you?"

"Rachel, we don't have a lot of time," said Frank, cutting her off. "Here is the situation. Last night Potter and Black, the last of the Order of the Phoenix, except for me, tried to kidnap Crouch. They need to find Dumbledore. It's gone so far that only a full-scale attack can bring the country back to the light."

"I know all this," said Rachel impatiently.

"What you don't know is that Crouch is planning genocide," said Frank. "I just heard Crouch and Malfoy talking. They can make every Muggleborn witch infertile within six months, and I think we both know who is giving Crouch his orders. They are planning an all-out war with the Muggles, and they are going to march all Muggleborn men to their deaths. They're recruiting an army now. There are no political routes left to fight him, but the Order of the Phoenix is not dead, though it is very weak. We need help and information."

"What are you planning?" asked Rachel.

"We don't know yet. I am here to see if you are willing to help us, and to find out what is going on, and where Dumbledore is."

"I have no idea about Dumbledore," said Rachel. "It was reported that he had been sent to Azkaban, and that is what Macnair and Crouch are saying, but I don't have the paperwork needed to transfer a prisoner to Azkaban. He is not in their records. Wherever he is, he isn't there."

"So he's disappeared off the face of the earth," muttered Frank. There followed a tense silence.

"Do you really think you can make a difference?" asked Rachel. "His power is felt everywhere."

"We have to try," said Frank. "But we can't do it without you, Rachel."

"So it all comes dow..." suddenly her eyes went wide. She threw down the cigarette and pushed Frank hard in the chest. His back hit the wall of the Complex, causing him to grunt in pain. Had she tricked him? Was this a trap? He reached for his wand, but before he could reach it he felt something press against him and something warm, wet and soft press gently against his lips.

"Wh..." he tried to say. He suddenly realised that Rachel had literally thrown herself at him, pinning him to the wall and kissing him. He broke the kiss and tried to ask why, but she cut him off.

"Shut up!" she hissed and planted her lips back on his, just in time. A second later two figures in red came around the corner. There was a sharp intake of breath as they saw what was happening. Neither of them were stupid enough to interrupt a member of the Black Watch in this situation. Frank's uniform had its advantages. The two Aurors turned and quickly made their way back to the Complex.

Rachel pulled away and peered around the corner.

"They're gone," she whispered as she turned back to face them. "Sorry, Frank," she added.

"For what?" he asked, seeing no reason to apologise.

"You still wear the ring," said Rachel, nodding to his hand. "I shouldn't have done that."

"It's fine," muttered Frank, turning the wedding ring on his finger. It had been a year since she had been killed yet he still wore the ring as a constant reminder of what he had lost. In

truth he hadn't thought of Alice when Rachel kissed him, and it was that more than anything else that worried Frank.

"Anyway, as I was saying," said Rachel slowly, "If we are caught the Black Watch will execute us without a trial."

"If we don't do anything," said Frank, "the Black Watch will hunt us down and execute us one by one, not to mention draw the entire country into a war that will kill thousands. Doing nothing gets us time, but weeks only. In the end, we have to fight and delaying only allows them to fortify their positions."

"You're right," said Rachel. "Something must be done. I can try and find out where Dumbledore is, and I assume that's also where they are holding Shacklebolt, Dawlish, Moody, and the others who disappeared." Frank breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you," said Frank. "We also need weapons if you can get them. Call me on the Frog-Card when you have it."

"Call you?"

"Say my name into the card," said Frank. "If I don't answer, assume the worst and contact Sirius or Potter. They can help you, and if you need an Emergency evac, call Potter and he will be there in quite literally a flash."

"One more thing," said Rachel as she turned to leave. "When the time comes, I know what Mad-Eye says, but I can fight. I can do my job."

"Okay," said Frank, nodding. He threw his tea over the trunk of a tree, vanished the cup and with a final thank you to Rachel Disappeared.

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Rachel Shepherd walked back onto the main floor of the Auror Complex. The smell of paint and solvents was still in the air, but the workmen had gone. The building seemed to be complete now. She walked along the central aisle to the end, turned left, stopping at her workstation, and sat back down. Following the upgrading of status of the Black Watch two days ago, she was no longer handling reception and communication, as it gave her too much power. That wasn't the excuse they gave, but she could read between the lines. They didn't want her listening in on their secret conversations. Instead, she had been given a desk and was working as a proper Auror again, except that she was not allowed in the field, and she was being watched by the Black Watch.

She glanced over at Macnair. How was she going to get him alone, and how could she extract the information from him? He used to be an executioner and now he was in charge of the Black Watch. Not much of a change, then. Rachel stood and walked out of the main floor, and into one of the corridors. Checking that she was alone, she slipped into the armoury. Around her

were rows of stun-batons, dragon scale armoured vests, Strike Team uniforms, Magical Incendiary Devices, spare wands and an assortment of other weapons. Rachel took a bag from one shelf and into it she placed ten Stun-Batons, ten Dragon-Scale Flak Jackets, three MIDs and a handful of wands. She then moved to the potions cabinet at the end of the room and slipped a bottle of Veritaserum into her pocket. Finally, Rachel placed three Magical Incendiary Devices around the armoury and armed them, set on a timer. That should put a pretty little dent in the response time.

She then slipped out of the Armoury and back into the corridor. She quickly made her way up the stairs at the end of the corridor and into the Medical Centre. There were no Healers around, so Rachel snuck in and hid the bag of weapons in one of the cupboards. Job done, she made her way back down to the main floor. Her heart was pounding, in her chest. Enemies were literally all around her. A million things could still go wrong. What if she got caught? They would bypass Azkaban and go straight for the death penalty. Yet, in all honesty, part of her was thrilled. The adrenaline pumped through her system. She was a spy, a real Auror again, fighting the good fight.

She tried to put the thoughts out of her mind and took a deep breath. Macnair's desk was on in the corner of the room, just at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the interrogation rooms. Rachel watched Macnair for a few seconds before making her way over to him.

"Walden," she said politely as she neared. "Are there any times available for interviews today?"

"Your medical report says you are unfit for duty," said Macnair coldly, not even looking up at her.

"*Mad-Eye* said I was unfit for duty," said Rachel. This was in fact true, and highly hypocritical. Her knee wasn't fully recovered, but his knee had been cut off years ago. What right did he have to tell her she was unfit for active duty? "But he's gone now, hasn't he, and good riddance. We all know how paranoid he was. Come on, Walden, please."

"What about your knee?" asked Macnair. She bit back a retort, putting the mission before her pride.

"I can walk, run and fight," protested Rachel. "Put me through a physical first if you don't believe me. Come on. I could run rings around half the new boys that have been brought in. This isn't because I'm a woman, is it?" The sexist card worked most times, but its results were unpredictable with sociopaths.

"Miss Shepherd," said Macnair impatiently. "My job is to assemble an elite force to uphold the law. I can't have anyone on my team who doesn't meet the standard - the *same* standard."

"What if you put me through a physical, and I have to achieve the same targets as the men to pass?" asked Rachel. She could bluff him all she wanted, as she knew she would never

have to take the test. To be honest, she would like to and believed she actually could, but now was not the time. If Voldemort was defeated and things went back to normal, she hoped she would be returned to active duty.

"Fine," said Macnair irritably. "I'll stick you in and we'll put an end to this fantasy. Come on now, I'll do your interview myself and then, assuming I pass you, you will be subject for the physical tomorrow, agreed?"

"Agreed," said Rachel. Macnair rose from his seat and marched up the stairs. He didn't look happy, but Rachel couldn't care less. She followed him up the stairs and into the interrogation room.

"So what is this rehearsal for?" she asked. It was to settle her own curiosity as much as gathering information for the Order of the Phoenix, of which it would seem she was now a member.

"You'll find out soon enough." Macnair marched straight in, the light coming on automatically as he did. He marched to the far end of the room and began to activate the recording orb. Rachel glanced each way down the corridor to make sure they were alone before making her move. She left the door open and ran at Macnair. Approaching from behind, she grabbed him around the neck in a sleeper hold. Macnair grunted in surprise as her forearm pressed into his neck, and then again when she drove her knee into the back of his leg. She grabbed a handful of his greasy hair, and pulled it sharply back before ramming his head into the brick wall. There was a loud thud as his skull hit the concrete wall. Rachel didn't release his head; instead she pulled it back and again thrust it into the wall.

Macnair's unconscious body crashed to the floor like a sack of potatoes as she released him, smashing the recording orb as he fell. Satisfied that no one was coming, Rachel acted quickly, kneeling next to him and rolling him onto his front. She ripped the arms of his robes off him, tying one sleeve around his eyes to blind him, and then the other around his wrists. Removing the Veritaserum from her pocket, Rachel dropped three drops onto his tongue and forced his mouth shut, stroking his throat in order to trigger his swallowing reflex. She waited a few seconds for the potion to take effect before reviving him with the Enervation charm.

"What is your name?" asked Rachel, glancing around to make sure no one was coming. She had to hurry. Her heart was pounding in her chest as she worked.

"Walden Macnair," replied the Death Eater, his voice vacant and dreamy.

"Can you see me?"

"No."

"Where are the Order of the Phoenix being held?" asked Rachel.

"Lundy Island," said Macnair without hesitation.

"Where on the island?" asked Rachel, not knowing the size or layout of the island.

"On the north end, in an old underground radar station from the second world war," said Macnair. Rachel breathed a sigh of relief, having gotten what she needed. She glanced towards the door again, making sure she was alone, and then pulled out her wand.

*"Obliviate!"* With that, she slammed his head back into the floor, sending him crashing back into unconsciousness. She stood up and walked over to the steel table against wall, taking a deep breath and bracing herself for the pain. Tensed her muscles, psyching herself up to do something very stupid, but very necessary, she stood by the table that had once held the recording orb. Ready, she leaned forward and head-butted the end of the table as hard as she could.

She managed not to cry out in pain. She could feel warm blood oozing out of her forehead and over her eyebrow. The table was metallic and shiny enough for her to see that she had cut herself. She was glad she had, otherwise she would have had to do it again. Blood flowed around her eye-socket and down her face.

Satisfied, she pressed the alarm button on the wall outside. Instantly, red lights appeared on the ceiling and a siren went off. Rachel had to cover her ears as the wailing surrounded her. There was a tremor of feet as a dozen Black Watch Aurors appeared all around them. Rachel leaned against the wall, looking vague and keeping one hand over her eye. Blood was starting to seep through her fingers.

"What happened?" asked Ludo Bagman, removing his veil. Rachel had had no idea he was in the Black Watch / Death Eaters, but she didn't let her surprise show. She spoke, making sure her voice wobbled and she had an appropriately vacant look on her face.

"I don't know," said Rachel, making her voice little more than a whisper. She was acting as though she was disorientated. "We were attacked."

"Who did this? Did you see him?"

"I didn't see anything," she said. "They came at me from behind. I think they were wearing an invisibility cloak. I didn't see anyone."

"Shut off all exits," ordered Bagman. "Get Shepherd and Macnair to the Medical Centre. The rest of you spread out, I want the intruder found." Rachel managed not to smile as the Aurors began to move.

The Aurors all disappeared in various directions, except for one, who led Rachel down to the Medical Centre. The Auror took her by the forearm and led her slowly down the steps. Rachel deliberately stumbled a few times en route to make it seem like she was really out of it. She checked her watch to see how long she had left. Not long, so she softened the act to make them walk quicker. When they reached the medical centre, Rachel climbed up on the bed and waited while the Auror fetched a Healer from the staff room. He returned a few moments later

with a man dressed in the greens of a Healer. The Auror excused himself and waited outside, while the Healer went to the sink to wash his hands.

"Been in the wars, have we?" asked the Healer, making small talk. Rachel smirked. He had no idea.

*BOOM!*

The MIDs had gone off in the armoury, and most likely set the rest off as well. That would keep the Black Watch busy. The entire building shook under the force of the explosion. The glassware in the cabinets wobbled and in some cases broke under the vibrations.

"What on earth..." stammered the Healer. He turned back to Rachel, presumably to ask what was going on, but he never managed a word. Rachel raised her good leg, kicking him in the mouth. The healer fell over backwards, and she rolled off the bed. She grabbed his dropped wand and pointed it at his neck.

*"Stupefy!"* she whispered. There was a flash of red and the man went limp.

Rachel immediately went to the cupboard and pulled the bag of weapons out of the drawer. She pocketed the Healer's wand and put the bag over her shoulder. With that she slipped out of the room, wiping the blood from her face. The main floor was full of people. There was a fire coming from the direction of the armoury, and orange flames reflected off the walls.

Sure enough, after a few seconds, a second bell went off, announcing a fire. Sirens went off all around them, and the Aurors started making their way to the main entrance and out into the clearing. Smoke filled the room, which had erupted into pandemonium. Rachel waited for nearly two minutes while the Aurors left before ducking behind a workstation. She crept from one to the other, keeping very low. She reached the lift in under a minute and pressed the button for the main entrance.

She quickly got into the lift, which luckily was empty. Since the Auror Complex was now a different building, the fire alarm would not go off in the Ministry. The Black Watch should have returned to base if they believed they were under attack. Fire procedure was to exit via the main door and not to use the lift for fear of the flames entering the lift and then the main Ministry building; however, Rachel wasn't in the mood to obey.

Rachel stepped out of the lift and after showing her ID to the guard, walked out to the Apparation Point. She smiled to herself before Disapparating. She reappeared in the bushes in a park near where she had grown up. She had to hurry. They may have detected her Apparation. It may take hours to work out it was her, but she couldn't risk that. She had to contact the Order. Immediately she pulled out the Frog-Card.

"Frank Longbottom," she said clearly, still doubtful the card would actually work. To her great relief, a second later, his face appeared in the card. These really were nifty little things.

"You get it?" asked Frank. Straight to business; he was about as friendly as a viper.

"Yes," said Rachel, still panting. "I can't go back, though. I managed to get the location and steal enough weapons and Veritaserum to last us, but my cover is blown."

"Good girl," said Frank. "Call the Knight Bus. Someone will be on it and will take you to safety." His face disappeared as suddenly as it had come. Rachel didn't entirely trust Frank, but she had no choice now. She transfigured her red Auror robes into a sky blue ensemble that didn't stand out too much. She held out her wand, and with a bang, the purple triple-decker arrived. She paid and took a seat, giving her destination as Diagon Alley.

Eyeing each of the other travellers carefully as she passed, Rachel took an armchair. Stan Shunpike allocated to her. Her bleeding face received some stares, as she had passed through the bottom deck on the way to the stairs. Luckily, she had been given a seat on the second deck, which was empty. She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. Adrenalin pumped through her veins. She felt exhilarated after the 'battle'; She hadn't felt like this since she had been on active duty. How she had missed it, forced to stay in the office doing paperwork. This was her chance to return to the old days and to stop the nightmare that was coming.

Suddenly there was a whoosh, and she felt a gust of heat on the back of her neck. Cautiously, she turned her head. Her eyes grew wide in terror. She had been betrayed. Sitting next to her was a Black Watch Auror. Her hand immediately flew to her wand. She pulled it out, but the Auror grabbed her wrist.

"Will you calm down?" he hissed, pulling down his hood. Rachel didn't know whether to be relieved or scared as she stared at the face of Harry Potter. The boy released her wrist and eyed the bag.

"Are those the weapons?"

"Yes," she replied. "And I got an address."

"Good," said Harry. He held out a hand. "Take my hand."

She cautiously reached out and took his hand. He edged closer, pulling her into a hug. She was quite startled by the boy suddenly being so close.

"Hold on," he whispered. "This may feel a little odd." Rachel yelped as she was engulfed in flame. Her stomach shot to her throat as she was transported over half the country. They reappeared in the lounge area of what looked like a cosy farmhouse. Glancing around, she noticed that it was also a Muggle house. This must be a stolen, or 'borrowed' house.

She noticed that she was not alone in the room. Frank Longbottom was sitting on one sofa, a glass of wine in his hand. Harry Potter had taken a seat in an armchair, and on the other sofa, half naked and with his arm heavily bandaged was Sirius Black. Poppy Pomfrey, who

whom Rachel knew from having been sent to the Hospital Wing many times when she was at Hogwarts, was tending to Sirius's arm.

"Welcome to the Headquarters of the new Order of the Phoenix, Miss Shepherd," said Potter.

~~~~ + ~~~~

Weasley?

Weeeaaasley?

"MISS WEASLEY! WILL YOU PAY ATTENTION!" boomed the gravelly voice of Professor Rookwood, bringing Ginny out of her stupor. Suddenly wide-awake, she glanced up at the irate professor who stood by the chalkboard, glaring at her. As she glanced around, all other eyes were staring at her. She had almost been fallen asleep, which was unsurprising considering that she had been up until half past three the previous night practicing with the DA. The exercise, combined with the late night, meant that the alarm clock this morning had been hideous. Ginny had rolled over, but the clocks in Hogwarts were charmed to not allow students to miss classes by being asleep. Five minutes after Ginny had hit the snooze button, the alarm had sounded twice as loud and this time refused to turn off until she was out of bed. Dark Arts had been her first lesson on the day and she had paid attention for the best part of two and three quarter minutes, a personal best, but had then slipped into a stupor, her eyelids growing heavier all the time. It didn't take a genius to work out that while she had been miles away, Rookwood had asked her a question.

"Er...what?" she managed to stammer. This was not what Harry meant about a low profile. She was drawing attention to herself. She glanced at the other two members of the DA in the fifth year, both of whom were looking equally as knackered. She hoped to Merlin that Rookwood didn't see a pattern. He might be able to piece it together.

"What is the difference between the Harmandala Curse and the Harmentela Curse?" repeated Rookwood, advancing on Ginny, his eyes blazing with anger.

"They're spelt differently," said Ginny absently, staring Rookwood in the eyes. She had no idea, not that she'd done the reading she had been assigned. There was a snort of laughter around her as the other Gryffindors struggled to hide their laughter.

"As I thought," sneered Rookwood, shooting a silencing glare at the Gryffindors. "You have not attempted the reading that was set. Homework is not optional, Miss Weasley, so it will be a detention tonight with Mr McKae."

"Who?" asked Ginny, raising an eyebrow.

"If you bothered to read the notice boards," continued Rookwood, "you'd know that Mr Filch and his accursed furball have been sent to a place better suited to them. Mr McKae is our

new caretaker, and I should warn you, his ability with magic extends beyond cleaning. He has the power to enforce punishments on rule breakers. It would be in all your interests not to cross him."

"Riiiiight," said Ginny slowly. She was not exactly sad to see the back of Filch, but this new guy seemed like a nightmare. Harry had better hurry up and do something, before this place went to the dogs.

"You may be interested to know, Miss Weasley," said Rookwood, "that the Harmandala Curse inflicts physical pain on the affected limb, while the Harmentela Curse infuses pain through the nervous system, but without causing physical pain."

"Well, I'll sleep better at night knowing that," muttered Ginny. Rookwood turned on his heel and retreated to the front of the class. He opened his mouth to speak again, when the golden alarm clock, which stood on his desk, rang out an alarm. The shrill bell pierced Ginny's ears, while Rookwood stood unaffected. Rookwood flicked his wand at the clock, which instantly fell silent.

"Right," said Rookwood, his voice betraying his excitement. "To the Great Hall" He dropped the chalk he was holding and pointed to the door. "It's time."

"Time for what?" blurted out Ginny before she could stop herself. She immediately cringed inwardly for being so stupid. Rookwood turned slowly to face her, but this time, it was not malice in his eyes, but a smug, superior look that Malfoy modelled so often. Whatever was happening, Rookwood was extremely excited about it. That spelt trouble in Ginny's book.

"Things are going to change, Miss Weasley," said Rookwood. "I won't spoil the surprise, but tomorrow, the sun shall rise to find a new world waiting for it."

Ginny's blood ran cold at the very thought. She had no idea what he meant, and but she didn't have to: it was plainly obvious. She just didn't want to think it.

Ginny joined the class filing towards the door, with a quick glance at Terry Boot. The two DA members exchanged a knowing look of resignation. Things were about to get much worse. The walk to the Hall took longer than ever before. Ginny felt like how she imagined someone being walked to their death might, as if the end of this journey would mark the end of everything she knew. She just hoped this wasn't entirely accurate. Her stomach felt sick and her feet like lead as she climbed the darkened stairs up from the dungeons. As they grew closer to the Hall, other classes could be seen filing down the stairs and out of rooms and passages towards the Great Hall. Some had their heads hung low, as if they knew what was coming. Others looked fearful, dreading the unknown, while some of the Slytherins looked like Christmas had come five days early. The tinsel that had been hung around the castle was lost on the students as they walked towards the Hall. They barely saw it, and it inspired no feelings of Christmas cheer, or even hope, in the few that even noticed it. Ginny hardly realised that Christmas was so close because of all the gloom. She had done her shopping for her friends and family -hyphen even those in prison, in the vain hope she would see them again - but this was no

Christmas, not as it should be anyhow. This was a taste of the world to come if the Order of the Phoenix, or what was left of it, failed. The trouble was, with each step Ginny took, she was more and more sure that they had already done so.

As she turned into the Hall, Ginny found the tables set out as they always were, but the front of the Hall, where the teacher's table should have been, was completely rearranged. A large white sheet hung across the back wall, completely covering the brick. Fifteen feet in front of it stood what looked like a small fat telescope on a tripod. Beneath the scope, contained within the legs of the tripod, was a basin. Ginny could see an emerald green glow coming from inside. A glowing glass rod descended from the scope into the basin.

Ginny had heard of these things before, though she had never seen one. They could be used to allow a large group of people to view the contents of a Pensieve, or, if linked to the Floo, (which, judging from the green glow, it was,) then it could show the events happening in one place to people seated in another. It was essentially a broadcast system, much like the fellytisson-things that her father had told her about.

The students were shepherded to their respective house tables as they entered. The teachers were there, guiding them along, looks of defeat etched into the faces of those on the right side, while a smug expression was plastered on the face of the High Inquisitor, who strode to the front to check the equipment. Snape was as hard to read as ever.

"What's happening?" hissed Ginny as she passed McGonagall.

"Wait there," said McGonagall, loudly, halting the line. "Please move right the way along to the end of the table, or there will not be room for everyone," she called along the bench. There was more than enough room on the benches since half the school had been expelled a fortnight ago. McGonagall just needed time to respond.

"Minister Crouch has set up a press conference in the Auditorium at the Ministry," said McGonagall quietly. "QUICKLY PLEASE!" she said to reassert her cover before turning back to Ginny. "Whatever it is, it's important and it's bad news. Move along, Miss Weasley."

Ginny took a seat on the bench half way down the Hall. A quick exchange of looks with Katie Bell told her exactly how worried the others were. The Hall seemed too cold, or maybe it was just the atmosphere. Ginny watched the last of the students enter and the Heads of House conduct a head count. The double doors were then swung closed with a loud unforgiving bang. That sound sealed it for Ginny. It seemed to her that all hope had just been locked out of the room, leaving nothing but despair and enemies inside.

"YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE," bellowed Rookwood from the front. "IT'S NOW ELEVEN FIFTY-FIVE. AT MIDDAY THE MINISTER OF MAGIC WILL BROADCAST LIVE FROM THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC AND SPEAK TO THE WHOLE COUNTRY. YOU ARE ABOUT TO WITNESS THE DAWNING OF BRITAIN'S GOLDEN AGE: BE PRIVILEGED. THIS DAY AND WHAT FOLLOWS WILL BE STORIES YOU TELL TO YOUR GRANDCHILDREN, AND YOU WILL BE PROUD TO TELL THEM THAT YOU

WERE THERE WHEN IT ALL CHANGED. PLEASE BE PATIENT, AND IN FOUR MINUTES, ALL YOUR QUESTIONS WILL BE ANSWERED."

Ginny shot a glance across the Hall at Malfoy, who was exchanging a hidden high-five with Goyle. She really wished she could leap over there and throttle the little weasel, but was forced to sit and watch. Just then their eyes met, just in time for him to flash a smug smirk at her before turning his attention to the screen.

Four minutes, two hundred and forty seconds, each of which seemed to last an hour, ticked slowly by with nothing but a blank white sheet to stare at. Just as the bell sounded its first bong of the midday ringing, the screen flashed into colour. A large wooden platform had been erected with a polished beech broadcast podium in the centre. Behind this, a large blue flag bearing the logo of Magical Britain had been draped. This was in front of an audience who sat in gently curving pews, giving the audience a shallow horseshoe shape, far below wherever the picture was being taken from. Whatever was capturing the images must be perched on a balcony.

The doors to the left of the stage opened and Barty Crouch Junior marched in, his robes immaculate and his stance tall and proud. He was followed by two lines of Black Watch Aurors, who lined up in front of the curtain, behind their master, as he took the podium. Ginny also noticed that the Black Watch were lined up against the sides of the room, with a few feet separating each of them.

Sweet Merlin, there were so many of them.

"Good afternoon," said Crouch politely as he deposited his notes on the podium and sipped at the water that had been left for him. The scene had a morbid feel to it. The man at the podium flanked by a line of identical black figures, their uniforms immaculate, reminded Ginny of Hitler and the Waffen-SS.

"Firstly, I'd like to thank you for all coming at such short notice," began Crouch, his voice echoing around not only the auditorium, but Hogwarts' Great Hall as well. "And a warm welcome to the members of the press who have attended. I can promise you, ladies and gentlemen, that it will be worth the trip. Now, to business: For many years, you have attended these last minute meetings with a sense of fear, knowing from experience that what you were about to be told was bad news, often with a body-count involved. I am happy to say that this is not the case today. Indeed, ladies and gentleman, I am delighted to tell you that this meeting will begin the process of ushering in a new era for this country and for the witches and wizards who live here. We will once again make this country worthy of the name *Great Britain*.

"Now, how can we go about such a change?" asked Crouch, his rhetoric reaching out to everyone listening, none of whom had any idea. "Merlin knows that we have had problems in the past. This country has problems; some of them so big that it seems there is no way out of this mess. We are a country which has been torn apart by war, and now must struggle to rebuild itself. These are hard times, make no mistake; but there is hope. I believe that this horrific war that has not only torn communities apart, but has crippled the greatest country on the planet, was

a blessing in disguise. It is an opportunity for change, real change. We have been given a clean slate with which to build a society that wizards all over the globe will see and admire.

We now have a choice. We can rebuild as it was, and leave ourselves open to repeating the mistakes of the past, or we can start anew. We have the opportunity to build a brave new world, and I will not pass it by. We will remind other wizards and witches around the world that there is pride in the race of wizards. We will build a society so grand that even the Muggles will take heed. What better way to honour the memories of those whose lives this war has taken, but by building a world in which their children can live, grow and run around safely? Beginning today, we will start to rebuild this crippled, broken society into a new order, and a new world in which wizards and witches alike can live and be happy, free from the oppression they have known these last decades. It is the solemn vow of this administration to stamp out the oppression we as wizards have suffered from all enemies, from anyone who would deny us our potential. We will take what is ours by right, and live as it was meant to be.

"But how do we accomplish this?" asked Crouch, once again drawing the crowd in with rhetoric. "I know you have heard similar words from politicians before, but once they got into power they did nothing. They sat on their thrones, in their own little worlds, growing rich while this country descended into civil war at the whim of a mad-man responsible for the deaths of millions; a man who for years has bribed, threatened and murdered his way through government, placing spies in key places, in the hope of gaining total power of this world. A plan which very nearly succeeded, and which sadly took the life of my father. It is clear to see that it is always the human factor that fails us. These weak leaders were corrupted by power because they did not understand it, so what is needed is not a set of hollow words, but a strong leader who will follow them. A leader who will not compromise, will not accept second place, a leader who will return pride to this country. Sadly, I must admit that I am not that man."

There was a gasp from around the halls and flashes of light as cameras flashed. Was he saying what Ginny thought he was saying? But that would mean...oh, bollocks!

"But it is with pride, not sorrow, that I step aside," continued Crouch. "It has been my life's privilege to serve him, and I have seen first hand his dream, and it is that dream that will guide this country into the future. You will have heard the name, though you still fear it. Ladies and gentlemen, this may come as a shock to you, but please remember whom you heard this from. For years, this man has fought to restore pride to this community, but has been met with nothing but slander by those seeking power for themselves. His name has been dragged through the mud, but still he selflessly battled to restore freedom, our rightful freedom to us all. He is a great leader and an example to us all. Unfortunately, he cannot be here today, but he would want this news to be told to you as soon as possible. He believes in keeping the country informed of what it needs to know, rather than keeping secrets. He recognises your right to know what you need to know.

"So here it is, ladies and gentlemen," continued Crouch, nearing his crescendo. "Five days from now, on Christmas Day, this country will recognise a new leader, under whom we will march proudly into the New Year. But in order to exact these changes, the Ministry will have to be completely restructured into a more efficient regime. The power of the bureaucracy will be a

thing of the past, along with poverty and oppression, under the powers of the new leader in a new role created especially for him. On Christmas Day, you will witness not the presentation of a new Minister of Magic, but the inauguration of a new High Chancellor. He's already a Lord of noble birth, and his new title will enable him to do justice to this country. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to inform you that from on Christmas Day, your very first High Chancellor will be his Lordship, Lord Voldemort."

~~~~ Chapter XV ~~~~ Who Dares Wins Pt. I

*“I see a whole army of my countrymen,
Here in defiance of tyranny.
You have come to fight as free men,
And free men you are.
What will you do with that freedom? Will you fight?”*

*Fight and you may die, run and you’ll live.
Atleast a while.
But dying in your beds, many years from now,
Would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that
For one chance, just one chance
To come back here and tell our enemies
That they may take our lives,
But they’ll never take our freedom?”*

~ William Wallace (Mel Gibson) ~ Braveheart

There was utter silence in the Great Hall. The news washed over them like a tsunami, causing their stomachs to clench and hearts to miss a beat. Everyone sat speechless, jaws limp and eyes wide. Voldemort; He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, Minister of Magic? It wasn't possible! *They can never get away with this*, thought Ginny desperately. It just couldn't be true! The stony select was reflected over five hundred miles away in London, as the auditorium sat in stony silence, staring at the solemn yet excited Minister of Magic. No one could think of anything to say, the shock was too much. Ginny's heart sank as she watched the scene unfold. Rookwood seemed hardly able to curb his excitement as he watched his masters make their final play for control of the country.

“They can't do this, can they?” whispered someone close to Ginny. “If people protest...”

“A lot of good it did us last time,” snapped Ginny, suddenly annoyed at the speaker's naivety. “And what do you think Herman Glosteen did? Do you really believe he was a dragon smuggler? No, there is nothing we can do.” She knew it was wrong to take her anger out on a second year, but she didn't care. Her thoughts were miles away; her hopes pinned on one boy destined to bring about the end of the war, who at present was in hiding in Devon. She knew she would have to convey this broadcast to Harry as soon as it was over; she just hoped she wasn't arrested before she could. Voldemort now had complete control; there was nothing he could not do. Anyone who protested would suffer the same fate as Mr. Glosteen had done – or worse. She knew more people would turn up having accidentally cut their heads off while brushing their teeth and other such excuses. So this was how liberty was to die...but it wasn't dead yet. She knew that as long as Harry Potter had a breath in his body, Voldemort would never truly win. Ron was seated next to her, his jaw open, his fists clenched and his eyes wide; he was frozen in place, and he wasn't the only one. Ginny quickly glanced over at Malfoy, who was whispering excitedly to Crabbe.

Ginny turned her attention back to the projection on the white sheet, her heart beating fast with horror, as Crouch raised his hands, beckoning for silence. Murmurings and shouts had begun to sweep around the audience, just as they had in the Great Hall, which Rookwood had silenced with an explosion from the end of his wand. Crouch was not so lucky and was ignored. When he did not get silence, he snapped his fingers at the Black Watch, who lined the back of the podium and the walls of the room. In a single synchronised movement, every one of them moved one step forward, their boots stamping onto the floor in unison, the sound ringing out like a clap of thunder. They all had their wands out and aimed at the crowd. The noise died away in an instant under the fear of the Black Watch.

“Thank you,” said Crouch, though he did not look best pleased. “Now I know this may come as a big shock to you. I know that for many years now, our Lord has received some very bad publicity on account of the terrorist group who called themselves the Order of the Phoenix. I would now like to take a few moments to clear up some details. I realise what I am about to tell you will be a shock to the system, and you will need time to come to terms with this, but I am going to have to be frank. Most of what has been said in the press over the last twenty years has ranged from being a half-truth to a complete lie.

“The Order of the Phoenix does exist, despite many attempts to keep it secret. It was run out of Hogwarts school by Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, who was arrested at the end of last month for murdering the Minister of Magic, my father.” Crouch bowed his head in a gesture that was supposed to show he was saddened.

“Crocodile tears,” muttered Ginny, clenching her fists. One of the Aurors in the hall near her table turned at the sound of her voice and shot her a silencing glare through his veil; his eyes were enough to convey the message. Ginny fell silent.

“Ever since the start of this conflict,” continued Crouch, “which the previous administration called a war, the Order of the Phoenix has appeared to have a very close relationship with the Minister. It saddens me to have discovered that this was no relationship. The post mortem of my father and this signed confession from Albus Dumbledore” – he held up a roll of parchment – “reveals that since his election in nineteen eighty-nine, my father was under the Imperius Curse, and being controlled by Albus Dumbledore.” There was a murmur from the crowd in the Ministry as Crouch finished the sentence. *Oh for Merlin’s sake*, thought Ginny angrily. Could they not see that this was bollocks? It looked like some of them were actually accepting it. Couldn’t they see that this wasn’t possible? Merlin, humanity was too stupid to live if they believed this blatant lie.

“He was not so much advising my father, as controlling him,” announced Crouch. “He has confessed to this crime of high treason, as well as many more. Control of the most powerful man in the country was not enough for Albus Dumbledore. Over the years he has bribed and blackmailed himself to the rank of Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. He has inserted spies into many departments, ranging from the Aurors to the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts, even the Minister’s own staff. The ultimate goal of this was to make Dumbledore the Minister of the Magic.”

“But Dumbledore rejected the post, even when it was offered to him!” shouted someone in the crowd at the Ministry. Ginny knew as soon as the man had spoken that it was a mistake. Crouch was beyond control or the need for caution at this stage. The Black Watch were here for a reason. The poor man, who was old and frail to begin with, didn’t stand a chance.

Crouch gave the man a piercing stare before replying. “Do you have any proof of this, anything in writing?” His voice was cold and dangerous. Ginny felt a wave of pity for the man. Crouch, on the other hand, was far from finished. “Dumbledore spent years flooding the Ministry with rumours such as that. There is no substance to that claim; it was one of many lies circulated to boost his standings. If you do not believe this to be enough proof, then consider his terrorist actions. Not one week ago, there was an attempt on my life by two former members of the Order of the Phoenix, Sirius Black and Harry Potter. I would once again like to extend my thanks to the Black Watch for their quick intervention. There was also the attack on the Hogwarts Express on the first of September this year. I have statements from Prefects Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger that there were adults present who should not have been. These include Remus Lupin, a former temporary-teacher at Hogwarts, Alastor Moody, an ex-Auror Trainer on leave at the time with no reason to be there, and several others. I have a list of eleven names here, none of whom had any reason to be there, yet who have been identified as having been present during the attack. The Order of the Phoenix were present long before any Aurors arrived on the scene. How could that have known it was going to happen? Why were they there, if not as part of the attack?

“Dumbledore has been forging alliances with all manner of Dark Creatures for years; the hiring of half-giant Rubeus Hagrid being a prime example. We have proof that he sent envoys to the giants, amongst others. Dumbledore was headmaster when I was at school, and I never thought him capable of these things. He did a good job in keeping his inner ambitions from the world. It pains me to say this, but Albus Dumbledore was a traitor, a murderer and an enemy of the country. I have a signed confession in my hand, and archival evidence backs it up.

“As to the choice of our new Minister, again I can appreciate this is not an expected move, but I will elaborate for you. Lord Voldemort – please, I know you have been taught to fear the name, but it is just that, a name – Lord Voldemort is descended from a long line of Pureblooded families, dating back to Salazar Slytherin himself. After his graduation, he was close to Dumbledore and it was then, after he had left Hogwarts, that Dumbledore tried to recruit him into the Order of the Phoenix. Our Lord rejected this offer. Dumbledore then tried to silence him permanently, but failed. As Our Lord fled, Dumbledore moved quickly to create a rumour of distrust about him. The evidence of his success is there for all to see. Most of you still fear to speak his name. Do you honestly believe his ego is so high he would not wish you to speak his name? Any form of attack was blamed on our Lord. His followers were given the name Death Eaters. It is a cliché name, but it still has the effect of causing fear wherever it is mentioned.”

“THAT’S A LIE!” shouted someone in the crowd. Ginny saw Crouch’s lip tighten. “DEATH EATERS MURDERED MY DAUGHTER. DUMBLEDORE PROTECTS US. YOU’RE A LIAR!” screamed the man, losing control. *Shut up!* Ginny silently begged him. *Don’t you see he’ll kill you?*

Crouch shot the man a glare before snapping his fingers. Two Black Watch Aurors stepped forward and grabbed the hysterical man by the shoulders.

“LET GO!” screamed the hysterical man. The Aurors ignored him, and began to drag him towards the door, his discarded cane falling to the ground with a clatter that echoed around the cavernous room.

“YOU CAN’T DO THIS TO ME!” screamed the man as he was dragged away by two figures in black. “I KNOW THIS ISN’T TRUE! YOU’RE A FRAUD! YOU CAN’T DO THIS!” his voice was cut off by the slamming of the door. There was a fearful murmur amongst the crowd as the echo of the doors slamming died away. Everyone seemed to be whispering to their neighbour with concerned looks on their faces.

“That was unpleasant,” said Crouch, his voice lined with a threat. “Keep quiet, and there will be no need for anyone else to be...removed. Now, where was I? Let us take the bombing of the London Underground in September. We know that Dumbledore placed a call to Kingsley Shacklebolt. Shacklebolt then put together an Auror team and on Dumbledore’s instructions went to the London Underground, without clearing it with the head of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones or any of his superiors. There was an explosion, and both the Order members of the team survived, while hundreds of others perished in the blast. The next day, it was put down as a Death Eater attack in the *Prophet* when there was no evidence for it. That was not justice, not for the hundreds who died in the explosion who were not even honoured by having the truth about their deaths made public. It is one of hundreds of examples. At each of these battles, the Order of the Phoenix has been there for no reason and there have always been casualties.

Now, I know some of you are thinking that the so-called ‘Death Eaters’ have been there as well. This I do not deny; Death Eaters have been present, trying to protect the innocent. Yes, it is true that our Lord had informants in the Ministry, but he was working tirelessly against the oppression of Dumbledore, not our Ministry. At the time, he did not know that Dumbledore’s influence was so high up.

Going back to the attack on the Hogwarts Express by the Order of the Phoenix. The so-called Death Eaters Apparated in and engaged the Order of the Phoenix, drawing fire away from the train and giving the students a chance to escape. Those captured were rewarded for their bravery with a one-way ticket to Azkaban. Is that justice for their attempt to protect your children? I am pleased to announce that those ‘Death Eaters’ captured in those attacks have been unconditionally pardoned and continue to serve in the Black Watch.”

Crouch was drawing to an end, and Ginny’s stomach was in her chest and her ears were ringing. People actually believed what was being said? Did they not see the blatant lie? The Death Eaters were killers, murderers and by Crouch’s own admission they were in the Black Watch. Did these people not see that it was wrong? Had they forgotten the fear in which they lived, or the fact that Voldemort had killed hundreds over the years? What was wrong with them? How could anyone believe that Death Eaters had been trying to help? Even in the Great

Hall there were those who seemed to believe what was said. They had been on the train and had seen the destruction. Had they forgotten?

“I believe you have heard enough,” announced Crouch. He reached under the podium and raised a spiral bound book above his head. “A written report will be made available in a few days detailing the extent of Dumbledore’s crimes, and a copy of his signed confession cross referenced with the archive and Hogwarts records. For now, let me assure you that our justice will be firm and fast. Albus Dumbledore is to be executed before the nation, in a ceremony that will mark the inauguration of our first High Chancellor and the end of decades of war. From the ashes of war, will rise a new order. We will build a world where we no longer have to be ashamed of what we are. Purebloods can stand tall and proud, and Muggles will no longer rule our community with their technological monstrosities. We will make the Wizarding community proud and free once more, just as it used to be.”

There was another murmur from the crowd. His words seemed to strike a chord in the audience. Ginny’s heart fell as she heard a faint murmur of clapping, which quickly spread into shaky applause.

No, she thought desperately, don’t do it. For Merlin’s sake think about what you are doing!

“I know this comes as a shock,” said Crouch, sounding almost sympathetic. “One day you are told that Lord Voldemort is the enemy and Dumbledore is your saviour, and now you are told that it is the other way around. I can appreciate that you will need time to adjust. Once the report is published in a few days, all will become clear. The inauguration ceremony will be held on Christmas Day, and I look forward to seeing you all there. That is all for now.”

There was a click from the projector and the image faded into nothing. The white sheet descended to the floor like a cascade, and with it fell the hopes of everyone in the country. Ginny watched as several house-elves appeared with a pop to remove the sheet. The hall was silent and still as the effect of the broadcast sunk into the students who sat with jaws low.

Ginny glanced around the hall. The Slytherins were all smirking amongst themselves and whispering in exciting voices. Everyone else seemed to look sad and depressed or just plain shocked. There were those on all tables whom Malfoy had control over who were also glad to have a change of government. Ginny knew that Malfoy and others like him would again have the power. Ginny clenched her fists. She couldn’t wait to see Malfoy’s face when Harry killed Voldemort and the country was free again. Speaking of which, at the first opportunity, she needed to contact Harry. By Merlin, it was not over. The DA and the Order would not allow it. Ginny didn’t know what was going to happen, but she knew that something would and when it did, it would shake the foundations of the earth. All this evil could be undone and would be. It was a fool’s hope, but as long as hope remained, it was not over. *Fear can hold you prisoner, she mused, but hope can set you free.*

“As you have heard,” shouted Rookwood, his voice bringing instant silence, “we are going through a time of great change, and as the Minister said, some of you will find it hard to

adapt. I know this comes as a shock to you all, but please remain calm. I am counting on the Inquisitorial Squad to help maintain order in the school. Thank you, that is all, back to your lessons.”

Ginny didn't want to draw attention to herself by being the first to leave, but she had to get out soon. She walked calmly out of the hall, knowing full well that she was being watched. Once outside, she darted down the first passage on her right and under the tapestry that Harry had once incinerated when the vampires had attacked. Sure enough, almost as soon as she had concealed herself Pansy Parkinson appeared around the corner, walking towards her. She stopped directly in front of the tapestry stared down the corridor, presumably looking for Ginny.

“Bollocks!” hissed the Slytherin, her face contorted with anger. With that she started to run off in pursuit of what she thought was Ginny. Once the hallway was clear, Ginny slipped out from behind the tapestry and slipped into the cloak cupboard in the entrance hall. Using her wand she locked the door and silenced it to be safe. Satisfied she was alone, she pulled out her frog card.

“Harry Potter!”

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“Jesus Christ,” said Harry as Ginny finished relaying the broadcast to him. Voldemort was now High Chancellor? Dumbledore was to be executed? Harry's head was spinning. It had all happened so fast. Trying to snatch the Minister must have sped it all up. Voldemort was completely in control now. There was only one path left open to him: Voldemort had to die and die publicly, where everyone could see him. But Harry alone couldn't do it. Even with Voldemort dead, his Black Watch and the Death Eaters would kill Harry. He needed more support. Whatever they were planning to do, they had to do it fast.

“When's the ceremony?” he asked, his brain working on a plan.

“Christmas Day,” replied Ginny.

“That gives us five days,” said Harry thoughtfully. It was so little time to plan something this extensive. They would need all the help they could get. “How strong is the DA?”

“There are eleven of us,” said Ginny. “We got two more, but we can fight, Harry.” Harry's heart sank. Eleven was nowhere near enough. If he included Hermione, who was at home, but could help, that made twelve. Two teams of six, plus himself, Sirius, Rachel and Frank made two teams of eight. But they had three objectives, not two. That meant three teams of five and Harry. So few, and the Black Watch were so vast.

“There are too few,” said Harry, shaking his head. “We will need you, but we need a plan first. For now, don't do anything. Keep your heads low and keep training. Contact me if anything else happens, but do not get caught.” They needed to sit tight while Harry got a plan together and cashed in his cheque from the Prime Minister.

“Why don’t we come and join you? It’s like a prison here,” suggested Ginny. She was clearly desperate to help.

“No,” said Harry. He needed her in place and to be safe. That, and it was going to be hard enough to make the place sterile after himself and Sirius. If they all came here, it would be a forensic nightmare. “If you go, they will know something is up. They are watching you without a doubt and the Ministry will be on high alert if you disappear. Stay there until I contact you. For now, I need to speak to Sirius.”

“How is he?” asked Ginny.

“Better,” said Harry. “Pomfrey fixed him up a bit. His arm is still a bit dodgy, but he’s awake. Ginny, I need you to go back to your lessons. Be careful. Now that he’s in complete control, it’s more dangerous than ever. Keep low and wait. Did you get Hermione’s package?”

“Yeah, they’re great,” said Ginny, referring to the coins. Harry nodded. “Good luck.”

With that, Harry broke the connection.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered again.

“What’s happened?” asked Rachel, the only other person in the room. He quickly relayed the message to her. Her face remained neutral, but her eyes showed her shock. She sat still for a moment before a thoughtful expression crossed her face. “So what now?”

“Now we stop that ceremony,” said Harry. “One way or another.”

“You do realise that’s what he wants you to do?” she asked. As a matter of fact, he did know it was a trap, it could only be. This was designed to lure Harry out into the open and trap him. “He wants you to raise your head so he can take you out. He’s going to be waiting for you with every Auror he has.”

“No,” said Harry. She didn’t know Riddle as well as Harry did. “I’ve been too much of a pain in the arse. He’ll want to kill him himself. He wants me alongside Dumbledore to be executed in front of the nation. He will wait for me alone.”

“Good for us,” noted Rachel. “But it still leaves you the problem of killing him.”

“Exactly,” said Harry. “The way I see it, we have three objectives. First is Hogwarts. There are ten Aurors stationed there at any one time, along with Rookwood. They need to be removed so that Hogwarts is A) safe, and B), can be used as a stronghold. Secondly there is Dumbledore. He himself is to be executed at the ceremony, but the rest of the Order are with him, if Macnair told you the truth.”

“Should have done,” said Rachel. “I nearly OD’d him on Veritaserum.”

“So we need to get the Order out of there, if only to make up numbers,” said Harry.

“They probably won’t be in a fit state to fight,” said Rachel. “Over a month in captivity can do that.” In truth, Harry hadn’t considered that. It was harsh to expect them to fight, but he had no choice. They needed more men.

“We’ll have to hope some can,” said Harry. “Our final objective is Voldemort.” He was mildly impressed she didn’t cringe at the name. “I need to get in there and take him out while everyone else contains the Black Watch and watches my back.”

“We’re hopelessly outnumbered,” said Rachel. “It’ll be a slaughter.”

“Ah, but I have an ace up my sleeve,” said Harry. He had the beginnings of a plan, but he needed to bring some people back here first – and that could prove a problem. “Trust me, Miss Shepherd, I have a surprise that will greatly enhance our standing and reduce the Black Watch to nothing. Firstly though, I have to call in a promise from a very important man. Before I go, do you know how to get a group of people from one place to another without using Portkeys?”

She paused for a second, thinking. “The Floo network is disconnected,” she said thoughtfully. “You might be able to use a window,” she suggested. “They’re illegal, but they should work, as long as they are not going through wards. They are hard to do, but I reckon I could do it. Where to and from?”

“To here,” said Harry. “I’m not sure where from yet.”

“When do you need it?” she asked.

“In about an hour, maybe two,” he said. It shouldn’t take too long, but convincing them to come just might.

“I’ll head into town,” said Rachel. “I need some glass to work with.”

“Tavistock is too small,” said Harry. “Plymouth will have a place that will do it. Be careful though, and watch your back.” She nodded before rising to leave, draining her tea as she did so. She dropped the cup in the sink and then headed outside to Disapparate. Harry also rose from his seat, as he had a meeting to attend.

It was time to contact the Prime Minister again.

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“Beth,” said the Prime Minister into the intercom on his desk. “Can you come in here for a moment, please?” He released the button and stared at the door. A few seconds later, a young lady wearing a sharp pinstriped suit and glasses entered the room. She carried a notepad with a pen ready.

“Yes, Prime Minister,” said the woman.

“Have we received any messages from Colonel Evans at Hereford?” asked the Prime Minister. He had ordered that Evans contact him instantly if he heard from Pandora, but he had heard nothing. He knew that this Harry Potter was planning to move against the Ministry of Magic, which he, and he alone, claimed was overrun by terrorists, but nothing seemed to have happened. The silence was unnerving, and since the Prime Minister didn’t trust the boy, no news was definitely bad news where he was concerned.

“No, sir,” said Beth. “Nothing has come in from Hereford since the confirmation of Red Team being on high alert.” Still nothing. What was keeping the boy? The Prime Minister had briefed Cobra and they were drawing up a potential plan of attack now. The armed forces were on high alert and the Royal Marine Commandos had moved into local barracks near all major cities, ready to move in for peacekeeping. The unit from Special Boat Service based at Poole had moved into a hotel in London Docklands. From there it was ten minutes upstream on one of their speedboats and two more minutes on foot to get to the Ministry of Magic.

The SBS were the Royal Marines equivalent to the SAS; they were Special Forces who had gone through the same training as the SAS as well as additional aquatic training, but were owned and run by the Navy, not the Army. The SAS were famous for the Iranian Embassy siege in 1980, but the SBS have remained clouded in secrecy, getting none of the media attention their sister service has. As such they were the Prime Minister’s first choice for deniable operations, and have been in the first wave of every conflict in which the United Kingdom have been involved. If this all went pear-shaped, the SBS would form the first wave of the assault on the Ministry of Magic. They were prepped and ready to go. Within fifteen minutes of the phone call, the SBS would enter the Ministry with orders to secure it, one way or another. If the SAS were ordered in as the first strike, Potter might hear of it through rumours at Hereford. By using the SBS, the Prime Minister made absolutely certain that it would be a surprise attack. A thin smile formed on his face as he remembered how he had outwitted the boy.

“Okay, thanks, Beth.” The girl nodded and turned on her heel, closing the door behind her.

The Prime Minister still did not know what to make of this mess. He had set one of his staff the task of communicating with the Magical community and to try to find out what was going on. It hadn’t been difficult, apparently. Michelle, the woman he had sent to make contact, had simply spent the day in central London with her eyes open. Anyone she saw dressed in robes, or mysterious attire, she had approached and asked if the name Harry Potter meant anything to them. Of course, only a witch or wizard would know who he was. From there it was a simple matter of asking a few questions about Crouch, his deceased father, Harry Potter, Albus Dumbledore and the Ministry of Magic. Of those asked, many seemed very scared to speak out, especially to a stranger. From what Michelle had gathered, the Ministry had recently gone through a major overhaul. Most of the Department Heads had been changed within hours of the new Minister taking over and Dumbledore being arrested.

While the Prime Minister could not understand the significance of a simple Headmaster, he could see that whoever Albus Dumbledore was, he commanded a lot of respect, and many people refused to believe that he had killed Crouch Senior. As for Harry Potter, the name was synonymous with fear and terror. Most had read in a newspaper called the *Daily Prophet* that he had defected to the 'Light' side, but many still did not trust him. They had all heard about a 'protest' organised by Potter, during which Magical Police had fired upon unarmed school children. It was a great big mess. On one hand, Crouch's police had fired on school children, and he had certainly not informed the Prime Minister that the Ministry had been changed so drastically, or discussed the introduction of a new police force for wizards. Then on the other hand, Harry Potter was still feared in the community, and what was he doing organising civil unrest with school children on the front line? Both characters had dark pasts and secrets, but whom to trust?

"Prime Minister," said a voice softly.

The Prime Minister's head shot up and he found himself once again looking at the face of Harry Potter. His entire body tensed at the sight of the former terrorist, who had somehow penetrated the room undetected yet again. He wore all black, topped with a travelling cloak.

"Sorry if I startled you," said Potter, approaching the desk and sliding into a chair. "Prime Minister, time is short so I'll get straight to it. Here is a copy of today's *Daily Prophet*." The boy reached into his cloak, pulled out a folded newspaper and dropped it on the Prime Minister's desk.

Straightening his tie and trying to regain his composure, the Prime Minister reached for the paper and unfolded it, watched all the time by the motionless Potter. On the front page of the newspaper was a huge headline covering the top half of the page.

LORD VOLDEMORT TO BECOME

HIGH CHANCELLOR OF ALL MAGICAL BRITAIN

The Prime Minister's blood ran cold as he took in the headline. He broke into a cold sweat as his eyes scanned frantically over the text. With every word he felt his stomach grow tighter and his head spinning faster.

"To cut a long story short," said Potter gently, leaning forward in his seat, "Crouch is a Death Eater. He has removed any form of opposition, leaving nothing to challenge this change of authority. The Black Watch have arrested the last of the Order of the Phoenix, with the exception of four of us. All Muggleborns have been sent home and we have found out that they are planning genocide by making all half-blooded witches sterile. He is in complete control of the country and is trying to expel anything even remotely Muggle. Turn the page, look at the bottom corner."

The Prime Minister, his hands shaking, turned the page and his eyes fell on the bottom of the page.

“He is recruiting an army,” said Potter. “*Make Britain pure*. Would you like to guess who the enemy are?”

“You mean he is coming for us?” asked the Prime Minister, his voice trembling. *Genocide! They would all be killed! Christ, they were monsters!* He needed to send in the SBS as soon as possible!

“In a word, yes,” said Potter. “When he has an army big enough – and he is forcing all the half-bloods to fight – he will start a war on your people. You haven’t heard from Crouch recently, have you?” *How did he know?* Crouch had been ignoring the Prime Minister’s attempts to contact him. Potter was right: something was going on, and his gut told him it was Crouch.

“No,” confessed the Prime Minister.

“Crouch won’t answer you now,” said Potter. “It’s too late. Plans are in motion.” What did he mean by that? Was Voldemort coming now?

“I need to contact the Army,” said the Prime Minister, reaching for the phone. He was thinking more of the SBS, but he had to put the whole country on alert and move the Army onto the streets. “I have to put them all on alert.”

“Prime Minister,” said Potter, leaning forward and grabbing the Prime Minister’s wrist as he reached for the phone. The Prime Minister recoiled under the threat of violence as Potter grabbed him. A chill went down his spine. Would Potter kill him if he refused? “If you do that, you will only cause the deaths of hundreds, maybe thousands.”

“He’s building an army, I can’t wait,” said the Prime Minister. Surely Potter could see that. “Every second I delay, he gets stronger.”

“Prime Minister,” said Potter. “Those are my people you will kill, and our retaliation will be swift and merciless. Remember that these people are not out to conquer, but to eradicate. It’s genocide, the systematic extermination of all non-magical life on this island. Men, women,

children, they will be cut down where they stand. Think about what you are doing. You will be launching an unprovoked attack on superior forces against, which your men have no experience of fighting. You'll start a massacre." The words hung in the air. The Prime Minister knew he couldn't start a slaughter, or move against civilians, but he couldn't sit and do nothing! What was Potter proposing?

"What would you have me do?" he asked.

"What if I could stop it?" asked Potter. The Prime Minister would love him to stop it, but he failed to see how it could be done. "What if I could stop this war, place a fair and just Minister back in the office and destroy this army and this administration?" It seemed too good to be true, and the Prime Minister suspected that it was.

"I would ask how," he said cautiously. He didn't want to anger Potter.

"You don't need to know," said Potter, irritating the Prime Minister. This affected him as much as it did Potter. "All I need is a team of SAS soldiers, at least twenty strong, and some time."

"How do I know you don't want to displace Crouch and sit on the throne yourself?" the Prime Minister asked. He was impressed by his own bravery, challenging a killer. Potter responded by smiling at him, though the Prime Minister did not see the joke.

"Do I look like a leader to you?" asked Potter, chuckling lightly. "I just want to end this war and go home; I just want my family back." He seemed genuine. For the first time, the Prime Minister felt himself warming to the boy; but this was a serious situation, and they needed to be serious.

"And what if you fail?" he asked. Potter bowed his head and sighed.

"If you haven't heard back from me, Dumbledore, or someone at Hogwarts by Boxing Day," said Potter, "Hit our world with everything you've got. But give me a few days to try and stop it. What have you got to lose?"

"Time and twenty Special Forces soldiers for a start," said the Prime Minister.

"Your men will be in low risk positions," said Potter, "And you don't need to lose time; put the army and marines on high alert, but be ready to stand them down." Little did Potter know that that had already been done and more. He didn't know about the Special Forces ready to go in at fifteen minute's notice.

"What shall I say to the press?" asked the Prime Minister, not correcting Harry.

"Make it up," said Potter, casually, openly not caring about the politics of the situation. "Or if you want, I'll deliver a tape to a newspaper threatening to blow up a British Army Base. That should get the country's attention, and justify you raising the alert status."

“Very well,” said the Prime Minister. “You have until Boxing Day; come midnight on Boxing Day I will mobilise the army, beginning with an air strike on the Ministry of Magic.” Potter raised an eyebrow at the threat. “If you were wondering how I know where it is,” said the Prime Minister, feeling powerful for the first time in Potter’s presence, “It may be invisible from us Muggles as you call us, with your repelling spells, but not from our satellites and computers. You have four days. There is no need to threaten a base. I will raise the alert status.”

“Very well,” said Potter, rising to leave. “But remember, Hogwarts is a school. There are rules of war.”

“Will Voldemort stick to them?” countered the Prime Minister.

“Not in a million years,” admitted Potter. “But you’re better than he is. Don’t attack schools.”

“So be it,” said the Prime Minister, not answering Potters instruction. “I’ll phone Hereford, telling them to be on alert. You should arrive at the main gate in one hour. Your codename is Pandora. I will tell them to expect you. Good Luck, Potter.”

Potter nodded, and then before the Prime Minister could say anything else, he disappeared in a ball of flame. Leaning back in his chair, the Prime Minister felt a cold shiver leap up his spine. He was caught in the middle of something he didn’t understand. This Potter boy, and he was just that; a boy, was dangerous. He gave the Prime Minister the creeps.

Had he done the right thing, giving twenty of the finest soldiers on the planet to Potter? Would he keep his word? Would the men be safe? So many questions plagued his mind. But he knew something Potter did not, and it was this thought that gave the Prime Minister hope. He had one card left to play.

Right now, the Marines from the Special Boat Service were prepared to go at a moment’s notice. If there was even the smallest sign that Potter had double crossed him, the SBS would move in. If Potter put so much as a toe out of line, the Marines would be waiting for him.

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Hereford was a town that was famous for the SAS and there was no denying that it showed. Just walking down the High Street, Harry could hear men telling women that they were in the Special Air Service. Of those he had seen, Harry didn’t believe a single one of them. He kept close to the shop entrances as he walked swiftly down the crowded High Street, making it easier to dive into a shop should he see any Black Watch Aurors or hear anyone Apparate near him. There was a cold winter breeze on the air, which was channelled mercilessly by the buildings, battering into Harry’s face as he walked. He was dressed all in black, inclusive of gloves and had chosen despite being out in public to wear a travelling cloak, again of black. He pulled it tight around himself in a vain attempt to block out the cold.

As he rounded the next corner the high wire fences became visible, as did the two guards in the booth at the main gate. Harry approached the gates, passing the famous 22nd Regiment SAS sign on the roadside. On any other day he might have taken the time to appreciate it, but time was of the essence here.

As he arrived at the gate, he was confronted by two soldiers carrying rifles. The alert status had been raised, so they were taking no chances. As soon as Harry came within twenty metres of them, the two soldiers raised their rifles threateningly. They didn't actually point at him, but the guards stood tall, fingers on triggers and rifles held up to their shoulders, rather than across stomachs, as they had been seconds before.

"Excuse me," said Harry politely to the one of the guards, ignoring the rifle in the guard's hands. "I'm here to speak to your commanding officer." The soldier shot him an appraising stare before rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

"Look, lad," said the man in a thick Scottish accent, which surprised Harry considering they were on the edge of Wales. He vaguely remembered hearing that there were lots of Scots in the SAS on the grounds that they were quote "hard bastards". "This is a working Army barracks, and we don't have time for your games. Now, go home." It was Harry's turn to roll his eyes. He could see why they wouldn't believe him, but it was inconvenient – to say the least.

"I'm not playing games," said Harry politely, though he was becoming irritated. The fact that they judged him by his age when he had seen more combat than both of them put together was insulting. "Call Colonel Evans and tell him Pandora is here to speak to him."

"Pandora? That your name, is it?" said the guard, laughing slightly. "Thought it was a girl's name."

"It's a codename," said Harry, resisting the urge to add 'you berk' on the end. He was fairly sure a Pandora's box joke was on it's way. He was however, wrong.

The soldier shook his head in mock despair as Harry stared at him. "Very good," muttered the guard. "Look, you've had your fun, but seriously now, go away."

"I told you, I have an appointment wit..." he was interrupted by the Scottish guard.

"I told you, kid," said the soldier, raising his rifle just an inch in a threatening manner. "I don't have time for this."

"Twenty of your men have been made ready," said Harry icily. "Red team are ready to move out. The whole base has been on alert for the past week, and on high alert since about an hour ago. Every soldier and every marine in the country have been recalled and the defence status upgraded. No one knows what's going on, but the entire base is battle ready with no obvious enemy in sight. Your teams are practicing for urban warfare on British soil, and you've been told not to speak to anyone about this. I know because I was with the Prime Minister when this happened. Call Colonel Evans and tell him Pandora is here. If he doesn't know what I am

talking about, I will leave and you'll never see me again – you have my word. If I'm right, you may have just worked your way onto the team that is about to move out.”

The guard glanced at his companion who returned a blank look. “It’s one phone call,” said Harry more politely. What would he do if he wasn’t allowed in? He would have to break into the headquarters of the world’s most elite fighting force. This was another needless job to do. Why couldn’t the guard just let him in and make it simple?

“Watch him!” said the Scottish soldier to his companion. The second soldier raised his rifle to point it at Harry’s chest. Harry gently raised his hands in response, but made no effort to move. The Scottish soldier made his way to the guard booth and picked up the phone. Harry couldn’t hear him speaking or read his lips, but he could tell he was talking to someone. After a few seconds, the man put the phone down and came back out of the booth, his eyes staring intently at Harry.

“Staff-sergeant Adams will be down to escort you to the CO, sir,” said the soldier, his tone more formal, though not apologetic. His companion lowered his rifle and stood to attention. “I apologise about this, sir.” Harry breathed a sigh of relief; he wouldn’t be breaking in after all.

“Not at all,” said Harry, resisting the urge to give him a hard time. He didn’t have time to waste. “I know I’m not what you would expect me to look like, and you were doing your job, protecting the barracks. Now, I have some questions for you. Have you seen anyone dressed like I am, in robes, cloaks or stuff like that? Anyone hanging around dressed oddly, you know. out of season?”

“Not that I’m aware of, sir,” said the soldier. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Voldemort wasn’t watching the SAS. Harry would have expected him to, knowing that this was where the strongest resistance to his war would come from, but Harry reminded himself that the object was to suffer heavy casualties amongst his Muggleborn Commandos. Still, he would have expected Voldemort to at least pay attention. This also meant he needed to get inside before anyone possibly watching under an invisibility cloak recognised him.

“What’s your name?” Harry asked the guard.

“Private Cummings,” said the soldier.

“Well, private,” said Harry, addressing the man by rank. “If you see anyone dressed like that, call through to the CO immediately – do not hesitate. How many men do you have on guard duty?”

“Two on the gate, four on each side of the perimeter, and each barrack has at least one man awake at all times” said Cummings. It was a little less than what he had expected. Surely this was no maximum security?

“How many in reserve?” he asked.

“None,” replied the soldier, to Harry’s astonishment.

“None?” he echoed in disbelief.

“With all due respect, sir,” said Cummings, “This is the SAS. The men sleep with guns next to them, they’re always ready to defend themselves.” It was hardly an excuse. He made a note to tell the CO to double the guards. Still, it was easy to get in with an invisibility cloak, so what could someone do from the inside?

“Once inside the perimeter,” said Harry, wondering if it really would have been that hard to break in here. “How many men on patrol?”

“It varies,” said Cummings. “Are you expecting an attack here? By whom?” Yet Harry couldn’t go around telling everyone everything.

“Listen,” said Harry. “Until I have spoken to the CO, I can’t confirm anything. You will know soon enough.”

Harry glanced through the gates to see a man coming towards them. He wore camouflage trousers and shirt topped with a green woollen jumper, with a green belt and polished black boots, as well as the coveted sand-coloured beret bearing the insignia of the Special Air Service.

“Sir, this is Pandora,” announced Cummings as the Sergeant approached.

“Is this some sort of a joke?” asked Adams, eyeing Harry. His accent was clearly from Yorkshire.

“No,” said Harry flatly, hiding his annoyance at having to repeat himself. “I can appreciate that I am not what you were expecting, but I *am* Pandora and I need to speak to Colonel Evans right now.” The sergeant eyed him carefully for a second before letting him in. Harry fell into step beside Adams, who marched off with military pace and conformity.

“What does a kid have to do with what’s going on?” asked Adams, his tone cold. He was speaking at Harry rather than to him.

“This kid,” said Harry, stressing the last word, “Just so happens to be the only one in a position to stop a civil war on British soil, so drop the attitude, sergeant.” Harry paused there, not wanting to go on any further. He needed their help, and insulting them was not going to help; he would have to accept Adam’s coldness for now. Part of him wished he could have brought Sirius or Rachel to help him, but he was the only one the Prime Minister liaised with.

He was led into a tall building that looked as if it had once been a manor, and now had been adapted for offices. He followed the sergeant up several flights of stairs and through corridors until he ended up outside a door on which was a plaque reading

Col. Richard Evans

## OC 22nd Regiment

The sergeant knocked and then entered.

“Pandora, sir,” said the sergeant, opening the door to let Harry in.

Harry found himself in a small office, which was in the corner of the building. Two walls contained massive windows offering a fantastic view of the barracks, on which over one hundred soldiers were training. The room was decorated plainly, but with many paintings on the walls. On the far side of the room was a large wooden desk, behind which sat a man with greying hair and a fat, bent nose. He wore a green woollen jumper with his rank denoted on his shoulders. He also wore the sandy beret of the SAS.

“You’re Pandora?” asked the colonel, from his seat behind the desk. His hazel eyes looked Harry over from top to bottom, appraising him. Harry got the feeling that he had developed an instant dislike for Harry. Without a doubt, they were about to repeat the conversation he had had with Adams at the gate, but Harry had neither the time nor the patience for this. It could be time to go for the old shock-tactics.

“Yes,” said Harry bluntly, not wishing to repeat himself for a third time. “And you’re Colonel Evans, I take it.” The man behind the desk nodded. He seemed to be about thirty-five to forty, with a thick moustache and slightly greying brown hair.

Evans, shot a quizzical look at Adams who shrugged.

“I see my age surprises you, too,” said Harry, not bothering to hide his irritation. “But time is short, so can we please get on? I understand that I am to be assigned twenty fully armed soldiers” They could forgo the small talk. He needed to be in and out quickly.

“Have a seat,” said the colonel calmly. Harry felt his frustration rise at the delay.

“Is there a problem?” asked Harry, not moving.

“Please sit down,” said the colonel, gesturing to the chair in front of the desk. Harry walked into the room and slid into the chair, not taking his eyes off the colonel.

“Son,” began the colonel, earning a glare from Harry. “I was told a little while ago to expect you to come within the hour and to have twenty men ready for you. I have been told nothing about what’s going on, and yet I am expected to keep this base on high alert and sacrifice twenty soldiers. Now, I need to know what is going on.” Oh great, thought Harry. Another stuck up officer sticking his nose in where it wasn’t needed. This was need-to-know, and the Muggles didn’t need to know.

“What’s going on,” said Harry, “Is that the Prime Minister has ordered you to give me twenty men and you are not doing it.”

“Look,” said the colonel, the vein in his temple throbbing. “We are being prepared for a war. The SAS are always on the front line, now I need to know who we are fighting so that I can prepare them, so I can save lives.” The colonel didn’t understand the time constraints on this mission – it would take too long to explain. Why couldn’t he just cooperate?

“If you give me these twenty,” said Harry, “I can stop this war from ever occurring; that’s why I am here. This needs to be kept secret because it is a sensitive matter.”

“I have clearance,” protested the colonel.

“COBRA are not privy to this,” said Harry, plucking a phrase from Christine’s notes. “This is a deniable operation, but a necessary one.”

“You can’t expect me to let you lead my men to an unknown fate without knowing what is happening,” said the colonel. “How can I know what equipment to issue them with?” Harry could take care of this; he didn’t need the colonel.

“With what I tell you,” said Harry impatiently.

“And you’re a soldier?” asked the colonel, referring to his apparent lack of experience.

“Of sorts,” said Harry. He stared at the colonel for a few seconds before conceding. He had promised the PM that this would usher in a new era of cooperation, where the magical community wouldn’t hide away.

“Fine,” said Harry, sighing deeply. “But this is for your ears only. Tell the sergeant to wait outside, and then I will tell you.”

“The sergeant can stay,” said the colonel defiantly. “He is cleared to whatever I am.” Harry shot the man a glare, but then paused. This was a perfect opportunity to go for the shock-tactics, and to wipe the smirk off the face of the sergeant. That would get the colonel’s attention.

“As you wish,” said Harry, flashing a small smile. “This is what this is all about.” He reached into his robes and pulled out his wand, holding it up for the colonel to see.

“A stick?” asked the colonel, looking unimpressed.

“Not exactly,” said Harry, pointing it at the sergeant. *Stupefy!*

The colonel’s eyes grew wide as a bold of red light left the wand, launching the sergeant off his feet and onto a table, where he lay unconscious.

“What the…” stammered the colonel, rising to his feet instantly as Harry turned back to face him.

*Silencio!*

Instantly he fell silent, grasping at his throat with his hands. Harry leapt from the seat, closing the door with his wand and locking it. He wished he knew how to do an Imperturbable charm. Turning back to the Colonel, Harry levelled his wand at the man who sat grasping at his neck. The colonel's eyes were wide with fear. Harry flicked his wand, thinking a silent spell. The colonel rose two feet from the ground, hovering in midair. His eyes were wide with fear and Harry was sure if were able, he would be screaming.

“Don't move, colonel,” said Harry – a moot point, considering that he couldn't. “I don't wish to restrain you. This little demonstration has shown you what you are up against. If one “kid”, as you called me, can do this to two fully trained soldiers, imagine what an army of fully-grown people like me could do. That is who you are up against and that is why I should not be telling you this. Now, be quiet, and I will release you. Rest assured, the sergeant is not dead, merely unconscious. Now, will you be reasonable?”

The colonel eyed Harry for a second before nodding. Harry lowered the soldier to the ground and removed the spell before pocketing his wand. The colonel drew himself up to his full height.

“Don't even think about going for the pistol in the drawer,” said Harry, “You'd join the sergeant before your hand touched the desk.” He wasn't sure that there was a pistol, but was fairly sure that the head of the SAS would keep one there. The colonel nodded and sank into his chair, keeping both hands where Harry could see them.

“How did you do that?” he stammered.

“Magic,” said Harry, before realising how sarcastic that sounded. He quickly elaborated. “Literally magic. You see, colonel, at any given time, around five to seven percent of the population of the UK are wizards, capable of doing what you have just seen, and ninety nine percent of us are good. You have seen the more violent uses of magic, and there are more violent still. However, most of magic is for simple things like cleaning, and making life easier for ourselves. We can do wonderful things, colonel, and we just wish to live normal lives. An entire civilisation exists, hidden among normal people like you. Now recently, a faction of terrorists have appeared who think that purity of blood is important. If a wizard marries a normal person, the child is a half-blood, and if a wizard is born to normal parents, which does happen quite often, then these children are considered by these fundamentalists to be inferior. These fundamentalists have taken over our civilisation, and are intent on removing the impure, waging a war against normal people. Do you understand?”

“So they don't like us because we are normal,” said the colonel. “You refer to ethnic cleansing?”

“Precisely,” said Harry. “They plan to wipe every normal person from the face of this country. Myself, and a few other like-minded people, are all that stand in their way. We are a secret society, a vigilante group, so to speak, except without the killing. Now, since they took

over, we are the outsiders, the terrorists. As you have just seen, wizards are capable of terrible things, but we are capable of being great as well. It's a minority who hate normal people, but unfortunately that minority are in power. They rule our community by force, and are planning to march against you."

"So what do you need from me?" asked the colonel. "I should be preparing my troops for war, a civil war of sorts."

"All of Her Majesty's armed forces are on high alert," began Harry. "You are preparing for a war against an enemy you cannot understand and have never encountered before. In short, an enemy each more powerful than your entire team, capable of summoning horrors you cannot imagine, who will not abide by any rules of war and will not stop until all normal people are driven from the island."

"We are the most elite fighting force in the world," said the colonel indignantly.

"Our shields cannot be breached by bullets or even bombs," said Harry. "Our attacks can rip through armour, change your guns into carrots and even control your own men's minds. We can kill with a word. No offence, colonel, but as you are, you don't stand a chance. But what if I could prevent the whole war?"

"How so?"

"Give me a team of twenty men I can trust," said Harry.

"I thought our weapons were useless," said the colonel. "And if they are, why do you need them? Will they be safe?"

"They will be a low risk role, but I need them fully armed and ready," said Harry. "Yes your weapons may not work, but you are not helpless. You will not be expected to make the first move. They expect me, and only me, to come. Your men make up numbers, and we may need their weapons. We only have one shot at this and we need all the help we can get. If I can take out those in power, we stand a chance."

"An assassination?" the colonel was quick off the mark.

"I would do it myself," said Harry. "No, this is more of a coup d'etat. We must take out the leader, along with his entourage, and do so in public for all to see. My problem is that while I may be able to take him out, his secret police are too strong in numbers. He has a small SS style entourage. We need to take them out and we don't have the numbers we need. That is where you come in. You will not be expected."

"A coup d'etat would start a war if it failed," said the colonel.

"Your Prime Minister was about to launch a first strike, and if we fail that is the only option left. How is that any better? At least this way we have a chance to stop a war," said Harry.

“And if you win, rebuild and live on, what assurances can I have that you will not attack us again in the future?”

“Once we have control back,” said Harry, “Wizards born to normal families will be allowed back in, and your assistance here will not be forgotten. What we do today will forge a new bond of friendship. We are writing history today, colonel. When the dust settles, we will remember how we stood united and we will remember that only together did we manage to defeat the darkness. You, colonel, will be responsible for saving two nations.” The colonel paused in thought for a few moments.

“So be it,” said the colonel at last. “Red team are standing by. I will give you the temporary rank of Major, to make things formal and to have something to write on the report.”

“No report,” said Harry instantly. “This is a deniable operation. I was never here, in fact, I do not exist. And there is no need for a rank.”

“A report must be done for COBRA eyes only,” said the colonel. “Else my men can’t leave the base.” Harry nodded begrudgingly. “Follow me,” said the colonel, rising to his feet. Harry did the same. “What about Adams?” asked the colonel as he passed.

“He will wake up in an hour or so,” said Harry, staring pitilessly at the fallen soldier. “Disorientated and dizzy, but nothing a breath a fresh air won’t cure. Or I could wake him now, but then I would have to admit what I did.” He would do it if he had to, but it would mean that yet another person knew what was happening.

“Leave him be,” said the colonel. “Come.”

The colonel led him back down the stairs and out of the building to where a car was waiting. Harry climbed into the back, while the colonel rounded the car and entered through the other side. Once the doors closed the driver sped off across the barracks. Harry stared out the window as they drove.

At the end of the road, they turned left. They first encountered a set of roofs, raised only a few feet from the ground. The model houses had no walls, yet still men in black overalls and combat gear grappled all over them, carrying machine guns on their backs.

*BOOM!*

At the end of the row was a full-scale house, which looked genuine, except that it was covered in black scorch marks. As they drove by, there was a tremendous bang and one of the windows blew outwards, just as a soldier abseiled down the roof and swung into the window.

The sound of automatic gunfire surrounded them as they drove through the training facilities. Harry’s jaw was low as he watched the creepy figures in black crawl all over these models, blowing up anything in their path.

“This shocks you?” asked the colonel, reading his face.

“It’s the gunfire,” said Harry. “I was raised by Mug... normal people, but as a wizard I have the stunning spell like the one I used on Adams. I can bring a man down without killing him; a machine gun can’t. It’s death or nothing. I always think of the Aurors as a life saving organisation whereas this seems to just kill.” He was off to kill Voldemort, so why he suddenly felt so much distaste for killing was beyond him? This was necessary and it was just, and he was going to prove that to Voldemort, but he felt a shiver run down his spine at the thought of these guns being used against the Black Watch, some of whom were just there out of fear, but were good men. It seemed so wrong. How many would die in the next few days?

“Perhaps,” said the colonel. “But remember, these men respond to terrorist threats. Do you remember the Iranian Embassy Siege in nineteen eighty?”

“Too young, but I have heard about it,” said Harry. He remembered seeing a documentary about it, and watching the figures in black crawling all over the building.

“We took down all but one of them,” said the colonel. “No chance to surrender, no mercy, in fact in one room men threw down their guns, but they were shot anyway.” *Surely that was murder*, thought Harry, but he had the sense not to say it out loud. The colonel didn’t seem sorry, in fact, he seemed almost proud.

“Cold,” noted Harry.

“The hostages didn’t ask to be there,” said the colonel matter-of-factly. “The terrorists did. They chose to be there and accepted the consequences of failure. They’re dead.”

“You never gave them a chance?” asked Harry. Surely a warning should have been given. It was only fair. Then again, they had had days of warnings and had still killed a man. Voldemort had been warned, and would give no warning in return. The colonel had a point. Voldemort had chosen for this to happen and he accepts the consequence of failure. Voldemort had to die.

“They had had three days to surrender to Plod,” continued the colonel, bringing Harry out of his thoughts. “That’s the police, as in PC Plod. Anyway, three days of negotiation yielded nothing. Then they executed a hostage. Once they take a life, the Home Office ordered control of the siege to be handed over from Plod to 22-reg. Once we have control, no one comes out alive. It’s as simple as that. They asked to be there, they end up dead, and in that way we save lives and act as a deterrent.”

“You let one live,” said Harry.

“He pretended to be a hostage. He managed to get out and into the view of the TV cameras,” said the colonel. “An execution on national TV would make us look like monsters.”

“I bet the lawyers and politicians loved that,” said Harry.

“Bollocks to them,” said the colonel. “None of them have the courage to stand up and fight. They like to sit on their arses, grow rich and let others risk their lives and then have the nerve to judge us when we make a mistake. We have a fraction of a second to make a decision; they have days to pick it apart, though they have no idea what it is like to be faced with such a choice. The hardest choice they have had to make is rice krispies or cornflakes for breakfast. Though to be honest, and keep this to yourself, after the siege, Thatcher and her husband came to Hereford to congratulate us. He came up to me, Mac and Tom, who had all been on the strike team. He said that we had failed. When I asked why, he replied, ‘you let one of the bastards live’.”

Harry smiled to himself. Laughing at death was slightly bad taste, but the colonel had a point. Voldemort had chosen to be a murderer; the country had not chosen to be slaughtered. Desperate times called for desperate measures. He did, of course, wonder what types of people he was recruiting. He hoped they didn’t enjoy killing too much, or else what made them better than the Death Eaters?

They arrived at what looked like an old aircraft hanger at the far end of the complex, and the car pulled gently up outside.

“ATTENTION!” shouted a voice as Harry followed the colonel into the hanger.

“At ease,” said the colonel, marching straight into the hanger and approaching a line of twenty men. “Gentlemen, sit down.” Harry took in the scene around him. Four Land Rovers, packed with equipment, were parked in a horseshoe shape in the middle of the hanger. In front of those was a semi-circle of chairs on which twenty men in black overalls were sitting, staring at the colonel and eying Harry, presumably waiting to find out what the Hell was going on.

“Gents,” said the colonel, once they were seated. “We finally know what is happening and I can promise you that you haven’t gotten dressed up for nothing. This is...in fact I don’t know his name, but for all intents and purposes he is your new CO, though he is a civilian and hold no rank. I will let him explain.” The colonel stepped aside, gesturing for Harry to take centre stage. He hesitated for a second. Standing in front of the best soldiers on the planet was somewhat humbling. He shook the feeling aside, shaking away his nerves. He had a job to do, and these battle hardened men wouldn’t take the leap of faith he was asking of them if he didn’t act professionally.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” said Harry. “So I’ll be blunt. As the best of the best, you have been chosen to try and stop a war that is brewing on British soil. The entire armed forces are on alert, and your job is to stop this war from ever starting. I will go into detail in a minute, but before you get any brash ideas, I must warn you that you are facing an enemy the likes of which you have never seen, armed with weapons you could not imagine. As of right now, all your training means absolutely sweet FA.”

“Excuse me mister...whoever you are,” said one of the soldiers, a tank-like man with a moustache and a broad Birmingham accent. “But what would someone so youthful know about our training? We can take care of ourselves you know.”

“Corporal!” snapped the Colonel, stepping forward to intervene. “You will show resp...” Harry held out of hand, gesturing the colonel to stop, which he did, knowing full well what a wave of Harry’s hand could do.

“And you are?” asked Harry, stepping towards the man who didn’t look in the least bit intimidated. Harry resisted the urge to smirk.

“Corporal Lokey,” said the man, chewing gum with his mouth wide open.

“You’ve fought in wars before?” asked Harry.

“Iraq, ninety-one” said the man. He was clearly older than he looked.

“Could the Iraqis do this?” asked Harry. He raised a hand and the soldier slowly lifted out of his seat. Lokey’s eyes grew wide as he gently floated out of his chair. Harry spread his fingers out in a sharp motion and Lokey’s limbs snapped taut, his arms out to the side as if he was being crucified. The other soldiers stepped back in surprise as Lokey’s feet left the ground. He was left hovering a foot above the ground, speechless with Harry standing three feet in front of him, his hand outstretched.

“Put him down!” ordered another soldier, standing to Harry’s right with his pistol drawn and aimed at Harry’s head. He was quick off the mark, but his effort was in vain. Harry extended another arm towards the soldier and the gun was yanked sharply out of his hand. It soared through the air, landing twenty feet away. The others stood with their mouths open, watching as a sixteen-year-old boy bested two members of the most elite fighting force on the planet. Satisfied, Harry released the spell that held Lokey in place, and the soldier tumbled to the ground before nineteen astonished soldiers.

“As I was saying,” said Harry, addressing the crowd. “You are facing an enemy with power you cannot imagine. It is true I am only sixteen years old, but it didn’t take much effort to render two of you near helpless.” He extended two fingers towards the lost gun, which jumped up the floor and zipped over to its owner, who caught it in one hand. Harry continued, “If I can do that, imagine what a fully grown wizard could do. The ones we are to fight can kill with a word, torture with a thought, and control anyone who crosses their path. They have no rules of war and will not rest until all of your kind are dead and gone. Get with the picture, gentlemen. A civilisation of wizards exists beneath your world and a small minority are planning to start a race war to exterminate you all. Are we going to stop this or sit around bitching?”

“Sir?” asked one of the soldiers; this time the tone was less sarcastic. “Did you say wizards?”

“Yes,” said Harry casually.

“You want us to fight Merlin?” sneered Lokey, still angry about his embarrassment.

“Merlin died centuries ago,” said Harry, backfiring the joke on the soldier. “We are fighting the Dark Lord Ð and yes, I know how corny that sounds. But wizards do exist, the Dark Lord does exist and he is coming. I used harmless spells to lift one of you and disarm another, but I can promise you, I could have done a lot worse to you. There are spells to melt the skin off your bones, to turn you inside out, to make your heart explode in your chest. There are killing curses, torture curses and those that do some of the foulest things you can imagine, and they WILL use them. You are all out of your depth, but at this time you are all we have. Now, your skills are not useless. We have the element of surprise, as they will not expect you guys. They have no experience fighting you, just as you have no experience fighting them. They consider normal people sub-human and will not dirty themselves learning about you. You have the advantage. Now, I can teach you what you are up against, but not here. We don’t have time. Come with me now and we’ll make a start. We have four days to stop a war before your government makes a first strike and the war begins. We are the only ones who can stop it so let’s start. But before we do, hand in all mobile phones and any other means of communication. Our society does not exist and you will not be allowed to phone home or anything for the duration of this mission. No contact with the outside world.”

The colonel produced a bin-liner and went around collecting the phones from the soldiers. While that was going on, Harry pulled out his Frog-Card.

“Rachel Shepherd,” he said calmly. Her face appeared a second later. “We’re ready. We need a window ASAP. We’re in Hereford.”

“Hereford? As in SAS barracks Hereford?” she asked. “Okay, I’ll be there in a second.”

“Apparate to me,” he told her before pocketing the card and turning back to the soldiers.

“Get your stuff into the cars,” said Harry. “We’re moving out.”

“Where to?” asked one of the soldiers. “I need to know if we’ve got enough petrol.”

“You’ll have enough,” said Harry. They were interrupted by a pop. Much to the surprise of the soldiers, Rachel appeared out of thin air, wearing black trousers and a top with body armour over the top. The soldiers were slightly startled; it was not every day that a beautiful woman appeared out of thin air in front of them. Rachel shot a quick glance at the soldiers, who were cautiously eyeing her in return, hands resting on guns. She carried with her a large sheet of glass perhaps the size of a small door.

“Ah,” she said. “Hang on.” Using her wand, she enlarged the glass so that a Land Rover would fit through it.

“Can you set it up on that wall?” asked Harry, pointing to his right. The soldiers had stopped to watch her levitate the giant sheet of glass over to the wall. Harry approached the first Land Rover, around which five men were standing, watching Rachel.

“Let’s get a move on, gentlemen,” said Harry. “MOVE!”

The soldiers instantly climbed into the four cars and started the engines, ready to go. Harry grabbed hold of one of the roof bars and stood on the step beneath the door, pulling himself up onto the car. The soldier in the front rolled down the window so they could talk. There were four cars with five men in each of them. At the wall, Rachel had propped the sheet of glass up against it. She had also pulled out her card and was talking into it, presumably to Sirius at the other end, as Frank was at the Ministry. *Sirius must be fixing the other end*, thought Harry.

After a few seconds, Rachel tapped each corner with her wand. Lines of pale blue light began to grow out from the corners along the edge of the mirror. Harry heard a soldier gasp in astonishment as the lines connected, edging the mirror in light. Rachel tapped it with her wand a final time in the centre and the entire sheet of glass turned sky blue. It glowed brightly for a few seconds then faded, leaving an image of Sirius standing in a garden overlooking a Moorland valley. Harry sighed with relief that it had worked. Sirius reached a hand through the glass and Harry was relieved to see it appear in the hanger. Giving Harry the thumbs up, Rachel stepped through the glass and out into Devon.

“Let’s go,” said Harry. “Drive through it.”

The engine roared into life and the soldier moved the car slowly towards the gateway, manoeuvring to get the car through with Harry on the outside.

“This is going to feel a little strange,” said Harry as they neared it.

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“T’was the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, except the three annoying little arseholes that won’t let me go to Quidditch Practice,” grumbled Ron, as he fished another book off the shelf.

“Your captain is in here,” said Ginny in an irritated voice, gesturing at Katie Bell, who was sitting in an alcove on the other side of the room, looking up charms. It was a rotten way to spend Christmas Eve, noted Ginny. They would meet in the sixth year boys’ dormitory in Gryffindor Tower later to practice. Terry, Luna and Ernie would fly in the window on brooms so they wouldn’t be noticed.

“Now shut up and work,” continued Ginny. “We will only be here another half hour and the ceremony is tomorrow. Unless you want to join dad and Percy in prison, I suggest you help.” Ron disappeared between bookshelves, muttering to himself. Every member of the DA was in the library. Ron, Luna and Ginny were working down one end, Katie Bell was with Seamus and Susan Bones on another table on the opposite side of the room, and down at the far end were Ernie and Terry, along with two new recruits – Cho Chang and Anthony Goldstein. They were now ten strong, and with Cho and Katie both being in their final year, they could share a wider variety of hexes.

Ginny’s mind kept wandering. The ceremony was tomorrow. Tomorrow, Voldemort would take control of the country; tomorrow freedom would come to an end.

Nearly an hour later, they were all gathered in the Sixth Year dormitory in Gryffindor Tower. They had been practicing all the new curses and hexes they had looked up. Over the fortnight that they had been together, the DA had come along in leaps and bounds. They had a wide and varied arsenal of curses for the using. Ginny wondered if they would be able to use them in a real situation. Real combat was not as easy to deal with as a classroom and a dummy. As Seamus put it, 'If we ever have to go to war against dummies, we shouldn't have a problem'. Katie had pointed out that he was not that witty and that it was taken from a Muggle film.

"Ginny Weasley!"

Ginny quickly fished the vibrating card out of her pocket, looking around to make sure she was alone. Harry's face was in the middle of it.

"Yes, Harry," she whispered. She knew none of the others could hear a word she or Harry said.

"Looks like the time has come," he said. "Assemble the DA. We are going to need your help, tonight."

"We're all together, practicing," said Ginny quickly.

"Where are you?"

"Gryffindor Tower, Ron's dormitory."

"Stay there," said Harry. "Be there in five." With that he was gone.

Ginny pocketed the card, trembling with excitement. Whatever was to happen would happen tonight.

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Harry reappeared on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He crept closer to the castle, until he was at the edge of the shadow. From there, he took a deep breath and braced for the pain as he transformed into a phoenix. His takeoffs were still a little on the dodgy side, but he managed to get himself airborne. Once he was, it was not a problem to fly up to the window. He landed on the ledge outside. Through the window, he could see the eleven members of the DA sitting around, while Ginny spoke. Harry transformed back into his human form, managing not to fall off the windowsill in the process. He then rapped sharply on the window.

The look on their faces was fantastic. Ginny quickly bolted to the window and opened it, allowing Harry to climb in. He immediately glanced at the door.

"Sealed and silenced?" he whispered.

“Yes,” replied Ginny. Harry trusted her to have done it properly. He took a moment to take in the room. There were eleven of them sitting around, with various books open.

“How’s it been going?” asked Harry.

“A nightmare,” said Seamus. “Rookwood has been breathing down our necks.”

“But we’ve learned a load of spells,” said Ginny.

“And some from Rookwood,” said Katie darkly. “Not that we should use them.” Harry raised an eyebrow. After three days of training the SAS to deal with basic spells and wizards, he was more used to the idea of killing. It shocked him that he could think about it so casually, but the colonel had been right: Voldemort had asked for this.

“In the fight for survival, there are no rules,” he said. “Use any spell you have to, to keep yourself safe.”

The others looked at him warily for a second, but he ignored it. “Is this everyone?”

Again, Ginny nodded. They all had their wands, and that was all they needed. Rachel had stolen the rest.

“Right,” said Harry. “What I am about to propose is highly dangerous, but ultimately necessary. I have three more Aurors in hiding with me. We have a plan, and need your help. If you do not want to take part, or feel you cannot, no hard feelings – return to your dormitories and say nothing to anyone. Once you come with me, there is no turning back. You have one minute to decide. Sorry to rush you, but we need to leave ASAP.”

“I’m in,” said Ginny immediately. Harry wasn’t sure if her eagerness was a positive or a negative factor, but he didn’t comment. He waited for the full minute, and in that time, every member of the DA agreed. He was grateful for their help; he just hoped they wouldn’t suffer for it.

“Thank you,” said Harry. “We have to leave now. Here is a Portkey.” He pulled a wooden spoon from his pocket and held it out. It was one that Rachel had made at the farm. Everyone took a hold and then Harry tapped it with his wand. He felt the familiar tug behind his navel and then he landed with a thud in the lounge Higher Croft Farm.

“Take a seat,” said Harry, getting back to his feet. He gestured to a large wooden dining table, around which several chairs were laid out, one of which was already occupied by Hermione Granger. Harry watched as the DA took their seats, most of them taking in their surroundings as they did so.

“Where are we?”

“Somewhere in the West Country,” said Harry cryptically as they sat down. After a few seconds, the doors opened and Sirius, Rachel and Frank came in and took seats as well, followed by two of the SAS men, dressed in black overalls.

“Okay,” said Harry, walking around the table to the last empty chair. “First, let me introduce those whom you don’t know. Rachel Shepherd, Sirius Black and Frank Longbottom from the Aurors. Captain Spears and Corporal Dixon, of the Muggle SAS. Now, let us move on. Tomorrow is Voldemort’s inauguration ceremony. It must be stopped at all costs. Now, we know we cannot do this alone, so our best hope is to spring Dumbledore and the rest of the Order from their prison. Rachel here – “ he gestured to her, for the benefit of the DA “ – has discovered the location of the prison. It’s in a supposedly abandoned World War Two Radar Station on Lundy Island. It is in the Atlantic, ten miles offshore between Wales and Devon.

We have three targets: firstly, Voldemort, who is at the Ministry, secondly, the Order who are on Lundy and, thirdly, Hogwarts, which is under the control of Rookwood and his Inquisitorial Squad. Frank, you spent most of yesterday on Lundy, any thoughts?”

“Security isn’t the tightest I have seen,” said Frank, leaning forward. “But it isn’t light either. I counted twenty Death Eaters. They were not Black Watch, so I don’t know if they are trained, or just civilians. There are several layers of wards on the island, most of them for detection rather than protection, as far as I can see. If we Portkey in or Apparate, they will know about it. There are Anti-Apparation wards over the bunker itself. Looks like we need to go in the traditional way, as in walk. The entrance to the bunker is at the base of a cliff leading out into a closed off bay. If we approach by sea, they will see us coming and hear the motor if we use boats, as the captain has suggested.

There is a Muggle ferry that takes tourists out there. We can get on the island that way and somehow get into the bunker. Once we are in, it shouldn’t be too hard, unless the guards are professionals. I dug the blueprints out of the Ministry of Defence; it is only a small bunker, and there are only a certain number of places they could be, but we can’t rule out Portkey evacuations and explosives.”

“Right,” said Harry. “Now, this bunker is Muggle built, and also in the middle of a major tourist attraction.”

“At this time of year?” asked Rachel.

“The ferry was packed when I went yesterday,” said Frank. “We will need to book tickets in advance. I’ll head over at the crack of dawn tomorrow and book tickets.”

“You will go to Lundy,” said Harry, pointing to the DA and the Aurors. “Captain, I mean you no disrespect, but I don’t want your men on Lundy. I made a promise to your CO to keep you safe.”

“This affects our future as much as yours,” said Spears, his tone calm, his eyes watching Harry cautiously, but without hatred.

“I can appreciate that,” said Harry, knowing what he meant. “Yet, you have no experience fighting wizards. You have no idea what they can do. Your job comes later, when we are weak and you are strong. Have patience, please. However, your tactical advice is still appreciated. What would you suggest for Lundy?”

“Well,” said the captain, spreading the blueprints over the table. “From the blueprints I see two ways in. I would split into two. One team can enter through an escape hatch here—” he stabbed his finger at the map. “Also from this point here at the base of the cliffs. The hatch isn’t a problem, but the cliff may prove to be a bit of a nightmare. We will need to return to Hereford for SCUBA gear, or at least a motor-dinghy. At low tide, we will also need to climb, over the rocks that are there.” According to the OS map, which they had handy as well, the entrance he was referring to was at the base of a cliff. The contour lines on the map showed that it was near vertical drop and that there were sharp rocks at the bottom, and warnings not to bring boats near the rocks.

“No boats,” said Harry, shaking his head. It was too dangerous. “We’d be sitting ducks and they would hear us coming a mile away. Not to mention that if we did get ashore, we’d have to clamber over rocks and that would be slow and dangerous and again, we’d be sitting ducks.” It would be impossible to approach from the sea without being seen and neither Harry nor the other students knew how to abseil, meaning they couldn’t climb down from the top of the cliff. Maybe the soldiers really did need to go in alone.

“We could descend on brooms,” suggested Rachel. Of course! It was so obvious. As a wizard and a Quidditch player, Harry felt stupid for not thinking of it.

“Good call,” said Frank, making a note on the paper in front of him.

“You seriously fly on broomsticks?” asked Spears, raising an eyebrow. Harry nodded with a small smile.

“Right,” said Spears, shrugging and returning to the map. “You need to split into two teams: one for the cliff, one for the hatch. The hostages will most likely be held in one of these two rooms.” He circled two rooms on the blueprints in thick marker pen. “I must insist though, that at least one of my men must accompany each team. What if you come across explosives, booby-traps and such like?”

“Frank?” asked Harry.

“We need everyone we can get,” said Frank. “I can take one on a broom with me, but we need them alive, in case there are wards, locks or anything on the hostages. I suggest we take Myles, as he is a trained Medic. Muggle medicine is primitive by our standards, but it’s better than nothing.”

“Do you realise that you have no idea what they are capable of, and you can’t block many of their attacks?” Rachel asked, addressing the captain.

“No different from a bullet,” said the soldier dismissively, but not arrogantly. These men accepted death as an occupational hazard realised Harry. It was not something they looked forward to, but something they accepted. They risked their lives for a below average wage, and harsh conditions. He wondered what drove a man like captain Spears. Harry himself hung on to hope that he and his friends would be safe, and it was their protection that drove him, as well as his own life. What could drive a man, a learned man, like the captain to accept this kind of danger for anything other than his own survival? Harry had never had a choice and frequently fought for his life. Spears had chosen to join the army and do this job, placing himself in danger, not for his own benefit. It had to be something deep down and personal that drove him onwards. The man was a mystery to Harry.

Harry was suddenly aware that Spears was talking to him. He just looked blankly at the captain who repeated the questions.

“Are we weapons free?” asked Corporal Dixon.

“What?” asked Harry, coming out of his thoughts.

“Can we use lethal force?” There were going to be casualties, there was no doubt of that and given then choice between his friends and his enemies, Harry didn’t have a problem with putting an enemy in a bodybag.

“Yes,” said Harry, earning a surprised glance from Ginny. The time for half-measures was over. He could see her disapproval. From her stare, he got the feeling that she had suddenly seen him in a colder light. She probably now saw him as the Dark Knight in killing mode once more. He could reconcile that later. For now, he had a job to do. “You will be the second soldier going to Lundy?” asked Harry.

Dixon nodded.

“Take them alive and silently if you can,” said Harry, expanding on the answer he had given the corporal. “Failing that, or if it all goes pear-shaped, take the bastards down any way you can. If it’s a choice between us and them, it sure as hell isn’t going to be us. You can work out the exact plan of attack later. For now, let’s move on. Once Lundy is taken, then we move on to Hogwarts and the Ministry. Frank and Rachel, we need Portkeys ready to return the captives to the Ministry and those in no fit state to fight, to Hogwarts Hospital Wing.”

“Hogwarts will be under the control of Rookwood,” said Ginny. “He’ll kill on sight.”

“McGonagall can be relied on to take him out,” said Harry. “I’ll drop her a note during breakfast tomorrow. Madam Pomfrey will be ready in the Hospital Wing. Those who require medical attention can be sent there. I also want Portkeys for both of the SAS guys and a simple way to activate them. If they are injured, they can go straight to Hogwarts Infirmary to get treatment.” In truth, Harry dared not think what state the hostages might be in, but he hoped at least a few of them were in a fit state to go to the Ministry. They needed all the help they could get.

“What about Snape?” asked Ron. “Can you be certain where his loyalties lie? What if McGonagall takes out Rookwood and then Snape takes out McGonagall?”

“We have no time to test him,” said Harry. “Flamel will have it covered, I hope. As for the Aurors stationed at Hogwarts, we can slip something into their drinks or drug them.”

“If you poison them, Rookwood will know,” said Ron. “He’s a git, but he’s not stupid.”

“Dope them up,” suggested Spears. “Get them so high, they can’t shoot straight.” Harry noted the suggestion, but it was time to move on. They had very little time.

“The ceremony is at midday, so at half eleven I will move into the Ministry with the remaining eighteen soldiers under the command of Captain Spears. Fifteen will secure the entrance hall, while the other four come with me to the Auror Complex. We will disable the Floo Network and reinforce the wards, so the only way out will be through the entrance hall. The Auror Complex is where the Portkeys will deliver those able to fight once Lundy is secure. From the Auror complex, everyone will acquire armour and weapons. From there, you must infiltrate the ceremony. The loyal Aurors will be grouped together to keep them out of trouble. We need to locate and recruit them. Then you play the waiting game. If I know Voldemort, he will wait for me to come to him. On my signal, unleash hell. Take the Black Watch down. I hope to have enough support from the audience and loyal Aurors to take the Black Watch out of the game. With no Voldemort and no Black Watch, we should have control of the Ministry.” Harry had gone over it time and time again in his head. It was the best he could come up with, and it stood a chance, but it was by no means foolproof.

There was silence in the room as his audience stared at him, and the maps in front of them. For nearly a minute no one spoke, before Rachel broke the silence.

“This all hinges on you defeating Voldemort,” said the Auror softly. “What makes you think you can defeat him? No offence, but many have tried – and look what happened to Dumbledore. Also, you plan to march just four soldiers and what, ten of us, plus perhaps another ten of the hostages at most, who are not one hundred percent fit, against the whole of the Black Watch?” This was the part of the plan that Harry was most proud of; he had an ace up his sleeve.

“Do you remember that secret weapon that went missing from the M.O.D. in Devon last month?” asked Harry, looking her in the eye, but unable to keep from grinning at his own brilliance.

“You’re kidding,” said Rachel, her eyes wide.

“I have it,” said Harry. He motioned towards Ron and Ginny. “These guys helped me extract it. The other two weapons have been destroyed. It will shut down all magic in a five-mile radius when it is on. If I can remove Voldemort’s magic, he will be defenceless. Now here is the complicated part. Even if I kill him, the Black Watch and Death Eaters would tear me apart. While I have no doubt that Ginny, Ron and you guys can take out Death Eaters with magic, physically you don’t have a hope in hell of besting them hand to hand, especially if they carry

knives. That is where you come in, Captain. Your men are to secure the Entrance Hall to the Ministry, around the Fountain of the Brethren. Once panic erupts, every civilian will flee there in an effort to get out. None will be allowed to escape, but you must hold them there. Do not shoot anyone not wearing Black Watch robes. Keep everyone inside and calm as possible. The rest of you are to come to the auditorium. While the duelling is going on, keep out of sight. As soon as the magic goes down, show yourselves. The blueprints are here, and we can steal enough black robes for you to disguise yourselves. You are there to protect us once the magic goes down, and hopefully there will be no means for the Death Eaters to fight back. In theory, you will just have to watch them. However, being Muggles, you may need to...prove your power.”

“You mean shoot someone?” queried the captain. Harry didn’t reply, feeling it was perfectly obvious what he meant.

“Nine men cannot cover a room that size,” said Spears. “The entrance hall maybe, but not this auditorium. I will need another twenty at least. Blue team are stood by, so if you let me return to Hereford, I can bring in another twenty men.” Harry paused for a second. This was to be a deniable mission. No one was supposed to know it was going on, and bringing in another twenty men was not what he wanted to do. People would ask questions if it emerged that forty soldiers had suddenly gone missing. It concerns about security were shared by the others.

“This is a major breach of the Statute of Secrecy,” said Rachel, echoing Harry’s thoughts. “Too many people know about this already.”

“We’re beyond that now,” interrupted Frank, before Harry could respond. “We’ll get them after the meeting.” Harry didn’t contradict Frank or overrule him, knowing full well the Auror was right. He had said it himself; the time for half measures was over. It was all or nothing.

“Okay,” said the captain, satisfied that the debate was over. “That’s the twenty men from blue team to secure the entrance hall and detain everyone, and twenty of us to cover your backs in the auditorium. That should be enough. One more thing though; let’s say it works, and the magic is down, and they are defenceless, what then? We hold them at gunpoint for how long? And what of the civilians trapped in the building?”

There was a pause, and all eyes turned to Harry. This was the price of leadership, but luckily this time he could shift responsibility to someone else.

“Dumbledore and the remaining Order of the Phoenix will be there,” said Harry. “They will tell you what to do. Everyone is to be detained until cleared. No one can leave until Dumbledore gives the all clear. Death Eaters are to be taken into custody. You’re mainly there for crowd control.”

“A million things can go wrong with this,” said Frank, voicing Harry’s main concern. However, time was short and this was all they had.

“Any better plans?” said Harry. “I’m all ears.” There was silence in the room. “This plan is far from fool-proof, I agree, but it is the only one we have.”

“Are your friends here even capable of this?” asked Frank, casting a condescending glance at Ron.

“Hey!” protested Ron indignantly, causing Harry to roll his eyes.

“Enough,” said Harry, cutting him off before he could continue. “A fair question, Frank. They have been training in duelling and other Defence Against the Dark Arts. Their duelling ability goes beyond a normal student.”

“But they are still only children,” said Frank. “This isn’t a game. They could get killed.”

“We know this is not a game,” said Harry. “But there is no one else. I don’t like the idea of placing my friends in the line of fire, but I have no choice. You three cannot take on twenty Death Eaters alone. They will suffer just as much as anyone else if we fail, so they are just as involved as you or I.”

“How long will the magic be down?” asked Rachel. “And we will get it back, won’t we? Will strong wizards still be able to duel?” Arctic Thunder was at this point untested Harry realised, but according to the notes, it should work.

“No,” said Harry. “The notes I took with the device say that it knocks out magic completely. It does not last for any given time. It is like a light bulb; you switch it on, magic goes off, then you switch it off, and the magic comes back on. As soon as Voldemort is dead and the SAS have disarmed the Black Watch, magic will come back on, and you will be back in control. From there, the Aurors – with the help of the SAS – will move the Death Eaters to cells and try and re-forged what’s left of the Ministry of Magic.”

“What is this signal you will give us to start the attack?” asked Frank.

“All hell will break loose,” said Harry. “Frank, corporal, I’ll leave you to sort out your plan for Lundy. Captain, you will draw up a plan for the ceremony itself. We need to be up by nine at the latest tomorrow, that’s oh-nine-hundred hours. That gives us an hour to double check everything and go over it again. We must have left here by ten thirty hours. Let’s get an early night. I will return to Hereford for Blue Team.”

With that, he left the room. It occurred to him on the way up the stairs that it was Christmas Eve. This year, presents seemed to mean so little. With luck, tomorrow they would give the country a present they would never forget.

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Harry stared at himself in the mirror. The Boy-Who-Lived, the innocent defender of the light, was gone. The Dark Knight, the cold-blooded killer, had returned. Harry stared into the

eyes of his reflection. They seemed much older than the rest of him, heavier, sadder. They showed the tiredness he felt, the severity of the situation. He wore the same clothes he had arrived in this world in. His black boots shone on his feet. His black combat trousers were darker than any night. Strapped over the top were the holsters. On his right leg was his primary wand and combat knife, and behind his back was his second wand. Hanging from the left side of his hip was his personal Stun-Baton. He had modified it further than it had been when he arrived, lengthening it to rival his sword. It kept enemies at a greater distance and felt more comfortable in his hands. Over his chest was his dragon-scale armour. All scratches and dents had been masterfully repaired and it seemed like new. Beneath the armour was his black jumper, which extended up his neck to his chin, and down his arms to his wrists, where a pair of black leather gloves took over. Over his shoulders hung a hooded black travelling cloak, held together by a silver clip. Over the top of the cloak was his Katana, which hung diagonally across his back. There was also one addition to his arsenal at this time. On his left thigh was a small black pistol, a present from the captain. Harry had not wanted it, and had rejected it, but as the captain had pointed out, he could not guarantee that he could get close enough to Voldemort, once the magic went down. If all else failed, he had no choice but to use a gun. It was there for emergencies and only emergencies.

The Dark Knight had returned. Snape had said that the cold-blooded killer was needed, not the Boy-Who-Lived. He had said that Harry had to become the monster again, to have any hope in succeeding.

“You’re wrong, Snape,” said Harry to his reflection. “This time you’re wrong.”

Harry had full control over his past abilities. His mind was set. He would kill a man today, but he would not become the darkness he so feared. We are who we choose to be, and he had made his choice. He was not his other self; the Dark Knight was dead. He was all that remained. Harry swished his wand and his entire clothing glowed for an instant before turning as white as snow. The only exception was his hooded cloak, which remained black as the night. He would not be noticed while wearing it, where as white stood out a mile. He was ready. Time to go to war, and possibly to death. All thoughts of returning home to his world were gone. Only two things mattered: save his family and kill Voldemort.

The time had come.

Harry descended the stairs to find the others waiting in the lounge. The DA all wore armoured vests, presumably from the supply that Rachel had stolen from Black-Watch armoury. The adults and some of the DA had Stun-Batons hanging from their hips, and a second wand in their pockets.

“Are we ready?” asked Harry, reaching the bottom of the stairs.

“Ready,” said the captain. Those who were bound for Lundy were all wearing clothes that would not get them noticed. The two soldiers wore anoraks, hiking boots and combat trousers. They carried a backpack, the contents of which Harry was uncertain, but he assumed they contained a machine gun, handgun, and a few flash-bangs and grenades. The students were

all going to Lundy, so they were dressed as though they were going for a hike, except that they also brooms with them, concealed in bags designed for guitars. Not many hikers carried guitars, but the guitar-cases would raise less questions than people carrying brooms. Harry just hoped they were not asked to open them, but with Frank, Sirius and Rachel there too – there shouldn't be any big problems.

The remaining soldiers who would take over the Ministry with Harry were also ready, dressed in full combat gear: black overalls topped by Kevlar vests, which were covered in pouches containing spare magazines. Each of them had a pistol on their thigh and a combat knife. They also all carried machine guns with the extended barrel of a silencer and a small laser. They wore helmets and gasmasks. They looked like true Special Forces, shrouded in black, with the inhuman face of a gasmask. Underneath their coveralls they wore magical body armour, which would protect them a little against the incoming spells, but not much. They had to keep out of sight. There were thirty-eight of them, now; eighteen had a red stripe on their arm and twenty had a blue one. Harry briefly wondered if they were to be Obliviated after this battle, or his offer of a working relationship with the Muggles would be realised. It was the Ministry's decision.

Harry checked his watch; it was half ten. Harry took a deep breath. There was nothing left to say. All they could do now was fight like hell and hope for the best.

“You'd better get going,” said Harry. “Good luck and Godspeed.”

“Take a hold,” said Frank, offering an empty bottle of wine to the soldiers, while Rachel did the same to the DA. The SAS had been briefed on Portkeys and what to expect, but they were still a little hesitant. Their faces remained neutral, but Harry could see they were nervous. Just before they disappeared Harry truly began to appreciate the danger he was putting his friends in. The plan was all they had, but so many things could go wrong with it. If anyone died, it would be his fault and his alone. Was there another way? Had he missed something? Questions started flowing into his mind; the seeds of doubt had been sown. He was starting to second-guess himself. *No, snap out of it, Potter*, Harry scolded himself. This was the only way. If Voldemort won, they would all die. This way, at least they had a chance of survival.

“Right,” said Harry to the remaining soldiers still in the room. He felt a little uncomfortable talking to the expressionless gasmasks that covered their faces. There was something inhumanly creepy about them. “We have ninety minutes until the ceremony. I need to deliver a letter. These Portkeys will drop you in the middle of London in a populated area. You are to hold positions until I arrive. Good luck.”

The soldiers nodded, not saying a word. At this point, what was there to say? They all took hold of the Portkey and as Harry tapped it with his wand, the soldiers disappeared with a pop leaving Harry alone in the house. They would appear in what was a closed and abandoned shop. In there, they could hide until needed. He quickly tidied the room, removing any evidence that they had ever been there. The soldiers had cleaned it all out this morning, removing all evidence, leaving nothing for any forensics team to find. The only clues left that they had once been there were the four Land Rovers parked outside, which would be removed later before the

lady of the house was revived. Aunt Marge herself was still unconscious in the bedroom upstairs. He would include that in his letter, so that even if things went wrong, someone would come and wake her and remove the Land Rovers.

Satisfied that their tracks had been covered, Harry concentrated on Hogwarts and disappeared in a ball of flame. It was fast becoming instinct for him to travel like this. He didn't really think about it anymore, he just did it.

Harry reappeared on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He didn't dare to go straight into the castle in case he materialised in front of anyone. Instead, he appeared about ten feet inside the tree line, behind Hagrid's hut. Harry glanced both ways before stepping out of the trees. He darted into cover behind Hagrid's hut. He wondered what it was used for now, since Hagrid had been fired two years ago. To him, it would always be Hagrid's hut, not a storage shed or whatever it actually was. Harry missed his largest friend.

With a final glance around, Harry disappeared with a flash of flame and reappeared simultaneously to the side of the main doors. The doors were open, allowing a draft in. Harry cautiously glanced both ways. The sun was high in the sky and the weather was surprisingly pleasant for the time of year, though there was a chilly wind blowing through the valley. The lake looked a bit choppy from where Harry stood. He was warm enough in his clothes, and ignoring the wind, crept into the castle. He slipped into the shadows and up to the notice board. Sure enough, on a big sheet of parchment was a notice about the Inauguration. All students were to be in the Great Hall at eleven; that must be where everyone was. Perfect! He was due a bit of luck.

Keeping his footsteps as quiet as possible, Harry ran up the stairs two at a time, jumping the trick steps and running along the corridor in the direction of the kitchens. Part of him wondered what Rookwood had thought when the DA had disappeared off the face of the earth, leaving everything behind. Never mind, this was not the time to think about it.

Harry tickled the pear and the painting opened up, revealing the kitchens. The room was full of elves running about like headless chickens preparing all manner of foods for the feast. As Harry entered, one of them immediately came up to him.

"You are not supposed to be here, sir," said the elf. "Mistress McGonagall says everybody is supposed to be in the hall, sir."

"I know," said Harry, kneeling down to face the elf. "Is Perky here?"

"I is here, Master Harry Potter, sir," said a voice, and another elf joined Harry.

"Perky, I need the item I asked you to look after for me," he said. Harry didn't catch the response, but the elf disappeared and reappeared a second later carrying a familiar-looking backpack. Perky handed the bag to Harry, who checked it and then slung it over his shoulder. "Thanks, Perky," said Harry. Everything was in order. Now he only had one more job to do.

“Can you bring me a quill, ink and parchment? Just a little, enough for a note,” he asked the elf. It only took six seconds for the eager elf to return with all that he had asked for, carried on a silver tray. That was what Harry called overkill, but he didn’t say anything. He scrawled a quick note on the parchment and then turned to face the elf again.

“Perky,” he said slowly, not sure how the elf would take the request. “I have a request from Headmaster Dumbledore.” The elf’s ears perked up at the name, and he glanced awkwardly around, clearly scared.

“The dark man telled the elves not to be speaking of him,” said Perky, his voice hushed and strained. “He is to be giving us clothes if we does.” Rookwood had clearly threatened the elves, but their loyalty was always to their true master, and Dumbledore’s name was worth thousands of Rookwood’s.

“But *Dumbledore* is still the Headmaster,” said Harry, stressing the name.

“Perky cannot admit that he agrees or he is having to punish himself,” said the elf. Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the remembered Dobby’s episodes. He didn’t have time to try and outwit a House Elf into doing what he wanted, and he certainly wouldn’t admit that he was having trouble outwitting a House Elf.

“But you will do what your *true* master asks you to?” asked Harry. The elf glanced each way, checking that they were alone before whispering in a shaky voice.

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Perky,” said Harry, breathing a sigh of relief. “He needs you to borrow some Draught of Living Death from the Potions cupboard and put some in the drinks of the Black Watch Aurors.”

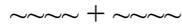
“I is going to do it,” said Perky.

Harry thanked the elf before leaving. Time was short. He pocketed the note he had written and made his way out into the Hall.

Ah! A thought had just occurred to him. He was going to have issues with this next bit. He had not thought about how to attach it. He didn’t have a pouch or anything and that would be too big once he changed. He would have issues picking up a flat piece of parchment with claws, and wings were just as useless. He had no practice at this kind of precision manoeuvring. Contrary to popular belief, moving as an Animagus was hard as one didn’t automatically inherit the instincts of the animal in question. In the end, it occurred to him that he could crumple the note into a ball. Then he could carry it. Yes, that would work.

It also occurred to him that he didn’t know where the owl’s entrance came out on the roof. He had never been up there, but it couldn’t be too hard to find. Now he just had to change.

He had done it before, but it was a little different now he actually needed it. Also he had yet to master flight, but there had never been a better time to learn.



“In one hour,” began Professor Rookwood, standing in front of the staff table at the front of the hall, “the broadcast will begin.” The hall was set up as per the previous broadcast from the Ministry. From here, they would all witness the events in the Ministry, and Minerva was sure it would be one to remember, one way or another. Minerva watched the speech with an anxious face. What was going on? What was Potter doing? He had to act today, but what was he waiting for? They had one hour; that was it. Her blood ran cold as she thought about what would happen if he did nothing. Did he even know what was happening? Surely he must. He had to do something; he just had to. Where the hell was he?

Rookwood droned on to the school, who were looking rather depleted since the nine students had disappeared last night. No one had noticed until this morning, and by then it was too late. Rookwood had spent a long time in his office, presumably informing Crouch. After that, he had interviewed the dorm-mates of the missing students, but no one seemed to know where they had gone. Minerva had a fairly good idea who was behind it, but she wasn't sure that Potter was stupid enough to put students into a battle. What was that boy doing?

Suddenly there came a loud squawk that cut Rookwood's speech short. All eyes glanced up to see a magnificent red phoenix soaring in through the owl's entrance. Phoenix song filled Minerva's ears as the stunning bird descended over the hall, bringing with it a feeling long forgotten in these walls: hope.

“Fawkes!” gasped Nicolas to her right. “Albus is alive, Minerva!” Minerva's heart skipped a beat, but then realisation dawned on her. That was not Fawkes. Oh, he hadn't! How foolish was that boy? She was impressed that he had managed to learn to fly, but this was a dangerous game, and it showed his ability to Rookwood. He would report to Crouch and all elements of surprise would be lost. Curse Potter's bravado!

The phoenix flew lower as it neared the front of the hall, coming closer and closer to where Minerva sat. Rookwood was forced to duck as the bird passed, aiming to slash him with its claws. *Phoenixes are peaceful, Harry*, thought Minerva, as Rookwood dived out of the way. *Don't over do it!* The bird looped around the back of the table.

“Dumbledore's bird,” said one of the students. “He's back!”

“Nonsense,” snapped Rookwood. “It's just lost.” He reached into his robes, producing a wand as the bird swooped again, this time for Minerva. She watched in silence as the bird glided past her dropping a scrunched up ball of parchment in her lap before swooping past and back up towards the skylight, narrowly escaping a curse from Rookwood's wand, and then it was gone.

Minerva unravelled the parchment, and read the words, scrawled on it.

Professor McGonagall,

Keep watching. When we attack, take Rookwood down. Keep an eye on the Inquisitorial Squad. Disable the Floo. Send Madam Pomfrey to the Hospital Wing now. Injured will be sent straight to her – also expect Muggle casualties. Black Watch have been drugged. Hogwarts is yours again.

HP

P.S. Higher Croft Farm, Mary Tavy, Devon. Woman in stasis. Free her and remove evidence if something should go wrong. Good luck.

Muggle casualties? What did he mean? What was he planning? Minerva relayed the message to Nicolas, who sat to her right. He then managed to pass it on to Poppy, who promptly left, as Rookwood droned on about how special today was. He hadn't even mentioned that it was Christmas. The tree in the corner, no longer the central focus of the room, looked old and weltering even though it was new and under a stasis charm. What a sad Christmas, and now the Angel of Death was coming to the Ministry. Black Noel would seem like a picnic compared to today.

She just hoped Harry Potter knew what he was doing.

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It was eight minutes past eleven as the MS Oldenburg came alongside the jetty on Lundy Island. The crossing had been pleasant in that the sun was shining and the sea had been flat. However, the icy westerly wind swept bitterly off the Atlantic and chilled the passengers to the bone. There was no shelter on the deck save for the cabin, which was off limits to all but the crew. The lower deck with the bar was full of people having a quick drink before they arrived at the island; mainly hot drinks rather than alcohol. No one paid any attention to the party of men and children on the deck, who stood at the front of the ship watching the luscious green island drawing ever closer. The ferry had sailed from Bideford on time and had passed its counterpart from Ilfracombe mid-channel. As the ship docked, everyone disembarked and moved up on to the tarmacked area at the end of the jetty. There was a small pub and an ice cream stall to the left and beyond that the island itself. *Who could eat ice cream on a day like this?* thought Frank, shivering slightly beneath his anorak. Hikers and bird-spotters filed off in various directions along well-trodden paths lined with bracken and gorse, while the party of hikers waited. Nothing seemed special about them. They all wore normal clothes with anoraks. They looked like a school party with five teachers and twelve children. They were, however, the only ones who appeared not to be having a good Christmas day.

“Okay,” said Frank, zipping his anorak up high around his neck. “This is it. Let’s get into position. You all have your brooms?” He stared down at the group of twelve children, two soldiers and two other Aurors. So these were the heroes everyone was counting on to save the world? Ideally, only two of them would be here. *This was a job for trained Aurors, and fully fit ones at that*, he thought casting a wary glance at Sirius, who stood beside him. Of course, that

was impossible at this stage to find a better team, or any other team at all, as there was no one else. Frank just hoped that this bodge-job of an operation, manned with people he wouldn't trust to organise a parent's evening, didn't get them all killed. Part of him appreciated their courage, but he knew that he couldn't concentrate on his job if he was constantly worrying about them. He hoped to Merlin that Potter knew what he was doing.

Frank received nods from all those he had spoken to; they were set. They had fifty minutes left until the ceremony. That meant that they had half an hour to complete their mission and get to the Ministry. The timing was so tight, the team had no experience and there were a million variables that could go wrong, not to mention that the entire strategy relied on a sixteen-year-old boy defeating the most powerful Dark Wizard in fifty years. Still, they had to try.

"Let's go." Frank set off up the slope towards the northern end of the island. The path was tarmacked, and wide enough for a tractor, since there were no cars on the island. The road continued up the hill for perhaps one hundred metres and passed a tavern and three ornate country cottages, before melting away to a muddy track, spotted with rabbit and sheep droppings complemented with the occasional pile of horse manure, much to the Weasley boy's disgust. Frank shot him a silencing glare as they trekked up the hill. He set a quick pace, with which the others had to jog to keep up. The SAS were used to this kind of pace and strode along in single file after the Auror, their backpacks slung over their shoulders. Sirius and Rachel hung at the back, keeping pace and making sure the slower of the children were all right. Frank kept his eyes peeled for anyone in robes, anyone loitering or seeming out of place as they walked, his trained eyes picking out small details so easily missed. So far he had found nothing as he marched up the hill, the grass on which flattened under the harsh winter wind, and sprinkled with a light dusting of frost, which would soon be gone under the sun which shone in the clear, but chilly sky.

Frank was surprised that so many people were out and about on Christmas Day. Christmas was a time for families, which was why Frank hated Christmas as it brought back painful memories. He couldn't understand people going out for Christmas. The whole point was to stay at home with the family; people didn't appreciate what they had until it was taken away. He wished he had one more chance to spend Christmas with Alice, Neville and what would have been their second child. If it had been a boy it would have been called Ira, and if it were a girl it would have been Guinevere. What he wouldn't give to have them back, but he never would thanks to Harry Potter, the boy he was now following perhaps to his death. Fate had a wicked sense of humour.

Frank suddenly realised that in his musing and anger, not only had he stopped checking for potential hazards, but his pace had quickened and although the two soldiers were up to it, the students were struggling. What was Potter thinking bringing them along?

They walked for nearly a mile before they reached the top of the hill, where the road merged with a field, through which a muddy track was still visible, but was overgrown by gorse and brambles. Frank continued through the field, keeping a fast pace. The wind was stronger now that they were out of the valley. After about one hundred metres, the trail forked; one

continued straight, while the other headed off at a forty–five degree angle to the right. The signpost read Cliff–Top Path.

“Rae?” called Frank over his shoulder as he came to a halt. The others were in a line behind him and it was another ten seconds before they were all grouped around enough to hear, due to the wind. Rachel hadn’t heard his summon, so he repeated her name.

“Do you know your IP?”

“What’s an IP?” asked one of the children.

Frank shot him a glare, but Rachel answered politely. “Insertion point,” she said kindly. “And yes, Frank, I know where it is.”

“Then this is where we go our separate ways,” said Frank, gesturing to the sign. He would take the coastal path with half of the students. “Right,” he said, addressing the kids. “Split into the groups we decided last night.” He watched as they split into two groups. He had taken the time to learn the names of those who would be coming with him. He had both Weasleys and the Muggleborn girl, Hermione. There was also Cho Chang, the Chinese girl, and then Amelia’s niece Susan and a ginger girl called Hannah Abbot. He was also taking Corporal Dixon with him, while Rachel took Sirius and the Medic, Myles. It seemed that they were ready.

“I’ll give you a call when we’re in position,” said Frank to Rachel, turning to head off up the coast path.

“Oh, and Frank,” came her reply after he had gone a few steps. He stopped and turned back to face her. “Merry Christmas.” Frank smiled to himself, despite his general dislike for this season. He nodded and then turned back to face the soldier who was coming with him along with the six students. With a wave of his hand he started off up the path, gesturing for them to follow him.

Rachel also gestured for her team to follow her and set off along the path they had originally been on.

They were visible for perhaps another minute or so before the paths were separated as the main one Rachel was using sank into a depression in the land, while Frank’s skirted a hill towards the cliff top. Of the eight of them, seven carried guitar cases inside which was a broom. It did look slightly suspicious, but no one had yet approached them and Frank’s eyes had not picked up on anything. It was another hundred metres to the top of the cliffs. There was a fence ten metres from the edge, stopping people from getting too close, but still giving them the view. Frank glanced each way up the path, making sure they were alone, before he hopped the fence and rushed into a patch of gorse from where he couldn’t be seen from the path. Safe inside the patch of gorse, he turned back to the others to see that already two had made it across. He kept a watch as the others quickly made their way into the hiding place.

“From here we have to fly,” said Frank. “They’ll be watching the paths, and this is the only place to descend without being seen. We’ll follow the cliff around to the next bay. The entrance is at sea level inside the bay. We need to stay against the cliff, so people above can’t see us. Keep it tight.”

He was removing his broom as he spoke and the others followed suit, unzipping the black padded cases. “Let’s get ready,” said Frank, checking the paths once again for any passers-by. Dixon removed his backpack while the others got their brooms out. He reached inside and pulled out a small metal object. The eerie metallic click of a pistol being cocked followed as the SAS man readied a pistol extended by a silencer and slipped it into a holster beneath his left arm. He slid two black objects that Frank assumed were refills into his pockets before giving the Auror a nod. Frank stood up and mounted the broom, gesturing for Dixon to get on behind him. Nervously, the soldier swung his leg over the broom behind Frank. He was probably wishing he could abseil down, but this was more efficient and it didn’t leave them like sitting ducks if anyone saw them. All six students were ready. Frank happened to know that three of them were Quidditch players, so this shouldn’t be too bad.

“Hold on,” said Frank to the corporal. “These things move fast.” He felt the corporal’s arms grab his waist tightly. They were ready. “Follow me, stay close to the cliff and do what I tell you. Let’s go.” The order was sharp, but they didn’t have time for manners. With a deep breath, Frank kicked off and headed towards the cliff-edge. As it reached the edge, the broom turned ninety degrees vertically downwards and shot straight down towards the jagged rocks and icy waves below. Frank heard the gasp of the corporal behind him and felt the man’s arms tighten around him. He suppressed a smirk as he dove towards the waves. Frank pulled out of his dive as he neared the water, maintaining a height of perhaps two metres above the waves. He kept to within the same from the cliff as well. The brooms glided silently over the waves, skimming towards their targets. Thankfully these had fences to stop hikers getting too close to the edge of the cliff, so as long as they stayed close to the cliff, they were invisible. Frank led them around the cliff for almost one minute before coming to a halt on a corner. The cliff, which was just over a metre to Frank’s left, seemed to end, but in fact turned sharply left and into the bay. They were at the entrance to the bay. Once they rounded this corner, there was a chance of being seen. However, they had to wait.

“Around this corner,” he said as everyone came close. “Is the bay with the bunkers entrance in it. Once we get the go-ahead from Rachel, head for the entrance as fast as you can. This is it, gentlemen. Be careful.”

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Rachel waited until Frank had gone a few feet before setting off towards the North end of the island with Ernie, Luna, Terry, Anthony, Katie, Seamus and Sirius along with one trained killer, the soldier named Myles. They moved at a brisk walk, which meant that they overtook most of the hikers enjoying a quiet day out at Christmas, who meandered along the path at a leisurely pace. What could this odd ensemble of silent hikers be in a hurry for?

The path reached a T-junction after one hundred metres with a farmhouse at the junction. A tractor was parked in the entrance to the farm, with the owner halfway inside the bonnet of the machine playing with the engine. Rachel turned left towards the east, checking that everyone was keeping up. On the right after fifty metres was a style. It was a small wooden ladder that allowed hikers to climb over the walls that kept sheep in, since the footpath went through the farmer's field. One by one, the nine of them climbed over the style and into the field, startling the sheep as they did so, which ran off, bleating as their field was invaded by the hikers. Once they were all over, Rachel led them along the grassy path, slightly darker than the other grass from where it had been trodden before. About fifty metres into the field, Rachel saw what she was looking for. A few metres to the right of the path was a clump of long grass, in the middle of which lay a round sheet of metal – a manhole cover.

The nine of them converged around the hole, staring down at the hatch, which was rusty and overgrown with moss, lichen and covered in mud. Sirius pointed his wand at the hatch and removed the long grass and moss with a quick Reductor Charm. Rachel glanced all around them, making sure that no one was watching. The curtains were drawn in the farmhouse, and the only movement was the farmer with his head inside the tractor. Along the other side of the wall, two intrepid hikers wandered along the track, only their hats visible above the wall. They were alone. Rachel shivered in the icy breeze as Sirius finished removing the grass. The others huddled round, with the added advantage of sharing heat. While Luna Lovegood seemed completely oblivious to the cold and seemed to be staring into space, Katie Bell – whose father had once been an Auror, Rachel remembered, until he had been killed in action was shivering and looking very pale.

With the debris removed, Rachel could see the hole more clearly. It was a dome-shaped cover and had a wheel about eight inches in diameter on the stop of it.

“Like a submarine,” noted Seamus. “Twist the wheel and it unlocks.” It wasn't exactly rocket science. Sirius sank to his knees next to the hatch, using the other's bodies to hide what he was doing from passers by – not that there were any. This was not the scenic part of the island. Sirius grasped the wheel tightly and tried to turn it. It refused to budge, and after a few seconds, Sirius hissed in pain and grasped his shoulder, his face contorted in pain. His arm was not fully healed. Rachel hoped it didn't mean he couldn't fight. They were going to need him.

“Private Myles,” said Rachel, looking up at the soldier. “Can you budge it?” The soldier seemed to have muscles growing out of his muscles, she noted, before quickly forcing the thought aside. This was not the time to be thinking about men. Myles knelt down by the hatch and grasped it as Sirius had done. Rachel glanced at her watch as Myles heaved. It read eleven twenty-eight. They were fast running out of time.

“Come on,” she said under the breath.

“Rusted solid,” announced Myles after a few seconds of trying. Rachel saw the children's faces change to shock and fear. They stared blankly at each other and then, inevitably, turned to Rachel for answers. She didn't let her concern show.

“What do we do now?” asked Terry Boot, staring down at the hatch.

“Blow it?” suggested Sirius.

“Too loud,” said Myles. “The bunker is made of steel. The blast will echo for miles and they will know we are here. However, I did bring cutters, mainly because I assumed they’d be locked in a sealed room.” Rachel breathed a sigh of relief. That was why they needed professionals. It was fortunate that they thought ahead. It never occurred to Rachel that they would not be able to get in, and chances were that Potter never considered it either. The soldiers really were useful. Potter had been right. Rachel had been a tad sceptical at first, when she heard that they were to use Muggle manpower.

Myles stepped forward, removing a small cutting torch from his backpack as he did. Rachel noted that the Purebloods amongst the group were watching the cutter with fascination. Macmillan and Goldstein stepped back in shock as a strong blue flame erupted from the end of it.

“Stand back,” said the soldier, kneeling beside the hatch. The wizards took a step back as a fountain of yellow sparks erupted from the hinge as Myles brought the torch down onto it. Ernie Macmillan seemed mesmerised as the torch melted the hinge, dripping white hot metal down onto the grass. Rachel checked her watch again. Thirty-one minutes past eleven. Frank would be pissed; they had fallen behind.

It took three minutes for the soldier to cut through the hinges and the lock of the hatch. That done, he stood up, extinguishing the torch and removing his visor. The hinges and lock had been surgically removed.

This was the back entrance to the bunker, the emergency exit, so in theory it would not be guarded, but she was taking no chances. “Wands,” she said.

Sirius knelt down, aiming his wand at the hatch, just in case there was anyone underneath it. With a deep breath, Rachel also aimed her wand at the hatch, taking one final glance around.

“*Wingardium Leviosa!*” she hissed. With a creak, the cover lifted free; Rachel breathed a sigh of relief. They were in! She dropped it on the grass to the side. The SAS soldier quickly took off his bag and removed the weapon; a pistol equipped with a silencer and cocked it with an eerie click. Rachel ignored it.

“*Lumos!*” Sirius muttered, igniting his wand and shining it down into the hole. Rachel dipped her head into the hole, shining the light down the passage below in each direction, checking for any signs of movement. From her position, she could see a thin corridor about a metre wide and two metres high. Pipes ran along one wall and the floor looked damp. The place stank of stagnant water. Rachel pulled her head back up and turned to the others. This was it. The hole was ready. Now, they found out if this had all been in vain.

“This is it, get ready!” she said as she dropped down into the corridor. Extinguishing her wand, she took two steps forward, staring into the gloom, allowing her eyes to adjust as Myles

dropped down beside her. He was wearing an odd contraption on his head that looked like an odd visor, which held a small pair of binoculars in front of his eyes.

“Night vision,” he whispered, apparently able to see her expression in the darkness. One by one the others descended into the passage. As they did, Rachel pulled out her Frog-Card.

“Harry Potter,” she said as the last of them dropped down into the corridor with a small splash. Her voice carried in the darkness, so she reduced it to a whisper.

“Yes,” came Harry’s voice as his face appeared on the card.

“We’re starting our attack now!”

~~~~~ Chapter XVI ~~~~~
Who Dares Wins Pt. II

*“Everything that has a beginning has an end.
I see the end coming.
I see the darkness spreading, I see death.
And you are all that stands in his way.*

*Very soon, he is going to have the power to destroy this world.
But I believe he won't stop there; he can't.
He won't stop until there's nothing left at all.*

*One way or another, this war is going to end,
Tonight, the future of both worlds will be in your hands
Or in his.”*

~ The Oracle ~ The Matrix Revolutions

“NOW!” shouted Frank as he pocketed the card. Not wasting a second, he launched the broom forward, zooming off into the bay. The waves were splashing over his boots as he skimmed over the sea towards the base of the cliff on the far side of the bay, where a staircase had been cut into the rock. The bay shielded them from the wind as they zipped across the waves, giving them a break from the icy chill that had assaulted their robes around the corner. The group was visible to people on the cliff-top, but it didn't matter at this point; hugging the cliffs would take too much time, and the Death Eaters would see them coming. Anyway, Muggles were stupid and would put it down to shadows, giant sea-gulls or refracted light reflecting off fish under the water. Frank couldn't fathom how Muggles believed such shite, and quickly forced the thought from his mind.

His eyes were honed on the bottom of the rock staircase. It was a long flat area of rock at the base of the cliff, stretching out five metres into the bay like a small jetty to which a small boat could dock. A staircase rose up from that for perhaps ten metres or so before it disappeared into the cliff itself. Frank could see that the jetty was slick with seaweed and knew that landing would be difficult, not to mention dangerous.

To his horror as he skimmed over the waves, Frank caught sight of two figures in robes at the entrance to the bunker having a cigarette. There was no way they could approach undetected from the sea; in fact as Frank watched, one of the men caught sight of the incoming brooms and pointed, his eyes wide in surprise. Within a second both of the sentries were staring at the incoming armada. Frank hesitated for a second. They were sitting ducks! There was nowhere to land, nowhere to hide, and they could not abort. It was the jetty or nothing.

Suddenly a jet of red light shot past Frank's ear. One of the Death Eaters had fired a curse at them, which Frank hadn't been expecting. Luckily, the curse missed. Frank whipped his head around to make sure the others were all right. Fortunately, no one had been hit, though some appeared to have scattered. Frank turned back to the cliff just in time to see a flash of green light zooming towards him. His life flashed before his eyes, as he saw the curse very late - it was almost on him before even he saw it. Acting instinctively, Frank wrenched the broom to his left,

rolling with the tilt. In desperation to escape the curse, he leaned a little too far, and with the dead weight of the soldier behind him, almost lost control of the broom. His elbow scratched the surface of the waves at high speed, spraying salt water up into Frank's face and eyes. Gasping in surprise, he blinked and shook his head, trying to regain his sight. He wiped his eyes, just in time to see another get of green light shooting towards him. He felt the power of the curse as it passed him, sending a chill down his spine and making his legs tremble. He had burst into a cold sweat from his near death experience. He managed to get level again, thirty metres from the jetty. The men were shouting up the stairs, trying to raise the alarm, as they launched yet another curse at the incoming armada of brooms.

Phht! Phht!

A muffled spit sounded behind him. Frank's head whipped around at the sound. He found himself staring at the corporal sat behind him, his arm outstretched, a pistol aimed at the entrance thirty metres away. *Phht!* The pistol fired again, right before Frank's eyes. Turning back to his target, Frank saw that one of the men was no longer standing; he was lying in an unnatural position, while the other gazed in shock at his fallen comrade, his jaw low and his wand arm hanging limply at his side. The distraction was long enough. In another second, Frank pulled his broom alongside the jetty, his feet touching down on the slippery rock. He levelled his wand at the Death Eater and with a single word, launched the sentry off his feet in a jet of red light and slammed him brutally into the wall.

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Ginny landed as gracefully as she could on the slippery rock now covered with seaweed. Her trainers had no traction as she dismounted the broom, and in less than a second she was on her arse on the cold wet rock. She ignored the icy winter water soaking into the trousers she wore, as she began to scramble over the slippery carpet of slimy seaweed using her frostbitten hands to steady herself. She had nearly been hit by an incoming curse, and had escaped by a hair's breadth. Adrenaline was pumping through her veins, and chills shot up and down her spine. She had come so close to death with that last curse, only narrowly having avoided it. It had passed so close to her head that she had felt a chill run down her spine as it had passed. It was a shocking reminder of how real this was.

As Ginny managed to find her balance, she looked over to where Frank Longbottom was hovering with the Muggle behind him. The two of them dismounted to join Ginny on the rocks, except they managed to stay upright.

Ginny slipped again landing on her knee. Ignoring the pain, she got up and managed the remaining three paces to bare rock, on which she could stand steadily, more or less. The Muggle soldier was on his feet; he approached the fallen figure of the Death Eater who had been shot, his gun outstretched in front of him, aimed at the fallen man. Ginny had never seen anyone shot before; she had seen blood in many classes and on the train back in September, which seemed an eternity ago, but nothing like this. She felt her stomach tighten and a little bit of sick make its way up her throat as she saw the fallen figure lying on the ground, a puddle of dark blood seeping out from beneath him. Wands were so humane, while the gun had left him to die slowly.

The corporal paused for a second, leaning over the body with his pistol levelled at the man's head. Using the tip of his boot, the soldier rolled the man onto his back. From here, Ginny could see the body more clearly. She hadn't heard the shot go off as they were flying, but the effect was clear: the bullet had hit him in his lower belly. The man was lying on his back in a pool of blood, coughing and gurgling as the thick red liquid made its way up his throat, as well as flowing out of his stomach. His breathing was short and sharp, with the added gurgling due to the blood. Ginny would never forget his eyes. They were deep blue and filled with fear. They stared desperately out from under his eyebrows, dotted with drops of sea water. Those eyes were begging someone to help him, to make the pain stop. Those eyes stared past Ginny's into her soul, and for a moment she pitied him.

The corporal on the other hand didn't; he paused for a second before raising the pistol to the man's head.

*Surely he wasn't going to...* her thought was cut short as the soldier pulled the trigger once more.

*Phht!*

Ginny cringed as the Death Eater's head erupted in a surge of blood. The bullet struck home in the forehead, leaving the eyes wide open and staring over towards Ginny, giving the body a pale and haunted look. Magical killing was much cleaner, but it was still something students should not see. Ginny glanced at the students around her, all of whom stared at the lifeless and bloody corpse that used to be a man. Katie had her hand over her mouth, while Cho seemed to be swaying and looked like she was about to be sick. *There had been no need for that!* thought Ginny, her anger growing. They could have helped him, saved him. He didn't need to be executed.

"What the Hell was that for?" challenged Ginny angrily, glowering at the soldier. "He was already down."

"The bullet was in his liver," said the corporal emotionlessly, his dark eyes fixed on Ginny. "Nothing could save him; I put him out of his misery."

"Magical medicine could have saved him," said Ginny indignantly. He was so ignorant of their world. They didn't need him here. Harry should never have sent him with them. They didn't need a monster like Dixon on their team!

"Weasley!" Longbottom attempted to silence her, but she was too angry. She ignored the Auror, and continued to glare at the soldier, her hand gripping her wand tightly.

"You didn't need to spray his brains all over the bloody cliff," snapped Ginny, her eyes seething.

"Are any of you doctors?" the corporal asked her, again keeping all emotion buried, and not looking the slightest bit intimidated by her rage. Ginny paused, knowing the answer and

seeing where the argument was going. “Exactly,” said the corporal in her silence. “He had twenty minutes to live, to suffer. I saved him that. Anyhow, he was a killer, as Frank has said. The world is better off without him.” How could he be so cold? Ginny was sure Harry had made a mistake by recruiting these people. She had no idea that the soldier was thinking the exact same thing about her.

Frank silenced any further protests from the others with a glare, and then turned his attention to the staircase of stone, rising up from the jetty into the cliff. Ginny turned back to the corporal, who had knelt by the Stunned Death Eater. Surely he wasn’t going to execute him, too? He possibly had a point with the dying man, but this would be execution.

Ginny watched as the soldier reached into his pocket. She gripped her wand, ready to stun him if he did; too many were going to have to die today already. They had no time or need for more killing. To her relief, he removed a short plastic strip about ten inches long and half an inch wide. He wrapped it about the man’s wrists behind his back, binding him tight. It was one of those tags that could not come undone without being cut. The more he struggled, the tighter it would get. Ginny’s father had brought some home once. Fred and George had had great fun with them; crucifying Ron to the rafters in the loft had been a highlight.

His task complete, Dixon stood up and removed his anorak. Underneath he was dressed in black, just like his companions with Harry. He wore black coveralls, with Kevlar body armour over his chest, which was covered with pockets holding equipment.

He reached into his bag and pulled out a helmet and gasmask, which he pulled over his face; it made him seem inhuman face and hiding all signs of emotion. It was a haunting face. Dixon pulled an electric torch out of his pocket, turned it on, and levelled it in front of him, while resting the gun on top of it so it lit where he aimed. “Ready,” he announced to Frank. The Auror gazed around, checking that everyone else was ready. Ginny could see the others with their wands out, ready to go. As she turned, she saw that one of them was behind. Cho was looking paler than ever; she was standing over the body of the Death Eaters, her hand covering her mouth and her eyes wide.

“Come on!” said Frank, glancing back from his position at the base of the steps, presumably to see what was keeping them. “No time to lose!” He seemed impatient as he aimed his wand light up the stairs into the tunnel. Ginny gestured for the others to follow while she went back for Cho.

“Hey,” she said gently, resting a hand on Cho’s shoulder. The poor girl was shaking uncontrollably, her eyes wide with terror as she stared at the fallen body, tears streaming silently down her cheeks.

“He’s dead,” she whispered, apparently in shock. “I can see....so much blood.” She was deathly pale and her eyes were vacant. “So much blood.”

“Come on!” hissed Frank from behind her. As Ginny looked over, she could see the others lined up against the wall at the bottom of the stairs. Ginny glanced from the others to Cho to the body and then back to Cho.

“She’s in shock!” Ginny called back to Frank. “She needs to return to Hogwarts.”

“What?” hissed Frank, rolling his eyes. His lack of pity annoyed Ginny, but she didn’t say anything. “Fine, activate her Portkey,” ordered Frank. It was the first decision the adults had made that Ginny one hundred percent agreed with. She reached into Cho’s pocket, and pulled out a small, silver tea-spoon; something Marge Dursley happened to have to hand. She thrust it into Cho’s hand and tapped it with her wand.

*“Activate!”*

Cho disappeared with a pop, safely back to the Hospital Wing. Ginny paused for a second, partially envying Cho, before scrambling over the rock to rejoin the others.

“She was in shock,” said Frank to them all, again with no hint of pity. Ginny managed to control her anger with him knowing that they were wasting time. “I know none of you have seen stuff like this before,” continued Frank, “but it will only get worse. I need all of you to be sure you can handle it.” He paused for a few seconds, but no one spoke. The others were determined to go through with this. Ginny felt a sense of pride in the DA at his point. Even Frank seemed grateful. Although he hadn’t quite managed to sound sincerely sympathetic to them in his pep-talk, he had a point, and it had succeeded in spurring on the DA. Ginny could see them set their jaws firmly, as they prepared to enter the cliff.

“Follow me, and stay against the wall,” said Frank, turning back to the stairs. “Any sign of movement, hug the wall and stay out of sight.” He stepped up onto the first step of the staircase and then a second later darted up the next twelve steps to the entrance to the cliff. Dixon, too, darted across the stairs and up onto the other side opposite Frank. He gestured for them to follow; Ginny dashed across to join the corporal. There was a burning torch on the wall, casting a dim light up the stairs, and another at the top, casting light downwards. After about ten metres of rock, the walls became metal. Thick metal pipes ran the length of the walls and ceiling and disappeared into the shadows. There were other flaming torches along the way, giving the corridor an eerie orange glow. It was much like how Ginny imagined Hell would look.

“Follow me,” said Frank, beginning to climb the stairs, his wand stretched out before him, ready to be used. The corporal advanced one pace behind and to the right of Frank, his gun levelled at the top of the stairs. Their footsteps echoed as they climbed, though they tried to tiptoe. To Ginny, even her breathing sounded incredibly loud; her heart was pounding so hard in her chest that she was sure everyone could hear it. Frank was right - this was no place for students. Merlin, she thought panicking, there could be someone at the top of the stairs waiting. What if the guards had alerted the others? There could be hundreds of Death Eaters. They could be waiting for them! This could be a trap! What would the Death Eaters do if they caught them? Kill them? Torture them? *Get a grip on yourself, Ginny!* She tried to shake her fears from her mind, but could not rid herself of the voice of doubt at the back of her mind. This was no place

for children. However, this was all they had so they had to go through with it. Ginny just hoped that no one else caved like Cho did. Taking a deep breath and trying to forget her worries, she took another step forward, willing her shaking legs to keep moving.

They had almost reached the top when they heard a sound up ahead. A soft scraping noise echoed down the metal passage. Footsteps were coming along the corridor! Ginny was sure of it. Merlin, they had been discovered! They were for it now. What would happen to them?  
*Calm down, stupid girl!*

There was a splash as the man trod in a puddle of water in the passage. Ginny remembered what she had been told and instantly pressed her back to the wall, trying to keep out of sight. Frank extinguished the nearest torch, plunging this section of the stairs into darkness. The whole team tried to hide in the shadows, but it was no good. As the man reached the top of the stairs, his eyes fell on the team, his face turning to one of horror, but he never had time to warn anyone.

“*STUPEFY!*” shouted six voices at once; the man never knew what hit him. He was blasted against the wall by six curses. He bounced off the wall, landing face first on the stone steps, and then began to roll. There was a long procession of thuds, growing softer as he rolled further away down the stairs. If the Stunners wore off - and the chances of six doing so were remote - the head injuries from rolling down the stairs would keep him out of the way. Ginny was just relieved that it hadn't been the corporal who had silenced him. Ginny realised her fists were clenched and she was sweating. Her spine was tingling, her heart pounding and her knees weak from the shock. She took a deep breath to try and calm herself. It was terrible; so frightening, but at the same time so exciting. Her mind was racing, a surge of emotion hitting her at once.

“Okay, just relax,” said the corporal to Anthony, who seemed to be breathing as hard as Ginny. “It's over now. Just breathe.” Ginny stood upright and looked ahead along the corridor. She hoped Anthony could pull it together, as they needed everyone they had. That was three enemies down, but there could be as many as ten left, if Frank's estimate of thirteen was accurate. She had no idea how he came up with the number.

“Okay,” said the corporal to Frank. He was standing next to Anthony with a hand on his shoulder. “He's ready.” Ginny turned back to Frank, who was staring ahead, down the passage, with his wand at the ready. Luckily there were no more stairs, as Ginny's legs were knackered. Hermione was also sweating as she stood on the opposite side of the passage from Ginny. It was good to see her again, but they had had no time to really talk, as time had been so short last night. They also would not have any time now: with Anthony ready again, Frank had started moving forward into the passage.

The flaming torches on the walls lit the way for them; the flickering shadows were creepy. Ginny's eyes couldn't adapt to the darkness with all the torches so she couldn't see more than twenty metres in front of her. They crept along the passageway as silently as possible, keeping their wands levelled in front of them. After fifty metres the passage came to a junction; there was another passage going off to the left. It went for about ten metres with a door on the

right at the end. A few metres further along the passage they were in to begin with, was a door on the left. Both doors must lead to the same room if Ginny had memorised the plans correctly. During the Muggle War this had been a sort of staff-room for those manning the radar station. Ginny had no idea what radar was, but according to Hermione it was there to detect German planes, ships and submarines coming in from the Atlantic and Normandy. The staff-room was connected with water and gas according to the schematics, which indicated a kitchen according to the Muggle captain. This was the most likely place to find Death Eaters. Frank paused at the junction and turned back to face them. Silently, he pointed to each of them and then a direction, indicating which door to take. Ginny took the door down the passage to the left. With her was the Muggle corporal, Hermione, Susan and Hannah.

They lined up outside the door, with Dixon and Ginny at the front. Her heart was pounding, as she pressed her back against the cold metal wall. She was sweating profusely, and her knees felt oddly weak. Her stomach was tight and her hands so sweaty it was hard to grip her wand. How had Harry lived like this for so long, dealing with this day in and day out?

“Okay, Dixon, on my count,” hissed Frank around the corner. “Three...” Ginny watched as the corporal pulled a small metal cylinder out of his pocket and removed a pin from the top. He kept it gripped firmly in his hand.

“...two...”

Ginny took a deep breath and raised her wand ready. This was what they had trained for; this was it!

“...one!”

The corporal opened the door just a tad and rolled in the cylinder. There was a metallic thud as it landed, and a shuffle from inside before a loud crack as the device went off. Ginny saw the reflection of a bright flash on the metal of the corridor and could detect a faint burning smell. Dixon moved in a flash, raising his gun to the door and then his boot. He gave the door a hard kick and it flew open. He disappeared through without any hesitation and Ginny followed, hot on his heels without thinking. Instantly she knew what the burning was. The cylinder had filled the area with smoke, as well as disorientated the Death Eaters. She could see several figures in black moving in the smoke. The brightly coloured anoraks, while unconventional, made it easy for them to spot each other. To one side was a small kitchen, in which one man was standing. From the spilt coffee it appeared he had been pouring himself a drink. There was a table in the middle around which four more were playing a game of what looked like poker.

Ginny barely had time to register this before Frank smashed in the other door, which swung back with a loud clang into the wall.

“Freeze!” shouted Frank, moving into the room, the other students entering behind him, their wands raised and ready. All five of the Death Eaters turned to face Frank, surprise written all over their faces. They were frozen in place, suddenly surrounded by an odd ensemble of

enemies. They wore full uniform, complete with masks. They would probably be bringing Dumbledore to the Ministry in half an hour to be executed, and so were in uniform.

“Keep your hands where I can see them!” ordered Dixon, approaching the man in the kitchen, his gun levelled at the man’s head. Ginny watched with her peripheral vision while keeping an eye on those at the table, making sure no one moved. This was easier than she had thought. They would hold them at wand-point, while Frank arrested them. Simple. What was all the fuss about?

“Put the bottle down!” ordered Dixon, approaching the Death Eater in the kitchen. The man in the kitchen looked terrified as Dixon approached, clearly unfamiliar with the obviously dangerous object Dixon was threatening him with. His hands shaking, he tried to put the bottle of milk down on the work surface, but because he was so scared, he missed. There was a moment, a split second before it happened that Ginny knew it was going to happen, but she was too far away to help. The glass bottle slid out of the man’s hand, and in slow motion, it seemed, sailed downwards towards the floor, shattering as it landed.

*CRASH!*

The corporal reacted to the crash in an instant, pulling the trigger. There was a spit and the Death Eater’s head whipped back, spraying the wall with red as his body dropped like a sack of potatoes. That was enough of a distraction for them to give the other Death Eaters time. One of them upturned the table, using it as a shield, while the other three drew their wands, taking cover behind the upturned table.

Ginny reacted almost as fast as Frank, aiming a curse at the Death Eaters. She tried to ignore the spray of red in the kitchen, now running down the walls. Her curse missed the Death Eater, hitting the wood of the table and splintering it. Frank had sent a similar curse, which sailed just wide of the table and went on to hit the wall.

The largest of the Death Eaters didn’t even need to use magic to hurl the table at Frank. His immense bulk was enough on its own, and the hard wooden table was launched through the air, towards the Auror. Ginny couldn’t help but watch the table fly by, even though she knew she should be watching the other Death Eaters.

“*REDUCTO!*” shouted the Auror, just as Ginny aimed a stunner at one of the Death Eaters. Whoever he was easily blocked her stunner and sent another one back so quickly that Ginny was forced to dive to one side, unable to cast a shield in time. There was a loud crack as the wooden table was smashed to pieces in mid-air under Frank’s curse, right above where Ginny had rolled. She covered her face as splinters and shards of split wood rained down on her. Her arms protected her face, as Hannah and Susan, who had appeared behind Ginny, shot two simultaneous spells over her head at the Death Eater. His shield snapped effortlessly into place, repelling both curses. Ginny stared up at the giant Death Eater, and beyond him to the ceiling where there was a strip light. An idea formed in her mind.

*“Reducto!”*

Her spell shot passed the Death Eater, who sneered at her. "You missed!"

The spell tore the bracket out of the ceiling at one end, causing the heavy glass rod to swing downwards, smashing over the back of the skull of the giant Death Eater. The impact on his head was enough to distract him. Three shouts of 'Stupefy' followed as Ginny, Hannah and Susan all together fired the Stunning Charm at the man, who couldn't raise a shield in time. The combination of three curses was enough to launch the Death Eater clean off his feet and slam him into the kitchen wall. A cabinet's brackets broke under his impact, so as he bounded off and fell to the floor, landing painfully face first onto the tiled floor, a cupboard full of glassware came crashing down on top of him, burying his head.

Suddenly Ginny felt hands grab her shoulders and hoist her to her feet. She looked up to see Susan and Hannah helping her. Girl Power! The three of them had taken down a Death Eater. That should show Frank that they were not useless, but it still left three Death Eaters still standing.

Ron and Hermione together had cornered another, smaller Death Eater, though he was not giving up lightly and it seemed that the two of them were taking a beating. Hermione sidestepped a curse elegantly, replying with one of her own. Ron shot another curse at the Death Eater who spun away, blocking Hermione's curse as he did so, sending it shooting back towards her. This time, unprepared, she jumped to the side, her back hitting the wall as she did so, cornering her. The curse missed, but she was in range of the Death Eater who grabbed her by the throat, slamming her head back into the wall.

She yelped in pain as her head hit the steel. Her wand fell from her grip as the Death Eater slammed her into the wall. Ron roared with fury and, forgetting his wand, dived at the Death Eater, who was in fact shorter than he was. Ron jumped onto his back, wrapping his arms around the man's neck and squeezing, his face contorted in rage. Had Harry been right and he did have a soft spot for Granger? Ginny didn't know, but she ran forward to help. The Death Eater released Hermione, who slid down the wall and lay on the floor, groaning and raising a hand to her head. The Death Eater screamed in rage and thrashed his arms about, spinning his torso in an effort to dislodge Ron, who held him so tightly around the shoulders that his wand arm was useless. He swung again, unable to break free of Ron's lanky arms. Ginny was sure that under the mask, the Death Eater would be turning purple as Ron choked the air out of him. Grunting in fury, he thrust his body backwards, slamming poor Ron into the wall, his back connecting sharply with the wall. Ron cried out in pain, but to his credit he hung on. Hermione had recovered by this time and found her wand, just as Ginny reached them.

"RON, LET GO!" she shouted. Her brother looked up for a second before releasing the Death Eater and diving out of the way as both Ginny and Hermione shot stunners at the Death Eater. The man was slammed into the wall by the force of the curses. He slid slowly down, finishing in a sitting position with his head slumped to the side. As he landed, his mask fell aside, revealing the familiar face of Marcus Flint.

There was a howl from the kitchen. Ginny looked up from helping Hermione to her feet. Dixon was physically wrestling with one of the Death Eaters. The man had pinned the corporal

down. His feet were on the floor, but his back was bent over the work surface, and his shoulders were pinned down. The Death Eater had his hands around Dixon's throat, and he seemed to have dropped the gun or been disarmed. Ginny didn't try to curse him in case she hit the corporal. Hermione, on the other hand, was more shrewd. She raised her wand to the kitchen. As Ginny watched, the cupboard flew open, raining cups and saucers down on the startled Death Eater. The soldier reached into the fruit bowl by the sink, grabbing half a grapefruit in the process, and then, in a highly undignified move, thrust the fruit into the man's face, smearing grapefruit into the man's eyes. The Death Eater recoiled, rubbing his eyes and screaming. Dixon grabbed a rolling pin from the pot of kitchen tools and swung at the man's head.

The Death Eater staggered backwards under the impact, right into a Stunner from Hannah Abbott, who was trying to help Dixon. The Death Eater fell to the floor with a crash, leaving just one remaining.

Frank was in the corner with the final Death Eater. The two of them were throwing curses back and forth incredibly quickly. Ginny couldn't keep track of the fight. She raised her wand to take aim, but he and Frank were circling so fast there was no room for a spell. Cursing, Ginny lowered her wand.

"Hey... what's...?" said a voice behind her as the door opened again. Ginny froze in horror as two more Death Eaters entered the room. It took but a second's hesitation before their wands were raised and ready. Ginny conjured a shield instantly as a curse left the wand of the first newcomer. The curse impacted in the centre of her shield, making it ring like a gong and pound in her ears as she was launched off her feet, shield and all, and across the room.

Coloured blobs burst across her vision as she landed. Coughing from the dust and smoke that filled the air, she sat back up, trying to shake the disorientation from her mind. Almost instantly Granger was at her side, offering her a hand to get up. Ginny took Hermione's hand, grateful of the support. Hermione pulled as Ginny tried to clamber to her feet but she never made it. Hermione's arm went limp as she screamed. Her body whipped backwards as a purple curse hit her back, sending her collapsing to the floor in a shower of purple sparks.

"NO!" screamed Ginny. Hermione's eyes rolled upwards into her head, and her eyelids closed, as she fell, seemingly in slow motion to the ground, falling at an unnatural angle. Granger had been hit! Ginny felt her stomach tighten and a shiver envelop her body; Hermione Granger was dead.

Suddenly there was a Death Eater standing over her, the newcomer who had cursed her. Ginny's eyes grew wide in terror as the man raised his wand high above his head, bearing down on Ginny. He brought it slashing down, roaring some sort of spell, his face contorted with rage as his arm sailed downward. Ginny was unable to move through fear. Hermione was dead and she was now about to join her.

There was a sudden spit and a small red hole exploded out of the Death Eater's chest, cascading crimson down his front and splattering Ginny with warm blood. The warm, sticky liquid touched her lips and she caught a faint coppery taste. Her eyes grew wide and her mouth

opened and closed, unable to understand what had happened as she lay there dripping in blood that was not her own. The man's face turned to one of utter shock and fear as he stared past Ginny to something behind her. Ginny turned, her whole body shaking, to see what had scared the Death Eater so. Her eyes fell on a figure dressed all in black and carrying a small black pistol.

*Phht! Phht!*

Dixon fired twice more, and Ginny felt the warm splatter rain down on her again, followed by a thud. She turned back to see the Death Eater lying in a puddle of his own blood, three holes in his chest and his eyes wide and vacant. Ginny didn't have time to scream or do anything else. Instantly a hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her roughly to her feet. She opened her mouth to complain, but she was dragged sharply to the side, into cover behind a kitchen cabinet, just as a curse blew apart a piece of the door. That had been close.

She looked up at Dixon, who was also hiding. "Thanks," she breathed. The soldier just nodded, his eyes still roaming the smoky room for targets. By rights there should be two more.

*CRACK!*

Another curse hit the woodwork they were hiding behind. Ginny shuddered as she felt the vibration.

"You can use the door as cover," said Dixon urgently. "And you can see more of the room from there. I'll cover you!" Ginny nodded and readied her wand as the corporal glanced around once more. "Go!" he hissed. Ginny turned back to thank the soldier again, but to her horror she saw a figure come out of the smoke, dressed in black robes and holding a wand.

"Get down!" she shouted, diving at the soldier and raising her wand to the Death Eater, who was preparing a spell.

"*Sanctius!*" said Ginny, snapping the small turquoise shield into place at the end of her wand. She pushed the standing corporal down to his knees, and stepped in front of him, holding the shield like an umbrella. She jabbed the small shield at the incoming curse, deflecting it away from herself and the corporal. The curse shot off, back towards the Death Eater who dived out of the way and disappeared into the smoke.

"Thanks," said Dixon, climbing to his feet and recovering his pistol.

"Now we're even," said Ginny, managing a small smile.

*BOOM!*

The whole room shook under the force of the blast. From somewhere down the passage an explosion had just gone off, sending vibrations throughout the steel bunker. If there was anyone who hadn't known they were under attack before, they certainly did now. Ginny's first

thought was that it must be the Order with their explosives, but then again, they may have tripped a booby-trap. Were they all dead? Images of her friends with their legs blown off by a trap filled her mind. She quickly pushed the images away; she had to concentrate, as there were still two Death Eaters in the room. Frank was with one of them; while the other was roaming.

Ginny didn't think about the other man. She left Dixon and ran over to where Hermione had fallen. Kneeling beside her friend, Ginny pulled her body up onto her lap. Hermione's muscles were limp as Ginny pulled her and her skin was as cold as ice, and white with death. Ginny held Hermione in her arms, clutching her to her chest. The poor girl had only been trying to help and it had been horrid what had been done to her. Ginny felt tears rising in her eyes as she pulled Hermione tightly to her chest. As the first tear fell down her cheek, a shimmer of hope rose through her. For a second she thought she had felt a heartbeat as she held Hermione to her chest. Instantly she released her, pressing two fingers to the underside of her neck. There was a second's pause filled with nothing, before she felt the smallest throb of her vein. She had a pulse! Faint as Hell, but it was there! Hermione was not dead!

"GOT HIM!" shouted a voice. Ginny looked up to see Ron standing over the fallen body of the Death Eater who had nearly killed her. She suppressed a satisfied smirk and turned back to Hermione, leaving a Ron that couldn't believe his luck, standing over his fallen opponent. She was impressed and quite proud of him, but there were more pressing matters than congratulating him.

She pulled off her coat and rolled it into a pillow before sliding it under Hermione's head. She waved her wand over her body, casting a gentle heating charm. She was not a Healer and had no real idea what to do.

"ARGH!" There was a scream from the other side of the room. Ginny's heart skipped a beat; had they lost another student? There was a pause, and Ginny raised her wand ready. After a second, there came a shout from the other side of the room.

"Clear," announced Frank. The smoke had all but cleared, and Ginny could see him again. He had a cut above his right eye, but seemed okay. Ron also looked okay, though he wore a smug grin.

"Are you okay?" asked Frank. Ron nodded, unable to lose the smile. As the smoke cleared, Ginny's brother caught sight of the fallen Granger. His smile vanished and he faced turned pale.

"Is she...?" he asked, rushing to Ginny's side. In a second they were all gathered around, staring down at the girl. She still looked like she was dead, but Ginny checked her neck again.

"She's alive," Ginny reassured them, "but barely".

"Send her to Pomfrey," ordered Frank, mopping his eyebrow with his sleeve and removing his anorak. Of course! Why hadn't Ginny thought of it sooner? That was the whole point of them carrying Portkeys! Cursing her stupidity, Ginny pulled the spoon out of

Hermione's pocket and wrapped the girl's fingers around it. That done, she tapped it with her wand, and Hermione disappeared with a pop, leaving a still room. Ginny just hoped she was alright. She had taken a hefty looking curse to the back. Her body armour would have absorbed some of the impact, but not all of it.

There was a second's pause before Frank broke the silence.

"She'll be all right," he reassured them, though Ginny doubted he was genuinely concerned. "We have to keep going. Let's move out!"

Not waiting for confirmation, he marched towards the door and stuck his head out into the corridor. Looking around, the others looked tired and worn, but to their credit, they didn't complain as they hurried after Frank. Ginny felt a swell of pride. The DA had just survived its first battle. They were all alive, and the Death Eaters were down. All the hard work and late nights had paid off. Ginny hurried to join the others by the door. Frank stepped out into the corridor.

"After fifty metres, the passage opens out. It's one of the doors in that room," whispered Frank. "Remember we don't know how many are left so keep your eyes peeled. Whoever is at the back needs to make sure no one follows us." The corporal agreed to stay as the rear guard, his professional eyes knowing what to look for. Ginny stepped out into the corridor behind Frank as they crept along the passage. Her trainers made no sound as she crept, except when she accidentally trod in a puddle in the dimness.

Sure enough, there was light at the end of the tunnel and after fifty metres the passage opened up into a room. There were three large pipes above each other running along the left wall, while smaller ones ran out of the corridor they had been in and then up the far wall, through a balcony and off along another passage. The balcony was made of rusting metal and was at the top of a thirteen-rung ladder. There was a large cylindrical tank in one corner, with a puddle beneath it, and occasionally a drip descending to the floor with a plop. A large strip light was on the ceiling, casting bright light down into the room. There were large steel doors on each wall, behind one of which were the prisoners. The question was, which one?

"Wait here," said Frank. Obediently, Ginny knelt by the corner and gestured for the others to stop behind them in the passage. She raised her wand in readiness, as did Ron who stepped forward to take Frank's place. The Auror stepped out into the room, away from the safety of the passage. His wand was raised and his eyes darted around, looking for any sign of movement. His movements were slow and cautious as he edged towards the door on the far wall.

He reached the other wall in fifteen seconds and glanced back over to where Ginny was hiding. After a second, he lowered his wand and raised a hand, beckoning Ginny to come out to him.

"Okay, come..." he started, but he never finished.

He was cut short as the floor in front of him exploded in a flash of green light, showered debris all around the room. Frank dived to the side, rolling on his shoulder in an inch of stagnant water. He rolled over again into a cover behind the large cylindrical tank. Ginny glanced up at where the spell had come from. There was a Death Eater at the mouth of one of the tunnels up on the balcony. The man was using the rail for cover, and was bearing down on Frank.

“*Reducto!*” shouted a voice in Ginny’s ear. Ron shot a spell up toward the man, but it only succeeded in hitting the wall, which absorbed it without even discolouring. The Death Eater flinched as the curse passed him, giving Frank the opportunity to peer out and shoot a stunner of his own up to the balcony. The spell missed. Ginny realised that the Death Eater was in an ideal position, almost impossible to hit due to the build and position of the balcony, but with a perfect view of them all.

Ginny ducked as a curse hit the wall by her head. How the Hell were they going to get out of this one? It was then that she saw movement behind the Death Eater.

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Rachel pocketed the card and turned to Sirius Black. Katie Bell watched with wide eyes as Rachel gave Sirius the nod. It was time. *Were they ready?* wondered Katie. This was real and they could get hurt – or even killed. Her stomach clenched tight with anxiety and her head began to spin. She took a deep breath, but it only filled her lungs with the smell of stagnant water and rust. Trying to calm herself, she raised her wand and closed her eyes. She counted to three and then opened them again. Sirius Black stepped past Rachel into the tunnel, shining his wand down the passage. Katie’s eyes were still accustomed to the light above, and could not make out anything, except for the white glow at the end of the tunnel. Presumably there were lights on at the room on the end of the passage. According to the plans, there was a storage cupboard on one side and the generator room on the other. Katie had only a basic idea of what a generator was, but Hermione has tried to describe one. She still didn’t get it, but settled for the description ‘it’s a big machine that makes power for the lights’. Hermione had tried to explain electricity to her, but had failed.

Katie knew that this passage was an emergency exit and as such was not designed to be travelled often. It was very narrow and so if a Death Eater happened to look down the passage, they would be sitting ducks. She was sure the Aurors knew this too, but she didn’t want to say anything out loud, in case it panicked the others. There was only just room for her to stand in the passage, without her shoulders touching the wall. The water on the floor made silence very hard and the fact that the top pipe on their left was red-hot and steaming in places where it had cracked, meant that they had to hug the right wall, for fear of getting burned. Her heart was pounding in her chest as she followed Seamus, who was behind Sirius.

Seamus crept forward behind Sirius, and Katie in turn followed him. She had met the Auror before, but it had been a long time ago. Her father had once been an Auror who had worked with Sirius, though it seemed like centuries ago. Her father had been killed in action five years ago. Katie could still remember the day when the messenger came from the Ministry to announce his death. She had been sitting in the lounge with her mother and then the messenger

had come in. She would never forget. In one of life's little ironies, after promising she would not get caught up in this war, and that she would always be there for her mother, here she was playing 'Auror', risking her life for the others. Who would have thought it?

Sirius reached the end of the passage, where it widened into a passage wide enough to walk two people abreast. Looking over his and Seamus' shoulders, Katie could see this wider passage. It continued for ten metres until there was a set of metal shelves on the left. As they ended, there was a crossroad in the passage with the generator room on the right and the store on the left. She could remember the plan quite clearly.

This was it! Katie listened for any sign of movement, but the hum of the generator made it impossible; she just hoped that that meant no one could hear them coming. Sirius stepped cautiously out into the light and pressed his back against the wall. Seamus was right behind him and also kept close to the right-hand wall. Katie took a deep breath and stepped out into the light; she moved to stand against the wall next to Seamus. The Auror, Rachel, was the fourth out and moved to the front, opposite Sirius; her wand was ready, and her eyes sharp. The others all squinted in the light as they emerged. They lined up with four of the students on the other wall with Rachel, while Katie, Seamus and Anthony Goldstein and the soldier stood behind Sirius on the right hand wall. Myles, the SAS medic, was dressed all in black, and carried a small black gun with a silencer. Sirius nodded down the line, showing he was ready. Katie just hoped the DA were ready too. They hadn't done any combat training other than what they could learn in a book. There was only so much a book could teach and they had no experience of actually duelling, except playfully with each other. Doubt filled her mind as she struggled to push it aside. Katie hoped they were up to it. Sirius took a deep breath and checked his watch; Katie glanced down at her own; they were running out of time.

"You four," said Sirius, pointing to the four students against the left-hand wall. "Take the door on the left with Rachel. Open it, throw in one of these, wait for a flash and then go in." He handed them a small flash-bang, which Luna Lovegood took in her hand, her expression dreamy. Katie was tempted to take it off her give it to someone else, as the girl looked like she was a million miles away. Sirius handed a second Flash-bang to Katie, who was apparently to go with him into the generator room.

"Right," said Sirius. "We go on the count of..."

He was cut short as the door behind him to the generator room swung open and a Death Eater stepped out into the passage. He was wiping what looked like oil from his hands on a dirty cloth, as he stepped out. It took him a fraction of a second to realise he was not alone. His eyes went wide and he dropped the cloth in surprise, but was unable to get the words out or scream. He didn't get a chance to.

"STUPEFY!"

Katie hadn't moved fast enough but Rachel and Sirius had. Two bolts of red light hit him in his chest, launching his body backwards. The man landed hard on his back, unconscious before he hit the ground. Of course, this announced his presence to the others in the room.

“MASON!” shouted a voice inside the room. “We’re under attack!” Sirius raised his wand to fire, but he wasn’t fast enough. Katie didn’t have time to shout a warning before several bolts of light shot out of the room and slammed into the door.

“GO!” ordered Rachel, running past the open door to get to the other side. She opened the opposite door to the store room and motioned for Luna to throw in the flash-bang. Luna did as she was told, while Katie remained hidden from sight. There was a flash and a bang as the device went off and Rachel disappeared into the smoke, followed by Luna.

“Ready?” asked Sirius, throwing a flash-bang to Katie. “Once inside, head to the right and hid behind the control desk.” She nodded, and stared down at the device in her hands. She guessed he meant for her to throw it in. He dived across the floor, across the open door, narrowly missing a curse that shot through the door and into the storeroom. Katie hoped it didn’t hit any of their team in there. After a nod from Sirius, she hurled the flash-bang in through the door. It went off a second later.

“Go!” shouted Sirius.

Anthony Goldstein took him at his word and stood up, rushing past Katie and into the room, firing a stunner as he went.

“NO!” shouted Sirius as the boy rushed past. “GET DOWN!”

“*AVADA KEDAVRA!*” the bolt of green light hit Anthony in the chest as he stood framed in the doorway. Katie ducked out of the way as his body buckled under the force of the curse. He fell to the ground, his neck at a sickening angle, and his vacant eyes staring up at Katie, lifeless and dull. He was dead.

Rachel emerged from the storeroom.

“Clear!” she announced, before her eyes fell on Anthony’s body.

“Man down!” hissed Sirius, “take cover and keep them inside.” He pointed to the others emerging from the store room. Rachel gestured for them to go back inside, just in time, as a curse shot out of the room, and slammed into the door next to Rachel’s head. Everyone ducked down. Katie couldn’t tear her eyes away from Anthony’s body. His dead eyes were haunting as he stared lifelessly into space. *Merlin, he was dead!* He was a student, her friend, not a soldier. He hadn’t deserved to die. The walls of reality came crashing down for Katie, as she stared into the lifeless eyes of her friend.

“NOW!” hissed Sirius, next to her. He and Rachel had managed to regain their focus. They were professionals after all, whereas the rest were just students, and now that something dreadful had happened, the difference showed. Katie was still focused entirely on the fallen member of their group, but the Aurors and the Muggle had moved on.

Sirius, Rachel and Myles all leaned around the corner, firing a volley of curses or bullets into the room. The small room was filled with smoke from the flash-bang and the machinery, making it hard to see. The three of them recoiled, Rachel knocking into Katie as she fell backwards.

“Sorry,” she muttered, regaining her balance.

“They’re dug in,” hissed Myles as another volley of curses shot out the door and hit the wall. One of them ruptured a pipe, which instantly sprayed a geyser of white-hot steam into the tunnel, making it near impossible to see. Luna and Terry were still in the storeroom, having taken cover at Rachel’s order. Ernie was by Katie’s side with Seamus. Katie couldn’t hardly see Ernie and he was less than a foot away.

“We can’t get in there or we’ll end up like Anthony,” shouted Ernie above the noise as more curses impacted on the wall, having been fired from inside. He flinched as pieces of metal was blown away from the wall. He was right. Katie didn’t consider herself an expert, but it was clear to see they were losing. They had no way to get in and were pinned down. Anthony had already lost his life, and it appeared that the same fate awaited the others.

“We’ve got to go loud,” said Myles, reaching into a pouch on his vest and removing a green ball with a black handle and key-ring. Katie had no idea what it was, and in her opinion, this battle was loud enough already. Whatever the green thing did, she knew to cover her ears.

Rachel and Sirius glanced at each other. If Katie had interpreted the ‘go loud’ comment correctly, wouldn’t that mean that everyone else in the bunker would know they were here? Would it not bring more Death Eaters down on their heads?

“It’s too late for stealth,” said Sirius. “Do it!” Myles pulled the key ring out of the ball and threw it into the room with a resounding clunk.

“Get down!” he hissed, covering his ears. Katie realised what was about to happen and clamped her hands over her ears. Just in time, too - the grenade exploded with tremendous force, causing the whole corridor to shake under the power of the explosion. A fountain of dust and debris shot out of the door, littering the corridor and raining hard shards of metal down on them.

“AHH!” Katie turned around to see Ernie, clutching his ears. There was a slow trickle of blood coming from one of them, seeping through his fingers, his face contorted in pain. He hadn’t got his hands up in time and the force of the explosion in such a confined space had ruptured one of his eardrums. Pain was etched into his face, now covered with dust. His hair was speckled with shards of debris. He was a mess.

“Ernie’s hurt!” hissed Katie, but Sirius and Rachel had gone. The two Aurors, along with the soldier, had entered the room, disappearing into the smoke. Katie could see flashes of light reflecting off the steam. Her ears were ringing and so she couldn’t hear the curses being exchanged inside. They emerged a second later.

“Clear!” hissed Rachel as she reappeared. Her eyes suddenly fell on Ernie. “His ears are gone,” she said aloud, kneeling next to him opposite Katie. “It’s okay; I can deal with this one,” she said giving Katie a small smile. Rachel gently turned Ernie’s head to the side so that she could see his ear - Ernie hissed in pain.

“It’s okay,” she soothed him. She pointed her wand at his ears and muttered a few words. A light appeared to be glowing from inside his ear, but the blood remained. Ernie once again hissed in pain, but Rachel ignored him. The light faded and she lifted him up into a sitting position. “Wipe the blood away,” said Rachel. “You’re fine now.”

“What about Anthony?” asked Ernie, rising to his feet. Katie followed Ernie’s eyes to where Anthony now lay. His body had fallen oddly with his neck at an unnatural angle and his unseeing eyes staring up into the lights. The subsequent battle had covered his body in debris. All dignity was gone from his death, as he lay partially buried and covered in dust, mess, and dirt. Some of the steam had cooled and covered him in water, leaving dark muddy streaks over his face and clothes. Katie stared at him, her thoughts straying to his parents, to those who had lost their son. Poor Anthony.

“We need to send the body back,” answered Sirius, his voice soft and remorseful. The Auror knelt next to the body, reached into Anthony’s jacket pocket and removed a fork. He pressed it into Anthony’s cold, lifeless hand and tapped it with his wand. Katie knew the fork was a Portkey and wasn’t surprised when Anthony disappeared with a pop, leaving the corridor in darkness. There was a moment of utter silence as everyone tried to put their fallen friend out of their mind focus on the job in hand. Anthony’s lifeless eyes still imprinted on Katie’s mind, she rose to her feet, ready to move on, trying to shake the image from her mind. Katie took the opportunity to peer into the room, taking in not only her surroundings, but the sombre expressions of those around her. Everyone’s face was stern and set, no one wanting to be the one who appeared scared, but Katie could tell each was suffering. She tore her eyes away and peering into the room. The whole place was littered with debris, though the large green machine in the corner continued to hum. That had to be the generator, as the lights were still on. The rest of the room was covered in clutter and there were several small fires burning, adding to the smoke.

“Come on,” said Sirius, gently guiding her from the room. “Let’s go.”

He didn’t allow them time to recover, but Katie appreciated that they didn’t have time. They had to keep going; they were so close. This had been a proper battle and Anthony had paid with his life. Merlin, Katie hoped this was all worth it. They had to succeed; they just had to!

Sirius set off at a jog down the corridor. Katie took a deep breath and set off after him. They were close now, and needed to hurry. The whole place knew they were here after that explosion, so they needed to clear the bunker quickly. Katie and Seamus set off at a jog side by side, with Luna and Ernie behind them and Rachel and Myles bringing up the rear.

They ran along a passage lit with electric lights, not seeing any sign of movement. They were moving quickly and their footsteps echoed, but the time for stealth was over. Suddenly

Sirius ground to a halt, and Katie nearly went into the back of him. He raised a fist as a gesture to stop and everyone froze.

“What is it?” whispered Rachel, making her way to the front.

“I thought I heard a curse,” said Sirius. Katie cocked an ear and listened hard, as the others pressed themselves to the wall.

“REDUCTO!”

The word echoed down the metal corridor, clear as crystal in a strangely familiar voice. “That’s Ron!” hissed Katie. “They need help.” The others were under attack. Had they lost more people? How many were dead? Was Weasley the last man standing?

“Wait here,” said Rachel, pushing past the others and tip-toeing off ahead in the corridor, her movements slow and cat-like.

“Stay close,” ordered Sirius, ignoring Rachel and moving slowly forward. Rachel was about ten metres ahead, but in clear sight. Katie was alongside Sirius, not far behind. Up ahead, she could see that the passage opened up into a room. It looked like a gangway or a balcony, as it had a barrier and an edge to it. There was a man in black robes crouched behind a barrel, looking down at the room below. Flashes of light reflected off the walls.

Suddenly there was a shout and a jet of red light shot past the man, missing and hitting the wall. That sounded like Frank, Katie noted. At least two of them were alive. She aimed her wand at the man, but Sirius pushed her arms back down, stopping her from aiming.

“You might hit Rachel,” said Sirius. Katie was mildly insulted that he didn’t trust her aim, but she said nothing. She watched Rachel as she approached the man silently from behind. Katie noticed that she had pocketed her wand. Why would she do that? As Katie watched, Rachel grabbed the man around the neck from behind, pressing her forearm into his throat, and gripping his neck with her other arm. Her knee was pressed into his back, preventing him from getting to his feet. The man dropped his wand in shock as she grabbed him. A second later, Rachel gave his neck a sharp twist. He died with a sickening crack that echoed down the passage, making Katie’s stomach clench. She had to look away, and felt sick at the sound of the bone breaking. With that, Rachel released the body, and it fell to the floor with a splash.

“In a spot of bother, lads?” asked Rachel, leaning on the rail. Katie assumed she could see the others below. Katie and Sirius moved forward to join her on the balcony, just as Ron and Ginny Weasley emerged from a passage on the lower level. Frank stepped out from behind a large cylindrical tank, dripping with water, his robes streaked with stains of mud, algae, rust and Merlin knows what else. The remaining part of Katie’s gang joined them on the balcony. Frank beckoned for them to come down, and pointed at the door at the end of the room.

“Be right down,” said Rachel, swinging herself onto the ladder.

“Was the explosion you?” asked Frank as Rachel climbed downwards.

“Yep,” she said as she reached the bottom of the ladder. “A group of them had position on us, so we chucked in a grenade. I counted four bodies in total.”

“We got nine,” said Frank. “That’s thirteen, but there could be more.”

“Or they could all be at the ceremony,” said Rachel, as Katie mounted the ladder.

“Hope for the best...” said Frank.

“...Prepare for the worst,” finished Rachel. Katie reached the bottom and stepped away.

“Everyone all right?” asked Ginny. Katie couldn’t look her in the eye.

“We lost Anthony,” said Katie sadly. “He’s dead.” Ginny paled slightly and bowed her head. The smile on her face vanished in an instant.

“Hermione and Cho are injured and back at Hogwarts,” Ginny announced. “They’re alive, but...” she trailed off. Three of them had been injured and they were not even at the Ministry yet. They didn’t know the condition of the hostages. How were they ever to amass an army large enough to rival the Black Watch? Katie was drawn from her thoughts by Frank’s call.

“Come on,” said the Auror, emotionlessly, earning himself a glare from Ginny. Katie was glad he had stopped her trail of thought or she might have driven herself to despair. Turning her attention to Frank, she listened as he continued.

“Let’s finish this, or their deaths and injuries will have been in vain.”

Katie nodded, knowing it was the right thing to do, and knowing her father would be proud of her today. She looked around the room. The last of them was descending the ladder. The two SAS men were talking quietly in the corner, presumably comparing notes. The three Aurors were at the far end of the room, examining a large metal door.

The students gathered round, a sombre atmosphere falling on the group. One of them was dead, two were back at Hogwarts, unable to go on; Katie didn’t know what state they were in. Ernie had been injured, though he seemed all right now. This wasn’t the grand adventure it had seemed. She hadn’t planned on this when she had joined the D.A. Dumbledore’s Army, a sort of joke name, an army loyal to Dumbledore, not Crouch’s Ministry. None of them had thought the name of the society was to be taken literally. Still, she was glad she had come. She hadn’t enjoyed it, for the most part, but she felt like she was helping people; she knew what she did today would save lives, just like her father had done. Maybe she would be an Auror one day.

“Guys,” said Sirius from by the door, addressing the students. “Form a semi-circle, wands aimed at the door. We don’t know what’s behind it.” They spread out, just as they had

been told, wands level at the door. Frank and Rachel were on one side of the door, with Sirius on the other.

“It’s warded,” hissed Frank. “The Alohomora Charm won’t work, and we can’t blast, as we’d kill whoever is inside.”

“Myles, cut it!” hissed Rachel. Katie watch as Myles pulled out his cutting torch again and went to work on the lock. Sparks flew everywhere, like a beautiful but deadly fountain as the torch melted the lock. It took perhaps thirty seconds, before the man backed off.

“Ready?” hissed Sirius. Katie tensed, her entire body ready to react with less than a second’s notice. Her wand was aimed at the door, a curse on her lips, ready to blast anything inside into oblivion.

“Three...” began Sirius, “...two...o...” He was cut off as the lights suddenly went out with a sharp crack.

“Defensive positions, take cover!” hissed Frank. There was a mad scramble and Katie darted into cover, colliding with something small, soft and warm. It was a person.

“Oi!” hissed an Irish accent.

“Sorry, Seamus,” whispered Katie. They were concealed beneath the balcony. There was silence and the fact that she couldn’t see her hands in front of her face didn’t help. Her heart was pounding as she stared into the darkness.

“I can’t see a thing,” hissed Seamus. Their night vision had been ruined by the light. “What happened?”

“Either someone shut down the power or it ran out,” said Katie.

“Shhh!” hissed a voice, probably Frank.

Suddenly, a white light filled the room. “Don’t move,” hissed Frank, rising to his feet, his wand light shining around them. In the gloom, Katie could see the others cowering in the shadows, and Frank moving into the centre of the room, shining the light around.

“It must have just ran out,” said Frank. “As you were.”

Lighting their wands, the others once again formed the semi-circle around the door, wands at the ready, the Muggles holding up Muggle torches so that they could see. Her heart will pounding, Katie aimed her wand at the door.

Frank took the handle in his arms and began to pull. With a grating sound, the door slowly began to move. Katie readied her wand, a Stunner on her lips, in case anyone tried to come out. With a final creak, the door swung completely open, revealing a consuming darkness.

Katie couldn't see a thing inside. The room was in total darkness, and it smelt of sweat and human waste. The smell hit them like a wall, and with a groan they all clasped their sleeves to their noses. It was vile.

"Wait here," hissed Frank, slipping through the doorway, into the gloom. Katie stepped a little further forward, lighting her wand to cover him. She stopped at the entrance, and kept her wand on Frank so he could see where he was treading. There was no sign of life. Ginny appeared next to Katie, wand light trained on Frank. Frank didn't light his wand so that he could use other spells if needed.

Katie watched as the man dressed in a green anorak, stepped cautiously into the darkness, his wand moving left to right, looking for any sign of survivors. There was utter silence, save for Frank's footsteps. Katie's heart was pounding. What was going to happen? Had they got it all wrong? Were the hostages not here? Had Anthony died in vain?

Suddenly there was a flash of movement, and something grabbed Frank and pulled him into the darkness. He disappeared with a grunt. Katie wanted to fire a spell, but it was too dark and she didn't know what she might hit. There was only one spell she could use.

"Lumos Maxima!"

Instead on a single beam of light, a ball formed at the end of her wand, lighting the entire room, so brightly everyone had to look away.

Frank lay face down on the floor with his arms being held firmly behind his back by a combination of a very scruffy looking James Potter and another man. Potter and his accomplice were frozen like rabbits in headlights, their dilated eyes staring at the army in the doorway.

"Prongs," said Sirius in an almost bored voice. "Is that any way to greet your rescue party?" Potter's jaw dropped and he stood gaping like a fish as Sirius stepped into the room. Katie could see the others now, dotted around the room. There were almost thirty of them. Some faces she knew, most she didn't. There were wearing an assortment of stained and dirty clothes, most with holes on them. The floor was covered in an inch of water, and from the smell of it was mixed with urine. They hadn't even been allowed out to go to the loo. One or two were sporting evidence of having been beaten, and they all looked deathly pale.

"Can I get up now, please?" hissed an angry voice from the floor.

"S...sorry, Frank," stammered Potter, releasing the Auror. Katie didn't manage to hide her grin, and quickly looked away. Potter continued to gape and stammered, "I...I...what are you doing here?"

"We are here at your boy's request," said Frank, climbing to his feet. "We have to get you out of here, now."

“Ginny!” Katie turned to see Rose-Marie Potter stagger out of the darkness and almost fall into her friend. As Ginny and Rose-Marie embraced, Katie could see that Rose-Marie had suffered. Her once pristine black robes were dripping wet and covered in greeny-brown slime. It was the decayed water, miserable food and probably vomit as well. Her face was covered in dirt, her hair a mess and her eyes vacant and tired.

“Harry decided we needed more help,” said Rachel opening the door fully. “Hello, Mad-Eye,” she added sarcastically, pulling the Auror to his feet. “How am I doing?” There was smugness in her voice, but Mad-Eye ignored it.

“Where’s Dumbledore?” asked Frank, shining his wand around. Katie scanned the room but couldn’t see the headmaster.

“They’ve already taken him to the ceremony,” said James Potter. “He’s to be executed.” They were too late. What happened now? Without Dumbledore, they would never manage to defeat You-Know-Who. Harry Potter was good, but he wasn’t that good. They needed Dumbledore. Without him it was hopeless.

“Then we can pick him up there when we meet Harry,” said Sirius, remaining calm. “Come on, it’s twelve minutes to twelve. We need to go.”

“All right,” said Frank, taking control. “Anyone fit to fight, come to me, and we’ll get you to the Ministry.”

“Lily, Rosie,” said Sirius, reaching into his pocket. “Come on, we’ll get you back to Hogwarts.”

“I’m going!” announced Rose Marie, drinking from Ginny’s flask of water, before splashing some more over her face.

“You’re too tired,” said Ginny gently, and Katie agreed, but the girl was adamant. She shook her head, and swet her jaw firmly.

“I’m fine,” said Rose, “And you need all the help you can get.”

“Lily?” asked Sirius, looking doubtful. Professor Potter sighed and nodded.

“We all go,” said Lily. “Harry needs us all.”

“Portkeys,” said Frank, handing them out. “James, Kingsley, Lily, you first. Let’s just hope the boy-wonder has done his bit.”

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The door to the lift slid silently open, and Harry stepped out into the gloom. The Ministry Entrance Hall was in semi-darkness, the only light coming from a false skylight in the roof,

which lit only a small area in the centre of the room, and a small light on the security desk. The desk was manned by a single guard, who had his feet up on it and was reading a magazine; another man paced the room. The two men were dressed in the uniform of the Black Watch. Looking around, Harry could see the fountain glistening in the gloom, and the sound of trickling water had muffled the sound of the lift's chime, and would also cover his footsteps.

Harry glanced at Captain Spears, who had come down with him in the lift. The captain stood beside him, along with two other soldiers. Four had been all they could fit in the phone box. It would take several more trips to get them all down here, but they had been told to wait until Spears radioed them. The captain raised two fingers to his eyes and then to Harry, showing that he saw two men. Harry nodded in agreement. He had no idea how he understood these signals, but it seemed that the Dark Knight once had. He raised the palm of his hand to Spears, gesturing for him to remain there. He would handle this - hopefully without bloodshed.

Harry slipped into the shadows on the left side of the room, far away from where the Black Watch Auror was pacing. Harry slipped down the side of the room, hugging the wall and invisible in the shadows, thanks to the black cloak covering his white. He passed all the fireplaces through which hundreds of wizards and witches had arrived this morning, but through which none of them could be allowed to leave this afternoon. An inconvenience, yes, but a necessary one. He reached the back of the reception desk and hopped over it, his boots landing silently on the floor behind the guard who was reading. Harry paused, taking in his surroundings again. The pacer was close to him now. Harry waited, as the pacer completed his length. His heart was pounding in his chest, and he was sure that his heart and breathing would give him away. The pacer finished his length and turned around, heading back up towards the lift end.

When the pacer's back was turned, Harry moved instantly. He grabbed the reading guard from behind, clamping his hand over his mouth to stop him speaking and poked his wand into the man's lower back.

*Stupefy!*

The man went limp, but unfortunately as he did, he slipped off the chair, crashing to the floor with a tremendous bang and taking Harry with him. There was a thud as he hit the floor, followed by a crash as the upturned chair landed beside him. The weight of the man and the chair pinned Harry to the floor. The pacing Auror spun on the spot and raised his wand, but he never managed to get a spell off. Three red holes exploded out of his chest, tearing his clothes to ribbons, as Spears fired his machine gun. The silencer prevented the sound of the gunshots, but the silence only made it more un-nerving as a man's chest exploded for no apparent reason, spraying blood over the floor. The body crashed to the floor in a puddle of blood. Harry stood back up, using his wand to hoist the stunned guard off of him. From behind the desk, he could see the fallen Auror lying in the light area. His face was pale, his eyes vacant and haunting. A pool of thick blood was seeping out from beneath him, slowly growing as his arteries emptied over the floor.

*"Scourgefy!"* Harry cleaned up the mess as Spears dragged the body away. Although sickened by the blood, Harry felt a surprising lack of remorse for the man. This was disturbing,

but probably for the best as it allowed him to concentrate on the job at hand. The other soldiers were now arriving in four loads from the phone booth. Rachel had just called from Lundy, so their attack had started. They had time, but not a lot.

“Come on,” hissed Harry as the last of the soldiers emerged from the phone-box. He stood in the light, cloaked in black, and surrounded by thirty-eight men, also in black. They were armed to the teeth with pistols, machine guns and knives. Their armour made them look more intimidating, while the helmet and gasmask gave them an inhuman and haunting look. They were indeed an ominous sight. Harry singled out Lieutenant Hopkins, the officer of Blue Team, and handed him the backpack he had brought, containing the last of the Arctic Thunder machines. “Keep this with you, I will return for it,” he told the man.

He turned to address all the soldiers. “This is it,” announced Harry. “Blue team, stay here and secure the room. We will deactivate the fireplaces, but people will try and escape through them. Use force if you have to, but no one is allowed to leave. Red team, you are coming with me to the Auror Complex. Follow me. Good luck, gentlemen.”

Harry turned on his heel, and headed around the security barrier and into the Ministry of Magic. The eighteen soldiers from Red Team followed his example in silence, Captain Spears at the front. They were too professional for needless chatter and there was nothing left to say. They followed him in silence. The lift at the end of the corridor opened, and they managed to squeeze half of them in. The lift took them to the new Auror Complex, in a different part of the country, by means of magic.

Harry raised his wand as he felt the lift stop. There was a series of clicks as the soldiers cocked their weapons. Harry hoped they didn’t have to use them. After seeing the mess in the Entrance Hall after Spears had shot that guard, Harry had no desire to repeat it. He felt no sympathy for the guard, but his own stomach had not liked the sight of the blood.

*PING!*

The doors slid open and Harry slipped out into the darkness. Thankfully, they found the complex deserted. *This would be an ideal day to rob a bank*, thought Harry; *the police are all on holiday*. His sharp eyes scanned the darkness, detecting no signs of movement.

“Secure the area,” Spears ordered his men. Harry watched as the figures in black dispersed amongst the desks, their guns levelled, looking for enemies. Harry headed along one corridor for about ten metres before finding the door he was looking for. Rachel’s map of the complex had been invaluable. He entered the armoury, which had been repaired following Rachel’s pyromanic episode. Inside were enough armour and weapons for them all – enough to start a war. He surveyed the rows of wands, Stun-batons, armour and phials containing useful potions. He picked out one labeled ‘Combat Cocktail’. According to the label, it was a combination of Pepper-Up potion, Blood-Replenishing potion, Strengthening Draught, Pholescanthia, which sharpened the senses. They would need that if they were to have a hope of walking out of the Auditorium alive.

God, he hoped he knew what he was doing. He had sent his friends to Lundy, to fight against trained Death Eaters. They had had next to no practice. God, he hoped they were okay. They were all he had, but he knew that didn't make them the best. What would he do if his friends were killed? He had no idea. He wedged the door open and returned to the main floor of the complex. The soldiers were standing around ready.

"You all know where to be and when?" he asked. The soldiers all nodded.

"Thanks for doing this," said Harry, bowing his head.

*POP!*

Harry spun round as four people holding a potato masher appeared out of thin air. James Potter, Rachel Shepherd, Nymphadora Tonks and Alastor Moody had appeared through the Portkey. The soldiers had immediately raised their guns in response to the new arrivals.

"Hold fire!" snapped Harry. "Lights!" The lights came on at the sound of his voice, due to the magic of the room. His father took two steps and speechlessly dragged Harry into a hug. Harry had never been hugged like that before, except by Mrs. Weasley, and didn't really know how to react, especially with the hard-as-nails SAS around him. How could they respect him after this show of affection? He was sure they were smirking behind their gasmasks.

"Thank Merlin you're okay," said James, his voice cracking as he held Harry tightly.

"You told me to find you," whispered Harry. "So I did." James chuckled sadly, as he released him, his eyes still glistening with tears. He had long stubble that was almost a beard and large bags under his eyes. He looked tired and worn, but his eyes were alive.

"Has Sirius told you the plan?" asked Harry.

"The long and the short of it," said James. "Are you sure you're up to this?"

"I have to be," said Harry. "Now, you'll need to lose the beard to get past the Aurors." Harry smirked at the glare he got from his father. "As a prominent Auror, you need to recruit as many as possible," said Harry. The soldiers had the blueprints of the Auditorium laid out on the table, so Harry led his father across to it. "You need to get to the Black Watch here —" he pointed to the map — "Also, there will be commandoes here, and Aurors who aren't in the Black Watch grouped here. They will have red bands on their arms."

*POP!*

Rose-Marie, Dedalus, Hestia, Kingsley and Katie had appeared from thin air, holding an egg whisk. *What on earth...?* thought Harry.

“What is Rose doing here?” demanded Harry of Rachel. “I specifically said take her to Hogwarts!” Could she not follow a simple instruction? Rose was clearly not up to fighting and he didn’t want her anywhere near the fight. He didn’t want her death on his conscience.

“She’s...” began Rachel.

“Quite capable of speaking for herself,” Rose cut her off, glaring at Harry. Harry admired her courage, but this was not the time to play soldier. This was serious. “I’m fine, Harry, and I can fight. I’ve been locked in a cell for a month. I’ve got lots of pent-up energy and frustration.”

“This isn’t about revenge,” said Harry. Didn’t she see that thinking like that would only get her killed? “You are in no fit state to fight. Please, return to Hogwarts.”

“I know it isn’t about revenge, but you need everyone you can get, so shut up. I’m coming,” snapped Rose. Harry opened his mouth and then closed it. He didn’t have time to argue with her, as she was as stubborn as he was. They were in a hurry. Harry glanced pleadingly at his mother, who although swaying slightly nodded to him. *Great*, thought Harry bitterly. *Now she’s coming too*. More worries he did not need.

Harry checked his watch. They were running out of time. “Fine,” he said to Rose. “But if it gets too much, if you are hurt or feel tired, you return to Hogwarts. You don’t get cocky or stupid, you leave, is that understood?” He didn’t like the idea of her being there.

“Yes,” said Rose, nodding. Harry took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. He hoped he could concentrate on Voldemort and not worry about her, but it wasn’t likely.

“Sirius, don’t let her out of your sight, okay?” The Auror nodded. “Right,” said Harry, after the third Portkey arrived. “Listen up! Grab a wand, armour and Black Watch robes and combat cocktail from the armoury. You will need them to slip amongst the ceremony. Aurors, recruit your old friends, others take up position and wait for my signal. When it kicks off, someone get Dumbledore clear. Captain, I need you in position as soon as possible but wait for the magic to go down.”

“What’s the signal?” asked Rose.

“You’ll know when you see it,” said Harry. “All Hell will break loose. Now get ready!”

“Here,” said Rachel, throwing a bag at Rose, who caught it. Rachel threw more to Mad-Eye and the others. They were small sports bags and they seemed full. Those hadn’t been part of the plan, had they?

“What are those?” asked Harry, gesturing to the bags.

“Auror robes,” Rachel replied, pulling a wad of red fabric out of one of the bags. “They were on their way to the incinerator. As guardians of the peace, we wore these. We fought under

the badge of justice and if there's ever been a time when someone should stand for justice, it's now."

"Cool," said Ron, having just arrived by another Portkey. "Always wanted some of these." He began to replace his anorak by the robes.

"When people see the Red," said Rachel, "when ex-Aurors see the badge once more, we'll see where their loyalties lie."

*THUD!*

Harry spun around. To his horror, he saw his mother lying spread-eagled on the ground, her face deathly pale.

"Mum?" was all he could say, his mind blanking in panic. James was by her side in a second, leaning over her. She had collapsed onto her back on the floor, and was lying in an odd position, her breathing shallow, and she was shivering. He checked her pulse, and leaned down low, his cheeky over her mouth.

"Pulse slow, and breathing shallow," he announced. "She's too weak to go on. She'll live, but she can't fight."

"Send her to Pomfrey, quickly," said Harry, kneeling next to her and trying not to let his concern show. He glanced up at Rose, who was staring down, here eyes wide and shining with tears.

"You could accompany her back," he suggested. Rose shook her head. She was still as stubborn as her mother. Rachel chucked a pair of tongs to James who caught them deftly and placed them his wife's hand. Harry took a deep breath, hoping this wouldn't be last time he would see her, and then tapped the Portkey with his wand. She was gone with a pop.

"Are you all right?" asked one of the soldiers.

"As I'll ever be," said Harry, standing up. He was more concerned about the others.

"Right, I have to get going," said Harry. "As soon as you've had some potion, get going. Wear Black Watch kit over the top of your reds," said Harry, "so you can move amongst them." He rather liked the idea of the old uniforms, but they mustn't stand out until it all kicked off. Then it would be good to be able to see each other clearly. "Get to the ceremony, recruit who you can, but remember, no one makes a move until Voldemort and I arrive," said Harry. "Good luck." With that, he left the others and marched over to the lift and pressed the button. The doors slid open and Harry stepped in. "Hurry, we have only five minutes. Good luck and Godspeed!" He pressed the button for the Minister's floor.

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The doors slid open and Harry stepped out into a deserted corridor. This was probably the only floor of the building with the exception of the ceremony downstairs, on which the lights were on. Harry blinked as he stepped into the lights, but his eyes quickly adjusted. He checked his weapons were all secure and his wands were where he could get at them. Satisfied, he pulled the black cloak around him and with a deep breath, he began to march the corridor towards the Minister's room. He walked in the middle of the corridor, no longer needing to hide. For a start, there was no one here, and secondly, Voldemort wanted him for himself. No one would touch him. Harry knew that this was a trap for him, but he knew something Voldemort didn't.

At this very moment, the newly revived Order of the Phoenix was spreading out into the Ministry. Harry wasn't alone. Voldemort had always said his weakness was his friends, but today, they were his strength. Today, Voldemort would be proved wrong. Harry knew that this was a plan to draw him out and that Voldemort would wait for Harry to come to him. Every step brought him closer to Voldemort, closer to the man who had killed his parents and closer to the man he was destined to murder. Harry thrust the thought aside; this was no time to think of morals – he had to concentrate. He's not a man, he's a monster; he's not a person, he's a target.

Harry clenched his fists and took a deep breath. He could do this, he knew he could! He paused just short of the double doors. He took another deep breath and tried to clear his mind. This was it, *concentrate, Harry, you can do this*. Shaking slightly, he raised a hand to the door and pushed. The large ornate double doors opened inwards almost invitingly. Ready himself, Harry stepped through the doors and into the room. It was deserted, with the lines of desks abandoned. His heart was pounding in his chest as he stared around the silent room. The shadows played tricks on his mind and he refused to let them. Taking a breath, he stepped further into the room.

BANG!

He spun around to find that the double doors had slammed shut behind him, trapping him. He had known it was a trap, but his heart was still pounding and he was sweating beneath his clothes. Harry refused to show that he was scared and began to walk around the lines of desks, staying near the wall. There was a flight of shallow stairs coming out of the wall that led up to the Minister's office. The glass wall to the office shone, and Harry could not see any movement in the office, but he knew Voldemort was there, waiting for him. He walked quickly but quietly to the steps and began to climb. He reached the top and, with one final glance behind him, he opened the door and stepped into the office.

The room was larger than it looked from downstairs. There were shelves against the far wall and a mini-fridge to the left. The left wall was made of glass and had a filing cabinet against it with a silver cobra on top. To the right were two black leather sofas with a glass coffee table in the middle. In the middle of the room was a large wooden desk covered in parchment, with a fire-caller on the side of it. Behind that was a large chair with its back to Harry. Harry was about to turn and leave, thinking he had made a mistake, when the chair began to turn slowly towards him. As it turned, Harry's hand moved quickly to his wand, ready for action. As the chair came around to face him, Harry found himself staring into a familiar pair of cold, red eyes. He stood motionless as his enemy calmly surveyed him from the black leather chair that rose

high above his head. Harry quickly cleared his mind of everything but Voldemort, not only to stop Legilimency, but to concentrate on his task: murder. He did not want to give away the presence of the others in the building; Voldemort had to believe that he was doing this alone.

The Dark Lord sat motionless in the chair. He wore jet black robes, which draped over the arms of the chair in which he sat. His elbows rested on the arms of the chair, and his fingers were pressed together just below his chin. His cold red eyes stared relentlessly at Harry, while his long black hair cascaded his face, leaving it in shadow, broken only by the reflected light in his pitiless red eyes. At last, he spoke.

“I knew if I left it long enough, you would seek me out,” said Voldemort calmly. His tone was one of ice calm and control, though his eyes burned with anger. His long spider-like fingers moved ever so slightly, the tips rhythmically tapping together as his eyes surveyed Harry. “You cannot allow me to become Minister, and so you would be forced to make one last ditch attempt on my life. “

“It would never stop at Minister,” said Harry, his voice betraying no emotion, though his eyes flickered around the office, looking for any sign of danger. He kept an eye on Voldemort’s hands, in case they moved for his wand on in Harry’s direction.

“True,” said Voldemort. “Give me one month to cripple the Muggle government and then in three this little island will be mine. A series of anti-Muggle wards in the Channel, Atlantic and North Sea and the wizard population will have this little island all to themselves, a sanctuary from the filth that have all but imprisoned our kind.”

“With you as the king, emperor, lord, baron, mayor or whatever title you choose,” finished Harry, his voice lined with the disgust he felt. Voldemort raised an eyebrow but did not reply. Was this what had happened to Harry’s own world as he spoke? Was this the fate that awaited him when he got home? *Snap out of it; focus!*

“Thinking about home?” asked Voldemort, his eyes flashing with malice. Harry wasn’t sure if he was using Legilimency or if it was just a good guess. “My journey through your thoughts was most interesting. Tell me, was it like this in your world? Come now, Harry, I find it all fascinating. Do tell.” Voldemort was baiting Harry and he knew it. He wouldn’t rise to the bait.

“In my world you were defeated, you are nothing but a memory,” said Harry, anger creeping into his voice. He didn’t bother to elaborate, or to finish the story “I killed you.” Let Voldemort think that if he had done it once, he could do it again. “I survived your killing curse,” continued Harry. “You can’t kill me, Tom.” If he could unbalance Riddle enough, he might make a mistake. It wasn’t like he was trying to discourage a fight. That was inevitable at this stage. He had to die.

“Your mind is an open book to me, Harry,” said Voldemort calmly. “Through your eyes I have witnessed my own downfall and my own rebirth. I now know that the measures I have

taken to prevent my own demise will work. I do wonder though, if you know how you came to be in this world?" Harry stared back unblinking.

"I did not think so," said Voldemort, his voice betraying a little scorn. Harry was quite relieved he didn't. The last thing he needed was this Voldemort crossing to his world. Two Voldemorts in one world would be impossible.

"Very well," said Voldemort, apparently having reached a decision. "Let us proceed. You came here today to kill me, Harry. Why do you hesitate?" asked Voldemort. Harry didn't want to answer, he didn't want to be judged a murderer.

"I don't want to," said Harry. Hesitating. He had to make him understand that he was not like him. He had to understand that Harry was not a monster. Why did it matter what he thought. For some reason Harry felt he had to justify himself.

"But that *is* what you are here to do," snapped Voldemort, cutting him off. "Despite your newfound *goodness*, you are still a killer, the killer that *I* made you, and you always will be." Harry felt the hatred rise. He was not a killer and he was not what Voldemort had made him!

"I don't like stooping to your level," snapped Harry, desperate to justify himself. He was not a murderer. "But we both know that no prison could hold you. You're too clever and wise for that."

"Was that praise, Harry?" asked Voldemort, his calm as infuriating as Dumbledore's. Harry realised that he was being drawn into a pointless argument. Voldemort was trying to get him angry enough to make a mistake, and he couldn't afford to let that happen. *Calm down, Harry! Focus!*

"I hate you, but it doesn't mean I don't respect you," he said carefully, his eyes darting from Voldemort's eyes to his hands. If the bastard moved his hands an inch, Harry would fry him. His fingers almost itched to go to his wand.

"Know your enemy," said Voldemort. "I taught you well." There he went again, claiming credit for Harry's actions. Harry had done this alone, not with Voldemort's help, but he wouldn't rise to the bait this time. He had to end the argument.

"Recount your title, turn the Ministry over to a person of my choosing and I will give you the chance to live," said Harry firmly, his eyes locked with Voldemort's.

"An idle threat," spat Voldemort dismissively. "But do you not see how similar we are? I gave instructions that the power of the Ministry be handed to my follower, the younger Crouch. You have just given an instruction that I hand over power to your follower, a member of your little Order; I cannot guess whom you would choose as Arthur Weasley, Amelia Bones and the young Dawlish are all *missing in action*, however the point stands: we both want power for what we believe in, Harry. Don't you see that we want the same thing? We differ in one respect and one respect only. We both know that the common man has no control over the government, so

we choose those in power. We are both willing to go to extreme lengths to achieve this, even the taking of human life. Those who seek power are by definition those who least deserve it, as you once told me. You chose those who claim they do not seek power, you believe the lie. I chose people who openly admit they seek power. The dishonest fool is far easier to predict and control than an honest one, for the very reason that the honest person, is a liar for he claims to not want power. It is a contradiction in terms.”

“What I believe in is the good of the people,” said Harry. “The vast majority.”

“*The vast majority* have been kept in line with a mere newspaper,” said Voldemort. “They believe whatever they are told as long as it means they do not have to do anything. They *allowed* my change of government, with the odd exception.”

“No!” said Harry, cutting him off. There was truth to his words but he could not be distracted. He had to concentrate on the task at hand. He had no wish to prolong the conversation or start a debate. He returned to his authoritative voice and addressed Voldemort. “Call Crouch on the Floo and tell him to release prisoners and stand down, or you will never leave the room alive.”

“Never threaten me,” sneered Voldemort, his eyes flashing with malice and his tone icy cold.

The elder man rose effortlessly to his feet, his eyes never leaving Harry’s. Harry tensed, his hand tightly clasped around his wand, ready for the inevitable attack. Harry placed his right foot behind his left, standing sideways-on, so Voldemort couldn’t see that his hands were closed around his wand on his right hip.

“You have impressed me over the last few months,” said Voldemort, stepping away from the chair and beginning to circle the desk. “You escaped my mansion, you entered Hogwarts, you convinced the old man to trust you. You struck several serious blows to my plans, not to mention gained entry to the plant in Devon. Tell me this, though. When I told you of your past, when I told you who you really are, when I offered you a second chance, why did you not take it? Having travelled through worlds, having seen more than most men alive, I offered you a place at my side, and true to my word, you could have taken your old position, why did you not take it?”

“I am not the same boy who left you,” said Harry, with a sense of pride. “He’s dead. I’m all that’s left. He was my *Voldemort* and he is gone; I am the Tom Riddle that is left. I’m sure you can empathise with that?”

“Not an analogy to be proud of,” said Voldemort. “Tom Riddle was weak, but as you said, he is dead, and only Lord Voldemort remains.”

“No,” said Harry. “Your Harry still lives inside me, his powers are now mine, just as Tom Riddle lives inside you, hidden away.” Harry’s arm tensed, knowing that Voldemort was about to become very angry indeed. “You are still the young boy, frightened and alone who grew

up in the orphanage. What was it like, growing up in Slytherin, never able to tell them that you father was a Muggle?”

“ENOUGH!” roared Voldemort, losing his cool. “You came here this morning to kill me! You are still the monster, but you are right about one thing. I didn’t make you this monster; I just trained you. You are a natural-born killer and you always will be. Nothing you have done or will do will change that. You remain, to this day, the...Dark...Knight!” He almost hissed the last three words, his eyes glowing with anger. Harry had had enough; it was time to show Voldemort how wrong he was. The broach on his cloak was undone, and Harry flung his arms in the air, throwing the cloak off him, revealing the glowing white clothes he had on below. Everything from the boots to the gloves to the armour were all perfectly white, which reflected in the Dark Lord’s glowing red eyes. The Dark Lord stepped back in surprise and maybe even fear as the White Knight stood before him.

“It was you?” hissed Voldemort, seething with anger. He quickly recovered from the look of shock.

“You’ve lost, Tom,” hissed Harry. “You can’t win!”

He opened his mouth to say something else, but he never managed to say a word. The desk in front of him suddenly jumped up toward Harry. The top side crashed into his chest, knocking him off his feet. His armour protected him from the impact, but he landed hard on his side, just before the heavy oak desk came crashing down on top of him. He lost his grip on his wand as the desk smashed into him, hitting his forehead with the corner.

There was a short cackle of laughter, but Harry couldn’t see where it came from. Shaking his head to rid himself of the disorientation of having hit his head, Harry summoned enough magic to wandlessly launch the desk off of him. The desk was launched into the air and into the far wall, cracking right down the middle as it hit. With a tremendous crash, it bounced off the wall and hit the ground. Harry sprang off his shoulders, landing gracefully on his feet, just in time to be hit by Voldemort’s incoming spell. His dragon-scale armour took the brunt of the curse, but it was strong enough to launch him off his feet. Harry was vaguely aware of his feet leaving the ground, before his back collided with the glass wall of the office.

There was a loud crash as Harry sailed through the window. He twisted in mid-air, but not intentionally. He saw the floor below him come up to greet him. With a thud he slammed face first into the ground. His hands prevented his face from getting hurt, but his hands themselves cried out in pain. He covered his head as shards of razor-sharp glass rained down around him, slicing into the backs of his hands as they protected his head.

Once it was over, Harry quickly climbed to his feet, ignoring the few small scratches he had received. Luckily, nothing had dug into his skin too deeply. He shook himself to remove the shards of glass, just as Voldemort appeared at the top of the stairs that led to the Minister’s office. As the Dark Lord calmly descended the stairs, Harry pulled out his second wand and aimed it at Voldemort’s neck. Neither of them cast a spell. Harry kept his wand trained on

Voldemort's neck and began to climb the stairs as Voldemort descended. They met in the middle, separated by only two steps.

"It ends now," announced Harry, his eyes locked with Voldemort's, green locked with red.

"In the only way it can," replied Voldemort. "*AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

Harry jumped, casting a silent hovering charm on himself. He had had so much practice at this that he almost didn't have to think anymore, allowing him to jump great heights easily. He sailed into the air, the curse zooming beneath his feet. He dived backwards in mid air, somersaulting and landing on a desk over ten feet from Voldemort. Harry instantly dived to the side to avoid another incoming curse; he landed on his stomach, sliding away on his belly on the polished floor. The curse hit a painting on the wall behind him, shattering the glass and blowing a good section of the wall apart. Burning pieces of canvas fluttered down to the ground, overtaken by falling chunks of plaster.

Harry knew he needed his primary wand back, the brother of Voldemort's own. It would give him an element of surprise and perhaps time enough to act. He may end up needing the power of that wand. Not hesitating in case he changed his mind, Harry jumped to his feet and charged across the room, in direct sight of Voldemort. Ducking another curse as he ran, he jumped and kicked off a desk, casting a hovering charm on himself as he did so. He launched himself fifteen feet into the air, performing a front flip as he peaked, and landed in the Minister's office through the glass wall that now no longer existed. To his surprise, he landed on his feet. He immediately picked up his own wand and tucked his second one away.

Harry quickly peeked out to see where Voldemort was before acting. He jumped out of the window, a ten-foot drop below him. In midair he fired two stunners at Voldemort, who effortlessly spun out of the way of the first and then blocked the second with a shield. Harry landed on the nearest desk, just as it exploded. Voldemort had read what he was trying to do and had destroyed the desk. Harry felt his ankle sprain as he landed on the debris of the desk. He cried out in pain, but still managed to dive to the side, avoiding the following curse.

"*Paralytio!*" shouted Harry, aiming his wand at Voldemort. Voldemort effortlessly blocked it with a shield, just as Harry prepared to use the spell that Dumbledore had used in the Ministry last year. He wielded his wand like a whip and shouted the incantation. A whip of fire sprung from the end of his wand, encircling Voldemort, shield and all. A brief glimmer of surprise crossed Voldemort's face. Harry knew there were Anti-Apparation wards in the Ministry, which meant that Voldemort could not Apparate, but thanks to his Animagus form, Harry could.

Harry gave the whip a sharp tug, and the magic of the whip enhanced the strength of the pull one hundred fold. Voldemort, still encased in his shield, was launched across the room and slammed into the cold, hard wall. He bounced off and hit the floor, rolling over once before coming to a stop. Harry stepped closer to his fallen foe, but before he had gone two paces, Voldemort flicked his wand, unleashing a Piercing Curse at Harry's face. Harry jerked his head

to the side, but not quite fast enough. He felt a flicker of pain in his left temple and felt a sticky warm flow of blood run down his cheek.

Harry whipped his head back around to face Voldemort. Another curse was already on the way. Harry levitated a chair into the way. The chair absorbed the curse, cracking down the back in the process. Harry then launched the chair at Voldemort, who simply raised a hand to stop it. The chair came to a stop in front of him. With a wave of his hand, the chair flew away into a wall, shattering as it did so.

Harry ducked behind a desk, taking a second to assess the situation. Voldemort's Piercing Curse had cut into the side of his head, leading a long gash near his temple. He was lucky it hadn't taken his ear off. Ready himself, Harry peered around the desk. It was a tiny movement, but Voldemort had seen it. He sent another curse toward Harry, who conjured the by now familiar blue circle of light in his hand. He scooped the incoming curse up in the circle and, sidestepping the next curse, hurled the ring, curse and all, back at Voldemort. Voldemort conjured a blue shield that Harry had never seen before. Seizing his chance, Harry raised his wand, thanking Moody silently for his training.

"Potestas Constricto!" shouted Harry. Immediately a dark green band of light surrounded Voldemort's shield at waist height. The ring of blue light Harry had thrown, and the curse it contained, was absorbed by Voldemort's shield, but the green band still surrounded the shield. It grew smaller and smaller, crushing the once round shield around Voldemort into an egg shape. As the band tightened around the shield it turned into a figure-of-eight shape, with Voldemort being crushed around the middle. Harry could almost see the sweat on the Dark Lord's brow. It took all Harry's concentration to keep the band corporeal. Voldemort was putting up one hell of a fight, as the band attempted to crush the air out of him. If his shield failed, the band would then move on to crush his chest.

Suddenly the band began to glow white. A crackling noise filled the air and then the band exploded. The shockwave forced Harry off his feet. He landed on his back on top of a desk and then rolled off, landing on his shoulders on a chair, collapsing it instantly.

He was losing this battle and he knew it. It was time to resort to his plan. Hidden behind the desk, Harry pulled out his stun baton and lit it with the stunner. The rod began to glow a healthy scarlet. It would be enough to disrupt the balance of magic. Satisfied, Harry held the baton next to his leg, careful not to touch it. He stood up again to face Voldemort sideways on so that his legs concealed the lit baton, while his wand was aimed at Voldemort. Merlin, he hoped this worked.

"Avada Kedavra!" screamed Voldemort, stabbing his wand at Harry.

"Expelliarmus!" shouted Harry instantly, recreating the blend of magic that had saved him in the graveyard. The charm surged out of the end of his wand and zoomed toward Voldemort, hurtling toward the incoming stream of green light. Sure enough, the curses met mid-air and instantly turned a deep gold. The thread of light linked them, and Harry felt a wave of magic wash over him. It was happening again, just as his plan predicted! His wand began to

vibrate in his hand and grow hot as wave after wave of pure magic surged through it. The golden thread held fast and the glowing ball of magic in the middle was spitting and throbbing violently, sending geysers of sparks in all directions, more powerful, more unstable and more deadly than the last time this had happened.

Harry glanced over at Voldemort, and was satisfied to see the look of surprise and fear cross his enemy's face. With the magic crackling all around them and the mental exertion that keeping the connection was taking, he found it really difficult to think of anything but the connection.

He glanced again at Voldemort, their eyes connecting for a fraction of a second before the golden thread spouted two dozen other threads that spiralled around them, forming a dome of light that encircled the two combatants. Harry could feel the breeze as the magic forced the air away from it. His hair was blowing in the artificial wind, his entire arm was vibrating and he was sweating under the force of the connection. He had to keep it going, he had to!

This connection was more powerful than the previous one, but just as unstable. Suddenly a bolt of golden lightning shot out of the dome and destroyed a metal filing cabinet, raining charred parchment all over the floor. It seemed that with Harry's new powers, it was more destructive as well. Harry glanced at Voldemort, and to his horror saw his enemy extend his other hand toward him, a second wand clasped firmly in his fingers. Harry hardly believed what he saw as a web of blue lightning left Voldemort's wand and shot toward him. Doing the only thing he could think of, he stepped to his left quickly, trying to maintain his concentration. His hand was growing hot as the magic surged through his wand and hand. The power roared in his ears, making it impossible to hear a thing. He tried to concentrate on forcing the fizzing centre of the connection closer to Voldemort, but his arms were aching as he struggled to hold the baton and the wand. How Voldemort was able to do two spells at once was unbelievable. Harry pushed the thought from his mind, concentrating on the connection, which was coming closer and closer to Harry. His hand was almost burning under the power of the connection.

BANG!

Another jet of golden jet of light had left the dome and shattered the staircase that led up to the Minister's office. As Harry watched, the dome grew bigger and bigger, its peak disappearing through the ceiling. The threads that formed the dome disappeared through the ceiling and the walls as the dome expanded. The amount of magic in the dome was incredible.

Voldemort shrieked in anger and cast aside his second wand, placing both hands back on his primary one. Harry watched in horror as the fizzing golden ball of energy moved slowly along the line toward him. He tried to force the power back down the connection, but he found himself unable to concentrate. The epicentre came closer and closer to the tip of Harry's wand, and he knew full well what would happen if it touched his wand; he was losing - it was time. Holding the glowing baton in his left hand, Harry raised it above his head. He saw a look of fear flash across Voldemort's face as he did the only thing that made sense. Harry hurled the baton at the wall of the dome.

It had the desired effect: too much power. The sudden infusion of light magic broke the delicate balance of the dome. The walls suddenly exploded outward, atomising everything within twenty metres, except for the combatants. There was a deafening boom as the magic exploded. Harry felt the floor beneath his feet disintegrate, and he began to fall.

The magic disappeared, along with everything inside its radius, and both Harry and Voldemort fell. Harry hit the ground hard, but luckily had landed on something soft. Glancing down, Harry realised that he had landed on a pile of cushions, decorated with fish. He quickly looked around to find himself in familiar surroundings. He stood up, finding himself once again in the archives of the Ministry. The familiar rows of shelves lined with paper stretched out before him and the walls were plastered with Muggle movie posters. He had landed in the cat's basket, but the cat, and indeed the owner, were nowhere to be seen. Voldemort also could not be seen. He must have landed on the other side of some shelves.

Looking up, a bizarre sight greeted Harry. A perfect sphere of the building had just...gone. Floors suddenly ended, walls just stopped and he could see four floors above him. Luckily, they had not breached the former Department of Magical Law Enforcement, or he would have received a lethal dose of radiation. As he looked up at the other floors, he could see that the cross-sections of walls were still glowing orange from the heat of the blast. Flammable material was burning on each floor.

Looking up through the floors he could see clouds forming on the ceiling. It was like the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall, except it showed not stars, but rain clouds. Suddenly the rain began to fall, putting out the fires, as the magical sprinkler system started to work. Harry was drenched in ten seconds. The water helped to shake the weariness from his body. Shaking his head and wiping his hair from his eyes, Harry looked around, trying to find his enemy.

Voldemort had not been as lucky as Harry when he landed. He had landed on the cold hard floor, and was only now struggling to his feet. Harry saw him as he rounded the first set of shelves, the top corner of which had been disintegrated by the blast. The water must have woken him up. Knowing that he would not be disorientated for long, Harry seized his chance. He ran over, and using all his strength, he grabbed Voldemort's wand arm before he could utter a spell and kicked him in the jaw. In absence of his wand, Harry swung his hand back and summoning all the magic, he could punched Voldemort in the stomach, shouting the incantation of the Blasting Curse as he did. As his punch landed, a shower of green sparks burst from his fist. Voldemort received the force of a punch and a Blasting Curse to his chest and was launched up into the air, but Harry was far from done. He held out an arm.

"Accio Voldemort!" he shouted. Voldemort hadn't even landed before he was summoned back. He hurtled uncontrollably toward Harry, who pivoted on his left leg, bringing his right straight up into Voldemort's nose. The Dark Lord did a back somersault before landing on his face in the inch of water that had already built up, courtesy of the rain. Picking up Voldemort's wand, Harry levitated the Dark Lord from the floor and slammed him into one wall and then another, just as Moody had done to the ferret that was Malfoy. After four impacts, Harry allowed Voldemort to fall to the floor.

The Dark Lord lay facedown, unmoving, on a pile of spilled parchments. He slowly began to move, trying to find his wand. Harry used his foot to roll Voldemort over so that he was facing upward. Harry felt a shiver run up his spine, and his teeth began to chatter. The rain was icy cold and he began to shiver. Luckily, the material he wore, although white was thick enough not to go see-through when wet or it would be embarrassing. It was still lightweight, even though it was drenched. He shook the water from his eyelashes and stared down at the fallen Dark Lord, now bleeding from his nose and mouth. The smeared blood on his chin made him look like a vampire from a B-movie.

“Looking for this?” shouted Harry, pressing the tip to Voldemort’s neck, his words being drowned by the falling rain.

“Are you going to kill me, Harry?” asked Voldemort, sitting up and staring him in the eye. He rose slowly to his feet, still maintaining his regal look although he was soaked through and his wet hair was sticking to his face. “Two words are all it would take.”

“I should do it!” said Harry, raising the wand to Voldemort’s face. He knew he should. He would not get a better chance than this. Voldemort was at his mercy, but he could not give him mercy. He didn’t have a choice; he should kill him, right here, right now. All he had to do was say two little words. But Flamel had told him he couldn’t do it. What if he failed? What if this curse didn’t work? Voldemort was so fast, he wouldn’t have time to draw a sword and do it that way. Anyway, he felt wrong killing an unarmed man.

“Then why do you hesitate?” asked Voldemort, his eyes burning into Harry’s. “Use the power deep inside you. It could all be yours; all you have to do is kill me. Two words, Harry. Two words. Look into the darkness, become who you were born to be - become the next Dark Lord.”

Harry stepped closer, aiming the wand right between his eyes. He knew that now was his chance. He could end it all, but the Killing Curse? Was he worth it? Could he even manage it? He had just mastered his own mind. Using the curse would set him back; he would be no better than Voldemort. Harry knew he had to kill Voldemort, for no prison could hold him; he had known that on the way here, but standing here now, victorious, it was a different matter. Could he kill an unarmed man?

“DO IT!” shouted Voldemort.

Harry sighed and lowered his wand. He knew he couldn’t do it. “You’re under arrest,” said Harry.

“You fool,” said Voldemort, a smirk appearing on his face. Suddenly he flicked his wrist and a second wand was in his hand. Harry was hit before he knew he had made a mistake. The lightning Voldemort used earlier erupted from his wand, snaking all over Harry’s body. Electricity surged through his body, magnified by the rain. He screamed in pain as the curse lifted him off his feet. Pain invaded every corner of his body as he flew through the air. Harry felt his feet leave the ground, but the impact of landing never came. His whole body doubled up

in pain as he thrashed against the agony. Harry opened his eyes to find himself hovering in mid-air with Voldemort standing in front of him, the sneer of victory on his features. The lightning surged through his limbs, setting his nerve endings alight with agony. He thrashed uncontrollably under the curse, all possibility of concentrating enough for a spell gone.

Suddenly the pain was gone. Harry was trapped in mid-air, unable to move as Voldemort stood before him, now holding his primary wand and aiming it at Harry, who was completely paralysed. He struggled against the spell, but his limbs were held taut and he was unable to move.

“You fought bravely,” said Voldemort, his voice as cold as ice and victory written all over his face. “But in the end, there can only be one victor. I have waited months to get my hands on you, Potter. You, who challenged me, who defied me, must now be made an example. You once told me that you would be here when I learned that I could not take people’s freedom from them. Well, I have taken the freedom from your precious Order, and you are not going to be around much longer. Your nobility would have sounded good on paper, but in practice, you never stood a chance.”

With a flick of his wrist, Voldemort send Harry hurtling backwards into a set of shelves, which toppled over under his weight. The shelves crashed to the floor, with Harry falling on top. The metal edge of the shelves connected with his spine and Harry cried out in pain. He lay in the debris of the shelves, now littered with parchments, glaring at Voldemort for a second before he was hoisted up into the air once again.

“Do you honestly think you have won?” spat Harry. His cracked sanity suddenly found this immensely amusing. He threw his head back and began to laugh. Voldemort stood motionless, unable to understand the boy before him. Harry managed to control his laughter enough to speak. Turning his head to the side he spat out a mouthful of blood that had built up in his mouth. Turning back to Voldemort, Harry smirked again. There was no need to hide his abilities any more.

“Goodbye, Tom,” he said, before disappearing in a ball of phoenix fire.

He was vaguely aware of the scream of anger that Voldemort let rip as Harry disappeared and reappeared a second later, on what was left of the floor above where he had been, looking down at the stunned Dark Lord. He could see his Stun-Baton, lying dormant on the edge of the level. His wand was floating somewhere in the water below. The room was flooded with water, upon which parchment was floating.

“POTTER!” hissed Voldemort, his voice lined with rage. Harry’s sharp eyes scanned for the wand, eventually finding it floating near the desk; Harry summoned it to him.

“COME OUT AND FACE ME, POTTER!” spat Voldemort. Harry picked up the Stun-Baton and tucked it away, clipping it to his belt. It was time. Harry took a deep breath and then ran to the edge and jumped. He somersaulted in mid-air, and then cushioned his fall with a wandless and silent hovering charm as he landed. The Dark Lord spun around at the sound of the

splash, just in time to be hit by Harry's disarming charm, which he had fired as he had landed. Voldemort was too quick though, throwing his wand in the air as the spell hit him, and then catching it a second later. However, Harry had bought himself the time he needed. Harry withdrew his Stun-Baton.

SECTUMSEMPRA! Harry non-verbally ignited the baton. The baton sprung to life, glowing a dark purple in the gloom. The Half-Blood Prince's spell for enemies was clearly dark. Harry had to be careful not to touch it. Harry's limited experience with the spell led him to believe it blasted holes in flesh. The rain picked up the light, making it sparkle even more. Voldemort managed to get another spell off, which zoomed toward Harry, shimmering in the rain. Harry swung the baton across his chest, clubbing away the curse with the Stun-Baton, and began to run toward Voldemort, his legs being dragged down by the water and his wet clothes. Harry ducked the next curse as he splashed toward his enemy and then used the Stun-Baton again to deflect the next. It seemed that his curse was more powerful than the incoming ones, as they did not dislodge it from the baton.

As Harry neared the Dark Lord, he dived at him. Voldemort spun away to the side and Harry missed with the slash, skidding to a halt on the wet floor. The water was nearly up to the top of his boots by this time, and his feet were becoming heavy. Harry swung again, but Voldemort jumped backwards. To Harry's shock, the Dark Lord landed not in the water, but on the water's surface. His jaw dropped as Voldemort spun away, treading lightly on the surface of the water, but not sinking.

"Jesus Christ," muttered Harry.

He splashed after Voldemort, almost knee deep in water and spraying it all over the place as he stomped after Voldemort, who glided lightly across the surface. Harry's legs were getting heavier with every step as he pursued Voldemort.

Suddenly the doors burst open. The water that had built up was suddenly free to escape, and washed like a tsunami out of the room, surging along the corridor. Standing in the doorway were five Black Watch Aurors, all aiming their wands at Harry as water rushed over their feet. One of them raised his wand to the ceiling. A jet of white light shot out and the rain instantly ceased.

"Destroy him!" shouted Voldemort.

The five instantly advanced on Harry, who held the glowing baton up defiantly. His eyes quickly scanned the room, looking for assets. He knew that since the Aurors were in flowing dress robes, if he could get them wet, they would find it hard to move. Harry glanced around again, to see Voldemort turn his back on Harry. He was leaving? As soon as Harry raised his baton, the five withdrew their own. Was it honour that stopped them drawing wands, or desire to beat Harry at his own game? Whatever their reason, they all matched his choice of weapon. Each ignited their un-modified baton with the only spell it could take: a Stunning Charm.

His Baton still glowing a dark purple with the Half-Blood Prince's spell, Harry stepped closer to the Aurors, who fanned out, encircling him, each carrying a glowing scarlet weapon, whose light reflected off the walls. Harry stood motionless waiting for the first attack to come. He glanced around, assessing the situation. This wasn't the movies; he couldn't take five on one with a series of acrobatic moves like an action hero. He was tired, and hurt.

He didn't have to wait long before the inevitable attack came; one Auror lunged at him from his left and Harry moved to intercept. He grabbed the Auror's wrist and spun on his foot, ducking under his arm. As he emerged behind the Auror, he had his arm bent painfully behind his back, and bent over forwards. Harry used him as a support, for in the same movement, Harry kicked off the ground and leaning on the Death Eater's back, kicked another in the jaw, sending the second one crashing to the ground with the splash. Not taking time to celebrate, Harry swung the captive Auror around to block the advance of the remaining three.

The Auror to his right took a swing, forcing Harry to duck, and sidestep to his left, so that his captive Auror was between him and his attacker. He had no sooner managed this, when another attack came from his left. Harry leaned back enough to avoid the blow, as he did, moving into the range of the Auror behind him.

Harry felt a pair of hands grab him from behind. He was wrenched away from his captive and thrown to the floor. Harry rolled as he hit the floor, spraying the inch of remaining water everywhere, as he skidded into a set of shelves. He looked up to see the shelves wobble, and the slowly begin to fall. In desperation Harry began to roll. Every inch of his clothes were now soaked as he rolled, over and over, just in time to escape the falling bookshelf which slammed into the floor, missing him by an inch.

Another Auror lunged at Harry who raised his baton to parry the attack. As the two batons met, a shower of red and purple sparks rained down on them. The Auror was must stronger and with a thrust of the baton, propelled Harry backwards. Harry stepped back but his heel hit the leg of an upturned chair. Harry lost his balance and came crashing down. Thinking quickly, Harry grabbed a fallen Auror's baton in his left hand and pressing it against his own, he formed an X shape.

"*Stupefy!*" he hissed, and the second baton burst to life, glowing a healthy red. Harry crossed them and held them up in an X-shape, blocking the attack from the Auror. Keeping the purple baton blocking the attack, Harry swung with the red one at the Auror. The man jumped back out of range, and stood, ready for Harry's next attack.

Harry looked up to see his five attackers surrounding him. The first two were back on their feet, and looked livid. Harry glanced around in desperation. All he saw was rows and rows of shelves, just like the ones that had nearly killed him just now...hang on...*that's it!* thought Harry.

Harry dropped his batons and drew both his wands from beneath his robes. He crossed his arms in front of him, pointing one wand out to his left, and the other to his right. As the Aurors began to advance, Harry cast the same spell with both wands.

“ACCIO SHELVES!”

A set of shelves on both sides, rushed towards Harry, who turned and ran. The Aurors who were a step behind, turned to see a heavy set of bookcase coming at them from both sides. Harry just escaped as the two bookcases smashes together with a tremendous clap, forming an Auror sandwich. Harry had no idea if the Aurors had survived the impact, but he had no time to find out. Quickly he glanced around, searching for a sign of Voldemort. It was unlike him to run. Where was he leading Harry, and why had he let others interfere when he had refused to do so in the graveyard? Harry turned around just in time to see Voldemort disappear through the emergency exit to the Tubes. It was the same exit Harry had taken when he had been on the run.

Pausing only to pick up his wand, Harry set off in pursuit, his limbs aching and his clothes heavy with water. He climbed through the poster and into the tunnel, casting a drying charm over himself as he did so. His clothes immediately felt lighter as he stepped out of the water and into the stone corridor. His legs felt like bricks as he ran – the magic, fighting, continuous impacts of curses and the floor were taking their toll. Fatigue consumed Harry’s limbs as he sprinted for the exit. Neither he nor Voldemort paid any heed to the asking them to transfigure their clothes back into Muggle attire. Harry knew he looked like a ninja with the high boots, loose flowing fabric, and chest-plate, all of purest white.

The door at the far end of the passage was just closing as Harry entered the passage. Harry sprinted the length of the tunnel, keeping his wand ready the whole time. He grasped the handle of the door with a gloved hand and pushed it down. He felt the lock snap open, but when he pushed the door, he couldn’t move it. He looked up at the door to find that the edge seemed to have been welded to the wall. Stepping back, Harry aimed his wand at the wall just to the side of the door.

“REDUCTO!” he shouted.

There was a tremendous bang as the wall exploded into a cloud of dust. Harry covered his face as pieces of brick shot out of the wall on both sides. The door was launched off its hinges and out onto the platform. Screams erupted around him as he emerged from the hole. There was movement all around him as terrified Muggles dived to the floor or ran about in a panic. From the explosion, they probably thought the platform had been bombed. Harry glanced one way then another, looking for the billowing black robes of his nemesis. There were Muggles running everywhere, many in long coats due to the winter weather, which made Voldemort almost impossible to spot as his robes didn’t stand out in a sea of flowing coats.

“YOU, FREEZE!” shouted a voice to Harry’s right. He spotted Voldemort, one track over from his, marching toward the staircase. A British Transport Police officer had challenged Voldemort, ordering him to freeze and holding his truncheon above his head, while talking into the radio clipped to his chest. He never stood a chance; Voldemort didn’t even break stride, he simply raised his wand and in a flash of green light, the policeman was no more. Screams escalated as the man was murdered before people’s eyes. His lifeless body fell to the floor with an undignified thump.

“VOLDEMORT!” shouted Harry, getting the Dark Lord’s attention. The elder man turned to face Harry. They stood for a second facing each other, separated by a set of tube tracks. Voldemort glared at Harry, apparently not surprised that he had survived. Voldemort hesitated for just a second before raising his wand, a jet of orange light bursting from the tip and zooming toward Harry. He dived forward onto his stomach as the ball of energy slammed into the wall, blowing it to pieces. Harry looked over the tracks in time to see Voldemort jump down onto the tracks another platform away.

Harry raised his head from having been covering himself, for fear of fallen debris. He was face to face with a terrified old lady, who was lying on her stomach next to a young girl, who was in tears. Harry flashed a small smile before picking himself up. As he ran forward toward the tracks, toward Voldemort, he raised his voice and shouted to the Muggles. “EVERYONE STAY DOWN, THE POLICE ARE ON THEIR WAY! EVERYTHING IS UNDER CONTROL!”

Harry had to get to Voldemort but that meant crossing the tracks and he had always been warned to stay away from the tracks, as they were electrified. To his horror he saw a light coming from the tunnel. A train was coming! Harry knew he had to get Voldemort, even though he could see the train coming down the tunnel. He didn’t have a choice.

Harry ran to the edge of the platform and jumped, casting a hovering charm on himself as he did so. His feet left the ground, as the dazzling light from the front of the tube filled his eyes. He felt the rush of wind as the train neared, and the sound of brakes squealed in his ears. The train missed by inches. Thanks to his magic, Harry jumped a ten-metre gap and landed easily on the other side, to the amazement of all those watching.

Harry hadn’t taken a single pace before a bolt of magic was heading his way. Harry raised a shield in time, but the force of the spell launched him off his feet and into the side of the train that had just managed to stop, knocking the air out of him and slamming his already pounding head into the glass. He felt the window crack under his weight as he hit the carriage. The glass shattered and he disappeared through the window, landing on something soft and warm. He covered his head as the glass from the window rained down on top of him.

As it subsided, he looked up, shaking the glass from him. He was in a carriage of the train. He had landed on a businessman, dressed and a young Chinese girl. Both looked terrified as Harry rose to his feet. He looked quickly around the carriage. Everyone was crouched down, arms raised to protect heads, and were staring at him, eyes wide with horror.

“Police,” said Harry quickly, introducing himself. “Stay down and don’t move!” It was a weak story, but he wouldn’t hang around long enough for it to be questioned. Where the hell was Voldemort?

He turned and looked out of the window. He saw Voldemort standing in the middle the next set of tracks on the far side of the platform. He was standing still, calmly watching Harry. To Harry’s horror, he could see another light shining on the side of Voldemort’s face. He was standing directly in front of an oncoming train! What the hell is he doing?

Suddenly it all fell into place! Voldemort needed Harry alive for one last task. Riddle needed there to be a major incident on the tubes. The Muggles would hear about all this magic being used to kill innocents, and Harry Potter would be identified as being present. The Prime Minister would hear how Harry had attacked the Tubes.

Voldemort wanted the Muggles to make the first move and Harry had placed all the armed forces on high alert, even setting a date for the attack with the Prime Minister. Voldemort wanted the Muggles to attack – he was counting on the anger of the wizards to unite them under his leadership. Harry could see the headlines now. The *Prophet* would say how Harry had marred the ceremony of the new leader with an attack on Muggles, like the villain he was. The Muggles would retaliate and then Voldemort's commandos would march against them. Thousands would die, and Voldemort would be viewed as the saviour of the Wizarding world.

Harry noticed behind him that everyone on the train was now pushing to be able to see what was happening outside. Harry's entire body ached and half of his face was covered in caked blood. Taking a breath, Harry climbed through the window, back onto the platform. He aimed his wand at the Dark Lord.

Suddenly the second train emerged from the tunnel to Harry's left, heading straight toward Voldemort at full speed. The Dark Lord turned calmly to face the oncoming train. The noise of the train masked the incantation, but before Harry's eyes, sparks erupted from the undercarriage of a train, spraying the platform and tracks with a fountain of glowing sparks. The train bucked violently and mounted the platform! The whole train was launched into the air and slammed down on the platform, sending chunks of platform and sparks in all directions. Screams erupted as people dived out of the way. The driver must have hit the brakes, as sparks flew up from every wheel as it skidded across the tiled platform with a sickening whistle. The screams were masked by the sound of the train scraping over the platform, as it hurtled toward Harry, grinding along the ceiling, sending lights and ceiling tiles raining down. The oncoming train was sliding not only toward Harry, but also toward the train he had just climbed out of, which was loaded with people. The two trains would collide and God only knew how many people would die if nothing was done.

The smartest move would have been to run, but Harry couldn't. He pulled his second wand out of his belt and, holding one in each hand, aimed both at the oncoming train.

"IMPEDIMENTA!" he shouted, pouring his mind, body and soul into a single jinx, channelled it through two wands, summoning every ounce of magic he possessed. Two beams of white light shot out of his wand and connected to the front of the train. A curved wall of white light formed over the front of the train, almost like a shield, slowing it down. Harry felt himself break into a cold sweat with exertion, as his single spell tried to stop over two hundred tonnes of steel hurtling toward him. The dull ache in his limbs, the pounding in his head made it impossible to concentrate, but he had to. The train kept on coming – there were fifty tonnes of metal per carriage, and there were a lot of them. The momentum was incredible. Sparks flew up from the wheels and screams filled Harry's ears. The wheels scraping on the concrete of the platform pierced every corner of his mind, his ears feeling as if they would burst. He felt his legs

go weak and begin to shake as he poured all the energy he had into the spells. He had to stop the train. If the two hit, the death toll would be horrific.

Harry tried to concentrate on stopping the train, but it didn't seem to be having much effect. The train was heading straight toward him; it was slowing, but not fast enough – the train was too big and too fast. It would mow Harry down and then slam into the stationary train, crushing the carriage and killing hundreds on both trains. Harry broke off the spells, sensing the futility. He took careful aim at the wheels.

“REDUCTO!” A jet of red light burst from his wand and shot into the undercarriage of the train on the right.

BOOM!

The wheels were blown apart with a huge bang. The whole train lurched to one side, the corner of the carriage landing on the platform, sending more sparks into the air. The jagged metal scraping the platform sent a sharp whistling and scraping into the air, like nails on a chalkboard times a thousand. It was leaning at a steep angle to one side, and the people on board were not going to be comfortable. He thought about levitating the train, but that would stop any friction on the floor and the crash would be faster. He thought about shrinking the train, but it would crush the people inside. He also thought about transfiguring the front carriage, but he didn't know what into or how. He only had one spell he could do.

“IMPEDIMENTA!” shouted Harry again, using both wands to perform the spell. He poured every ounce of concentration he had into stopping the train. The two beams of light formed the white wall again, completely covering the front of the train. The added friction of the collapsed wheels on the front car, which Harry had blown apart, helped. Harry could feel the train slowing, but at the same time knew it would never work. It could never come to a stop inside the fifteen metres it had between it and the train behind Harry. Harry held the connection as long as he could, willing the train to stop, summoning every ounce of magic he had inside him. At the last possible second, Harry dived to the side, breaking the connection. His feet missed the train by inches as he moved. He landed on his shoulders and rolled back up onto his feet.

“ACCIO TRAIN!” he shouted, once again aiming both wands at the train. The pull of his wands changed the direction of the train ever so slightly, just enough for it to crash headlong into the side of the first carriage of the train that had almost hit Harry. The impact was immense, completely shattering the front of both trains, leaving nothing but a crumpled wreck behind. In hitting only the first carriage, the collision only destroyed the driver's compartment, rather than a car full of people. Those in the moving train would have been launched off their feet and everyone would have been shaken, but the death toll should be minimal; at least Harry hoped that that was the case. Had the drivers been in their compartments, they would have perished, possibly along with those nearest the front, but the rest should have survived. Harry's knees gave way beneath him and he fell to the platform in exhaustion. The effort of slowing the train had taken its toll on his body.

Raising a hand limply, Harry used his wand to shatter the windows of the front carriages so the people could get out. He took a deep breath and shook his head, trying to ready himself. Rising to his feet, he turned to try to find Voldemort once more.

Voldemort had gotten his story; the trains had been attacked and Harry had been seen to do it. It was too late and he would have to answer to the Prime Minister for this, but that was the least of his concerns. Now, Harry had to make sure that Riddle didn't hurt any more people. He could hear screams coming from up the escalators. What more was Voldemort planning to do? Did he want wizards duelling in the streets, in plain view of Muggles? Probably, but Harry couldn't just stay down here. He had to go up and face him!

Harry hurried across the platform, shouting for the Muggles to stay down as he did. He ran up the escalators, taking two steps at a time, in hot pursuit of the soon-to-be High Chancellor.

As he emerged from the Tubes onto the city streets, he immediately covered his eyes from the dazzling Christmas day sunlight. It was so bright it blinded him. He recoiled for a second, before removing his hand, squinting in the sunlight, looking for his prey. As he removed his hand, he instantly had to duck as over a ton of metal hurtled over his head.

The airborne taxi narrowly missed his head, as it smashed its way through the front window of the coffee shop on the corner, raining glass down on the patrons as the car landed at the till. As Harry stared helplessly at the destruction, a red curse hurtled passed his head and into the underside of the fallen car. The whole thing detonated, launching a huge orange fireball out of the shop and into the street, incinerating anyone unlucky enough to be having a coffee. Harry rolled away from the stairs, ducking to avoid the fireball. He rolled back up to his feet as the flames receded.

“CALL NINE-NINE-NINE!” he shouted to a man in a suit with a mobile phone. He turned his attention back to the street, looking for a figure in black robes. He glanced both ways up and down the street, trying to find his target. Muggles were running everywhere in panic, making it near impossible to pick out a single person. Voldemort had created panic and used it to his advantage, disappearing into the crowd.

They were at an intersection between two large roads, each carrying four lanes of traffic. There was an underpass beneath the road Harry was now on, carrying another four lanes of cars and lorries, now slamming on the brakes. Cars had screeched to a halt around him and below him, as the coffee shop exploded. The roads were an instant stand-still - doors flew open and the owners fled in panic leaving their cars to completely clog-up central London. Harry jumped up onto the bonnet of an abandoned Land Rover and then up onto the roof.

From his vantage point, he could see more clearly. The giant glass walls of City University Hospital reflected the flickering flames now eating away at what was left of the coffee shop. Across the overpass, giant glass buildings of Abby and NatWest stood overlooking the scene. Through the glass walls, Harry could see lines of office workers staring and pointing down at the confusion, at the reclining flames and the plumes of smoke now rising from the entrance to the tube station and the former coffee shop. Even those in the McDonalds to his right

were cowering below plastic tables, all thoughts of their greasy, gooey burgers forgotten. Harry's eyes returned to the crowd, scanning for any signs of a cloak.

He didn't see a cloak, but he did see a bolt of light surge toward him. With a flick of his wand, Harry conjured a shield. The curse hit him square on, but the shield held. The force was tremendous. Harry was launched into the air, landing painfully on the bonnet of another car. The windscreen cracked as he landed. He turned to see the face of a terrified woman staring out at him from the cracked glass.

"RUN!" he ordered, rising to his feet. As he jumped back up onto the Land Rover, high enough to see clearly, he saw a jet of green light hurtling toward him. It was time to beat Voldemort at his own game. Harry raised his wand, aiming it at the Fiesta in front of him. The Fiesta rose into the air, right into the path of the incoming spell. The car burst into flame in mid-air, sending a giant ball of flame into the air. Harry wanted to hurl the flaming wreckage at Voldemort, but there were too many people in the way. Cursing, he released the car, which fell back to earth with a mighty bang. Harry jumped down from the Land Rover and started forcing his way through the crowd to where Voldemort was hiding.

BOOM!

A lorry fifty metres in front of Harry burst into flames, sparking a symphony of screams as the remaining Muggles ran for their lives. Voldemort was going for the show, causing lots of explosions and displaying his power for the Muggles to see. After today they would not be able to deny the existence of wizards. Harry had always learned that flashes of light, puffs of smoke and loud bangs were the signs of ineptitude, but today, they were all for show. Voldemort was going for the wow-factor, and he was succeeding. Suddenly, Harry spotted a figure in flowing black robes.

"*REDUCTO!*" shouted Harry, unleashing the curse toward Voldemort, whom he had just spotted. The curse surged through the crowd and straight into Voldemort's shield. With a clang, the curse ricocheted off the bubble and into a traffic light. The pole came crashing down like a fallen tree, the light smashing into the roof of a car deserted by its owner, crushing the roof of the car.

"Oops," muttered Harry, forcing his way through the crowd toward Voldemort.

There was a sudden, urgent knock at the door. The Prime Minister hadn't even had time to say 'come in', before the door burst open and a man dressed in the formal green suit of the army strode in, his face a look of fear and determination.

"What the...?" began the Prime Minister.

"Sir," said the general, crossing the room. "You need to see this." The Prime Minister watched as the General, a member of the COBRA council, produced a laptop computer from the leather bag he carried. He opened the lid and an image appeared on the screen. The Prime Minister's jaw dropped as he realised what he was seeing.

A man in black robes had appeared from an underground station and was blowing things up left, right and centre. The Prime Minister was speechless as he watched the man in black, who had a haunted white face and flowing black hair, send a beam of light into a building, which erupted into a large orange fireball. *That was Lord Voldemort! He should be in prison*, thought the Prime Minister. Maybe Potter had been telling the truth.

Just as his thoughts turned to the boy, that very person appeared on the screen. Potter ran up from the same tube-stop. Before the Prime Minister's eyes, he and Lord Voldemort began to hurl cars at each other, as more parts of the street exploded. The Prime Minister watched a black taxi-cab sail through the window of a Costa Coffee before the whole building erupted into flame.

"Prime Minister, this is coming in live from a military helicopter over central London," said the general. "There are two more helos in the air, keeping News choppers out of the way, but we can't contain ground units. Sir, we don't know what these people want, but they are destroying buildings here. I monitored the police frequency and SO19 have been deployed - they'll be there any second."

"I..." stammered the Prime Minister, staring at the screen. What was going on? Potter had promised to stop a war, not bring one onto national television. He didn't seem to be fighting this Voldemort, more destroying as much as he was. Was Potter in league with him? Why had he not killed Voldemort, and why had this fight erupted onto the streets in broad daylight? Had it been one big ruse from day one? Had he been tricked?

"Sir," said the general. "I strongly advise you to leave London." The Prime Minister ignored him as he was too deep in thought.

He hadn't heard back from Colonel Evans since he had phoned to report that Potter had demanded another twenty troops. Where were they? Why hadn't they been deployed to protect the people? This had to mean that Potter had tricked him. Jesus, that meant that Potter had stopped the military build up, delaying it until tomorrow. He also had removed forty of the most elite fighting force in the world. The Prime Minister recalled him mentioning a spell that allowed wizards to control people. That meant he had the SAS on his side, not theirs. Jesus! The Prime Minister had to mobilise the army.

Jesus, how could I been so stupid?

"I'm not leaving," he said, his jaw set firmly. He pressed a button on the telephone on his desk. "Beth, get me Colonel McGregor at Poole."

"Sir," said the general, seemingly put out by the Prime Minister venturing to the Marines and not the army. "If you mobilise the army now, I can have London locked down by sunset."

"Not yet," said the Prime Minister. He would not let the man declare martial law. "Leave me." The General hesitated for a second before turning to leave. Just then, a voice with a thick Scottish accent sounded on the speaker phone.

“McGregor here, sir,” said the voice.

“Colonel,” said the Prime Minister. “The situation we discussed has happened. Send in your men.”

“Yes, sir,” came the reply. “We have an ambulance ready. The siren means we can move through the traffic faster. My men can be inside the Ministry of Magic in twelve minutes.”

“There’s a new element, Colonel,” said the Prime Minister. “We have sent in forty of Colonel Evan’s SAS men from Hereford. It is possible that they are being controlled by the wizards, and will see anyone who intervenes as hostile.”

“Sir?” queried the Colonel. “Are you asking us to fire on our own men?”

“I am authorising you to use any and all force necessary to protect our society,” said the Prime Minister. “Lord Voldemort, Harry Potter and anyone who stands in your way - take them all down.”

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The road was wide enough for two lanes of traffic in each direction, and crossed another similar road a few metres down the road. The traffic lights were green, but the cars were abandoned and the crossroads blocked by halted cars from the intersecting Hampstead Road. Both sides of the road were bordered with skyscrapers. Harry was a few hundred metres from the tube stop he had come out of. He ran past City University Hospital and a Hilton Hotel, following the figure in black, who seemed to be moving swiftly through the crowd, firing off curses into random buildings. There was a crash as the window of a building on the right shattered under the force of a curse. Harry watched helplessly from a distance as Voldemort fired a curse into the ground, splitting it like an earthquake inside a pizza restaurant. From the signposts, Harry knew that the British Library was further down the road, as well as Kings Cross station, which he was more than familiar with. There would be hundreds of people there, and Voldemort could cause havoc. If he blew open the gateway to Platform 9 3/4, he could expose their world completely to the Muggles, or he could destroy the whole station, bringing not only London, but the south of England to a standstill.

Harry jumped up onto the bonnet of a car and cast a hovering charm on himself as he kicked off the roof. He jumped thirty feet into the air, sailing an equal distance forward as he passed over the crowd. The loose white fabric of his clothes flailed in the wind as he sailed back down to earth, landing on the roof of a Mercedes, which caved under his weight, shattering the windows. He jumped again, repeating the spell and launching himself into the air.

*CRASH!*

A bus that had just rolled out of the bus stop at Euston Station and tube stop had been knocked on its side by a curse while loaded with passengers. Harry jumped for the third time, soaring through the air and landing in a clear patch of pavement. He began to run, his heart

pounding in his chest, digging deep for more energy. He had to go faster, he had to cut Voldemort off. He couldn't allow him to reach Kings Cross.

Voldemort passed the old red brick building of the library, the outside covered in scaffolding. On the next corner past that was London St Pancras and Kings Cross; two adjacent buildings, two train stations and a joint tube stop, comprising one of the busiest train and Tube stations in the city. On Christmas morning, God only knew how many people would be there. Harry jumped one more time, this time coming down in front of the Dark Lord. Voldemort looked mildly surprised at Harry's landing. He shot him a sneer before shooting a Killing Curse at him. Harry stepped to the side, avoiding the curse

*"Sectumsempra!"* hissed Harry, sending the purple curse toward Voldemort, who vanished in a swish of his cloak, reappearing a few metres to his right.

Before Harry could do anything else, there was a roar of an engine and a screech of tyres as a police car screeched to a halt a few metres away. The car was decorated with orange and blue chevrons and topped with flashing blue lights. Instantly, two men got out, dressed in blue overalls, topped with armour and a helmet. Each was armed with a machine gun, just like the SAS. The code SO19 was written on the side of the car.

"ARMED POLICE! DROP THE WEAPON!" shouted one of the Muggles as a second car pulled up next to it. Harry hesitated, as four machine guns were levelled at him and Voldemort. He quickly turned to Voldemort, who looked as if he was facing a House Elf, a level of superiority and disgust etched into his face.

"DON'T DO IT!" shouted Harry, almost pleading, but it was too late. The second car, the one nearest Voldemort, suddenly flew into the air, turning over as it did so. The astonished men who had gotten out could only stand and watch as their vehicle hovered above them. It stayed still for no more than a second, before it was launched backwards across the street, crashing through the glass walls of a building. Harry saw the six four astonished policemen, turn back to Voldemort and Harry, clearly the cause of this confusion, levelling their weapons. Harry instantly conjured a shield designed to stop matter, not magic.

There was a series of loud cracks as all four men opened fire. Several of the bullets bounced off Harry's shield, just as one of the officers was blasted off his feet by a jet of blue light. Harry flicked his wand at Voldemort, sending a Stunner toward him, if only to stop the slaughter of the Muggles. Voldemort sidestepped, sending another curse into the ground in front of the second policeman. The ground exploded, launching the copper into the air and blowing his body to pieces.

Harry had to stop this. As another volley of shots impacted his shield as well as Voldemort's, Harry raised a hand to the copper. The man was thrust backwards by an invisible force, landing on the concrete of the street, and then forced to keep rolling. As Voldemort launched another green curse at the final copper, Harry levitated the man over the curse. Voldemort shot a sneer at Harry before another Killing Curse. Reacting quickly, Harry dived to the side, just in time to avoid the incoming curse. In doing so, he lost concentration on the flying

policemen, who fell back toward Earth. Voldemort, sensing his opportunity, turned left and ran down an alley, past a taxi-ramp and into London St Pancras station.

Harry ran forward toward the falling policeman, raising his hand. The policeman was pulled sharply toward him and brought to a stop, hovering in front of Harry.

“Your weapons are no good,” said Harry quickly, holding the man in mid-air to make sure he had his full attention. “I will handle him. If you want to make yourself useful, evacuate the station and Kings Cross. Don’t let anybody come in.” With that, he dropped the man on the ground and sprinted after the Dark Lord, his legs complaining with every step.

As Harry surged through the sliding glass doors of St Pancras, he smashed the fire alarm with his fist. Instantly sirens went off and red lights began to flash on the wall. A voice appeared over the PA system, asking people to leave. Harry took a few more steps before seeing a flash of movement to his right. He turned but he was too slow. The curse hit him in his back, launching him into a wall. Using his wand, Harry softened the impact, grateful that the armour had absorbed most of the curse. Bouncing off the wall, Harry landed on his feet and dived behind the deserted coffee shack.

Peering out, he could see a newsagent on the left side of the room, in front of which escalators were going up to the platforms. Around the back of the escalators, near Harry, was a line of cash machines, and around the far side were the ticket windows, now sealed. To his right was a sandwich stand. It was by this that Voldemort was standing.

Voldemort stepped calmly away from cover, giving no sign that he had just run for the best part of a mile down the road, launching curses left, right and centre all the way. He stepped closer, his wand raised. Harry felt the whole coffee shack shake as another curse slammed into it.

“Harry?” called an icy voice. “Come out and face me, Harry.” There was a pause and then the shack shook again under the force of another curse. Harry was forced to whip his leg out of the way as the boiling water machine ruptured and a cascade of scalding hot water narrowly missed him.

“Come out, Potter!” called the icy voice again. “Face me like a man.”

“At least I am a man,” Harry shouted back. He peered out from his hiding place. He was sitting in a big puddle of cooling water, which was expanding over the floor.

“Ready to die now, Potter?” Voldemort asked, stepping closer and raising his wand. As Riddle took another step, Harry saw that Voldemort too was standing in the water, his cloak beginning to soak it up. Maybe Harry could conjure a water monster or drown him or something. He was running out of ideas and ached all over from his fight.

“You first,” said Harry. He suddenly had an idea. He took a deep breath and rose to his feet, still in cover of the shack. He pulled out the stun baton and lit it with a spell, causing it to glow a pale blue colour. Preparing himself, Harry stepped out of cover, holding the baton behind

his back. He stepped out further, his footsteps creating ripples in the water, and echoing around the deserted station.

“Do you honestly think you can win?” asked Voldemort, levelling his wand at Harry. “Do you honestly think you are a match for me?” His tone was superior and icy, while his eyes flashed with malice. He paused for just a second, before moving.

*“AVADA KEDAVRA!”*

*“WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!”* Harry cast the spell on himself, lifting himself high into the air, and dropping the baton as he did so. The blue lightning spell glowed sky blue as it descended, and when it hit the water, it sent bolts of blue lightning snaking across the water’s surface, heading toward Voldemort’s legs. The man screamed as thousands of volts of electricity surged through his body. Harry, hanging from the rafters, could see the blue bolts dancing around his feet as the man shook under the force of thousands of volts coursing through his limbs.

*“Finite Incantatem!”* said Harry, aiming his wand at the baton, which faded into dormancy. Harry couldn’t return to the ground if it was all electrified. After the baton has ceased glowing, Harry let go of the rafter, and dropped towards the floor. He did make it.

“AHHHHHHH!”

With a sickening battle cry, a figure in black rocketed into the air. Harry didn’t have time to react before the flapping cloak came crashing into him as he descended with the force of a train. Harry was caught in the stomach; he lost all control as he hurtled towards the hard ground. With a splash and a thud, he landed painfully on his back in an inch of cold water. He managed to take one breath before a hand clamped over his throat. He was pinned down by Voldemort kneeling on his chest, holding him in place by his throat.

Voldemort’s other hand rose high above his head, the jagged piece of metal he held shimmering in the sunlight coming in through shattered windows for just an instant, before it plummeted down into his left shoulder. Harry bit down hard, trying to block out the pain as the jagged steel pierced his shoulder and the floor, pinning him in place.

“You think simple Muggle tricks are a match for me?” hissed Voldemort, his eyes burning with anger and his robes steaming with evaporating water. “You think I can be killed so easily, by someone so weak?” Harry lashed out with his free arm, aiming a punch at Voldemort’s face, but he was too slow.

*“CRUCIO!”*

Pain surged through his body, inflaming the nerve endings and boiling his blood. All thought left his mind as the pain consumed him. His body thrashed in the water, only acting to saw his arm against the jagged metal holding him in place. The pain was gone a second later, and Harry lay still for a second, shaking, before Voldemort was back.

Harry felt his entire body rise into the air. He managed to stifle a scream as his left shoulder was torn from the jagged steel holding him in place. Free from the water, but not from the spell, Harry rose into the air, turning upright as he did. Voldemort stood below him, icily watching as Harry rose into the air.

Where the hell had his wand gone? He needed to find it to have any hope of escape. He had to get Voldemort back to the Ministry, before he harmed anyone else.

Harry didn't have any more time to think about it as he was launched backwards into the wall of the building. His head and back slammed into the bricks before bouncing off. Harry crashed to the ground in a heap, gasping for breath as his limbs once again were consumed by the icy pain of the Cruciatus Curse. His body thrashed as his mind tried to numb the pain, while the Dark Lord stood over him, his eyes flickering with malice as he sustained the curse, pouring into it every ounce of hatred and anger in him.

At length, the curse was removed, and Harry lay steaming on the ground, his limbs too weak to move. This had been a really bad idea. What made him think he could take on Voldemort? He had lost, and the whole country would lose with him. This plan had been folly from day one. He should never have come.

"Look at yourself," said Voldemort softly. Harry glanced around, desperately seeking his dropped wand. It was here somewhere. All around he could see people running away from the havoc they were causing. The windows were all shattered, the main road was in ruins, and some people had gathered to watch, though they kept a safe distance. Where was that wand?

"Look at yourself," repeated Voldemort. "You are pathetic. As my right hand man, you had everything. When you switched bodies you had a choice; you could have sided with me. Instead, you chose death. You ran to those you call friends, those too weak to survive. Your precious family were what dragged you down in the first place, installing feelings of compassion and love - weaknesses, Potter, words made up simply to give pride to the mediocre and the weak, to make the weak think more highly of themselves. Love cannot even be defined - why, Potter? Because it doesn't exist - it is an illusion designed by those with power to compensate those without for their lack of it. You are so caught up in the concept, you have given up what you did have; power, respect and potential, and this is how you come before me now: weak and feeble, with no real cause to fight for but your own survival. Dressed in white, Potter, how pure do you think you are? You're a monster, a murderer."

"In the past," coughed Harry, rolling onto his back. Voldemort's words meant nothing. He knew he was just, he knew he was a good person.

"Then what have you come here for today, if not to kill?" hissed Voldemort. "Look at yourself, how your blood stains the white of your clothes. White, Light, shows all its weaknesses, where it bleeds, where it is dirty, and when it gets wet, when tears or water touch it, it becomes transparent, offering no protection, just like you. Black, Darkness, hides its wounds, hides the dirt, the pain and does its job. It's impossible to keep white clean, just as it is impossible to keep those you fight to protect clean from the darkness. They'd throw you to the

wolves to make themselves better off. They are tainted, don't you see, on their way to darkness. Anger and vengeance build in their hearts with every day. You are fighting for a cause that does not exist."

"They deserve a choice," said Harry, his eyes still seeking his wand. Suddenly his eyes picked out his wand, lying in the remains of the coffee shack. Harry looked from the wand up to Voldemort.

"Then I will give you a choice," said Voldemort, aiming the wand at Harry's head. "One last chance. Join me, or die."

"DIE!" screamed Harry suddenly, lashing out at Voldemort with his leg. He hit Voldemort in the stomach and then sprang up from his shoulders to his feet. He extended an arm and his wand jumped up into it. Harry caught the wand, just as Voldemort tried to raise his. Harry did the last thing he was expecting: he grabbed the Dark Lord, pulling him into a hug.

With that, Harry disappeared in a ball of flame, dragging the Dark Lord with him. He reappeared in the Ministry of Magic, pushing Voldemort to the ground as he did so. Not giving him time to react, Harry disappeared again, flaming back to the Entrance Hall. There were twelve SAS men in full black combat gear waiting for people to come out. Harry crashed to his knees the moment, he reappeared.

"Jesus, are you alright?" asked one of them as Harry tried to stand up. He was covered in dirt, blood and ash, was soaked through and looked a right state.

"Give me some explosive," said Harry, as the soldier approached. "Quickly!"

One of the men handed Harry a paper block with a small clock attached. "Set time with this knob," said the man. "Press here to start the timer and here to stop it." With that, the men disappeared behind columns and the security desk. Harry pocketed the C4.

"It won't be long now," said Harry, picking up the backpack with Arctic Thunder in it and throwing it over his shoulder. "Stay sharp." He took a second to compose himself. He ached all over, was cold, tired and in pain. His head throbbed and his mind was numb. All that remained was the kill, and he had to be seen doing it. This was all, the final conflict.

He flamed back to Voldemort, appearing in the middle of the passage as Voldemort turned to face him. Harry slipped to the side, disappearing down an adjacent passage. It was his turn to lead the pursuit now.

"Catch me if you can, arsehole!" he shouted over his shoulder. He had studied the blueprints of the Ministry and knew that along the next passage was a dead end. That end was directly above the Auditorium where the ceremony was being held. Harry checked his watch. It was ten past eleven. The ceremony was a little late. It was time to give the signal. Harry turned the corner and removed the C4 from his pocket, winding it to three seconds. With that he waited. Voldemort stepped around the corner, his eyes burning with anger, his wand level.

“Nowhere to run, boy,” said Voldemort, marching forward with his wand raised, while Harry stood with his arms at his sides. “How will your father feel, knowing you ran like a coward from me?” Harry scowled at him, knowing that his father would be proud of him for tricking Voldemort. He removed the C4 from behind his back, holding it up for Voldemort to see.

“If I were you,” he said calmly, “I’d raise a shield.” With that, he pressed the button and slammed the explosive onto the floor in front of him, the soft pliable plastic flattening into the floor.

Voldemort’s eyes grew wide and he snapped a shield into place, just in time. The explosion was deafening in the confined space. Harry’s shield protected him from the flames as the explosion tore the floor apart, and Harry and Voldemort began to fall.

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The national anthem had just begun and the clock on the wall read five-to. James Potter, having cleaned himself up a bit and having removed the beard, slipped silently through the ranks, unnoticed by the audience of Black Watch, some of whom he had once worked with. No one questioned the latecomers, or the fact that some of them were rather short. They slipped amongst the Black Watch, dressed to match, assuming positions around the hall.

The main floor of the room, in front of the stage was a sea of black. The Black Watch were out in force, standing in perfect ranks, equally spaced and snapped to attention. On the right side of the room in front of the stage was an area of green. The newly formed Commandos (as Sirius had explained on the way down to the Auditorium) consisted of the Muggleborns and Half-Bloods working in the Ministry, who had been forced to join an army that would be marched to its death. They wore robes which were patterned with the green, brown and beige blobs of army camouflage, which was topped by a grassy-green coloured cloak.

Above them were two levels of balconies. Both of them were packed with civilians, under the watch of several Black Watch Aurors who lined the steps at both ends of the rows of seats. They were stood up, and holding the provided song cards, giving the words of the national anthem, which at present was filling the air. James watched some of the Order position themselves up on the balcony. At the front of the room was a stage. A black curtain was draped behind it, as if the country was in mourning, which ironically, it was.

Right, to business, thought James, as he passed the rows of singing men. Where was Dumbledore? He was not on the stage, nor in the crowd, yet he was scheduled to be executed here today. If they could free Dumbledore, they had a greater chance of success. *If I were holding the most powerful wizard on earth, where would I keep him?* wondered James. He had no idea, but he knew there would be a lot of security around him.

He raised his hand to his face, as if to scratch his nose, or adjust his veil, the purpose was to bring the Frog-Card that was hidden up his sleeve close to his mouth. “Anyone got eyes on Albus?”

“They won’t bring him out until the last second,” said Frank from somewhere in the room. “Too much chance for an escape and it’s more dramatic. Remember, this is a coup d’theatre, a big show designed to capture your boy and to show the public who’s in charge, even though it’s not necessary at this point.” James took one more glance around before heading into the ranks of Aurors.

“Okay,” said James. “Take positions. Rachel, stay near the stage. When it all hits the fan, you get Dumbledore out of there, okay?”

“Got it,” came the hushed reply.

James walked calmly around the back of the bottom level, behind the Black Watch, into a section of them who wore red bands on their right arms. They did not wear veils, even though they had their hoods up. James walked along the side of the ranks, picking out faces he recognised.

The singing of the anthem was reaching its climax as James approached three Aurors he recognised, and in fact had once commanded.

“Are your wives proud of your career change?” he hissed over their shoulders. Each turned their heads to face him, their eyes bulging in recognition. Glancing around, he could see Mad Eye walking between the ranks, his limp hardly noticeable. The mad old git played up his limp! Cheeky bastard! James knew it lowered expectations of him, giving him the element of surprise, but it seemed so...underhand for the Auror.

“We heard you were arrested,” said Derek, one of the Aurors, his lips hardly moving, but his head turning to face him.

“Shut up and face the front!” hissed James, his voice a growl. Obediently, their heads returned to the front, and their mouths began to move, as if singing with the rest of the room, but not making a sound. James glanced at his watch. He needed to hurry. “I was arrested,” he continued. “But I’m free now. Now, answer my question: are you proud of career change?”

“Not especially,” said Raul, “but it’s better than being dead.” True, thought James. Most of the Black Watch were only there out of fear. They would be cut down, unless they came back to the ‘good’ side. It was their choice to make. Would they stand beneath the badge of justice, or the Dark Mark?

“If there was a chance to go back to the old days, would you take it?” asked James, his hand on his wand, ready to petrify them should the answer be no.

“In a heartbeat,” said Derek, much to James’ relief. The other nodded in agreement.

“Good,” said James. He parted his Black Watch robes enough for them to see the bright scarlet robes and the Auror badge - two crossed wands over a six-point star, topped with a pair of scales. It was the symbol of justice in the Wizarding World. It seemed to James’ eyes that the

sight of the badge relit the flame of hope inside them. For what seemed like the first time in ages, the men smiled. They would side with the Light. “Get ready,” ordered James. “When it all kicks off, transfigure your robes to red and fight.”

He hoped enough would join the fight to turn the tide. The plan was good, but risky, and it was all they had. He hoped to Merlin that Harry was all right. This plan hinged on him not being killed and killing a man some said could not be killed. Glancing around, James noticed the others slipping into the ranks of the Black Watch, whispering in ears. Sirius had already slipped amongst the Commandos and was whispering to one. They would be most likely to join the Aurors rather than the Black Watch.

James glanced at the clock; it was almost time. There were Muggle soldiers hidden on the balcony and in the wings, ready to come out. Everything was set; it was up to Harry now. Rachel was set at the front of the stage, ready to grab Dumbledore. There was nothing else they could do but wait. James spotted another group of familiar Aurors and made his way across, his mind straying to Lily at Hogwarts, whose time in captivity had taken its toll. She was pale, weak, tired and her mind had been shutting down with worry about her children. When Rose had arrived, she was more relieved to find her alive, than horrified that she had been kidnapped. Had her sanity finally broken?

He thrust the image out of his mind, forcing himself to concentrate. Like a conscience, James whispered into the ear of one of the Black Watch, telling him of the chance to return to the old days. The Auror agreed in seconds. The singing had reached the end and had stopped. The clock on the wall was about to strike midday and Crouch had entered and was about to take the stage. He walked proudly up to the altar, his head held high and his back straight. He reached the podium in ten seconds, taking a sip from the water left out and placing a sheet of parchment on top.

Silence had fallen in the room and an ominous atmosphere settled in. The Death Eater was about to address the nation and freedom and liberty were about to die.

BONG!

The first bell sounded as midday arrived. Crouch stood motionless at the podium, staring out over a sea of black. The bongs continued, as though counting down to something...something terrible. James' heart sank as he listened. This was the end. His fingers gripped his wand tightly, and his body tensed. It was time. Harry needed to do something now, or forever hold his peace.

As the final bong reverberated around the room, there was a mass shuffling as the crowds took their seats. Crouch waited a moment for the noise to subside before beginning his speech.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” began Crouch as the sound of the twelfth bong faded.

Where the hell was Harry? wondered James. Why hadn't he done something? Where was Voldemort? Had Harry been killed? What now? Would they have to attack on their own and someone else take him down?

If they could free Dumbledore, he could do it instead of Harry. That made Rachel's job even more important. Merlin, he hoped nothing had happened to Harry.

Crouch continued, "It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the inauguration of the country's first High Chancellor. Today we will usher in a new era of this country - one of prosperity, and most importantly, one of freedom. No longer will we have to hide who we are, no longer shall we be ashamed of ourselves. We will send a message to the Muggles, reminding them who we are, and retaining our rightful place. We will end the tyranny, and restore freedom to our community. A strong fight can only come from a strong leader, and that is what we are gathered here today to witness.

"And what better way to mark the occasion, than with a firm and absolute example of the justice he has brought us? Let this day stand as a symbol of a moment when the entire Wizarding population said with a single voice, "we will not let this go on, we will stand as one, and we will not tolerate tyranny!". We mark today with an execution, an example to any other rogue elements and to anyone who will stand in the way of our victory - ours, yours and mine.

"BRING OUT THE ACCUSED!"

At Crouch's words, the veil at the back of the stage slowly began to rise, exposing an area behind the stage. It reminded James of the garage at Lily's parents house. It was a small dark room with bare walls, nothing covering the bricks. As he watched, he saw something move in the shadows. Something was coming out. Slowly and in silence, a shape emerged from the shadow. James' jaw dropped and an audible gasp swept around the hall.

Hovering a foot above the grounds, and slowly moving into the light, was a large chair made of thick oak and reinforced with metal. The highly polished wood glistened in the light, the shiny metal strips that reinforced it gleamed. Sitting in the chair, held in by manacles over the wrists, forearms, upper arms, waist, chest, ribs, ankles, thighs, shins, neck and head, sat Albus Dumbledore. He seemed to have been mummified in strips of metal, holding him firmly in place. He had been dressed in black, beneath the strips of metal, and it seemed they had made an attempt to clean him up. His skin seemed clean and his beard combed and straight. He had a white patch over one eyebrow and on the left side of his jaw. He had been in a much worse situation the last time James had seen him, back on Lundy. They had kept Dumbledore chained to the wall, unable to move, and after a short time, unable to speak, meaning that conversations became a game of charades, as he could only nod, shake his head or blink. He had been beaten and cursed, leaving his face in a horrible state, but that had mostly been healed. He looked almost presentable, except for his confinement. Standing on either side of the chair was an Auror, his wand drawn and ready. They stepped forward, a pace at a time in perfect unison, never leaving the side of a chair as it floated forwards and came down to settle on the stage. *It was almost like a funeral march*, noted James, and in essence it was: the last ride of a condemned man.

James knew he could do nothing.

It was all up to Harry now.

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Minerva's heart missed a beat as she saw Albus projected on the big screen. He had white bandages on his face and had clearly been mistreated. Merlin, what had he been through? She glanced over at Rookwood, who was smirking to himself, from his position by the fireplace to the side. As Potter had promised, his Aurors had all been sick, which had put him in a foul mood. However, Rookwood firmly believed that it had been a student who had done it in order to mar the day, rather than anyone else as part of a bigger plan. He had threatened the school with punishments, demanding to know who it had been, and where the missing eleven students were. Poppy had sent a House Elf down a moment ago to inform her that they had received several of the prisoners back and were receiving treatment. Professor Potter was back, along with Hermione Granger. Minerva had also been told about receiving the body of Anthony Goldstein. The poor boy had given his life for the cause. He had not been a particularly bright or powerful boy, but he had believed and in a time of darkness, he had done what's right. *Outstanding moral fibre*, as Albus used to call it.

Minerva watched helplessly as the chair Albus was sitting in on the big screen levitated and was brought forward slowly, hovering an inch off the ground. The two Aurors stood on either side, marching next to the chair. They came to a stop two metres to Crouch's right.

There was a second's pause before the chair descended lightly to the ground, its wooden legs making next to no sound as it landed. The eyes of those in the audience and those watching at Hogwarts and around the country were glued to the man they once called teacher. *How could they not remember how good he was?* thought Minerva desperately. *How could they forsake him?* There was a sharp metallic scraping sound and a click as the chair extended, forcing Albus into a standing position, still held firmly in place by over a dozen metal straps.

Despite all this, he seemed to keep his dignity about him. It was a feat so few could manage. Minerva watched the screen. The scope taking the image was presumably placed up on a balcony as it showed the image looking down on the stage, over the heads of a sea of Black Watch Aurors and a small section of men in green, which Minerva guess were the new Commandos.

"Albus Dumbledore," said Crouch, addressing not only him, but everyone watching. *Where is Potter?* wondered Minerva. She was waiting for a signal, but had no idea what it was. She just hoped the boy knew what he was doing. He seemed to have succeeded in rescuing some of the hostages, but why so few? Where were the others, were they dead?...surely he wouldn't march them into the Ministry in their state? Merlin, she wished she knew what was going on.

She had passed on her note to Nicolas and Severus, both of whom were standing by.

Crouch continued, “You stand here today, accused of the crime of high treason and murder...”

It was all up to Harry now.

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BOOM!

The whole building shook, and a deafening explosion rocked the room as the ceiling exploded into a cascade of dust, rocks and debris. James glanced up as a circle of the ceiling fell away and rained down upon them, the explosion shaking the very foundations of the room. Everyone inside screamed, looked up and dived for cover as the roof caved in around them. Through the cloud, James could see two figures falling with the rocks, encased in shields; one in black and one in white. Harry!

This was the signal; it had to be. Harry had said that all Hell would break loose and it soon would. The time had come; he hoped everything went well.

“Now!” he hissed into his frog-card, hidden up his sleeve. He threw off his Black Watch robes, exposing the bright scarlet and the badge of justice, and raised his wand to the podium.

“*REDUCTO!*” he shouted at Crouch. The curse missed the man, slamming into the wooden podium and blowing it apart, sending chunks in all directions, just as the rock and dust falling from above landed on the stage. Pandemonium erupted as other figures in red emerged from the black, sending bolts of light in all directions. The air was thick with curses and the ground with running bodies, as the Aurors emerged from the ranks of the Black Watch. The Black Watch didn’t know what hit them. All of a sudden, the audience on the balcony and main floor made for the doors, screaming and running around like headless chickens, as a full scale battle erupted around them. The Black Watch had drawn their wands, but there were so many of them, it was hard for those on the outside to pick out a target when there were hordes of civilians running between them.

James shot an area effect spell at the ground, causing those near him to stick to the floor. He finished off the four caught in the web with a series of Stunners. They crashed to the floor in front of him. He could see the others duelling around the room, while the doors were clogged with civilians, as people pushed and shoved, desperate to get out. Flashes of light were going off all around as the Aurors and the Black Watch faced off. The air was thick with curses as the orderly ceremony exploded into chaos. Amidst the violence, flashes went off as the Press who had gathered took photographs of the action as it unfolded.

A Death Eater appeared in front of James, throwing a curse at him as he did. James ducked, flicking his wand up as he did so. A flash of blue left his wand and the man was sent hurtling through the air. The trouble was that there were so many. As soon as he had taken care of one, another took his place.

Levicorpus!

The Death Eater was hoisted into the air by his ankle and was suspended in mid-air, unable to escape. James didn't hesitate, sending the Death Eater hurtling into another pair running forward to face him.

“AVADA...” James had dived to the floor before the second word was even finished, his Quidditch-trained reflexes saving his life. He rolled onto his back, facing the Death Eater, his wand level. *Stupefy!* The silent curse caught the Death Eater in the neck and he fell forward, unconscious.

“Katie, Seamus,” he shouted to the nearest students. He pointed toward the doors. “Help them clear the room. The Muggles can handle it from there!” Those pushing crowds would end up hurting someone and they stopped people getting out.

Suddenly a Black Watch Auror appeared in front of him. He was too tired to duel properly, but he had to survive. They were all knackered, but Aurors were trained to dig deep. James summoned his strength, and managed to get off a Stunner just as the man raised his wand. He collapsed in a shower of sparks, but there were too many. As the man fell, two more took his place, bearing down on James.

Suddenly out of nowhere, Derek and Raul appeared. Each clamped their hands over their victim's mouth, jabbed their wands into their backs and stunned them point blank. The Aurors, still wearing the garb of the enemy, released their victims, who fell to the floor with a crash.

“Thanks,” hissed James, accepting the hand that Raul offered him. “Transfigure your robes to red and let's go!” As they changed their robes, James glanced over to the figure in white, lying on the stage, where the petrified Dumbledore was stuck.

“RACHEL!” shouted James over the crowd. “GET DUMBLEDORE!”

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BOOM!

Minerva jumped as a tremendous explosion appeared on the screen. The force was so powerful that it cause the scope to shake, meaning the picture on the screen wobbled. On the screen, half of the ceiling of the auditorium shattered like a pane of glass, raining chunks of rock, stone and dust down onto the stage. There was a gasp as the explosion rang out, not only through the Ministry, but through Hogwarts as well.

“What the...?” began Rookwood, but he never finished. This was the signal; this was it! Minerva had her wand out in a flash and levelled at Rookwood.

*Stupefy!* The curse silently left her wand, hurtling toward the High Inquisitor. Rookwood turned to face her, just in time for the curse to hit him in the chest. His body folded inwards as he

was struck down by the curse. Instantly the Inquisitorial Squad, as they had been named, jumped to their feet. Surely, not even Draco Malfoy would attack a teacher? Wrong.

A spell left the boy's wand, a vile shade of green. Whatever it was, it was dark; no doubt a lesson from his father. Minerva ducked behind her chair as Nicolas rose to his feet beside her, flicking his wand. Malfoy's own wand was plucked from his fingers. Malfoy yelped as he lost his grip, toppling over in the process. Already, Filius, a former duelling champion, and Severus, a former Death Eater, were on their way around the table and down amongst the school, most of whom were covering their heads in fear. It was not every day that the bullies attacked the teachers.

Malfoy had climbed under his table, taking cover as Filius Flitwick jumped up onto the Hufflepuff table, running along the top, his wand aimed sideways. It was like a shooting gallery for him, as Crabbe and Goyle rose from their seats like targets, just in time to receive a stunner to the face.

Pansy Parkinson was also on her feet, her wand aimed at the incoming Snape, who walked silently and relentlessly toward her, without his wand even drawn. Pansy looked unsure as she faced her Head of House, a man with a widely known dark past and a passion for the Dark Arts. She stepped forward, swinging her wand in a slashing motion, unleashing a ribbon of purple light. Severus flicked the curse aside with the back of his hand, and in one fluid motion, grabbed Pansy's wand arm, twisting it sharply behind her back, forcing her to drop the wand.

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," said Snape icily, raising a hand to her face. As his hand touched her skin, Pansy screamed in pain, the cry reverberating around the hall. Minerva watched in horror as smoke began to rise from Severus' hand, and Parkinson thrashed in his grip. What in the name of Merlin was he doing? As Severus removed his hand, Pansy fell to the floor, a handprint burned into the side of her face.

"Anyone else wish to raise an objection?" he asked, his icy tone reaching all corners of the hall. Minerva hated the method, but she had to admit, he had the hall's attention. "Now, sit and wait," he hissed, picking up Pansy's fallen wand, ignoring the girl's sobs of pain, and throwing it into the fireplace. Minerva glanced one more time at Pansy's blistered face before addressing the school.

"Stay where you are," she ordered. "Madam Hooch, please take Miss Parkinson to the Hospital Wing. Everyone else is to stay still until this is over." With that she turned her attention back to the screen, upon which a woman with flowing brown hair, dressed in red Auror robes, had reached the stage. She dived into a roll, avoiding a green curse and firing a red one in return as she rose to her feet. The Auror guarding Albus dropped like a sack of spuds as the curse hit him. With that, the girl rose to her feet and began to work on the chair.

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Lieutenant Hopkins of Blue Team checked his watch again. He had heard and felt an explosion just a few moments ago, and so his body was tense and his veins filled with

adrenaline. There were fireplaces along two of the opposite walls, and a fountain in the middle. To his left was the security desk, past which were the passages that led into the Ministry of Magic.

Magic? Yesterday he had gotten up to a normal world he understood. One phone call from the CO's office and everything had changed. Not only did magic exist, but also half of the people who could do it were homicidal maniacs and now it was up to him to clear up the mess. Truth be told, he still didn't understand the true reason for being here, but he was under orders, and those were that no one was to leave the room until a man named Albus Dumbledore or a boy called Harry Potter gave the all-clear, and those orders would be followed to the letter. He knew that he was allowed to shoot anyone dressed in black if they were a threat, and that too seemed simple. There were twenty men from Blue team in the room, all of them with their MP5 aimed at the door from which the panicking wizards would have to come. It was only a matter of time now. That explosion must have been the start of the battle. Hopkins didn't understand why they, the true soldiers, were not in the battle when a group of school children were, but again, he would follow orders. God, this was confusing.

He was dressed all in black, with a gas mask on and a helmet. The other nineteen looked ominous in the gloom, as they stood before the fireplaces, their weapons ready. It wouldn't be long now.

Click!

What the...?

He didn't have time to react before something small, round, cold and hard pressed against the back of his skull. He knew that sound. It was the cocking of an automatic pistol, and unless he was very much mistaken. It was pressed against the back of his head.

Blue team seemed to realise something was wrong, and turned. Hopkins saw in dismay that each of them had a small glowing red dot on their chests. As they turned a series of clicks came from the shadows. Many weapons were being cocked and aimed at the SAS and they couldn't see a thing. God, how many men were hiding in the shadows.

"Drop the weapon," hissed a voice in his ear. "Tell your men to do the same."

"Who the hell are you?" snapped Hopkins. He received a vicious smack on the head with the butt of the pistol. He staggered forward two paces to regain his balance. He made it more dramatic than he felt, taking the opportunity to slide a hand towards his weapon.

"Don't even think about it, Lieutenant," said the voice icily. "Once again, order your men to safety their weapons and place them on the deck." Hopkins realised with surprise that this person knew who he was. Was it a wizard who could read minds? He slowly brought his hands up so they were visible and turned to face his attacker, unsure what to expect. He stared into the shadow and after a second, a figure stepped out, into the half light.

He was dressed all in black, very similar to how the SAS were dressed. He wore combat overalls, assault boots, Kevlar, and had a longer rifle over his back. He was aiming a silenced pistol at Hopkins' head, The kit was more or less standard issue for British Special Forces - this was no wizard. Had Evans sent another team? Why would he? How could he? He didn't know where they were, did he? As he glanced around, Hopkins saw more figures in black emerging from the darkness.

"Who are you?" demanded Hopkins. "How did you get in here?"

"Not by strength, by guile," said the man, and Hopkins understood.

"Special Boat Service," he breathed. The Royal Marines equivalent to the SAS was considered to be a bitter rival at Hereford. They referred to their sister service as 'Stupid Bent Sailors'. Hopkins managed to keep his tone neutral.

The figure inclined his head ever so slightly into the tiniest of nods.

"Now, do as you're told Lieutenant," said the Marine. "Tell your men to drop their weapons, and bear in mind my orders are to kill anyone who stands in our way."

"Ordered by whom?" asked Hopkins not moving.

"It doesn't matter," said the Marine. "We were told that you might be bewitched, not yourselves. I can't take the chance of letting you go, now surrender your weapons. We need to move in and take out Potter and Voldemort now!"

"Look, Marine," said Hopkins, his tone level and as calm as he could make it. "We are not bewitched, or under a spell or anything. God, I've seen some really weird things in the last twenty-four hours. This Potter, he's strange, powerful, and a trained killer, but no more a monster than you or I."

"That's not for us to decide," replied the Marine. "We follow Orders."

"So do we," replied Hopkins, "and ours are to protect Potter while he finishes off this Voldemort."

"And ours are to eliminate both Potter and Voldemort," said the Marine.

"Guess this means we are on opposite sides of the lines," said Hopkins. "How did we get to the point where British soldiers are fighting amongst themselves?" He took a step closer to the Marine, his voice almost pleading now. "Jesus, can't you see that something has gone wrong? It's not a sane order that sends British soldiers to kill their brothers."

The Marine hesitated. He didn't reply, or lower the gun, but his shoulders moves slightly and his body sunk a little.

“Thank about what you’re doing,” said Hopkins. “We are both on the same side, trying to protect this country. We are both out of our depth, but trust me, Potter is not the enemy and neither are we.”

“I am under orders,” said the Marine at last.

“I can appreciate that...?” said Hopkins.

“Captain,” replied the marine, filling in the blank.

“I can appreciate that, sir,” said Hopkins. “But at least delay your orders. There is a battle raging a few floors beneath us. Any minute now, hundreds of civilians are about to flee up here. All we are here to do is keep them from escaping. No killing, no further interaction, just keep them here and keep them safe. All I am asking is that you wait. We only need to hold them, and then the other team will bring up Potter and Voldemort, the latter hopefully dead, and the boy alive. You will see that neither are a threat any more. That way neither of us disobey orders, and no-one gets hurt.”

“And if I refuse?” said the man, his tone hardening. He raised the pistol a little higher.

“You are Special Forces,” said Hopkins. “So are we. If push comes to shove, we will both lose men. Non of our brothers have to die today, sir, I am only asking for time.”

The young marine looked nervous for a moment. Hopkins was twenty-eight and on his second tour with the SAS. Officers only served a three-year slot, and usually only once. He was one of the few on a second, and the officer in front was on his first. He was very young and inexperienced and it showed. He shook slightly, and his gun arm was far from steady.

“It’s your choice, sir,” said Hopkins, taking another step. “We can all walk away heroes and we can all go home.”

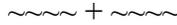
“I...” the man hesitated.

Suddenly he heard a terrifying sound. Screams were coming from down the hall, and the rumble of footsteps could be felt. He could feel the thunder of the stampede, and the sounds of screams were floating down the corridor. They were out of time.

“Captain,” said Hopkins firmly. “You can either get on board or get out of the way, but decide quickly.”

“Marines,” said the young officer at last. “Spread out, no-one gets to the lift!” Hopkins breathed a sigh of relief, and turned back to the security desk, just as a wave of people in brightly coloured robes surged through it.

“FREEZE!” shouted thirty-two voices at once.



Harry's legs felt like they were made of lead - so heavy that he had trouble moving them. It took all his energy just to get to his feet. The sound of the explosion was still reverberating through his ears, and the fall had done him no good. Blood flowed from his ears and noses, which, in conjunction with the stone-dust and plaster that had turned his face white, made him look even more haunted than ever. His muffled hearing made him feel light-headed, like an out-of-body experience as he stared at the chaos around him. It seemed to be happening in slow motion. Flashes of light kept catching his eyes, bodies were moving, falling, writhing, faces full of pain, fury, hatred and fear all moved around him, like a swirling storm of violence.

He managed to get up onto two knees, and hold it long enough to shake the weariness from his mind. He looked around in detail this time. They had landed on the stage at the front of the auditorium, which was now littered with stones and debris. All around him there was light and movement. A sea of black robes, broken by the occasional man in red, were moving around like headless chickens, the air thick with curses and screams. At the back and on the balcony, hundreds of civilians only here to see the ceremony hurried for the door to escape the battle. In theory, Hopkins should be there to keep them from getting too far in case any Death Eaters tried to slip out.

Harry turned back to face Voldemort, whose black robes were now covered in white powder. He too was having trouble balancing. Harry slipped the backpack off his back and dropped it to the floor, along with his sword. He could see the DA all dressed in red. How very nostalgic, wearing traditional Auror robes to fight in. It made them easier to spot; the public could relate to them and they symbolised justice - just what was needed.

Rose! It was Rose-Marie!

Harry could see his sister, looking very thin, pale, bedraggled and tired, but still fighting. She was hiding behind an upturned pew, firing hexes into the sea of black robes. Harry could see some people turning their robes from black to red as they rejoined the Light. Ginny was there too, duelling with a Black Watch Auror, she dived behind a pile of chairs, and launched a curse at her attacker as he dived. Just as one man blocked the flying chair, another grabbed Ginny from behind. Ginny screamed as the Death Eater grabbed her by the hair and wrenched her to her feet, his free hand rising high above his head, ready to strike. Harry quickly summoned a knife from a fallen Death Eater and hurled it at the man holding Ginny. The Dark Knight's aim was true and the knife stuck into the Death Eater's thigh, causing the man to roar in pain. Ginny stamped hard on his toe and then turned and grabbed his private parts, squeezing hard. Harry cringed at the thought as the man's eyes bulged and he silently screamed, unable to get a sound out. In a flash of red light, Ginny sent the Auror crashing to the ground. Rose was out of her hiding place. Harry watched her take two steps, dive over a corpse into a forward roll, and fired a stunner at the man duelling with Ron as she rolled back up onto her feet.

A flash of movement caught Harry's eye, and he realised that Voldemort was back on his feet. Harry grabbed his wand and muttered a charm to release a cloud of fog. Running toward

cover and followed by a strafe of curses from around the room, Harry fired a curse over his shoulder into the fog.

He took cover behind the remains of the alter to avoid a volley of curses from amidst the violence. He didn't know if they were loose curses or ones meant for him, but Voldemort made his point clear.

“LEAVE HIM” he shrieked. “HE’S MINE!”

Harry couldn't see Voldemort through the fog, but looked in the direction of his voice. He could see a figure moving through the fog, and seized his chance; he ran and dived towards the figure, ramming his shoulder into the man's stomach, knocking the air out of him, and slamming him to the ground in a vicious rugby tackle.

As Harry landed on top of the man, he realised his mistake. It was just a Black Watch Auror, not Voldemort! Suddenly two hands clamped around his shoulders, hoisting him to his feet and launching him across the room. He was vaguely aware of his lead-like feet leaving the ground before he slammed into the back wall, just below the magical flag of Great Britain which descended like a veil, covering him as he fell to the floor. Harry didn't stop to catch his breath. He had had the wind knocked out of him, but there was no time to wheeze. He wrenched himself free of the fallen flag and was back on his feet in seconds. Voldemort stood opposite him, his wand levelled at Harry.

This was it. There was no need to put on a show for the Muggles, no reason for Harry to remain alive. This was a duel in the true sense of the word: to the death. Red eyes met green. Black met white. Evil met good. This was it; one duel to decide the fate of a nation.

Harry's back bent slowly, his emerald eyes never leaving Voldemort's. The Dark Lord's back sank a minute way as well, as he bowed to Harry.

BOOM!

Something had happened at the back of the room and a giant ball of flame erupted from the wall, blowing several bodies dressed in black across the room. That distraction was all Voldemort needed. Harry blinked and a green jet of light was already coming toward him as he reopened his eyes. Harry surged forward, ducking the curse as he did.

“*Crucio!*” hissed Voldemort as Harry ran toward him, now ten feet away. Harry sidestepped the curse, coming into range of Voldemort. He lunged forward, *Sectumsempra!*

The curse glowed at the end of his wand as he lunged, as though he were fencing. Voldemort sidestepped as he passed, thrusting his wand toward Harry's ribs as he passed, a ball of black smoke at the tip of his wand. *Sanctius!* Harry jabbed his wand at the curse and the turquoise shield snapped into place at the end of his wand, literally parrying Voldemort's attack away from him. Harry and Voldemort turned in unison, coming about to face each other, a curse already on each of their lips. Harry raised a hand to block Voldemort's arm from coming close

enough, parrying the arm with the wand, and jabbing his wand point blank into Voldemort's chest. Harry's arm blocked Voldemort's, forcing the wand away from his face, just as bony fingers closed around his own wand arm, forcing it up toward the ceiling. Two curses rocketed off in random directions, both missing their targets.

Voldemort still held Harry's arm and before he could react, he pulled Harry closer, slamming his arm into Harry's neck in a clothesline. Harry's momentum carried him through, his feet being forced from the ground. His back slammed hard into the wood of the stage. Coloured spots appeared over his vision. Harry had a quarter of a second to move, as Voldemort plunged his wand downward, the tip glowing green.

Harry rolled to the side as the Killing Curse slammed into wood, blowing it apart. Harry leapt to his feet with a little help from a hovering charm, and fired a curse at Voldemort, whose arm parried his already. Voldemort, it seemed, had mastered this style of close quarter duelling, wherein the combatants had to block the arms, not the wand, lest they be cursed.

Harry thrust his wand forward, but Voldemort grabbed his wrist, twisting it sharply outwards, exposing Harry's ribs. He tried to jab his wand at Harry, a purple curse already glowing on the tip of his wand. With a little help from a hovering charm, Harry jumped upwards as the curse rocketed away beneath him, narrowly missing his bum. As Voldemort still held his wrist, Harry performed a back-flip, reversing the twist on his wrist, and pulling Voldemort off balance. He lashed out with his foot as he was upside down, kicking Voldemort in the jaw on the way over. Voldemort released him and Harry landed on his feet, instantly unleashing another curse and sidestepping Voldemort's advancing wand.

It was like fencing, only faster and deadlier. Harry jabbed his wand at Voldemort, while at the same time physically blocking Voldemort's attacks. He wasn't using defensive spells, merely physically restraining Voldemort's arm so that no curse could hit him. In theory, not using magic for defence, left more time for magical offence, but the physical defence was more tiring. The trouble was that Voldemort was clearly no stranger to this type of combat and Harry was tiring quickly.

Harry jabbed at Voldemort, but an arm brushed his wand aside. Harry shifted his feet to maintain his balance, just as Voldemort's wand came up from below toward his head. Harry whipped his head back just in time as a curse shot by his chin. That was close! Taking the initiative and withdrawing, Harry stepped back, quickly switching his wand to his left hand, hoping Voldemort had not seen it. As Voldemort lunged again, Harry reached his blocking arm, now carrying the wand, around the outside of Voldemort's attack, clamping the arm between his elbow and his ribs. He lashed out with his right fist, punching Voldemort on the left cheekbone, sending the Dark Lord staggering backwards, just as Harry released a piercing curse with his wand. The curse narrowly missed Voldemort, more by the fact he was stumbling as he tried to regain balance than an intentional sidestep.

Harry swapped his wand back just as Voldemort shot a curse at him. Harry clicked his fingers on his right hand, muttering the other Harry's own spell. The pale blue ring of light formed in his hand. Spinning to his right, Harry scooped up the curse, and as he came full circle,

threw the curse back at Voldemort. The curse hit the floor at his feet, exploding into a huge orange fireball, launching the Dark Lord off his feet. He wasn't getting away that easy.

Accio Voldemort!

The Dark Lord was tumbling through the air, then a second later was pulled back toward Harry, who jumped and thrust both feet at once into Voldemort's chest. Voldemort's body spun out of control and landed with a crash, while Harry flipped in the air and landed more or less gracefully on his feet, towering over Voldemort. Thrusting his wand downwards and slamming his knee down onto Voldemort's chest as well, Harry sank to the floor. The Dark Lord slid along the ground by magic, and Harry's knee and curse hit nothing but wood.

"ARGH!"

Harry knew that scream. He spun around to see Rose, lying on the floor, her thigh covered in blood along with her hand, which was trying to stem the bleeding. A Death Eater was towering over her, his wand aimed at her head. Harry didn't hesitate. He jumped off the stage, landing behind the Death Eater. Harry grasped the dagger attached to the man's thigh with his right hand while his left clamped over the man's mouth. The Death Eater didn't have time to react before Harry dragged the dagger over his throat, slicing cleanly into his windpipe and jugular. Harry felt no emotion, nor pity for his victim.

"Rose," said Harry quickly. "Use the Portkey. You've done your part, now go home!" Her face was paling quickly as a result of the blood loss. She nodded faintly, before reaching into the pocket of her Auror robes. A second later, she disappeared with a pop. Harry breathed a sigh of relief, just as something hit his back. He was thrust forwards and ended up flat on the floor, his face colliding with the ground, bursting his right eyebrow.

"Your compassion for others makes you weak, Potter!" sneered a voice in his ear as two hands clamped onto his shoulders and dragged him to his feet. He stood for a fraction of a second before another curse slammed into his stomach. Harry was propelled into the air and back up onto the stage. He landed hard, splintering the wood and sinking into the ground. Voldemort was over him in an instant. Harry lay there, consumed by pain. He could feel the warm sticky blood oozing into the fabric of his clothes. Whatever that last curse was, it had caught him and he was bleeding into the once white fabric. His ribs were in agony, his stomach felt sick and his limbs ached. He stared helplessly up at Voldemort, who towered above him.

"That's why my Harry, the true Harry, was the best, and you are the pretender," said Voldemort. "He saw the big picture. He took his life in his own hands, not putting it in the tired wrinkly hands of an old fool. *CRUCIO!*"

Pain seared through Harry's body, piercing every last cell, enflaming the nerves, boiling his blood. Lightning thundered through his mind, removing all thoughts but the pain that ripped through his body. Thrashing uncontrollably, his screams not even heard amidst the battle, Harry could do nothing as the curse tore into his body. After a few seconds it was gone.

“Why do you fight, Potter?” asked Voldemort as Harry tried to crawl away toward his wand, his mind too numb to summon it. “Why put yourself through this? It didn’t have to be this way. You could have become my disciple, and I could have given you the world. Instead you succumbed to the ideals of an aging fool, embraced weakness as gospel. Do you even know what you are fighting for? Is it freedom, which is then given away to men like Crouch and Fudge? Is it love, well why not take your family and rule with them, on my behalf? Is it hope perhaps, surely you know hope is but a passage, with no destination. Face it Potter, you have no goals, none but your own survival. And this is how you come before me, with no hope, no goals, only your own survival and a delusion. You show your weakness as something to be proud of, but I will not let you drag the rest of the Wizarding World, the world that my ancestor Salazar Slytherin helped to shape, down with you. It’s time to die, Potter.”

Harry grabbed a handful of debris as Voldemort raised his wand above his head, ready to strike. He threw it with all his might, up into Voldemort’s eyes. The Dark Lord screamed and recoiled as the dust and plaster flew into his eyes. Harry didn’t even bother with a wand. He dived at Voldemort in a rugby tackle, landing hard on top of the Dark Lord, whose eyes were now redder than usual. Harry raised his fist and slammed it down into his face.

This bastard had nearly killed Rose!

Again, Harry pounded his fist into Voldemort’s face.

He had kidnapped his mother, and locked her in a bunker!

Slam!

Sent Vampires into the School!

Slam!

Torn his family apart!

Slam!

The time had come. Voldemort lay bleeding beneath him. Harry knew this disorientation wouldn’t last long. He had to move quickly, though his entire body ached. He glanced around. The civilians had now all left, leaving only those who were fighting. There were various fires around the room, from explosions, and the air was filled with the fumes of sweat and burnt flesh. The smell of battle was vile. Harry could see bodies littered everywhere and the very walls of the building were in ruins, having absorbed hundreds of mis-aimed curses. All furniture was gone, destroyed, and piles of debris from the ceiling and the walls littered the floor. The once blue carpet was now black, from all the blood that was seeping into it from the hundreds of bodies now lining the floor.

Harry had to end it! He summoned his wand, aiming it down at Voldemort, who lay beneath him, groaning in pain. The time had come for him to die. One death so that hundreds

may live, and it was Harry's job to kill him. He was born to carry this burden, this sin. He was a natural born killer, and this was his destiny. He would take Voldemort's life.

Harry levelled his wand at Voldemort's chest.

Come on, Harry, two words will end it. They are so simple. Summon your anger; take his life. He would do it to you. It's the right thing to do, so get on with it. Do it, Harry, now!

He stared down at Voldemort, who was gasping for air. Harry took a deep breath. Flamel had doubted he could do the curse; they were about to find out. He would have to sink to Voldemort's level, but it was unavoidable.

As Harry raised his wand, there was a flash of movement to his left and a piercing shriek filled the air. Harry stepped backwards in surprise as a flaming figure appeared, hovering in the air above him. A Heliopath had returned. The fire demon's eyes burned red, and its muscular limbs danced with flames. Harry hesitated a second too long.

"KILL HIM!" shouted Voldemort from the floor.

So much for no one touch it – it almost sounded like 'help me'!

Harry turned and ran, just as the stage where he had been standing a second ago erupted into flame, sending splinters in all directions. Harry felt the heat on his back as the Heliopath glided over him. Harry reached the edge of the stage and jumped, just as the jet of fire swept over the stage like a flame-thrower, narrowly missing Harry. He was sweating in the heat as the Heliopath turned in mid-air, preparing for another pass.

Harry had no idea what to do, as the monster glided closer.

Suddenly a ball of blue light shot over Harry's head, striking the demon on the shoulder. The creature roared and rolled in mid-air, passing to Harry's right. Harry turned to look behind him. Dressed all in black, looking weak and off-balance but very much alive, stood Albus Dumbledore. He was free and alive! Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He had managed to get off a curse that actually affected Heliopath.

The monster was hovering near the ceiling. It roared in anger, summoning two balls of fire, holding one in each hand. Harry struggled to stand as two plumes of flame shot down toward him and Dumbledore. He needn't have worried, for as the flame approached, a blue bubble formed around them. The flames encased them but had no effect. Thank God Dumbledore was here. Harry turned to face his Headmaster, who stood behind him looking old, weary, but at the same time, determined.

He raised his wand and a jet of blue light soared into the air, colliding with the incoming Heliopath. With a scream, the monster disintegrated, raining a cloud of ash down on the Aurors fighting for their lives.

“Finish it, my boy,” said Dumbledore simply, wobbling as he stood.

Harry nodded, summoning all his strength and all his courage. He glanced around at the battle. The room was littered with bodies, both red and black. The walls and pews were in ruins and the carpet was red with blood. The smell of flames, death and burned flesh stung his nostrils. It was the most horrid smell and sight he had ever beheld. Harry knew he had to stop this, and now. He glanced over to where he had dropped his backpack and sword.

It was time.

God, he hoped Spears was in position and ready, and more to the point, he hoped this device worked. He grabbed the satchel and tore it open, revealing the chrome finish of the device that was the last hope of the country. One glance around told him that the sea of black was getting the upper hand against those precious few in scarlet.

Harry took a deep breath; he pulled up the cover, exposing the button. He closed his eyes, bracing himself to have his magic stripped. It was now or never. *Please God, let this work.* He pressed the button.

The effect was instant - a tingling feeling, much like an electric shock, surged through his body, every limb buzzing with the power. A wave of blue flashed across his eyes like a camera flash, and his muscles involuntarily tensed. It was as if pins and needles had spread to every corner of his body. He could feel the power draining from the room around him. Harry dropped the device as his entire body tingled. The effect lasted no more than two seconds.

All around him, the shouts died as no one's wand seemed to work. Screams of curses died as the light never followed. The air that had a second ago been thick with curses, screams, shouts and movement, was now silent and still. Duels that had been raging halted as the magic was sucked out of them. People froze, staring at their wands and at their enemies, no one knowing what had happened.

The room was still as Harry climbed back to his feet, carrying the sword in his right hand. Every step was painful, his bleeding ribs stung, he was weak with blood loss and his limbs ached from exertion. He felt like he couldn't make it, but he had to and he refused to let his pain show.

“What did you do?” shrieked Voldemort, slashing at Harry with his wand from the stage, now no more deadly than the twig from which it had been made. Again, he tried as Harry stepped up onto the first step of the stairs leading up to the stage. “What have you done to me?” Harry was vaguely aware of all eyes being honed on him and Voldemort as he ascended another step. All duels had stopped, for Voldemort was not the only one who wanted to know the answer. His voice rang out over the hall, the fear in it clear for all to hear. Right now, not only in the Ministry, but in Hogwarts and numerous other locations, thousands of people would hear the fear in the Dark Lord's voice, and they would witness the end. Harry secretly hoped that the Captain was on time, or this could all go pear-shaped; he certainly wouldn't let his fear show. After seeing Harry with a sword, it wouldn't take long for the Death Eaters to resort to physical violence and knives, and the students were no match for that.

Harry stepped up onto the stage, sliding the sword free from the scabbard. The Katana glimmered in the dim light, as Harry twirled it menacingly about his wrist. A glimmer of fear crossed Voldemort's face, and after a second, he took one step backward. The effect was instant. A gasp rung out from the Death Eaters; never before had they seen their master recoil in fear.

"Are you afraid?" said Harry softly, his voice carrying to all corners of the room in the stillness. "Muggle," he added icily. Voldemort's eyes flared under the insult, the veins in his neck and temple throbbing, as Harry took another step forward. "How does it feel, to be completely incapable of magic?" He took another step toward Voldemort, who had halted.

"I destroyed your magic, *Tom*," said Harry. "You're no more powerful than the merest Squib. Without your magic, you are nothing."

"DIE!" screamed Voldemort, suddenly. He leapt at Harry with tremendous speed. A flash of light caught Harry's eye as a polished knife came out of the folds of his robes, wrapped in Voldemort's spider-like fingers. The gleaming blade, no doubt tipped in poison, came crashing down toward Harry in a last-ditch attempt to retain dignity. But this was Harry's turf; while magically, Voldemort far outmatched him, hand to hand, the Dark Knight reigned supreme.

Harry spun to left, just out of reach of the dagger, bringing the sword up in the same movement. In one fluid movement, he spun one hundred and eighty degrees and as Voldemort dived past him, Harry slashed in one fluid motion at the backs of Voldemort's ankles as he passed. There was a scream of agony and a gasp from around the room. Harry's blade had severed Voldemort's Achilles tendon, making standing impossible. Everyone in the room gasped in awe as the Dark Lord lost his grip on the dagger and fell to his knees, unable to stand and utterly powerless. Harry stood facing him from behind. Forcing all emotion, all traces of pity, justice and remorse from his mind, Harry stepped up to Voldemort and around his left side, making sure that everyone in the room could see exactly what was happening.

Voldemort's mouth was full of blood as Harry came around to his front. He was on his knees, unable to move and trying to conserve any form of dignity. His eyes flashed with malice, even though Harry was sure he knew that his time had come. Harry fought to block compassion and mercy from his mind. He was too dangerous to be left alive. He had to die, it was the only way; this was the right thing to do. On the odd occasion, he knew that pursuing the right path demands an act of evil. Evil itself can be the right path. Harry hated killing an unarmed and defenceless man, but it had to be done. It was his job, he could not burden anyone else with it. His soul was the one that had to suffer for this.

"It doesn't end here, Potter," spat Voldemort, his voice lined with anger, his eyes full of loathing. "I will return. You have only bought them time."

"It's over," said Harry, shaking his head.

"No," hissed Voldemort in Parseltongue. "Only when you join me in death, shall I truly be gone."

“Then I’ll see you in Hell,” hissed Harry. Before he could think anymore, Harry raised the blade high over his right shoulder. There was a gasp from the crowd.

A guttural scream of anguish, not anger, escaped Harry as he swung the blade with all his strength. Avoiding Voldemort’s eyes, Harry sliced the blade clean through the Dark Lord’s neck, severing his head completely. His momentum continued his spin. Harry turned the blood-soaked blade back under his arm so that it pointed out the back, so that as he spun, as he faced away from Voldemort’s body, he plunged the blade into Voldemort’s heart.

There was utter silence in the room as Voldemort’s head sailed through the air. All eyes watched the severed head as it plummeted from the stage and landed with a sickening crunch on the floor.

Suddenly Harry felt heat on the back of his neck. He turned to see Voldemort’s headless body still kneeling where he had been before. A strange green light was pulsing near his heart, a ball of energy over his chest, slowly becoming brighter and brighter. It was magical for sure, and so powerful that it heated the air around it; not even Arctic Thunder was powerful enough to contain it. Harry suddenly remembered that when the Voldemort in his world had been ripped from his body, it had destroyed the entire house.

BOLLOCKS!

“RUN!” he shouted, turning to move. He had gone two steps, just enough to reach the edge of the stage, when a surge of energy erupted from Voldemort’s fallen body. The green light blasted into Harry’s back, launching him off his feet and into the air. He felt his feet leave the floor, and then nothing but pain as he landed twenty feet from the stage.

Every muscle ached, his head was throbbing, and his vision was blurred. He had hit his head as he landed, his head was spinning, and his balance was off. He realised that he had landed on a corpse, dressed in black, but couldn’t move. His eyes seemed to be the only things moving.

He could see the blackened and shattered front wall, over the wreckage of the stage. It had worked, and it was over; Voldemort was dead. Harry’s whole body was numb; he couldn’t move and he was cold, oh so cold. This must be it. His time had come. At least he had done some good with his life. It was over now, and he had earned the rest. He might not have been able to save his own world, but he had defeated Voldemort and he had met his family. His two targets in life were done, and it was time to die. Harry felt a warm glow of relief. No more pain, it was over, time to rest. He felt his eyelids growing heavy.

Suddenly he was aware of a figure standing over him. It was Macnair, Commander of the Black Watch. “Die, Potter!” he screamed, diving toward him, a dagger of his own in his hand. Harry could see the silver descending when suddenly a loud crack rang out, thundering in his ears.

Macnair’s chest exploded with red, and his body was forced backwards, off his feet, crashing to the ground as the bullets impacted his chest. Bursts of gunfire surrounded Harry.

Screams filled his ears and a flurry of movement blocked his vision. As the coloured shapes of people moved past his vacant eyes, Harry was vaguely aware of shouts of “Freeze!”, “Don’t move!” and bursts of gunfire as the SAS descended on ropes from the ceiling and burst through the doors.

Captain Spears had come through for him in the end. *Just in time*, thought Harry; it was over. Content, Harry’s eyelids closed and he resigned himself for the long trip down to Hell.

~~~~ Epilogue ~~~~ The Promised Land

*“Child of the wilderness, born into emptiness,
Learn to be lonely, learn to find your way in darkness,
Who will be there for you, comfort and care for you?
Learn to be lonely, learn to be your one companion.
Never dreamed out in the wild
There are arms to hold you
You’ve always known, your heart was on it’s own
So laugh in your loneliness, child of the wilderness
Learn to be lonely
Learn how to love a life that is lived alone.”*

*~ Andrew Lloyd Webber
Learn to be Lonely (from Phantom of the Opera, 2003)*

Harry felt the hairs on his skin stand on end as the cool New Year’s breeze sailed in through the open window and brushed his skin. The air was crisp but not bitter. The sun, although low in the sky shone brightly, pouring in through the windows and net curtains that billowed in the breeze. Harry opened his eyes as the breeze brushed his skin, allowing light to flood in. He seemed to be floating in a sea of white. Light reflected off the floor, walls, and ceiling, blinding his dazzled eyes. He recoiled under the brightness, covering his eyes.

He felt somewhat light-headed, as if he was floating. His limbs felt almost as though they weren’t quite there. Looking down, Harry found himself wearing just a pair of white trousers and lying in a bed of purest white. It was warm, soft and comfortable. He felt refreshed and fulfilled. Was this what death felt like for real? His eyes were still unaccustomed to the brightness; he blinked, trying to get to grips with his surroundings. Was this heaven?

As Harry blinked, a face appeared through the light: an elderly yet kind face with a long white beard.

“Professor,” said Harry, realising that he was certainly not dead. “Welcome back.” His voice cracked with the words as his mouth was so dry.

“Thank you, Harry,” said Dumbledore, sinking slowly into a chair next to the bed. Harry propped himself up on his elbows and raised himself into a sitting position. His limbs were regaining their strength as he shifted. Dumbledore was wearing his customary purple robes, but no hat today. A white bandage covered part of his forehead and he moved gingerly as he walked. He picked up a pitcher of water from the table by Harry’s bed and poured a glass of water, which he offered to Harry. He accepted it and took a long drink, draining the glass. Satisfied, he returned the glass to the table and lay back. Dumbledore spoke again, “I believe, I can extend to you, the same compliment. Your efforts are much appreciated, not only by me, but by thousands of others.” Harry was never any good at taking compliments and brushed it quickly aside, shaking his head.

“What happened? Is everything all right?”

Dumbledore suddenly looked a shade older and more tired than usual. He stared at Harry and it wasn't hard to work out that Dumbledore was remembering.

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*BOOM!*

The whole room shook as the ceiling above them shattered into a million pieces and a geyser of dust and debris shot towards the floor. Albus was helpless, as the restraints in the chair held him in place. The chair was magically locked and without a wand he had no hope of being able to break free. He watched as two figures fell from the ceiling amidst the explosion, one dressed in black, the other in white. His two former pupils fell to the floor as the rubble rained down around them. Suddenly the podium upon which Crouch had been speaking from shattered as a stunner hit it. It all happened so fast! The wood cracked, and Crouch was forced backwards by the force. Albus quickly turned in the direction it had come from. Did his eyes deceive him or was that James Potter?

Albus blinked and looked again. Sure enough, James Potter had fired that spell. The Auror was dressed in black, no, wait; as Albus watched, James threw off his black robes, revealing the red of the Aurors underneath. The Aurors were here! Albus felt hope return to his heart. His eyes scanned the crowd and as he watched, more figures in red appeared amidst the sea of black. Albus could see Sirius, Dawlish, Alastor, Nymphadora, and many others. The air was suddenly alive with curses and screams as the Black Watch broke rank and the civilians up on the balcony surged for the exits.

As Albus watched, he realised how short some of the Aurors were. In fact, he recognised them. They were students! Ron and Ginny Weasley, Rose-Marie Potter and several others. Surely they hadn't recruited soldiers from the student body? Two students were up on the balcony helping the public out, while the rest joined with the battle. More of the Black Watch were returning to the Aurors, as more figures in red appeared. The new Commandos in their green and camouflage robes had also joined in, fighting mainly the Black Watch – or so it appeared.

Albus turned to his right to the stage. Harry and Tom were on their feet and fighting again. They were in so close together, fighting hand to hand. Albus didn't need to be a genius to realise that Harry was tiring fast. His white clothes were covered in blood and he was fighting a losing battle.

“RACHEL! GET DUMBLEDORE!” a voice shouted through the crowd. After a few seconds, an Auror had emerged from the carnage and was by his side. Albus recognised the woman, though he couldn't place her name. Using her wand, she shattered the restraints, allowing Albus to move. She produced a wand from her robes and handed it to him.

“Professor,” said the Auror, shouting into his ear to be heard above the noise. “We need to get as many people out as possible. The magic will go down in a few moments.”

Albus had no clue as to what she meant, but agreed with her first statement. He was Headmaster and that meant he had to get his students out of harm's way. Looking around, he saw that there were enough figures in red to keep the Black Watch at bay. Albus looked around, his eyes searching for students, and then made his way down into the battle.

The first one he encountered was Luna Lovegood of Ravenclaw. She was duelling with an Auror twice her size. Albus moved swiftly into the middle, repelling the Death Eater with a simple banishing charm, and then took hold of Lovegood's hand.

"Do you have a Portkey?" he asked, expecting her to have one. She nodded. Albus tapped his wand against her pocket and the girl disappeared with a pop.

"Miss Bell!" he called, spotting her hiding behind the remains of the door. "You need to leave, now!" His calm and friendly demeanour had slipped, but Albus cared not. He had one priority and that was to get his students out of harms way. Everything else, including the death of Tom Riddle, were a long way behind that on the priority scale.

*"BOOM!"*

The doors on the other side of the room suddenly burst open and a jet of fire surged into the room. From the flames a Heliopath rose up towards the ceiling, tufts of flames sparking away from its fiery skin. The creature flexed its muscles, glowing brightly as it prepared to dive.

"GO!" Albus shouted to Katie. With that he headed back into the crowd towards the Heliopath, which had already dived at Harry but missed. Albus surged through the crowd as the Heliopath dived again, unleashing a jet of flame. Harry dived off the stage, sailing through the air and landing on a pile of debris, but relatively unharmed. He rolled onto his back and looked up just in time to see the Heliopath dive.

Albus acted instinctively, aiming his wand at the descending fire demon. The spell shot out of his wand, surging towards the Heliopath and striking it in the shoulder. The creature roared, rolling in mid air and aborting its attack. Harry's head whipped around to face Albus. Hope reappeared in Harry's eyes as he stared at him.

The monster roared again as it rose up to the ceiling, conjuring balls of fire in each of its hands. The two balls shot towards Harry and Albus like geysers of flame.

*Fuero Retardo!*

A pale blue bubble appeared and surrounded Harry and Albus, keeping them safe. Albus held the spell until the fire subsided. The creature dived again, heading straight towards them. Using the same spell as he had originally, Albus fired again. The ball of blue light hit the creature in the chest, and with a final roar, the fire demon disintegrated, raining ash down over the battle.

Albus looked around once more. The floor was littered with bodies, their blood soaking into the carpet. There were fires around the room, and the smell of death and smoke was intoxicating. Albus turned back to Harry. They had to end it, and only Harry had the power to do so.

“Finish it, my boy,” Albus said, trying to hide the pain and tiredness in his voice. The boy nodded and climbed to his feet and disappeared through the crowd.

Albus turned to see if he could find more students and get them out of the building. Suddenly a tingly feeling swept through him, like pins and needles all over. His whole body felt odd and his mind frozen. Albus shook off the feeling, which only lasted five seconds. Albus quickly aimed his wand at the Death Eater who had appeared in front of him.

“*Stupefy!*” he hissed, just as the man shouted the Killing Curse. Nothing happened. Albus looked down at his wand. The other man tried again, but nothing happened. This must be what Rachel had meant by the magic going down?

“What did you do?” shrieked Tom, his voice echoing around the room, which was now almost silent as no one could use a spell. Tom again slashed his wand at Harry, who began to climb the stage. “What have you done to me?”

All duels had stopped and as Albus looked around, all eyes were honed on the two on the stage. As Albus turned back to the stage, Harry removed his sword from the scabbard, the same sword that the Dark Knight had used to kill so many. Albus knew the boy was right; he couldn't use the Killing Curse, so he had to use a Muggle weapon. By taking away the Magic, Tom was helpless. It was a good plan. Now it all hinged on Harry having the will power to take another life. Harry spun the sword menacingly around the wrist as Tom tried once more to curse him. Realising it was useless, Tom did something unheard of: he took a single step backwards.

The effect was instant. A gasp rung out from the Death Eaters: never before had they seen their master recoil in fear. To the best of Albus' knowledge, Tom had never backed down in his life. He was too powerful. Albus was the only one he feared and yet he had never seen Tom back down from him.

“Are you afraid?” said Harry, his voice loud enough to carry to all corners of the room. “Muggle.” Tom's eyes flashed with anger as Harry took another step forward. “How does it feel, to be completely incapable of magic?” Harry was teasing him, making sure that everyone in the room knew that Tom was powerless. It was a coup d'theatre, but that what was needed. They needed the whole country to see he was weak.

“I destroyed your magic, *Tom*,” said Harry. “You're no more powerful than the merest Squib. Without your magic, you are nothing.”

“DIE!” screamed Voldemort. Albus watch with horror as a knife appear in his hand. Tom leapt at Harry with tremendous speed. Albus opened his mouth to shout a warning, but Harry had already moved. He spun to the side, rotating in a complete circle, and slashed with the sword.

The blade clipped the back of Tom's legs, and the Dark Lord fell to his knees, dropping the dagger with a clang. There was another gasp as the Dark Lord ended up on his knees in front of Harry, unable to defend himself. Everyone in the room could see the most feared man in the country utterly powerless and scared for his life.

"It doesn't end here, Potter," spat Tom, his voice lined with anger. "I will return. You have only bought them time." Albus could see that this was just a threat, unless they found the Horcrux.

"It's over," said Harry, shaking his head. He publicly dismissed Tom's rant, showing the world that his power was broken.

Suddenly Tom opened his mouth again, but this time, instead of words, a hissing sound came out. Parseltongue! Tom was speaking Parseltongue. To everyone's amazement, Harry leaned in a little closer and then replied in the same language. Harry was a Parselmouth! How had they missed that? But there was no time to consider it, as Harry raised the blade high over his right shoulder. There was a gasp from the crowd.

Harry sliced the blade clean through Voldemort's neck, severing his head completely. His momentum continued his spin. Harry turned the blood-soaked blade back under his arm so that it pointed out the back, so that as he spun, as he faced away from Voldemort's body, he plunged the blade into Voldemort's heart.

There was utter silence in the room as Voldemort's head sailed through the air. All eyes watched the severed head as it plummeted from the stage and landed with a sickening crunch on the floor, not far from Albus. He quickly turned his attention back to Harry, who stood staring at the head. Albus suddenly noticed that Tom's body was beginning to glow green. Harry must have felt it, for he turned to face the body. A ball of green light was amassing over Tom's heart. Albus had no clue as to what was happening, but it appeared Harry did. His eyes went wide, a look of horror on his face.

"RUN!" he shouted, turning to move. He took two steps to the edge of the stage and jumped, diving to the floor. Suddenly, a surge of energy erupted from Voldemort's fallen body. The green light blasted into Harry's back, launching him off his feet and into the air. The shockwave forced everyone close enough to be knocked to the ground.

Harry lay on the floor, struggling to move. Albus tried to make his way over, but there were too many bodies in the way and those still alive were clambering over each other to get to their feet. After seeing that blades worked, Death Eaters had begun to produce knives and were trying to escape.

Albus could see Walden Macnair standing over Harry, his dagger ready in his hand. Albus was nowhere near close enough to help the boy. Macnair raised the dagger high above his head, but he never managed to bring it down.

*BANG! BANG! BANG!*

Suddenly three holes exploded out of Macnair's chest and his body was forced to the ground by the impact. Albus spun around to see five men dressed all in black, with helmets and inhuman masks with huge eyes standing on the edge of the balcony. They were covered in armour, and carried what he recognised to be guns. *Muggles!*

As the five stood, firing their weapons over the heads of the battle, another five slid down ropes, gliding towards the ground. As they landed, they released the ropes, and picked up their weapons, aiming them at the crowd. Albus heard another few cracks, as Death Eaters lunged at the new arrivals.

BOOM

The doors on both sides of the room were blown open with a tremendous bang, sparring debris into the crowd. Suddenly more figures came running through the cloud of dust, each shrouded in black and carrying a weapon.

"FREEZE!" "DON'T MOVE!" shouted the Muggles, aiming their weapons at the survivors.

"Muggles!" shouted a voice.

"They're nothing but vermin," shouted another. "Kill them!"

Three men made the mistake of running at the men in the doorway to Albus' right.

"No!" he shouted, but of course they didn't listen to him.

There was a tremendous series of bangs as the eight men all fired on the three Death Eaters, each of whom crashed to the floor with over twenty bullets imbedded in their bodies. Screams erupted all around as the wizards realised the Muggles were serious. The three bodies now lying in a pool of blood, massive hole having exploded out of their chests, were enough of a message so that even the battle hardened Death Eaters knew they were beaten.

"LISTEN UP!" shouted Frank Longbottom, standing on the remains of a pew so he was above the rest of them. "ANY SURVIVING DEATH EATERS ARE HEREBY UNDER ARREST. WE KNOW WHO YOU ARE: MACNAIR WAS NICE ENOUGH TO KEEP INTERVIEW NOTES ON ALL OF YOU - WE KNOW WHO YOU ARE, SO DON'T BOTHER RUNNING. CAPTAIN SPEARS, IF YOU AND YOUR MEN COULD PLEASE KEEP AN EYE ON THE PROCEEDINGS WHILE WE MAKE ARRESTS. ALBUS, PLEASE HEAD TO THE MAIN ENTRANCE HALL. THERE ARE PEOPLE THERE WHO NEED YOUR CLEARANCE TO LEAVE, JUST GIVE YOUR NAME TO LIEUTENANT HOPKINS."

Albus watched for a few seconds as Sirius, James, Rachel - yes that was her name, Rachel Shepherd - Frank, and Alastor began cuffing those in black. Some of the Muggles produced PlastiCuffs from their pockets and joined in while their colleagues watched. Albus

would head upstairs in time, but first he had to tend to Harry. The boy was lying face down on the floor, a small puddle of blood leaking out from under him, his white clothes stained crimson. Albus knelt next to Harry and rolled him gently onto his back. Harry lay across Albus's lap. The headmaster opened Harry's eyes. The boy's pupils were dilated and his eyes vacant, but he did have a pulse. He was alive, but only just. Albus's hand came away red as he held Harry's body."

"Where the hell is he?" shouted a voice. James Potter appeared through the crowd, looking desperate. He froze when he saw his son. Harry was lying across Albus' lap. His head was hanging limp at a sickening angle. There were large red gashes in his stained and dirty clothes. His mouth was red from where he had been internally injured. A trickle of blood had flowed from his mouth down his cheek. Albus's hands were crimson from having touched him. He looked deathly pale.

Luckily, they had all had the forethought to bring Portkeys.

"Frank," Albus called. "You take charge, release those in the Entrance Hall. I must return to Hogwarts." Using his wand, Albus activated the Portkey and the Ministry disappeared with a pop. They reappeared in the hospital wing. Most of the beds were full of people from the battle. There were several beds with sheets pulled over the occupant, symbolising their death, but Albus paid them no heed. He passed the students who had returned, cradling Harry in his arms.

"POPPY!" he called. Madam Pomfrey turned to face him, her eyes widening. She rushed towards him, indicating an empty bed. As he laid Harry down, Albus saw the terrified faces of the students who were watching them. Meanwhile Poppy was examining Harry in a hurry.

"Merlin, he had lost a lot of blood," she said. "Weasley, Blood Replenishing Potion, my office, now!" Albus saw Ginevra Weasley hobble towards the office.

"He's sustained massive internal injuries," said Poppy. "Lacerations to all limbs, blood loss, concussion and what looks like the effects of the Cruciatus Curse. We're in for a long haul with this one."

"Do your best, Poppy," said Albus. "This country needs its hero."

Tom was dead; his power was broken. Crouch was under arrest, the Ministry free. The Death Eaters were in custody and the Black Watch destroyed. This Christmas had brought with it freedom, all thanks to a boy who wasn't even a resident of this world. He mustn't die - this boy deserved some good grace in his life.

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"You're lucky to be alive," said Dumbledore.

"Luck had nothing to do with it," said Harry. "It was your help and the SAS."

"Yes, they were most helpful once you defeated Tom," said Dumbledore.

“So he is defeated?” asked Harry, fearful of the answer. “It is finally over?”

“It’s over,” confirmed Dumbledore, nodding his head. “What did he say to you?”

“Who?” asked Harry.

“Tom; just before he died, you spoke in Parseltongue,” replied Dumbledore.

“He told me that he would only truly be gone when I am dead too,” said Harry, shivering at the memory. “I assume he was referring to his Horcrux.”

“Yes, Nicolas told me about your theory on those,” said Dumbledore. “We have done some research and I have some good news. When a Horcrux is made of a person, or living thing, it is encased in a person’s soul, not their body. The reason for this is that cells in the body die very quickly. A skin cell, for example, will last only a day or so, and a snake will shed its skin. The soul is therefore encased inside another soul, and so the host will take on personality traits and maybe powers of the original.” That made sense to Harry, and might partially explain the other Harry’s actions. However, somewhere, sometime, right at the beginning, the other Harry had made a choice. Why? Would Harry ever find out?

“I can’t believe it’s over” said Harry, resting his head on his hands, a small smile on his face.

“Are you not glad?”

“I am,” said Harry sadly, “but it is only over for you, not for me.”

“And why should it not be over for you?” asked Dumbledore.

“When I killed him,” began Harry, outlining his thoughts, “Some form of magic exploded out of him, just like when he was killed in my world. In mine he came back, presumably because he has a Horcrux there. Since that power exploded out of him, I have a nasty feeling that he is alive, which in turn implies that his Horcrux—the other me—is alive, and I have to find him, because if I am in his body, there is a fair chance he is in mine, and my world is defenceless.”

Dumbledore nodded, agreeing with his assessment. “Your mind is set?” Harry nodded.

“Very well,” said Dumbledore. “Once you have recovered your strength, I will assist you to return home.” Harry sighed in relief. He had been afraid that Dumbledore would try to keep him here. He was going home, the thought filled his mind. Of course, on the downside, it meant saying goodbye to Rose, to Mum and Dad...were they even alive.

“What about Rose, my family?” asked Harry. He knew Rose had been hit and he knew Hermione had never even made it to the Ministry. Dumbledore sighed deeply as he stared at Harry over his half-moon spectacles. The look said it all; there had been fatalities. It sounded horrible, but Harry desperately hoped it wasn’t anyone he cared about.

“There were fatalities,” said Dumbledore gravely. “Rest assured your family are all fine. Anthony Goldstein was killed during the assault on Lundy Island, and then later at the Ministry of Magic, Percy Weasley was killed, as were Dawlish, Hannah Abbot and a former pupil Cedric Diggory. We will be holding a remembrance ceremony for them in a few hours.” Harry bowed his head in sorrow; he had never meant for students to get hurt.

“I never intended for them to come to the Ministry,” said Harry. “Just Lundy.”

“It was their choice to continue,” said Dumbledore kindly. “You gave them hope and a chance to make things right and they took it. It was their choice, and their legacy will not be forgotten. I feel sure that should you ask any of them whether they would make the same choice, knowing what it could cost them, that they would make the same choice again.”

“They are still dead,” said Harry, “and nothing can bring them back.”

“No,” said Dumbledore. “It cannot. But remember, death is but the next logical step. Fate has a time for us all, and maybe this was meant to be theirs.” Harry nodded, not fully convinced, but knowing that he couldn’t grieve forever.

“What about Rose?” asked Harry, “and Hermione?”

“Both have made a full recovery,” said Dumbledore, “and have rejoined the school’s population.”

“So what’s happened?” asked Harry. “Did everything work out okay?”

“There were other fatalities,” said Dumbledore. “The SAS and SBS both lost men.”

“SBS?” echoed Harry. “What were they doing there?”

“It seemed that the Prime Minister did not entirely trust you, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “He had a team of SBS Marines ready to move in on the Ministry if there was any sign of betrayal.”

“But I never...”

“Your display on the streets of London gave him the motivation to move in on the Ministry. They very nearly caused the mission to fail, but the soldiers you chose were able to convince them. One Death Eater made it to the entrance hall. The SAS took him down, but not before he was able to kill one Marine. Of the SAS in the battle, three were lost. Above ground, the death toll for Voldemort’s attack on London currently stands at seventy-seven Muggles. We also lost a number of Aurors—fifty-three the last time I checked.”

“But we won, didn’t we?” asked Harry, reaching for the water on the bedside table once again.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore, nodding. “Once you...defeated Tom, the Black Watch lost all formation. Without their magic, there was nothing they could do. The threat of those weapons the Muggles used was far too great. They put up little protest.” Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

“Was it worth it?” Harry muttered. “Was there a better way?”

“You want their deaths to have meant something,” said Dumbledore. “And they have. We all woke up the next day to a brave new world. Their deaths were unfortunate, but they would have been proud of what they helped to create.” Harry didn’t argue, though he knew it would take time to move on and forget. Eyes were strictly one-way systems. Images went in and could never come out. He would never forget what he had seen that day. It was burnt onto the back of his skull.

“How are the Muggles?” he asked.

“Back at Hereford,” said Dumbledore. “And Poole, respectively. They are holding remembrance ceremonies for the men they lost.”

“What are the families being told?”

“That they died in a training accident,” said Dumbledore. “It is far from ideal...” he began, but Harry cut him off.

“Damn right it is,” said Harry angrily. “They died as heroes and will be remembered for being clumsy when they weren’t. They deserve better.”

“Such is the way of the clandestine services,” said Dumbledore. “As Captain Spears said to me when I told him the official story, if anyone ever knew what the SAS did, they had failed. They could save the world, and no one would know about it.”

“It’s unfair,” said Harry.

“But it is the way it is,” said Dumbledore.

“Did you...you know?” asked Harry, tapping his temple with a finger

“No,” said Dumbledore, to Harry’s relief. “As Special Forces, they know to keep their mouths shut and not to mention what has happened. Also, if they did speak out, they would be committed, so we have left them as they are.”

“What about the Statute of Secrecy?” asked Harry, scarcely believing that the Ministry had done something right.

“By liaising with the Muggles, you broke a number of laws,” said Dumbledore calmly. “But obviously, under the circumstances, you have been forgiven. The Ministry, for the moment

at least, are allowing things to remain. Initially, no one was happy about leaving nearly forty Muggles out there with knowledge of our world, but they have come to accept it.”

“The least they could do,” muttered Harry.

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore, smiling slightly. “You have also forced their hand in dealing with the Muggle government. We cannot be ignored any more. The Ministry were initially hopping mad, but they have calmed down and now we have become more integrated into the Muggle government. There is now a representative from the Aurors in COBRA, we have our own member of Parliament, and all wizards, as long as they meet the nationality requirements, now have the right to vote in local and general elections. Obviously, this takes a lot of paperwork, as they need to register on the census to have the vote, but our societies have become integrated, though off the record, of course; the general Muggle population are none the wiser.”

“So they managed to hush up my bit of carnage on Euston Road?” asked Harry.

“With difficulty, they have,” said Dumbledore. “They have said that you were using what they call Rocket-Propelled Grenades, with smoke in the rockets, not unlike the Red Arrows. The policemen who challenged you and the key witnesses have been Obliviated, and any tapes sent to the press or police have been destroyed and the owner’s memories changed. Again, with a lot of red tape.”

“But the Ministry love that,” said Harry. The Ministry didn’t have a good track record of doing what was right. They seemed to have a policy of avoiding effort wherever they found it. Fudge was useless; Crouch was blinded by pride, as the less said about his son, the better. But that raised another question: if Crouch was under arrest, then... “Speaking of which, who’s now Minister? Hang on, what day is it?”

“It’s New Year’s Eve, Harry,” said Dumbledore. New Year’s? But that meant he had been asleep for... “You’ve been unconscious for a week,” continued Dumbledore. “And I regret to inform you that you have missed Christmas.”

“No worries,” said Harry, brushing it aside. Truth be told, it hadn’t felt like Christmas at all. He had almost forgotten what with the other things he had had to worry about. “It’s the least Christmassy Christmas ever.”

“As for the Ministry,” said Dumbledore, answering the first question. “A lot has happened. Department Heads that were relieved when Crouch took over have been recalled to vote. Arthur Weasley has been voted in as temporary Minister of Magic, pending elections to be held in February. Frank Longbottom has been promoted to Head of Aurors, after Dawlish died in the battle. He and Amelia Bones now hold the country under martial law until we have found our missing Death Eaters, and until the Ministry has been reassembled. As for Hogwarts, we are back under our own control and Lucius Malfoy is no longer a governor and now resides in Azkaban. Draco is still here, though he seems somewhat lonely as of late, as his influence is no longer felt. In short, you have restored what was taken, Harry. You have given them hope.”

“I had a lot of help,” said Harry, blushing.

“All of whom are now heroes,” said Dumbledore. “Orders of Merlin are to be issued to those involved - Miss Shepherd, Mr. Longbottom, Sirius, your friends and yourself.”

“Pity the country that needs heroes,” said Harry, suddenly feeling like he didn’t want it. It was a reminder of the past, of a time he hoped to put behind him. It was over now, and he had no desire to wear on his chest a chunk of metal that would serve only to remind him of what he would rather forget. He had to move on, he had...work to do.

“Also,” said Dumbledore, rising from his chair. “There is the matter of these...” He pointed to a large item covered by a white sheet. It was about the size of a car, and stood at the foot of his bed. Dumbledore raised his hands and the sheet fell off, revealing a table, stacked with presents and cards. Harry stared, flabbergasted at the mountain of presents. “It seems there are many out there that wish to thank you.” Dumbledore picked up a thick padded jiffy bag from the table. It was an A4 envelope of brown paper, with bubble-wrap inside, and had thick yet neat writing on the outside.

“If you wish to see the extent of how widely what you have done is felt,” said Dumbledore, “I suggest you read this one.”

Harry took the proffered package and opened the envelope. He tipped the contents onto the bed. A thick card inside a pale blue envelope fell out, along with a small box, which was covered in blue felt. It looked suspiciously like a box for a wedding ring, only a little bigger. Harry decided to open the card first, slitting the envelope open. Inside was a card, on the front of which was a still image of two cartoon bears, hugging each other. The words ‘Thank You’ were embossed in gold in the top corner of the card. Harry opened the card to find a page of neat handwriting, written in blue ink, not the black a wizard would use.

Dear Harry,

This card carries not only my thanks, but also the thanks of a nation. Winston Churchill once said that never before on the field of battle, has so much been owed by so many to so few. Well, thanks to you, Harry, the battle never even started. You are only sixteen and yet you have displayed courage and valour beyond any man I know. You and your team have not only saved hundreds of lives, but you really have changed the world. You have shown us that our two communities can work together to a much greater end. United we stand, divided we fall, and we nearly did. Starting today, the Ministry of Magic will have its say in Parliament (off the record of course). There is much we can learn together and your efforts have ushered in a new era for this country, one that I hope we can look back on in years to come as Britain’s Golden Age.

Attached is a small token of our appreciation. Normally these come from Her Majesty the Queen, but your involvement is so secret that you cannot be officially presented with one. Your own government

may wish to reward you, but I wish you to know that you have the thanks of the entire country, Magical and Non. May it remind you that whatever trials you face in life, you do have the courage to face them.

Merry Christmas

J. Major

Prime Minister

Harry put down the card and opened the box. Inside was a small bronze medal, hung from a purple ribbon.

For Valour

He had heard of the Victoria Cross, but never seen one. It was Britain's highest award for bravery. Few had ever been issued, and never to a civilian. Harry ran a finger over the word Valour and thought back to Voldemort. He had been so scared, but he had had a job to do. He remembered hearing someone say that courage wasn't not being scared; it was being scared but doing what had to be done despite it. Harry knew that the Prime Minister had not trusted him and sent in a second team of Marines to kill him, but he didn't hold it against him. He had done what he thought was right, and in his shoes, Harry would have done the same. But it was over now; it was behind him. Harry closed the box, for the same reason he didn't want the Order of Merlin. He hadn't fought for riches or rewards; he had fought so that he might go home. Home? Where was home? Home is where the heart is? Where did his heart lie?

"I must take my leave now," said Dumbledore, breaking Harry's trail of thought. "The feast is starting soon. I will leave you to your presents."

As Dumbledore glided out of the room, Harry threw the covers off him and rose to his feet. He inspected the table of presents at the end. He had so many more questions, but this was not the time. He saw cards from his friends, from the Aurors and many people he had never heard of. Rose had sent him some sweets, and his parents had sent him a parcel, which he still lacked the courage to open. He somehow felt so undeserving of all this.

All he wanted was to go home and rest.

Home.

The word reverberated through his head. After all he had done, after everything he had seen, this was not his word. It was a second home to him, but he had a first and he had to get back to it. If the other Harry wasn't here, he must be there. It made sense. If he was in the other Harry's body, then the other Harry must be in his. That meant that he no longer had a choice. He had to find the Dark Knight and make sure that Voldemort could never come back. It also meant that if Harry was there, with Voldemort...oh God, his friends were in grave danger.

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“This year,” said Dumbledore, addressing the hall, his glass raised, “has brought with it trials, and tests for us all. Fate has dealt us some rotten luck over the last few years, forcing upon us hardships that have taken away our very liberty. Fate, it seems has had a vile sense of humour. The author Dante had a dream, in which he walked through the nine layers of Hell. When he woke, he wrote a book to match this, and do you know what he called it? The Divine Comedy. We all face hardships in life, but it is how we face these troubles that defines who we are, and by this scale we shall be judged. We went from bad to worse; we came one step forwards and then three backwards, and at every stage, we thought that it couldn’t get worse. Where is God now, we said. What kind of God would let this happen? As Dante said in his book, we all face trials, and only those of faith, who never lose hope, will be rewarded.

And so we were sent a miracle. At the eleventh hour, our miracle came, and it was not some great and powerful mystic being. It was not a weapon that saved us, or an army, or divine intervention. All it took was a group of students from this very school. All my life, I have tried to teach you all how to be good, useful members of society, to make better witches and wizards out of you, so it is with great pride that I honour those who stood for freedom in our hour of need. These students may not have been the most academically able, the strongest, fastest, or bravest of us, but they kept faith. Hope can be found, even in the darkest of places, if we simply remember to turn on the light. These students refused to let the light go out, and now we can all enjoy a time of peace. Two of their number are no longer with us. They gave their lives for us and we honour them for it.”

Dumbledore stepped around the front of the table and down into the middle of the room.

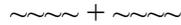
“Each of us has been dealt a fresh hand,” said Dumbledore softly. “This New Year, we can wash aside the darkness of the past. Those who have sinned against us, we must look in our hearts to forgive.” He stared at the Slytherin table, before turning to Snape. “Those who have made mistakes, we must put it aside. If we do not learn from our mistakes, we are doomed to repeat them. Professor Flamel’s history lessons are more important than ever. So, my friends, it is with great pleasure that I introduce to you, those who fought for us. Ronald Weasley, Ginevra Weasley, Hermione Granger, Rose-Marie Potter, Kathryn Bell, Terrence Boot, Susan Bones, Luna Lovegood, Seamus Finnegan, Cho Chang and the deceased, Hannah Abbot and Anthony Goldstein. My friends, a toast to you, to freedom.”

“TO FREEDOM!” the school repeated, raising their glasses to their lips. Those who had been named were on their feet, and all eyes turned to watch the people who were once students, and who were now heroes. Still, the question on everyone’s lips was ‘where was the leader?’. Where was the former Dark Knight, the person who arrived at the eleventh hour, the person without whom, none of this would have been possible?>.

Albus’ thoughts also turned back to Harry. What was he going to do? It was remarkable how he had coped. What would Albus himself do if the world suddenly turned on its head? What if he woke up to find the war was back on, that he was a villain, that people were trying to kill him and that those he loved never knew him, were dead and those he knew to be dead were alive? Could he cope? He remembered how Harry had described himself: a stranger in an unholy land. The world had seemed horrible and violent to him when he arrived, and he had had no idea

what was going on. He had gone from famous to infamous. In a war-torn and godless land, Harry had made himself a Lord and now... it was over. What now for the Stranger? It was his choice to make, and his alone.

The toast was over and so was the feast. As a treat, the Weird Sisters were playing a New Year's concert at Hogwarts, to celebrate the end of the war. The students were in for a fun evening.



It was half past eleven when Harry finally made it down to the Great Hall. He wore all black with a cloak over the top. The corridors were deserted as he made his way down from the Hospital Wing. The winter night's air was chilly as he passed. His injuries had healed in the week he had spent in bed, and he looked almost normal. The Victoria Cross was in his pocket, the weight pressing against his side, comforting him. Why did he value a Muggle medal more than an OM?

He could hear the music from the second floor. Descending the stairs, he passed various couples and groups of students. Raising his hood to avoid being recognised, Harry kept on walking. He reached the Hall, and where the music was making the walls reverberate. Harry recognised the songs, and they triggered memories of his fourth year when the Weird Sisters had played at the Yule Ball. He thought back to Parvati, Ron, Hermione and even Krum. He suppressed a sad smile at the thought of his friends back home. Friends that he now had no excuse not to return to.

He leaned against the side of the door at the back of the hall. The room was in partial darkness with blue and silver lights at the front. The four-piece band was blaring away with their latest single, as the students by the stage went mad. Someone was crowd surfing and another stage diving, as the rock and roll piped out the speakers. Around the edges of the room there were tables at which some students sat chatting, kissing or drinking. The sea of bodies near the stage bounced in unison to the music, while the teachers generally sat around the edge, keeping an eye on the events and nodding a head or tapped a foot in time. Harry could see his mother, wrapped in a thick cloak, sitting on a bench at the side of the room; her husband sat next to her. They were watching Rose and Ginny, who were diving off the stage and onto the crowd.

Harry smiled sadly at the scene. There was so much joy in the room, but it didn't seem to affect him. It was odd, but he felt like it was all a dream. He had never envisioned a time when Voldemort was truly gone, when it was over, and he had never really thought he would live to see it so. This was what it was like. This was proof that Voldemort could be defeated. Harry felt like he did when he handed in one of Snape's essays. He had slaved over it and finally finished it, but there was another one set that very day, a pattern from which he could not escape. He had triumphed, but there was another Voldemort and another Hogwarts to save. He tried to shed this from his mind and share the joy, but all he saw was a pair of burning red eyes.

He could stay here. It was not impossible. What he saw now was proof. He had a family, and it wouldn't take long to make friends. He could live on in peace, never having to fight again.

But it would be a lie. Everyone he talked to would be lied to. They would be told of amnesia, not of his real home. No one could ever appreciate what it was like for him. Could he live a lie? His family would know, but he would be unable to be close to anyone, let alone intimate, if who he was was a lie. It seemed that he would never find someone who understood him: who could, unless they had been through exactly what he had?

Back home, no one would be able to relate to what had happened to him, and he would have to cover it up, but at least he would know who he truly was, although his strengths would take a little explaining. Both were lies, but he had home, and he had to get to it. He loved Rose, his mother, and his father, he truly did, but he couldn't stay. Watching the three of them together as Rose went to talk to them, he realised that he would always be the outsider looking in. They had a real son and brother out there, and Harry had no right to steal them from him. Though his mission was not to take him from them, but to kill him. How ironic.

He had to leave.

"Evening, boss," said a light voice behind him. Harry turned to see a group of adults heading up the steps towards him. Amongst the group were the Aurors from the assault, Frank, Rachel, Sirius. Harry greeted each one in turn.

"Glad to see you back on your feet," said Sirius. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," said Harry.

"We did all right though, didn't we?" asked Sirius rhetorically. "We got the job done, and lived to tell the tale."

"Not all of us lived," said Harry sadly.

"No," said Rachel, "but you can't blame yourself for that. It was their choice."

"I organised the mission."

"You showed us the door," said Rachel. "We all walked through it. It was their choice and they wouldn't want their leader blaming himself for it."

"What are you going here?" asked Harry, eager to change the subject.

"Order meeting," said Sirius. "Dumbledore wants to do a quick debrief. We're a little early, but rumour has it the Weird Sisters are here."

"In there," said Harry, pointing to the hall. Sirius looked into the hall, his eyebrows rising quickly.

"See you later, Harry," said Sirius, heading for the door.

“Mister Longbottom,” said Rachel, in her poshest voice. “Care to escort a lady to the party?” Harry raised an eyebrow, remembering Frank’s past, and wondering if he really was interested in another woman after Alice. Harry shook the thought aside. It was none of his business. But it had suddenly reminded Harry of something.

“Frank,” he said softly. “Can I have a quick word?”

The Auror paused, his expression blank and turned to Harry. Rachel took the hint and backed off a few paces.

“Frank,” said Harry. “If you go into Dumbledore’s office, have a look in the Penseive. I put in it all the memories I have of Neville.” Harry saw his jaw tense at the word. “I know I can never make up to you what was taken, and I know you blame me for it. I can never forgive Riddle for murdering my family, as you can never forgive me. I just thought that you might like to see your son as he would be today.”

Frank didn’t move or speak. He expression was blank, his jaw set firmly. After a second’s pause, he extended a hand slowly and hesitantly up to Harry’s shoulder and let it rest gently on him. “You’re not the one I’m after,” he said with a small smile. “And thank you.”

With that the Auror turned and walked into the Great Hall, another Auror having taken his arm. Harry stared after him for a moment. It seemed that everything was new today, everything except him. He raised the hood, not wanting to be spotted, just to leave quietly, with the least amount of pain for his family and the least possible goodbyes.

“Thinking dark thoughts?” asked a voice. Nicolas Flamel had appeared at his side. Harry was mildly surprised that he had recognised him with the hood up.

“Only you would hide on a day like this,” said Flamel, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Harry, I don’t have to be a Legilimens to see what you are thinking.”

“Then what should I do?” asked Harry

“That is up to you,” said Flamel. “All that matters is now, the present. Both paths will be hard, but the decision is yours. Albus and I will not stand in your way whichever path you take. You’ve earned that right.”

“We both know I have to leave,” said Harry, turning away from his family to face Flamel. Dumbledore stood behind him. “I can’t turn my back on my past, and if the other me really is in my world, then I have to go.”

“Nor can you let your past rule you,” said Flamel.

“Even so, I can’t just abandon my friends,” said Harry. “I am most likely destined to die in my world. This world has been a break from it, like a vivid dream or surreal holiday, but it has to end. I have to get back. Every second I stay here, I am more tempted to stay.”

“So you wish to leave now?” asked Dumbledore.

Sadly, Harry nodded.

“What of your belongings?” asked Dumbledore.

“I need my swords, wands, clothes, a snack for the road and that should be enough,” said Harry. “Give my Christmas sweets to the Weasleys and my family. Rose can look after my stuff.”

“Are you planning to return?” asked Flamel, raising an eyebrow.

“If fate permits me,” said Harry. “You did say it could work both ways?”

“That I did,” said Flamel, smiling. “It would be nice to see you again, Harry.”

It took ten minutes to collect his stuff. Both swords were wrapped in cloth and tied over his back, while the food and clothes were in a bag hanging over his right shoulder. His wand was on his hip, his spare in the bundle. In addition, he had also brought a pair of glasses, with lenses that did not magnify. These were to hide his abilities, until Voldemort found out the hard way what he could do. For once, he was not wearing body-armour and he felt so light and free without it.

It was quarter to midnight when Harry left the castle. Dumbledore and Flamel walked the figure in black out of the main entrance and down the slope towards where they were going to Apparate. Harry had no idea where to go, so he would side-along Apparate. They had gone perhaps ten feet from the door when a voice rang out into the night.

“WAIT!”

Harry turned slowly to see the last thing he wanted. Lily Potter was running down the hill after him, her cloak billowing in the wind. Harry paused and took one step back up the hill.

“Where are you going?” she panted as she caught up. From the tears in her eyes, Harry guessed she already knew the answer.

“I have to leave, Mum,” said Harry softly, wiping a tear from under her eye with the back of his finger.

“No,” said Lily, pulling him into a tight hug. “No, you don’t; you’re one of us now. This is where you belong, with your family, with us.” Harry squeezed her tightly. He could feel her trembling as she hugged him. Harry closed his eyes, fighting back the tears he could feel coming. He had not wanted this.

“Mum,” he said slowly, pulling away from her and taking her hands in his. “Nothing would thrill me more than to stay. You’ve shown me a life I never could have imagined. You

taught me to feel again, put my life back on track, and I am so glad that I came here. I've hoped for a day like today for years, a day when Voldemort was gone and I could get on with my life, but that day is not today. I have friends back home who are counting on me. When you died, they were there for me, just as you are here. I owe them almost as much as I owe you, so I can't desert them in their hour of need."

"But you could die," protested Lily, choking on tears.

"As I was meant to die all along," said Harry. "I should have died last summer, but I ended up here. Remember what Dumbledore said about the Divine Comedy. God, Fate, Destiny; something plucked me from death, and with its great sense of humour and irony gave me everything I ever wanted. It has given me a holiday, a break. It gave me time to get to know what I had lost years ago, but I have to get back. Professor Flamel says that I should be able to come back and visit, and you have my word, if I can, I will."

"Harry, please," begged Lily. "You can't leave again. I can't lose you again."

"You won't," said Harry. "This isn't goodbye."

"You don't have to run anymore," said Lily.

"I'm not running, Mum," said Harry. "Staying here would be hiding. We all chose our own paths in life, and mine lies elsewhere." Lily stood motionless, staring at him unblinkingly through her glistening tear-filled eyes. Harry could see the pain in her eyes, but he had to leave; he didn't have a choice.

"At least let me see you off," said Lily, her voice shaky.

"Come," said Flamel, taking Lily's hand. The four of them walked slowly down the hill, under the moonlight. The air was cold and crisp, but the night was clear and quiet. In a few minutes, the fireworks would start and the sky would see a cluster of colours, but for now, the silence was absolute. Harry felt an odd mixture of relief, regret, and hope, as he was now to leave one world behind and return to another.

"Here," said Flamel, bringing them to a stop just beyond the Apparation barrier. "Lily, take my hand; Harry you hold on to Albus." Harry took Dumbledore's hand, just as his mother took Flamel's.

"Are we ready?" asked Flamel. Harry nodded and so did Lily, albeit shakily. They Disapparated with a pop. Harry felt like he had been squeezed through a rubber tube. The air was crushed out of him and his head began to pound, and he landed with a thud at the other end, collapsing as he landed. The other three looked down at Harry as he lay in a heap.

*I much prefer my way, thought Harry, brushing himself off.*

Picking himself up, he found himself in a large cave. It was about fifty metres across in total, made from a dark rock. They were in utter darkness, save the light provided by Dumbledore's wand. On the ground, a strip of metal protruded up, about an inch thick, marking out a circle. Inside there were patterns carved into the ground. The cave was vast, yet there was no damp in the air. While the circle was perfectly smooth, around the edges of it, stalagmites poked up from the ground. The jagged rocks cast eerie shadows in the wand-light.

Over on one side was a small alcove in the wall containing what looked like a globe on a pedestal. Flamel approached the globe, pushing his spectacles right up to the top of his nose, holding up his wand and lighting it to gain a better view of the apparatus. Harry stepped closer to watch as Flamel brushed the dust off the machine with his sleeve.

After a few seconds' hesitation, he unzipped his bag and removed what looked like a small sceptre. It was about ten inches long and two thick. It was octagonal at the base and made from what appeared to be gold. Runes were carved into the side of it. Dumbledore held his wand up high so that Flamel could see to work. Grasping one end in each hand, Flamel twisted the sceptre. The top half began to turn as he twisted. The inside must have been like a screw, for as he twisted, the sceptre extended and a large crystal rose up from the tip of the sceptre. It was now twelve inches long and topped by a large diamond; at least Harry thought it was a diamond.

"This is the key," said Flamel to Harry. "Insert it in here, like so." He inserted the sceptre into a small octagonal hole in the top of the pedestal. The sceptre slid cleanly into the slot. As he did, the globe began to glow a healthy white. Little balls of light dotted around the walls burst into life, illuminating the cave in bright white light.

"That's better," remarked Dumbledore, extinguishing his wand.

"Harry," said Flamel. "I need you to perform a spell on that globe. Something simple." Harry raised his wand to the globe and muttered the words to turn it red. The globe began to glow as the spell hit it. Red energy poured out of the globe into small ducts in the floor, which snaked away to the edge of the circle on the floor. The energy began to pulse at seven identical points around the circle.

"Why seven?" asked Harry.

"The most powerful of magical numbers," said Flamel. "No one knows why but most of the advanced arithmancical equations result in a ratio of 7 to 1. It is beyond coincidence, but no one knows why it is - it is just accepted. Right, I have analysed a spell you did in one of my classes and a drop of your blood. I have the equations here." He produced several sheets of parchment from his pocket.

"This is the equation used, and how I arrived at the numbers I did," said Flamel, beckoning Harry to read the notes. "Albus has checked them, and from there they are transferred into Greek runes, like so. I need you to trace these runes onto the seven tablets over there."

At seven equally-spaced points around the circle on the floor were pools of light, not unlike a Pensieve, except that they glowed red, not silver. Following Flamel's notes carefully, Harry copied the runes from the paper down onto the pools of light using his wand. As he finished one, it began to glow white. As he finished the final rune, seven beams of light shot upwards towards the centre of the circle. One of the stalactites on the ceiling was not made of rock, but of crystal, just like the key. The light met there and glowed a blinding white. Harry covered his eyes as a screen of light descended downwards in an arc towards the ground.

It reminded Harry of the *Priori Incantatum* effects, as the glowing gateway formed.

"Well that was easy," said Flamel, stepping away from the globe. "There's the doorway, Harry, now all that remains is for you to walk through it." Harry stared at the archway of light in the centre of the cave. It was just like a doorway and all he had to do was take that single step. One small step for man.... He knew he wanted to, so why did he hesitate? He had to do it. He had a war to fight on the other side, and his home, his friends were there. Why did he hesitate?

"You don't have to," said Lily, taking hold of his hand. It was more of a temptation to stay. All the way here, he had known he would have to leave. He had accepted it, even imagined the looks on the others' faces when he appeared. It was a fact, set in stone, that he had to leave, but every second he stayed, he was more tempted to stay.

"On the second parchment," added Flamel, pointing to the collection of parchments he had given Harry, "is an equation derived from my own blood and magic. It should be able to bring you back any time you desire. You will require the key. Flamel held up the sceptre, which now lay dormant in his hand. Harry took it and put it in his bag, along with the parchments. Right, this was it; he had to go. All he had to do was say goodbye and then walk forward, but he couldn't do it. His limbs and mouth didn't want to move.

"You are quite welcome to return any time," said Dumbledore, approaching Harry and Lily. "There will always be room for you at Hogwarts, and help will always be given..."

"To those who ask for it," finished Harry, knowing the phrase too well. And he was right. Those back home were crying out for help, and Harry was all that could help them.

"Thank you," said Harry, facing the headmaster and extending his hand. Dumbledore took it in his, shaking his hand firmly.

"No, Harry," he said, smiling. "Thank you."

Harry shook Flamel's hand in turn and then turned to his mother, whose eyes still glistened with tears. Harry knew she had accepted that he was leaving, but it was still hard for her. She had lost her son once, and now had to do so again.

"Say goodbye to Dad and Rose for me," said Harry, staring into her emerald green eyes, knowing that Rose would want him to stay and would refuse to accept that he had to leave. In her

mind, his place was here; in her mind, he was something he wasn't: her real brother. "Especially Rose - she won't understand."

"I will," said Lily, a tear rolling down her cheek as she pulled him into a hug. Harry hugged her back, encased in her arms. He could feel her shaking as she sobbed into his shoulder. In his mother's arms, Harry felt safe, if only for a moment. For that moment, he was truly home, where every little boy should be; but it could never last. "Promise me that you'll come back some day," sobbed Lily.

"I will," said Harry, pulling away from her. "If I can, I will return."

"Good bye, Mum," said Harry, turning to Flamel. Lily didn't release his hand until the last moment, almost pulling him back. Harry's fingers slid slowly out of his mother's grip as he stepped closer to Flamel. "What do I do?"

"Simply walk through the gate," said the professor, gesturing to the archway of light.

"Good luck, Harry," said Dumbledore, resting an arm on his shoulders. "The Promised Land awaits."

Harry nodded to him before stepping into the circle and heading towards the archway in the centre. The hairs on his body stood on end as he neared the gateway of light. He could feel its power in the air, like static electricity. This was his way home. His adventures in the Unholy Land were over; he had found a way home. So why was he so nervous? Dumbledore was right, the Promised Land lay waiting for him. It was time to go home.

With a final glance back at his mother, Harry wiped the single tear from his cheek and stepped into archway of light.

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Having every single atom in your body separated from the next and thrust straight through the fabric of space and time is a very odd feeling to experience.

That was the first thought that entered Harry's mind as his newly reassembled body landed with a very hard bump. It felt like he had been dunked in a lake of ice-cold water, and a feeling of numbness took his entire body. There was a bright white light that would have blinded him, were it not for the fact that his eyes were already atomised. Then came the rush as his atoms were forced sideways in time. His stomach was in a trillion tiny pieces, yet he still felt it leap into his throat, as if he was riding the world's fastest roller coaster. Then came re-entry. It felt like he was being crushed as his molecules flew back together in a nanosecond before being spat out by the Node. He landed painfully on his side and rolled twice before coming to a stop. He was freezing and covered in a watery residue, which had soaked into his clothes. Harry sat shivering for a few seconds before looking around.

The light from the Node faded, plunging the cave into darkness, making it impossible to see. His eyes, unaccustomed to the darkness after his walking into blinding light, were as good as useless. Harry shivered from the slimy goo that covered his entire body. He fumbled in his pocket for his wand.

Lumos!

His wand burst to life in his hand, shining a beam of white light at the wall of the cave. It was identical to where he had been before, except that there was no Dumbledore, no Flamel and no Lily Potter. She was dead here. Harry sighed sadly at the thought that he could no longer go and see her whenever he wanted. He couldn't pop in for a cuppa or visit her at will. Here he was alone. Still, Flamel had said he could go back at a later date. He would visit them, of course he would. He could spend holidays with his family like normal people. Maybe he could take his Ron and his Hermione, maybe even Ginny. Still, that was a long way into the future.

Shaking the thought from his mind, Harry stood up. The cave was damp and yet the air was full of dust, which had been disturbed by Harry's arrival. The dust in the cave was sticking to the slimy residue all over his body. Harry grimaced as he wiped the goo from his mouth and nose, whipping his arm to the side to get rid of it, but the goo stuck to his fingers.

Scourgify!

Harry cleaned himself as best he could using his wand. After nearly two minutes' work, he was clean and warm, though every limb in his body ached. The pain of re-entry hadn't worn off yet, if, in fact, it would before he went to bed. Satisfied with his appearance, Harry turned his wand back to the cave, looking for the way out. The wand light highlighted the passage that led out of the cave over to his left. He checked that his swords were secure before swinging the bag of supplies over his shoulder and starting to stagger towards the exit. His legs protested with every step and his body felt numb. The warming spell on his clothes was having a minor effect, but he felt so, so tired.

Harry followed the passage for about two hundred metres before he heard the sound of rushing water. Suddenly there was light at the end of the passage, albeit dim light. As Harry moved further along the passage he was faced with a wall of water. The path opened up onto a narrow ledge that led around the back of the waterfall. The trouble was that it seemed to have weathered away to nothing, leaving nowhere to put his feet.

Harry shot a dirty look at the rock in frustration before concentrating his cold, tired and hungry mind on his limbs. He felt an odd tingling sensation as the cliffs began to grow around him. His whole body felt like it was being squashed and squeezed into a tiny box. Of course it was not the cliffs that were growing, but he who was shrinking.

Harry spread his wings and began to flap as he had been taught. Soaring out from behind the waterfall, Harry flapped harder, propelling himself upwards on an air current, towards the clear night's sky.

It was night-time and the sky was clear. Pinpricks of light shone down from the heavens. There was no wind and the moon was half full. It was a beautiful, peaceful night that had only been interrupted by the arrival of an inter-dimensional traveller. Not something that these parts were famous for.

Rising above the cliff top, Harry glided gently down towards the ground, turning back into his normal form as he did, landing gracefully on the crisp grass. He felt almost drunk and his head was spinning. He shook his head, trying to clear his mind of the tipsy feeling. The Animagus transformation so soon after travelling was not a good idea. Looking around, Harry found himself totally unfamiliar with the surroundings. He could look down on the waterfall, as the rock stretched out beyond the end of the river. It was enough to give most people vertigo.

The grass was long and had not been maintained. It showed no sign of a human presence. That was probably for the better, as no one should ever use the Node; it could cause too many complications. The downside of the remote location was that Harry didn't have a clue where he was or how to get to Hogwarts.

Harry felt exhausted; suddenly the full weight of what had happened over the last few hours caught up with him. His limbs ached and he found himself yawning. He pulled his traveller's cloak tighter around him and cast another warming charm over it as well. He returned his wand to his hip and pulled a sandwich out of the bag. He forced it whole into his mouth and chewed. Etiquette went right out the window as he checked the bag to make sure everything was all right. He had all his things, Flamel's notes, and the key so he could return. The two swords and stun-baton were wrapped in black fabric and were tied over his back. Harry raised his hood to keep his head warm in the bitter air. It had been warmer in the Unholy Land.

To his surprise Harry found that he still had the knowledge of how to use the weapons, and indeed how to fight. The memories he had acquired in the other world seemed more like a dream now but the instincts, the abilities seemed to have travelled with him. That was good, he now had an advantage over Tom and he sure as hell was not going to let it go to waste. Last time he had hopped worlds, he had been ripped from his body and taken someone else's. This time he had not. It had been like Apparating from one place to another, so he had retained his body and skills. Boy, Tom was going to be surprised.

Pushing his way through the thigh-high grass, trying to ignore the continuous scratches from brambles and thorns, Harry headed into what looked like a path of sorts. It was more like a gap in the trees that seemed to go somewhere. Harry made it to the muddy path in a few minutes, his gloves protecting him from the stinging-nettles, though the thorns from bramble bushes still seemed to penetrate his combats, pricking his legs. Groggily he stumbled along the path, looking for any sign of human inhabitants. He had gone less than a mile before his prayers were answered. Up ahead, to the right of the path, was a house. It was old and made of stone rather than bricks - a quaint little cottage in the woods with a small garden.

Harry felt a rush of hope surge through him, filling his limbs with energy. If there was someone here they could tell him where he was. In fact, come to think of it the house was so remote and close to the Node that they might even be Magical. If that were the case they would

recognise him and perhaps even let him use a pinch of Floo powder. He could be home in minutes. It was probably wrong to get his hopes up in case he was disappointed but he was too tired to care. All he wanted was his bed, but before that he had to get home.

Harry hopped the picket fence. The grass in the garden was quite long, but not high enough to impede him.

Harry rapped on the door three times, but to his surprise, the door swung open as he knocked. With a creak, the wooden door opened slightly. Well, thought Harry. Whoever lives here probably doesn't get many visitors so is quite lax about security.

"Hello?" he called as he pushed the door open a little further. Inside it was dark; the curtains were open but the bushes outside the window prevented the moonlight from seeping through. The living room was small, the smell of dust prevalent as Harry entered. The fireplace was empty, and the mirror about the mantle was covered in dust. It was almost as if the house was deserted. There was no sign of life.

"HELLO?" called Harry again. There was nothing. The house seemed completely dead. Harry checked the kitchen and found nothing. Mouldy food filled the cupboards while mice scurried away as he entered. Everything was put away and tidy, now covered with a layer of dust.

Harry moved back into the living room. If this was indeed a magical house, there would be a pot of Floo powder by the fireplace. If he could find it, he could Floo to Hogwarts. He could reach Dumbledore. Finally this whole damn fiasco would be over. He could sleep in his own bed in his own world, safe and sound; well, as safe as one can be when Voldemort is after you.

"*Lumos,*" muttered Harry, pointing his wand at the fireplace. A bright light appeared at the end of his wand, illuminating the fireplace. It was certainly large enough for a human to climb inside, so there was hope. On the metal mantle there was a flowerpot, containing what remained of some flowers now only useable as compost. There were also some small figurines of animals and then right on the end was a small ceramic pot, containing a very familiar-looking powder.

"Yes!" Harry cried. It was his ticket home. He pointed his wand at the fireplace and in a flash a small fire was happily burning away. He grabbed a handful of the power "Hogwarts, Great Hall!" he cried as he threw the powder into the fireplace.

WHOOSH!

Harry came stumbling out, covered in dust. He looked around, expecting to see four long tables and the familiar signs of a hall teeming with students. However, he was sadly disappointed. He was right back where he had started. There was now more dust in the air from the effect of his Flooing. Harry coughed and covered his mouth.

Why hadn't it worked? He had done it all correctly and since the flames had actually turned green the fireplace was connected to the network. Of course! Security. Hogwarts couldn't be reached by Floo. It would be too vulnerable to attack. In the current climate of world affairs, Dumbledore wouldn't take the risk.

Harry picked up more powder and Floo'd to the Three Broomsticks. This time it worked; he emerged triumphantly, if somewhat clumsily, in the pub, which was in full swing. Men and women were everywhere with their drinks, and a light drizzle of rain was falling outside, visible to Harry through the windows. There was music in the air and the beer was flowing, judging by several red-faced men in the corner. No one batted an eye as he emerged from the fireplace.

Relieved, Harry pushed his way through the crowd and out into the street. The cool rain came as a relief, washing the tiredness from him as he began the long trek back up to the castle. He kept a steady pace but was too achy to run. His feet were hurting but seemed to be free from blisters, much to Harry's relief. He had gone a few hundred feet when the rain stopped.

Harry kept on walking step by step, ignoring the protests of his limbs. He came to the castle at last. It loomed up in front of him, silhouetted against the clear night sky. The windows glowed orange; it seemed so warm and inviting. He was so nearly there. Just a little closer! He could imagine his bed now, so warm, so comfy, with Ron in the next one along and Hermione in the girls' dorm. He was home! Harry arrived at the front lawn. The entrance hall was one hundred metres ahead. The aches seemed to vanish; he had done it.

Home, sweet home.

Harry walked forward, every step taking him nearer to the door.

"Sweet home, Alabama," he sang softly to himself, unable to hide his happiness. Harry had no idea what the words were, so hummed as he crossed the lawn, tempted to skip, but too tired.

He came to a sudden halt as he saw that the doors were closed. The large wooden door was firmly shut and not Harry's banging, nor his Alohomora spell had any effect on it. He could be out here all night. This was just ridiculous. He couldn't get in. He had been dreaming of a warm comfy bed, not kipping on the cold hard ground.

Hang on! No puny Apparation ward could keep Harry out. Of course he could get in. Harry shook the weariness from his mind and concentrated on the Entrance Hall.

The familiar sensation of being engulfed in flames followed and Harry found himself in the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts. He had done it. He was back in Hogwarts, in his own world.

The warmth of the castle filled his mind and body as he stood just inside the door. The darkened hall seemed gloomy, but to Harry it was like the pearly gates of Heaven. He was home. Harry put on his false glasses and then pulled his hood up to hide his face - he didn't want to have to explain his presence to anyone but Dumbledore this evening. He turned left towards the

stairs and began to climb. He had to go and tell Dumbledore he was back. He briefly considered turning up to breakfast as if nothing had happened, but it was just unkind. He had to tell Dumbledore.

Harry climbed the stairs, ignoring the aching in his limbs. He really needed to practice his Animagus training if it hurt this badly. Harry reached the second floor and turned to go up to the third when a voice called to him.

“You, freeze!”

Oh, great! thought Harry in frustration. *Rumbled by a prefect.* They patrolled the corridors at night. It was probably one of them that had challenged him. He briefly considered running for it, but knew that in his current state he couldn't outrun an asthmatic ant with some heavy shopping. Harry turned to face the speaker.

“Curfew is at nine,” said the voice, as a large fat man who looked like a walrus stepped out of the shadows. Well, it certainly wasn't a prefect. Who the hell was this?

“Who are you?” asked Harry, not wasting time on subtleties.

“Possibly the worst attempt to avoid a detention I've ever heard,” said the man, looking at Harry as if he's just told the Pope that Mary wasn't a virgin. “I've been Potions Master long enough for even the most dim-witted to know me, boy.”

So he's the new Potions Master, is he? thought Harry. Then where's old Snivvy? Was he undercover? Surely at Hogwarts he was more useful. Then again, in the Unholy Land, as he now referred to it, Snape had genuinely been on the side of good. Who knew what was happening in the Promised Land? Harry would have to discuss it with Dumbledore, not this man, whoever he was.

“Of course, sir,” said Harry. “My apologies. I just need to see the Headmaster, then I'll go straight to bed, promise.”

“I would have let you off with a warning,” said the Walrus, staring accusingly at him. “But if you really wish to involve the headmaster in this, then so be it. After you, young man.” Harry turned and began to climb. He had no idea who this man was, but he had developed an instant dislike for him.

“You're not one of my Slytherins,” said the Walrus, “so which house are you in?” Harry still had his hood up, but his face could be seen, so the man could identify him, but he didn't know him. Oh well, he was the new teacher and had not met him yet. He must be stuck up, for he had been potions master—or so he claimed—since September, which was four months, and yet seemed to think everyone should bow to him. He seemed to be Head of Slytherin as well, which told Harry to hold his tongue, just in case he was Dark.

“Gryffindor,” said Harry, leaving the stairs and heading towards Dumbledore's office.

“Fifth year?”

“Sixth,” said Harry, partially relieved that the man didn’t recognise him, as it meant that no one would spoil his thunder.

They arrived at the gargoyle before the Walrus could reply.

“Quid Pro Quo,” said the Walrus to the gargoyle. The stone figure obediently jumped aside, revealing the stairs. Dumbledore must have gone off the idea of using sweets as passwords. Was it too predictable?

The Potions Master knocked on the wooden door and then stuck his head around the door, blocking the office from Harry with his vast body.

“A student is here to see you, headmaster” began the professor. Dumbledore must have nodded, for the Walrus stepped aside and Harry stepped into the office. It had totally changed. The furniture was different, the feel was different and the man himself was different. Harry’s jaw dropped as he stood before Headmaster T. M. Riddle.

END OF PART ONE

The adventure continues in...

